

MYSTORY – Perspectives on Education

¹Anca Cristina Colibaba, ²Lucia Petrescu, ³Stefan Colibaba

¹Gr.T.Popa University/ EuroED Foundation Iasi (Romania), ²EuroEd Foundation Iasi (Romania),

³Al.I.Cuza University/ EuroED Foundation Iasi (Romania)

¹acolib@euroed.ro, ²lucia.petrescu@euroed.ro, ³stefan.colibaba@euroed.ro

Abstract

It is the aim of teachers to teach and that of the students to learn. What happens when teachers come to teach slightly irrelevant matters and students are more aware of the surrounding dynamics than their professors? How do we get teachers to update their knowledge, perspective and attitudes and how do we get students to still be interested in the basics knowledge while in a world of endless novelty? In short, how do we educate today?

This paper is going to consider the manner in which trends in education support and enhance students' efficient personal and professional development. It also looks at the changing role of the teacher and the a new approach in education so as to valorize the great variety of input freely accessible today online and offline.

MyStory project (project no. 511641-LLP-1-2010-1-RO-KA3-KA3MP) has developed on this new perspective in an intergenerational context. Throughout the project activities the international team has looked at means and ways by which the successful project experience could be transferred to contexts which can exploit the project deliverables. Out of these, education is probably one of the most important and, at the same time, the one which can mostly influence the dynamics of society.

Introduction

In the end, it all comes down to our stories: how we started, how we were educated, the choices we made, the opportunities we took, the failures we had and the risks we managed. It is OUR story that matters to us. Stories other than our own, those of our family members or of our friends, become a part of our own story. It is our personal perspective that casts the causality within these later stories. It is because of this that they come to matter to us, it is the way we perceive these stories that triggers our responses and actions. Even though this is a widely known general fact, we yet fail to consider it when it comes to education.

What matters most for students is what interests them and not what we have to teach. It is the way in which they can relate to the input that establishes the quality and then the manner in which intake is valorised. This has always been the case. The difference was the context education happened in. Most education systems mainly have teacher-centered education. Teacher centeredness does not stand only for the teacher cast in the main role of the omniscient leader, capable of everything, as opposed to the learner, the humble apprentice. Teacher centeredness mainly implies that learners are prescribed what and how to learn and that little attention is being paid to the perspective of the learners, to their stories.

This is althemore inappropriate in a society in which knowledge and information are growing too rapidly for any education system to have the chance to catch up. Labour market dynamics are also intermingled with this and they have proven to be one of the pillars of education in the sense that they validate the school experience of the learners against their abilities and competences as employees.

So, how do we educate today to ensure that:

1. learning experience is relevant and meaningful for the learner?
2. intake is appropriate and can be valorized on the labour market?
3. personal and professional development becomes a lifelong journey?

We must first look at other questions which help narrow down the quest for these answers.

1. Increasing knowledge

First of all, the amount of knowledge to be transferred within the educational process has drastically increased. The dynamics of change no longer allow a structured, step-by-step, transfer of information from the teacher to the student. The response education systems around the world found to this was teacher training. But training teachers even on a regular basis does not mean they can cope with the enormous amount of data. They can be informed but they cannot be trained in each and every aspect of the field they activate in. Training teachers is a must-have component but it is nevertheless



insufficient. The knowledge put at the disposal of learners should be open in the sense that it self-updates. This cannot be done by the system or by the teacher. This is done through the active contribution of learners who bring in their personal perspectives to identify new sources of information, to select the relevant parts and to then put them to good use, as it serves them. MOOCs are beginning to prove more and more illustrative of this.

MyStory project includes such a “self-update” mechanism. The life stories it deals with are a constant enriching resource which can be valorized by a great variety of individuals and still suit their interest for the simple reason that stories are interpreted on the basis of personal experience. A class-full of students will find several meanings and values within the same story. From the same story different learners will take out different learning and the value of this is that the intake is personalized and relevant for individuals and has not been planned to suit a general category, as in the case of curricula.

