Abstract

Student mobility has had a central place in the Comenius 2.1 project “Docente Europeo – The European Teacher”. A total of 72 students participated in the mobility between the partner universities in Norway, Slovakia and Italy. Students took part in different activities during the mobility, both on campus and in secondary schools. The paper will describe some of these activities and will focus on the results of the project mobility. One of the main goals of the mobility of the future teachers has been to give them insight into the adaptability of the education in different countries in the European Community.

Key words: Student mobility, teacher training, teacher role, teaching competencies, Socrates Comenius Project

1. The Comenius 2.1 Project “Docente Europeo - The European Teacher”: a short description

The “Docente Europeo” Project is a three-year Comenius 2.1 project, involving three European countries – Italy, Norway and the Slovak Republic. Partner institutions have been University of Palermo, Comenius University of Bratislava and Bodø University College. The project has been coordinated by Collegio Universitario ARCES, Palermo.

1.1. Background for the project

The overall idea of the “Docente Europeo” project took its inspiration from the Bologna Declaration and the European Council of Lisbon, which focus on searching for common European answers to common European challenges in higher education and training systems. The project aimed specifically to develop in student teachers the practical approach of learning, allowing them to experience school life in a European environment.

1.2. Target groups

The target groups were student teachers and teachers involved in initial training, secondary school teachers and decision makers, such as head teachers, faculty deans, head of departments involved etc.

The project actions aimed at analysing the European development of teachers’ skills by identifying the key contexts and the relation among contexts according to the following scheme:
1.3. Project phases and methodology

The main phases of the project were:
1. Analysis and comparison of Italian, Norwegian and Slovak national educational system
2. Research into the methods employed in initial teacher training in the three countries involved
3. Mobility initiatives for students in the three countries, in order to be able to compare the various training approaches
4. Trans-national meetings to launch, contextualise and sustain research on a common ground, prepare and/or compare materials, establish parameters for assessing experiences
5. Evaluation and publication

The partners involved in the project shared the idea that, apart from disciplinary skills, it is transversal competences that have a fundamental and crucial role in the ideal model of the European teacher. Indicators and descriptors for the different transversal competences were developed, along with research tools (e. g. questionnaires for interviews) and tasks for exercises during mobility.

2. Activities during mobility

Student mobility has had a central place in the Comenius 2.1 project “Docente Europeo”. During the two 4-week mobility periods a total of 72 students participated in the mobility between the partner universities in Norway, Slovakia and Italy. Students took part in different activities during the mobility, both on campus and in secondary schools.

2.1. Activities on campus

During the mobility, students took part in several activities on campus. The most important of these were:
- Introduction to the host University
- Introduction to European programs (Socrates, Leonardo …)
- Cultural course:
  - Introduction to host country language and society
  - Introduction to host country history and politics
- Practical exercise: ”Aquarium activity”
- International Round Table (Focus Group Discussion)
- Observation of lectures at host University
- Information briefings
2.2. Activities off campus

The most important activities off campus were the following:

- Visit to institutions (kindergarten, primary and secondary schools ...) of special interest
- Visit to places of special interest (museums, monuments, sights and landmarks ...)
- Practice in secondary school:
  - Observation of teaching activities in class
  - Preparation of didactical situation together with tutor
  - Documentation (videos, photos, written report) of didactical situation

3. Main results of project mobility: Examples from Bodo

3.1. Practical exercise: “Aquarium activity”

Guidelines

In the “aquarium activity” students were divided in two groups, A and B. The activity was conducted by supervisors from the university and consisted of three stages:

Stage 1

Group A was simulating a simple, non-professional everyday situation, during which a task had to be carried out in a given amount of time. Group B observed with the aid of a checklist or with specific observation tasks in mind.

Stage 2

Group B carried out a similar simulation, whilst the first group in its turn observed utilising the same instruments, and/or with the same tasks.

Stage 3

On completion of the activity, the two groups came together again, and the moment of “examining reality” took place, during which individuals brought up points linked to their observations during the course of the simulation.

