



Learning by Doing Europe – A Project for Active Citizenship

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Abstract

Education for active citizenship has become a key concept and it may gain even more significance being an important aspect of preparing young people for the future, which is the original, primary goal of schools. Active citizenship is a complex concept, and is made up of several components: knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and identities. An important task of citizenship education is to facilitate participation, which can be achieved best through the use of interactive methods. Teacher training plays a key role in active citizenship education. Teachers need to acquire the necessary knowledge, but it is even more important that they should use new, interactive methods, thus making it possible for students to experience democratic principles and models. A project “Learning by doing Europe” within the EU Jean Monnet Programme has been implemented by the Department of European Studies of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. The project involved University professors, secondary school teachers, and students. The main aim of the project was to develop together suitable interactive methods and techniques to facilitate learning about EU matters across the curriculum and to stimulate students’ active participation. The major impacts of the project were improved teaching quality and learning capacity, enhanced interest in European matters at secondary school level. The project was acknowledged as a best practice by the European Commission. The paper presents the main results and lessons learnt from “Learning by doing Europe” project.

1. The project context

Bulgaria became a member of the European Union in 2007. In this context, rising of the awareness of European integration and of the European dimension of citizenship is a very important goal to achieve and young people are one of the main target groups. “Learning by doing Europe” is a project implemented by the Department of European Studies of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in partnership with the National Association of European Clubs in Bulgarian schools. Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” has been the national foremost centre for university education and research since 1887. Today it is the largest university in the country with 88 degree programs offered by 16 faculties. The Sofia University European Studies Department is the first of its kind in the country and for more than 15 years now has been the leader in training experts in the field of European integration and the full range of European studies – history, law, economy, political studies and civilization. The National Association of European Clubs in Bulgarian schools (NABEC) comprises more than 80 clubs and is involved in a number of extra-curricular activities devoted to bringing the European Union closer to Bulgarian schools through non-formal learning.

The project was financed in the framework of the “Learning Europe at School” action, whose general objective was to bring the EU closer to the young citizens. This action was part of the Lifelong Learning Program of the European Commission – subprogram Jean Monnet during in the period 2007–2013. The project was performed in 2012-2013.

2. The rationale of the project - active citizenship and active learning

The concept of active citizenship is very complex and contains several components as knowledge, skills, attitudes, values. It is related to a society which is democratic, inclusive and participatory. This paper does not have the ambitious goal to present and discuss in detail all important issues, related to active citizenship like the different definitions of active citizenship, or to answer the questions like what active citizens do. However, it should be stressed that it can take different forms of political participation, participation in the life of a community, voluntary activities, etc. and its importance for overcoming the democratic deficit in the modern society is growing.

The need for formal and non-formal civic education has already been recognized not only by researchers, but also by decision makers in the European Union. Social and civic competences are among the eight key



competences formulated on EU level. These include personal, interpersonal and intercultural competence and cover all forms of behaviour that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life, and particularly in increasingly diverse societies, and to resolve conflict where necessary. Civic competence equips individuals to fully participate in civic life, based on knowledge of social and political concepts and structures and a commitment to active and democratic participation [1].

A report, published by UNESCO stressed the four main goals of education as continuous learning – “to learn to know, to learn to do, to learn to live together, i.e. to learn to be” [2]. There are no doubts about the crucial role of lifelong education and learning in formation of active is how to teach active citizenship. Which methods can be used to develop the competencies inherent to active citizenship? It is obvious that lectures and traditional methods of teaching are not enough.

Another important question is: can we build up the United Europe of 21st century without the support of its citizens? The European Communities were set up in the 50s with the main goal of securing the peace on the continent. The economic integration was supposed to make war among the Member States materially impossible. It would be wrong, however, to perceive it only as an effort for free trade, for common rules of the economic game and single currency. Europe is our homeland with common values and remarkable civilization that had to be preserved. The human dimension of the integration should not be forgotten in the contradictory time of economic and political interests. Cultural and European values have been playing an increasingly higher role so that people could “touch” Europe with they own hands. Understanding the multi-cultural and socio-economic dimensions of European societies and how one’s national cultural identity interacts with the European identity is essential.

Civic competence is based on knowledge of the concepts of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship, and civil rights. The core skills of this competence include the ability to communicate constructively in different environments, to show tolerance, express and understand different viewpoints, to negotiate with the ability to create confidence. Learn to leave together, build up understanding with joint efforts will eliminate the mutual mistrust, destructive haughtiness and repelling arrogance that have not yet disappeared from our continent. One often compares the European Union to a family: can people, who know little or almost nothing of one another, who do not trust simply because they do not know one another, live together? “If you don’t know, vote “no” was a popular slogan in Ireland before the referenda on the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Lisbon. This was a tactic to exploit voters’ ignorance [3]. In order to avoid this tactic, it is necessary to eliminate ignorance.

The project “Learning by doing Europe” was developed around these two issues: First, the project is based on the concept that active citizenship is closely linked to active learning, since practice is very important. Active learning stands in contrast to traditional methods in which teachers do most of the lecturing and students are passive. Second, knowledge of European integration and of the EU’s structures, main objectives and values is also essential, as well as an awareness of diversity and cultural identities in Europe. This involves critical and creative reflection. It also includes knowledge about the rights of the citizens of the EU as well as demonstration of a sense of responsibility and understanding of and respect for the shared values.