2. Teacher responsibility revisited

Furthermore, as mentioned above, teachers themselves cannot entirely cope with change and information novelty and therefore, they can no longer be considered entirely responsible for the learning opportunities students have. To encapsulate the meaning of education in the activity school does is a precarious view of personal and professional development. However, one action schools can successfully undertake is that of guiding students. Teachers should be considered mentors even at an early age. Actual teaching nowadays can happen only in the case of basic, general information and rules. All the other aspects children need to be informed of but not taught. If we accept that a practicing teacher’s professional knowledge cannot always catch up with the latest updates, then the conclusion follows that teachers need to develop their pedagogical skills more so as to be able to monitor and support students’ quest for the “updates” which the educational system does not offer.

It is novelty and active engagement which eventually make the difference between a well-taught learner and an active learner. New pedagogical trends such as SOLE and SOME illustrate with facts that teachers’ roles have changed from that of teaching to inciting learners and guiding them.

MyStory project creates the perfect setting for teachers to act in this new role. Life experience cannot be taught but it can be observed, discussed and developed on with the class. Teachers in various fields can make use of the Gallery of stories in the project (<http://www.mystories.eu/stories/>). They will soon discover that not only is MyStory providing them with a generous amount of materials but it also triggers individual reflective activity on the part of the student which is the start of a solid personal and professional development.

3. Sustainable resources

Teaching materials (irrespective of format) are but a limited frame of knowledge which restrain students’ view if not permissive and encouraging external exploration by students. The fact that we are now offered a greater variety of resources in various formats is not necessarily a benefit. Approved materials, online access and use of MOOC are still restricted according to the different policies schools and education systems have. Still, the fact that students’ knowledge should and can still come from a book (a generic term for the agreed teaching-learning support) has well been left behind. And still, education is keen on testing learning efficiency compared to the information comprised by these standardised materials. Standards are efficient and relevant only to the degree to which they offer cohesiveness without intruding on the individual perspective, interests, type of learning intelligence and abilities.

Even though school systems are not always permissive enough to include MOOC as a resource because of various administrative or security reasons, there is still the opportunity to engage students in individual exploratory research. Resources such as the MyStory collection are easily accessible in online and offline format (if project members are contacted) and they can therefore allow teachers to complement the standard teaching materials with authentic stories which have proven to be engaging and to trigger learning on several levels for students of different age categories.

4. The technology issue

Technological progress has often been screened as a disruptor of classes. This, however, is the outcome of any novelty – it disrupts, it takes attention away from the old and focuses it on the new element. Is this a negative perspective? One cannot change the means by which a class is held and still have students behave and react the same in front of an interactive board as they do in front of a black board. If teaching means change, class dynamics will change as well. One way to ensure that



technology disrupts and then takes learners into a direction complementary and meaningful for their study is to carefully include technology when and in the form in which it is needed, not for the sake of novelty but having in view complementarity and the added value it can bring to the learning process.

Technology offers a vast array of alternative systems through which information can be accessed, knowledge built and skills and competences developed. However, what it does not offer is a “joy stick” for learners to use. All the choices and alternatives it offers need to be balanced and considered from a critical perspective. Including technology in our classes means to uncover the hidden potential it has for education not just within the formal learning system but especially for informal contexts.

MyStory offers a platform where life stories can be shared by people all around the world. The training courses MyStory has implemented using a Moodle platform are based on the real needs of the trainees which, in their turn, are linked to the contexts they function in.

