Docente Europeo – a unique student mobility project

Kirsten Limstrand
Bodø University College, Norway
Kirsten-Limstrand@hibo.no
Tlf. +4775517745, +4797150760

The following article is based on some of the experiences of the 72 students participating in the two mobility periods in connection with the Comenius project "Docente Europeo- The European Teacher". The students spent 4 weeks in the host country. The participating countries are Slovakia, Italy and Norway. All the students have been interviewed upon their return to their native country. Local seminars have been organized with mobility students participating. Six mobility students (two from each country) participated in a round table discussion at the final Docente Europeo conference in Palermo in April 2005

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What do you learn in four weeks?
The mobility periods have been relatively short in this project. Many things were supposed to happen in only four weeks, and many of the students felt that the mobility period was very hectic. The culture of the host country was also an important aspect of the project. Therefore, days and weeks felt too short for some of the students. In addition to studying the teacher role and the culture of the host country, mobility students spent time getting to know local students. They were also supposed to mingle with students from the other participating country. Moreover, students felt a need of realizing some of their own dreams and plans in the host country, far away from home. In Bodø (north of the Arctic Circle in Norway), some of the students seized the opportunity of going even further north: to Svalbard, the exotic “winter land” halfway between Tromsø and the North Pole. On Svalbard, the sun is absent for about 4 months in the winter, but in the summer you can enjoy the midnight sun during the same number of months. The students’ curiosity was great: They wanted to see more and learn more about the host country. However, the main foci of the project were school systems and teacher and student roles.

Iveta Kohanová was one of the Slovak students at the Final Conference i Palermo in April 2005. She is a student at the Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Informatics of Comenius University in Bratislava. Iveta’s mobility took place in Palermo, Sicily. Even if she says it had been learning for life, she gives some recommendations for a future mobility, e.g.:

- Four weeks is not enough
- It’s necessary with a selection of student participants and domestic consultant teachers who really speak English to avoid a lot of language problems

The mobility has strengthened us in the conviction that a certain basis in English as a common language (or another lingua franca) is necessary in order to get an adequate benefit from such a project. It has also convinced us that a four week mobility period is too short. Mobility should last a minimum of six weeks, say most of the students. An exception here are students with responsibility for small children. They express that a short mobility period made it possible for them to participate in the project.
Before going abroad, the Slovak students attended an English course where they also got information about the project. During the mobility, they followed cultural courses and got the possibility to learn some new teaching methods, observe differences in school systems and improve their language knowledge and personal development.

The following schedule describes the activities that have been done concerning the project:

1st week - getting to know local schools and people, choosing the subject of the project
2nd week - observation in a secondary school, preparation of materials and tools
3rd week - teaching in English, didactical situation
4th week - evaluation and presentation of the project

About teaching in English
Iveta felt that for students in the secondary school in Palermo they were some kind of "attraction". Most of the students had never before had lessons in English given by a foreign teacher, and she felt that they liked it, even though they were not speaking English very well. Anyway, they tried. “This fact made them quite active during lessons; we were a good motivation for them”.

In addition to teach their subject, mobility students informed about the society and culture of their home country. The secondary school students found Slovakia on the map and wanted to know more about it. On the other hand, also for the mobility students, teaching in English was a new experience. All the Slovak students had been teaching mathematics or physics in their native language for some years, but this was new experience. They realized that it is not so easy, even if they speak English. They had to learn a lot of new technical English terms, and they also had to understand and know the mentality, way of behaviour and habits of students in the host country, which they felt very important. The cultural course during the mobility was necessary, making the students more familiar with history, habits, language, kitchen, music, media and ordinary life of people of the host country.

Is cultural knowledge necessary?
Peter Vankúš from Bratislava was in Norway during the mobility, at Bodø University College. Peter was practicing in an upper secondary school during the mobility period. He noticed some very interesting facts about the Norwegian school system, the organization of schools, the schools’ equipment and facilities. For him the most interesting thing was the organization of the students’ study, their schedule, subjects and especially the students’ work during lessons. “All these activities gave us very useful ideas for our future career as mathematics teachers. Many of the methods and ways of working with students that we observed are for us inspiring and we would like to apply them in our own teaching practice”, he says.