Beyond learning, a great emphasis is placed on lived experience. The project focused on measures to encourage 'learning by doing', which is a critical element in an area of learning that requires practical skills. In this case, teachers are guides who help students to understand and apply the acquired information and the knowledge, they create opportunities for students to act.

3. Project Implementation

The concept of the project was based on the understanding that active citizenship education should start with teachers. They should be more open to this task and to use new methods which make the learning process more interactive, more participatory.

A current research in Bulgaria shows that teachers are motivated to teach about Europe, but the teaching of such matters often suffers from the outdated methods applied – mostly a lecture and/or a dictation of the learning points making it unattractive and boring to the students. The implementation of interactive methods require new attitudes, skills and approaches and the teachers need to be trained to meet these challenges. Thus the main aim of this project was to develop suitable interactive methods and techniques to facilitate



learning about EU matters across the curriculum and extracurricular activities and to stimulate students' active participation.

The methodology implemented for achieving the objectives of the project was the following: the University professors worked together with a group of teachers to prepare suitable tools and techniques on selected EU topics, European studies students demonstrated in practice the proposed tools to the teachers – for ex. simulation games, debates, interviews, newspaper writing, problem solving, case studies, etc.

Selected teachers piloted the tools at schools. The methods were adapted to respond better to the needs of secondary schools. A methodological toolkit “I am citizen of the European Union” and a CD with ready-to-use pedagogical materials were published. More than 100 teachers were trained and best practices were demonstrated by secondary school students. A national Olympiad “Knowledge of Europe” was organized as tool to motivate students' participation. The results of the project and especially the Toolkit “I am citizen of the European Union” were broadly disseminated through different channels. – Ministry of Education, Regional Inspectorates for Education, NABEC, Europe Direct Information centres. The joint work of University professors, University students, PhD students, teachers, secondary school students was crucial for the establishment of the most convenient and the most innovative methods. The project activities and deliverables were not restricted to civic education teachers only but were made available to a wide pool of interested practitioners all over the country and thus reached a big number of secondary teachers and students in Bulgaria. This effect was further maximized by the involvement of NABEC and its clubs and had an impact on both formal and non-formal education for teachers and students.

The methodological toolkit “I am a citizen of the European Union” is focused on the introduction and deployment of new teaching methods such as simulation games, interactive exercises, competitions, “learning by doing”, etc., on the following main topics: The beginnings of the European Union, The End of the Cold War and the Eastern Enlargement, Bulgaria in the International Organisations, the Future Enlargement and the Borders of the EU, The European Parliament, Euro - the common currency, The money of the European citizens - we decide the EU budget, My rights as an EU citizen, My rights as EU citizen abroad, My rights online, How the Court of Justice of the EU works?, How the European Ombudsman protects us?, Our European Projects, The values of United Europe, Culture and Identity – Who am I ? Who are you?, Intercultural encounters - personal experience, World cultural heritage, European capitals of Culture, Costs and Benefits of the EU membership of Bulgaria, Best practices – European club as a form for teaching Europe at school, Project work – a step towards the youth entrepreneurship.

The activities, proposed by the toolkit involve students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing instead of sitting passively in the classroom and absorbing the knowledge, transmitted by the teacher. One of the characteristics of the proposed methodology is to bring students “out of the classroom” through study visits, making interviews in the street, involving students in theatre performance, learning through arts. The simulation exercises and role playing on complicated European topics like the decision making concerning the budget of the EU increase the level of interest and engagement of the students and eliminate the barriers for a free discussion among them.

Several teacher training seminars on the use of the new toolkit methodology with teachers from all over the country were held during the project implementation. The seminars consisted of two parts presentation of the toolkit and best practices from a university and secondary school context; and demonstration and hands-on training (i.e. via a simulation game, role play, theater performance, debates, videos or another exercise on a European integration topic). Each seminar finished by panel discussions; conclusions and ideas on improving the suggested methodology.

4. Impact and lessons learned

The major impacts of the project are: improved teaching quality and learning capacity, enhanced interest in European matters at secondary school level, improved critical thinking skills and abilities for analysis, synthesis and evaluation, increased motivation. The training of the teachers resulted in increased self-confidence in applying active learning methods and helped to overcome the reluctance to the changes in the educational tradition. The highly participatory and practical nature of the training and learning activities ensured that teachers and students experienced in practice social cohesion, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, respect for gender equality and personal fulfilment. Students gained active citizenship and



intercultural communication skills and improved their capacity for critical analysis, argumentation of a statement, public defence of a thesis, team work.

Several specific obstacles to the application of the proposed methods of active learning were identified during the implementation of the project. Some of them are limited class time, a need for more preparation time and efforts, lack of needed materials or resources especially in the small towns and villages.

A crucial prerequisite for the successful implementation of the project was the support by several important institutions like the Ministry of Education, the Parliament, the local authorities, the regional education inspectorates.

One of the most important results of the project was the establishment of close cooperation between University professors and secondary school teachers, which resulted in the appropriate and adapted to school needs, methods and teaching materials. Another important reason for the success of the project was the involvement of university bachelor, master and PhD students in European studies, who demonstrated in practice the proposed instruments like simulations, role play, debates, etc.

In conclusion, the coordinated efforts of University professors, teachers, university and secondary schools students as well as of the national institutions and local authorities were an important factor for the successful implementation of the project "Learning by doing Europe". The results of the project do not consist only in the development and introduction of new methods of teaching and learning about Europe. It gave the opportunity not only for understanding Europe through practicing Europe, through discussing Europe, through living Europe.

References

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