5. The labour market issue

One of the stake holders of education is the labour market. Its requirements most often exceed or include more than school education offers at various levels (starting from attitudes which are built even from the early school years up to information and skills in upper secondary and university studies). Employers need to bridge the gap with initial training, mentoring/coaching programmes which sometimes have to do more than a simple induction because of the major incongruity between education and work requirements. But preparing students for the labour market does not only mean equipping them with the right knowledge and skills. Getting them ready for employment is first of all helping them find their “element”, as Sir Ken Robinson calls it. This is done through careful observation of the self and also by trial. School needs to provide students with the opportunity to consider what “their story” is or could be to ensure a successful professional activity and further development according to the dynamics of their personality.

MyStory illustrates professional activity in different fields and, at the same time, it includes a critical view upon professions offering students the chance to consider the challenges and rewards in several professional fields. Classes have already been implemented using MyStory materials with students of medicine. Both teachers’ and students’ feedback was positive in terms of the added value such materials can bring to class through their authenticity. Thus, MyStory can help create the link between school and the labour market by raising the awareness of learners of key aspects to consider when choosing their field of activity.

6. Student empowerment

Last but not least, students find themselves at a loss, trapped in the middle of all of the above: they become more and more aware of the changing dynamics they are surrounded by, many of them are guided by teachers who still balance teaching updates and the freedom the system offers, they have to “obey” the textbook but be ready to face reality after graduation. Students are no longer willing to listen and act, they want and need to be listened to and guided in their actions. As with all changes, education can only deal with this one step at a time.

Drawing guidance lines, creating opportunities for exploratory learning, using technology for its educational purposes and contextualisation are some of the directions which can be taken to ensure a smooth catch up. Still, the ultimate criterion is that of relevance for the learner: it is their story that matters, their story that is being written and it is only normal that they should be allowed and supported to do this as suits them best.

Conclusions

MyStory project is complementary to all learning objects in school. This is due to the fact that it valorises life experience in all its complexity: people, actions, feelings, experience, dreams, opinions and interpretations. The materials the project offers engage the receiver (reader or listener) in a dynamic relation with an authentic life experience which can only be accessed through the stories of those who have lived it. It is by going back to the roots of human experience that we can gain the wisdom to make use of the novel things and put them to good account so as to benefit us.

MyStory is about perspectives, about seeing where each generation/beneficiary is “situated” and helping them meet in a such way that they could all benefit from the encounter. MyStory is about subjective history, the one that impacts more on the listener through its authenticity – it is a first-hand account. MyStory is about Knowledge, about the tacit knowledge which both generations transfer to each other. Be it life experience of the elderly or IT knowledge of the young, they all add to a new understanding of the reality around. MyStory is about finding the common ground between worlds



which may seem to be too far away, too old or too modern. MyStory is about real interest and curiosity even if we may sometimes express it differently. We may need to know the other generation better before we understand how we reflect in their own eyes. And of course, MyStory is about striking the balance between what we think motivates learners and what learners are actually motivated by.

Following trends in education can prove to be a sandy foundation. On the other hand, constant updates are necessary and valid as long as they focus on learners' interests and abilities. Using incentives in class on a regular basis not just as ice-breakers is actually adapting information to the curiosity of the learners and making them discover new meaning and uses in a common given data item. Reality shows that education does change whether we, teachers, are more or less aware of it. The aim is that with the technological updates we still keep a sense of what is meaningful and relevant for the learner. Only that intake which can be valorised will be relevant for the learner and will therefore trigger continuous personal and professional development.

Through its intergenerational context blended with ICT, MyStory project offers a well balanced approach valuable for both teachers and students. The absolute gain of using MyStory is that it rewards all parties involved and sets the way for further and deeper exploitation of the self through lifestories.

References

- [1] Kurt Nelson, Motivation and the Brain: How incentives affect the brain and motivation, Research paper, www.lanterngroup.com/papers/motivebrain.pdf, accessed August 12, 2013.
- [2] Cameron, J., & Pierce, D. W. (1994). 'Reinforcement, reward, and intrinsic motivation: A meta-analysis'. Review of Educational Research, 64, 363-423.
- [3] www.mystories.eu
- [4] <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/02/120222133431.htm>