Peter was enthusiastic about the cultural course (Norwegian language, history, culture and society). “The cultural course helped us obtain a wider perspective on Norway and Norwegian education”, he says. He also noticed how important it is for teachers to know the cultural and social background of different country if he wants to choose proper ways of teaching for students in that country. Peter means that in order for a teacher to be a “European teacher”, he must have a lot of information about European countries and their educational system.

He gave the following conclusions from his mobility experience:

- Generally, mobility was very useful for us.
• We obtained a lot of information about the Norwegian school system and organization of schools.
• We observed inspiring teaching methods and ways of working with students. These new methods we can use in our future teaching practice.
• We learnt facts about the Norwegian culture and society. Thus, we better understood differences in education between various European countries and the necessity to know each other in order to be a “European teacher”.
• We made contacts with professional teachers, researchers and students. These contacts will help us to be in touch with the modern European education.
• The mobility experience will help us manage future European projects orientated towards teachers and students more easily.

New perspectives
“In my personal experience, mobility has been the key to understand what Europe is, to exchange my home experiences and my knowledge with other students from all around Europe and world”, says Francesco Lannino. He is a philosophy student at the University of Palermo. He was in Norway during the mobility, at Bodø University College.

According to him, one of the best advantages of the mobility experience comes from the possibility it gives you to detach your point of view from the daily full–immersion in the national reality you come from. He means it’s quite normal that everyone is used to concentrate his whole attention on the issues concerning specifically his reference environment; notwithstanding they also know that the European dimension has grown in meaning and importance during the last years, and that every member of this new and wider environment should understand the opportunities and the new problems that comes from this “borders boasting”.

He tells us that he has learned a lot about the specificity of the teacher’s role in his own country by comparing his working conditions with those of the other students. His case is really particular, because he’s going to be a philosophy teacher, and probably Italy is one of the few countries where philosophy resists as a curricular subject on its own. “I knew a lot of things about the culture of the hosting country – obviously in the limits that comes from the short time spent there – and I knew a lot of things about my country’s culture too, by looking at it from a detached point of view, through the eyes of the foreigners who spoke with me”.

Francesco says there’s no needing to say that all the perspectives he’s exposing would never have born in him without the mobility experience. This experience has had a great effect also on the motivational issues. Before leaving for Norway he was somehow disappointed about his teacher education and about his school experience in the home country. But the mobility gave him a big push to carry on his work in a better way when he came home. After the mobility, in his mind, the teacher’s role lost its “traditionalistic” and “repetitive” character, to enter in a more innovative and wide–minded dimension.

New methods and learning for life
The comparison between school systems showed Francesco Lannino the weak and strong points of the Italian school system: “of course I noticed that we surely care too much about the “selective role” of school, about the cultural aspects and about evaluation, while we have less attention towards the social–relational aspects of education; we still privilege individualism, while we’re not able to manage well a cooperative method – both in learning and in teaching”. His meaning is there’s no doubt – and the European Union is moving in this precise direction – that the mobility dimension is an important milestone for a gaining awareness of the
specificity of every culture – including our one – and he thinks that all students should be allowed to experience a training period abroad. “I always said since I came back from Norway that I had learnt more in a single month than in a whole year in my home country, and that I hadn’t just acquired new professional skills, but also a new perspective on my job and on myself and my environment, a feeling that is comparable to a breath of fresh air on a mountain’s peak”.

Francesco would strongly suggest expanding opportunities for mobility on all school levels, because it’s an experience of high formative level, which gives a lot of opportunities to improve professional and social skills through the confrontation with other cultural and social realities. The strongest feeling he carried with him after this experience is a deep will to know, a strong curiosity which leads him to open his eyes and reinvent his perspective continually. “The best gift I might imagine was a new look on a well–known reality, and this experience has fulfilled this desire”, he says.

Is subject knowledge important?
One of the Norwegian students participating in the Final Conference, Alice Ramberg Eriksen, is boasting the subject knowledge of the teachers in the host country Slovakia, and also the respect this created in the students.

She had her practice at lower secondary school. The teachers she observed taught mostly mathematics. She noticed that the level of the mathematics lessons were higher in Slovakia than in Norway at the same school year. “In my opinion and experience the students are more interested and committed to a subject when they can feel the teachers’ enthusiasm and skills”. After her mobility in Slovakia, she has started to wonder if Norwegian teachers are underestimating their students and what they are able to learn. They should make the students more aware of what we’re expecting from them, she thinks.

