



DIV. ED: a Practical Approach to Diversity in Higher Education

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Abstract

Due to the increased mobility and the boost in the ICT –supported communication, people’s personal and professional lives are affected by unavoidable encounters with different languages and cultures, attitudes, ethnic or religious affiliations. The term Diversity is extensively used in the European political and socio-economic discourse to speak about various dimensions of differences between individuals, social groups, communities and nations. The ERASMUS Multilateral Project "Diversity in the Learning Experience in (Higher) Education" (www.diversity-ed.eu) addresses Diversity as an important feature of today’s learning environment and also as a content to be acquired on the theoretical, knowledge-based level, and on a more practical one: reflecting on attitudes and developing skills for adequate performance in the situations where people from diverse cultural, ethnical or social groups study or work together. The project partners from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Lithuania and Portugal have pooled their varied expertise: experience in Erasmus exchanges at universities, distance and blended learning, visual arts and ICT-based pedagogy. The main project product – the 6- ECTS -Module on Diversity - is designed to develop competencies in the fields of social and cultural acceptance / tolerance through enhancing learners’ intercultural and linguistic sensitivity and cultural understanding. The Module is based on the theory of Social Learning that highlights the exclusive role of a social group in the acquisition of social competences. Apart from group reflections and interactive tasks, the Module makes use of the Digital story-telling as a means to share and collect experience of various social exchanges and intercultural communication, which is often affected by the use of a foreign language. The created digital stories provide additional material for analyzing culture-specific features of verbal and non-verbal communication. The Module is available in the blended- and/or distance-learning format; it can be used in non-formal learning environment. The project partners will contribute to the creation of the documentary film on diversity (Screenplay by Patrick Spanbauer, On Screen OG, Vienna) that explores the using of one’s abilities and singularities as opportunities for learning and teaching.

1.Introduction

The 21st century has highlighted the need of understanding people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. With rapid changes in global economy, technology, transportation and migration, the world is becoming a small, intersecting community. The development of communication technologies has multiplied the contacts that one establishes throughout life. Information and communication technologies have increased the time, space, and forms of ties between individuals, between groups and society, thereby adding a huge spectrum of ICT-based communication to natural human relationships. Although the need to communicate has always been one of the intrinsic features of a normal human being, the possibilities to communicate and relate with others have never been that varied and manifold. The increasing integration and globalization has broadened the range of people one may have to work, live or study with, thus making “diversity” a commonplace experience in all areas of contemporary society. The term *diversity* is extensively used in the European political and socio-economic discourse to speak about various dimensions of differences between individuals, social groups, communities and nations. Higher education institutions are no different in respect to diversity. On the contrary, with almost 20 million students enrolled in higher education, the European Union has an increasing number of students representing different social, cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnical and racial groups, as well as sexual orientations and ages.

There are several factors that foster diversity at universities. **Demographic change** is one of the major factors that directly affect education: the number and size of schools at any level depend on how many pupils or students enroll and on how many and which type of specialists are needed in the changing society. The 3rd Demography Report [1] describes the population of the EU as older and more diverse today than a decade ago. The effects of such demographic changes can be seen in the growing popularity of special programmes for mature students, who come to study to improve their job prospects or to make a fresh start. Although the average age of students has not changed radically,



the lifelong learning policy has increased the number of older adults in both formal and informal education.

Demography is also strongly affected by the **migration** in a population: in terms of intra-EU mobility, the 2011 Euro barometer survey shows that 1 out of 5 respondents has either worked or studied in another country, lived with a partner from another country or has property abroad. One in ten is planning to move to another country in the next ten years. Different countries demonstrate difference in outward and inward flows of migration. For example, the populations of Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia and Lithuania have considerably decreased due to outward migration: many young people leave their countries to go to university in Scotland, Denmark or Norway where tertiary education is free or cheaper than in their home countries. The Report also indicates a stable growth in immigration from non-EU countries: 1-2 million immigrants come to live or work in the EU member states per year. The survey shows there has been a growth in the numbers of migrants whose mobility is based on personal preferences, and not only on economic opportunities.

Apart from demographic changes, the process of diversification has been greatly affected by EU **policies in education** that promote mobility and exchanges of university students and staff, convergence in the degree structure, facilitate access of all to education/training systems, and promote active citizenship and social cohesion. No doubt, the Bologna Process that marked its first decade in 2009/10 has played a major role in laying the foundations of the common European Higher Education Area with a more transparent and easily comparable system of academic degrees. Such changes enable today's universities to provide quality education to diverse and ever-changing societies.

The Erasmus programme is another example of the EU driven initiatives that has contributed a lot to the diversification of universities. With over 4000 students involved in exchanges at any time, the programme does a lot to raise cultural awareness, tolerance and better understanding. Erasmus for All is a new programme proposed by the European Commission in November 2011. It will bring together all the current EU and international schemes for education, training, youth and sport, replacing seven existing programmes with one. This will increase efficiency, make it easier to apply for grants, as well as reducing duplication and fragmentation. It is due to start in 2014. Up to 5 million people - almost twice the current number - will get the chance to study or train abroad with a grant from Erasmus for All. Among them would be nearly 3 million higher education and vocational students.