Observation criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactive communicative competences:</th>
<th>Planning competences:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does the group/the participants</td>
<td>How does the group/the participants?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• deal with linguistic and cultural obstacles?</td>
<td>• decode the needs of the others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• give signs of feedback?</td>
<td>• set aims concerning the perceived needs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• express and interpret nonverbal messages?</td>
<td>• choose methods, tools, and working ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• act on behaviours of approval, disapproval, and refusal?</td>
<td>to obtain their goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• check if the message has been understood?</td>
<td>• check the started courses, processes, and outcomes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of practical exercises

A. Interactive communicative competences:

A group of international students, taking part in a student exchange program in Bodo are making plans for a joint weekend tour. The group members differ, in preferences as well as in economy.
B. Planning competences:

- The group is making plans for and organising a trip to Svalbard/Spitzbergen with an international group of students.
- The group represents a student organisation planning an international day at the University.

Feedback from students

Comments from the students “diaries”:

- The aquarium activity was useful to think with more attention about the processes that a group usually follows to achieve a result, and also about the difficulties of communication (not only due to the linguistic or cultural differences)
- It was funny and interesting to know something more about the other people belonging to the group
- I liked the way in which we have conversed, because we noted several aspects of the personality of each one and the different roles that everyone had
- The aquarium activity was very interesting and motivating both as observer and representative. The feedback was very important.
- You learn from observing others, but the “confrontation with reality” is the most important part

The supervisors’ evaluation

- The students seemed to take the assignments seriously. Despite some language problems, almost everybody took part (more or less) in the discussions.
- The fact of being observed was not important for the aquarium group members. From the beginning of the activity they were fully concentrated on the task to fulfil, and they forgot about the observers.
- The plenary discussion at the end, gave some of the students in the “aquarium group” some revelations. They were not aware of their use of body language, facial expressions etc… Neither were they fully aware of the roles of the group members (one or two seemed to be leaders, one a secretary etc, without being specifically assigned to their roles).

3.2. International Round Table: Focus Group Discussion

Guidelines

The supervisors chose a group of students from Italy, Slovakia and Norway, using the following criteria when choosing the participants: Nationality, fluency in English and gender. During the first mobility, the group size was 10. In the second mobility the size was reduced to 6.

The group of students were given themes to discuss, while the other students observed. One of the supervisors acted as a moderator for the discussion. The round table discussion lasted for about 60 min. After a short break, supervisors and the observing group of students made a few comments to the discussion.

Criteria for choosing themes of the discussion

1st mobility: Attitude scale questionnaire

- Students were invited to express their agreement or disagreement to 26 statements. The themes for the discussion were chosen from the statements with largest degree of disagreement.
Based on the results from the attitude scale the supervisor proposed the following themes: Planning, the role of syllabus and motivation

2nd mobility: Themes proposed by supervisors
• Similarities and differences between the school systems in the participating countries

Feedback from students
Comments from the students “diaries”:
• I like listening to other’s opinion. I have to exercise my listening ability. I think that to be a good speaker, you first have to be a good listener.
• Round table is very useful. I think it would be very good to use this method to change our ideas and to learn more about the others.
• The round table discussion was really interesting, because it gave us the possibility to express and compare our opinions about differences and similarities between Slovak or Italian school system and the Norwegian one; the presence of Norwegian students was very important to understand if what we noticed could be confirmed by a person directly involved in the system we were observing from an external point of view.
• I liked the atmosphere of this round table discussion because it was a big symphony and respect and calm tones even if we talked about different realities and points of view.
• I advise to realize more discussions during mobilities, it’s another way to get more information on what methods have which results.
• The round table idea was really great, although maybe it came a little too late.
• I liked the conversation, which was very interesting an “hot”. I liked to listen to what the group was taking about. I learned new things and even though I was not involved in the discussion, I agreed with the people who were involved.

The supervisors’ evaluation
• The international round table discussion is a valuable activity in an exchange program like “Docente Europeo”
• The theme most likely to give a fruitful discussion among the students is probably the observed differences and similarities between school systems in the involved countries. This theme should be one of the focus areas.
• 6 – 8 persons seem to be a good group size. If possible, both male and female students should participate and all students should have adequate English skills.

4. Some concluding remarks
Together with the didactical activities in secondary schools, practical exercises like the “aquarium activity” and the International Round Table (focus group discussion) have been an important part of the “total mobility experience” for students taking part in the “Docente Europeo” mobility program. Feedback form students show that these exercises have been “eye opening” experiences when it comes to realize and understand the similarities and differences between school systems in the involved countries.

Experiences of cooperation between universities were a basis for a proposal of new system of preparation of future secondary school teachers in the countries concerned, as well as for the preparation of thesis (Master, PhD).
References

Gassner, Otmar (ed.). *Strategies of Change in Teacher Education – European Views.*