Alice started to work as a teacher last fall, and she has experienced that teachers in Norway have to be generalists, as opposed to Slovakia, were they were more subject specialists. She’s teaching 8 different subjects in her class: Norwegian, mathematics, science, art, geography, special education, music and physical education. When she has all these subjects in her group, she can be more aware of the students’ development - socially, professionally (related to subject knowledge), psychically and emotionally. “I get to know each student very well, and I know the best way for each of them to learn, I know their strong sides and also what they have to work more with.”, she says.

Social workers or subject teachers; generalists or specialists?
The "European Teacher” – a social worker or a subject teacher? The question was raised both during the local Comenius conference in Bodø and at the Final Conference. Experiences from students in mobility tell us that both Sicily/Italy and Slovakia are giving more emphasis to subject knowledge and specialist teachers, while Norway makes a point of the teacher as a social worker and a generalist. Both views have advantages and disadvantages, according to the students. Alice felt that giving too strong emphasis to subject knowledge may obstruct the cooperation between students – a very important area in Norwegian schools. ”In Slovakia we observed a didactical situation where the students had to cooperate. They solved the mathematical problems very well, but they did it on their own, without discussing the exercise”, she says.

“This is something that I’ve been thinking about since then; that the school in Slovakia, from what I saw, doesn’t attach importance to social and cultural skills”.
On the other hand, Alice has become more aware of the importance of subject knowledge. She has been conscious of how important it is that we exchange our knowledge and personal experiences as teachers. “In this way we can develop our school systems and ourselves as teachers”.

“The mobility has changed my life”
This is what one of the Italian students said at the Final Conference. It’s interesting to notice that a relatively short mobility period can have such a great impact. But this is not so strange after all, when you think about the big contrasts and differences the mobility students met, between their own schools and the schools in the host country. Norwegian students were impressed by the subject knowledge of Slovak and Italian teachers. But they also found that the respect for and the distance between teacher students and their tutors/professors were unnecessarily large.

On the other hand, Slovak and Italian students were surprised and amazed by the status of equality and the warm social tone between teachers and students in the teacher education in Bodø, Norway. They also found some of the same equal status between teachers and students in secondary school. The mobility students felt that secondary school and teacher education students were met by respect.

One of the Italian students told during the Final Conference that she tried to behave in the same way when she met her tutors after the mobility period. She hoped to be met by the same behaviour. But it did not work. After having wondered about this for a while, she realized that it was only she and her fellow students who had participated in the mobility, not her tutors. Teacher educators/tutors had not observed and experienced the same thing as their students. For the tutors, the mobility periods were “business as usual”. This makes it hard to explain what has happened, after you get home.

Challenges and real changes
The project Docente Europeo is over, but the thoughts and ideas from the project live on and should be followed up, according to the students. “Next time teacher educators and tutors should go abroad together with the students. Then we can reflect together on what we have learnt, after returning home”, says Laura Cammarata, one of the Italian students. She is one of the students with responsibility for small children. She’s therefore pleased with the fact that the mobility lasted only four weeks. In view of this, maybe the length of the mobility periods should be flexible, so that a larger group of students and tutors could participate.

The mobility students have observed and experienced both strong and weak points of the school and educational system in the host country. They have had a desire to tell about their experiences back home; especially when they have wanted to change something. But this has not been an easy task, partly due to the fact that only students have been out there experiencing another school reality. In order to succeed in getting real changes, both teachers, students and tutors should participate in the mobility. This is emerging clearly from the students’ feedback. Another weakness is the lack of formal structures at the home universities to intercept and take care of the students’ experiences. Too much depend upon the students own initiative and courage to share their feelings and experiences. Lasting changes are grounded on a formalization of experiences and finds, followed by discussions in the organization.
What are the most interesting differences in the teacher roles observed in the different countries? Students have pointed out the Norwegian teachers’ competencies in the social area, with less emphasis on subject matters. Slovak and Italian teachers are skilled experts, creating an atmosphere of respect and discipline with their students through knowing their subject. But the one does not rule out the other: we can learn from each other. It is, for instance, possible to have a dialogue with our students, keeping at the same time a clear perspective on learning and development. As the Norwegian student Alice put it: “we’re pampering too much and challenging too little in Norwegian schools”. At the local Comenius conference in Bodø, one main discussion theme was “the possibility of creating the necessary sense of security and at the same time give challenges to our students”.

A slogan for the new European teacher might be: Security and challenges! To this the participating students could not agree more.

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Kirsten Limstrand