Managing diversity, either at University or later on in companies and other organisations, takes into account various dimensions of diversity, both at the surface and at the deeper level described above. Effective management of diversity cannot be achieved by training alone: it needs a comprehensive and systematic approach, one which is subject to constant evaluation and assessment. Diversity within organisations, including educational institutions, is about recognizing differences in people and valuing people as individuals, respecting their differences and their different needs. It is also about accommodating differences wherever possible so that an individual can play a full part either in educational or working environment. Using a modification of Cox's definition [2], we can define managing diversity as "creating a climate in which the potential advantages of diversity for organizational or group performance are maximized while the potential disadvantages are minimized".

2. DIV.ED rationale

The idea of the *ERASMUS Multilateral Project "DIV.ED: Diversity in the Learning Experience in (Higher) Education"* (more about the project at www.diversity-ed.eu) stems from the project partners' awareness of the importance of taking practical steps toward facilitating the process of adapting to and proper functioning in the diverse world, be it during one's studies or other social engagements. Although the project partners represent quite a diverse group of institutions (classical, distance and open universities, a language teacher association, a film-making enterprise and an e-learning company), they all share the following assumptions:

- diversity awareness is crucial for a society which aims at cohesion, educational and professional mobility,
- in spite of higher mobility and increased communication opportunities there exist a worrying tendency towards discrimination,
- such methods as social learning and collaboration, supported by the varied ICT applications and tools, could provide desirable effects both in university and other learning environments.

The project partners view diversity as a subject for academic research and as an operating environment that sets practical problems and provides case studies to illustrate and analyze theoretical concepts.



3. DIV.ED products

The DIV.ED main products cater for various modes of learning (classroom, distance and the combination of both) and provide a reasonable balance between theoretical studies and practical assignments.

3.1 Module on Diversity

The main DIV.ED product – the 6-ECTS-Module on Diversity - is designed to develop competencies in the fields of social and cultural acceptance / tolerance through enhancing learners' intercultural and linguistic sensitivity and cultural understanding. The Module is based on the theory of Social Learning that highlights the exclusive role of a social group in the acquisition of social competences [3]. The Module content includes three main topics: firstly, expansion of knowledge on diversity in the learning process and its featuring as an opportunity and a challenge; secondly, diversity awareness raising in the learning process, which incorporates the reflection on attitudes and values as well as on various interactions in the process of learning and methods, including collaborative and social learning [4],[5] ; and thirdly, intercultural communication and competences, with a special focus on the features of verbal and non-verbal communication and the perspective taking in multicultural contexts. The Module contains self-check questions and further reading recommendations, besides, it provides a lot of motivating tasks and assignments that can be adapted for the classroom or can be used in a distance- or blended-learning environment. The e-version of the Module will be available on the project website.

3.2 Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is a well-known way of experimenting with self-representation which is an important element in asserting one's identity and relating oneself to others. In the DIV.ED project digital stories will be created and used to research differences and similarities in either individual or group presentations and interpretations of personalities, facts or events. Although a varied digital content is a distinguishing feature of such presentations, the verbal content – the narrative - constitutes a substantial part of digital story-telling. In the multicultural environment which is common for various student and staff exchange programmes, the linguistic peculiarities of digital storytelling provide ground for further research into language-sensitive aspects of self-representation as well as into a broader context of social interaction between native speakers of different languages and the way they communicate in a chosen foreign language. Digital storytelling will be used for analyzing verbal communication in the international multicultural environment focusing on language as a primary tool of communication and its interrelation with society. The resources of each language allow for different representations of the world [6]; the practical assignments offered to students lead to discovering that language is a marker to identify certain socio-cultural phenomena relevant in a particular communicative situation. Such categories as professional affiliation or social status, gender and age do not only position us in society but also determine the language variation we use.

3.2 Documentary

The DIV.ED project partners will contribute to the creation of a documentary film on diversity, which explores and presents one's abilities and singularities as opportunities for learning and teaching. The screenplay of the documentary was created by Patrick Spanbauer, On Screen OG, Vienna; the shooting of the documentary is carried out during the project piloting with university students and faculty. The participants of the workshops and training sessions get involved in original awareness-raising activities with elements of drama and self-analysis: they explore their reaction to one's weaknesses and, in a subtle way, are guided towards working on or reviewing their attitudes and beliefs. The documentary is to be shown in academic settings as well as to the general public.

4. Conclusions

The DIV.ED project suggests a practical approach to learning and teaching "diversity" in the highly diverse context of formal and informal studies as well as offers the means to implement this approach. The learner with his/her individual needs, beliefs and attitudes, cultural background and social experience is placed at the centre of the learning process. The method of ICT-assisted collaborative learning stimulates the sharing of individual experiences and the exploration of the vast opportunities provided by the diverse environment, be it the Erasmus exchange programmes or other situations where people of different social and cultural backgrounds communicate. The materials of the digital



stories in the DIV.ED Module on Diversity will provide data for further research of the diversity discourse, its linguistic peculiarities and social implications.

References

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