Learning Situations within an Informal context: Case Study (Ethnology and Folklore Course)

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Abstract

The informal framework could be identified as an accompanying tool to be used for the higher-level education, in particular when it comes to specific disciplines that, on account of subject matter and technique, entail a pragmatic side at the same time. One case specific case refers to the discipline Ethnology and Folklore, included in the syllabus of the first-year students in Philology. Handling the pedagogic activity based on proficiencies clearly highlights the practical dimension of study, the usefulness of the benefits of study for individuals and community. This is the reason why it appears helpful to produce/confront/generate the benefits of learning in an informal framework away from the formal context provided by the academic environment and the course proper that would represent additional configurations to provide in order to acquire information on substance and proficiencies. Pragmatic aspects are also underlined for the importance of the practical course, such as possible future work places or extracurricular activities to museums, expositions etc. Against this background, the concept of a partnership between the university and the Association TRADITION GROUP, that was founded in 2005 and deals with durable social, cultural/artistic and tourist advancement of the rustic settlements and horizontal groups in the Alba County appeared to be a manner of enhancing the capacity of students to attain knowledge about the folk culture in substance and intellectually as well. The essay departs from an abstract standpoint represented by the specialized literature and continues with illustrating the practical activities conducted during discussion groups that were organised alongside the lecture on Ethnology and Folklore throughout a six-month term. We detail some examples of activities with a complex character, without underlining the concentric principle of the entire process.

Keywords: learning situation; informal context; approach by competences; ethnology and folklore;

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1. Paper Rationale

In the contemporary society, the informal context seems a complementary solution to the academic education, especially for the disciplines with a practical aspect such as Ethnology and Folklore, during the first year of study for students in Philology. In the past few years, a frequently modified syllabus deducted the above mentioned object from two-hour lectures and two-hour seminar every week to only two hours of practical course per week.

Under the circumstances, the comprising of the contents and, inevitably, a certain arid character of the scientific information (delivered considerably), have represented a reason to search for new complementary activities as new means of acquiring information, skills, abilities connected to this object.

2. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

According to the opinions in the domain, elaborating the university curriculum means devising and structuring the proper learning situations of the students, an action which necessarily presupposes prefiguring the learning and formation experiences which they will undertake.

The learning situation represents a key-element of the curriculum concept, a pedagogical contest configured by the convergent conjugated action of the following main categories of elements: the learning objectives formulated in an operational manner, the content of the learning process, the learning task, the teaching-learning and evaluation methodology, the material resources of the educational and learning environment, the characteristics of the communicational (didactic) context and of the relational context, the time resources. A well-prefigured and constructed learning situation from a logical and psycho-pedagogical point of view, anchored on the aimed educational finalities, can determine, at the learner’s level, positive, desirable learning and formation experiences.

The learning and formation experience represents a component of the structure of the curriculum which refers to the personalised modality to interiorise the learning situation of apprehending the learning situation, to the personal comprehension generated by a learning situation, a comprehension which can be objectified in different changes of the cognitive, affective and psycho-motor structures. It represents more than a personal reaction to a learning situation; faced with the same learning situation those who learn have different learning experiences, configured and modelled by their own personality traits and their own subjectivity. A curriculum cannot anticipate the vast register of the individual experiences, but can plan learning situations proper for the aimed objectives, with the hope that they can generate successful, beneficial and constructive learning experiences.

From a pragmatic perspective, the main challenge of the curriculum is represented by the transposition, ‘translation’ of the themes to be studied in relevant learning and formation experiences. [1, 2, 3].

Approaching the didactical process through skills “emphasizes the pragmatism of the learning process, the futility of the learning process for every individual and for the society.” [6] Starting from this hypothesis, our intention was to involve the students into the logical equation: “Why do we have to study Ethnology and Folklore? What is the use of the theoretical aspects of this practical course?” Nevertheless, the students in Philology may find different motivations even during the first lecture: considering objects such as Mythology, History, Language History, Dialectology, History of Literature, History of Art, Literary Theory, Linguistics, Sociology, Psychology, Aesthetics, History of Religion etc. as directly connected Ethnology and Folklore, students will learn to use different instruments which will improve the capacity to read and interpret a literary text in a critical manner and to identify the traditional, ethnographic and/or monographic element in a literary text. This is also due to the fact that it is impossible to isolate the study of Folklore from other theoretical, methodological or practical aspects which are to be enabled by the above mentioned objects. To these motivations, we could add pragmatic aspects regarding future workplaces or extra-curricular activities in museums or different ethnographic exhibitions, the organization of specific events, professional practice, etc.
For the above mentioned reasons, it seemed useful to create/provoke/facilitate learning situations in informal contexts, outside the academic frame and lectures and its methods seemed useful to us. Specialists in the educational fields underline the fact that “the problem of the learning situations – as situations to form skills – resides in ensuring a balance between the real and the simulated/patterned situations for the following reasons: on the one hand, the school/university cannot cover a complete register of real professional or extra-professional situations, which require and use various skills which the future graduates have to acquire; on the other hand, the ultimate aim to acquire skills is not to practice them in simulated situations or in patterned real situations but in real professional situations.” [6].

The creation of this kind of situations seems a viable solution to sustain the opportunity to gain theoretical information. “It is important that the learning situations: reproduce/create the technical, material and logistic conditions of the real professional situations, also the temporal and psycho-social professional conditions; to stimulate the student to make cognitive and active approaches specific for the skill action: the usage, integration and transfer of information, abilities and attitudes as well as autonomy and responsibility.” [6].

3. Author’s contribution on the existing theory and practice in educational field

This way, we consider that students are more likely to manage an optimal transfer of skills into real professional situations after they graduation. In the light of this demonstration, context is of great importance. We choose to present an informal context, because the conditions required by our intentions cannot be reproduced into an academic environment. Moreover, an extra –motivation for the students would be their preference to step outside the academic environment and to meet directly a different social, cultural environment, with a different type of mentality.

The first theoretical lectures offer the students the scientific tools necessary to step outside the academic frame (the delimitation of the theoretical terminology so that terms such as ethnographic, folklore, anthropologic, ethnographic area, sociological method, ethnographical method, ethnographical investigation, informer, sample etc.). Two important aspects are to be followed for the ethnographic method [4]: the ethnographic inquiry, as a first step for the work of the ethnologist and the ethnographic document, meaning “any information source available to the ethnological knowledge inside a community”; “a reality transformed as symbol of ethnologic heuristics.” Related to the investigation, the term “into the field” was designated by specialists to represent the place to collect direct information. The field work gives the observant or the investigator (“indiscrete witness”) the possibility to be part of a usually foreign environment. This kind of work was very plastic described by Claude Lévi-Strauss to his return from the Amazonian forest: You have to wake up with the sunrise and stay awake until the last individual go to sleep and sometime watch over their sleep; you have to know how to be invisible but always there; you have to see everything, to retain everything, to note everything, to be humiliating indiscrete, to beg information to a small dirty child, to be ready to use complacency and any lack of attention and to be able for days to repress any curiosity and remain secluded by some affective disposition of the tribe. [4] It is said that the only rule of the field researcher is to respect the investigated materials and sources.

Nonetheless, our case not representing a specialization in Folklore or Ethnology, the proper field work is reserved only to those students especially keen on ethno-folkloric aspects, who do, most often, field research with the aim of writing a BA thesis or a study.

In the light of these interests, the idea of a partnership with the association TRADITION GROUP [7], set up in 2005 and preoccupied with sustainable cultural-touristic and social development of the rural communities in Alba County, seemed a solution to improve the students’ acquisition regarding folk culture, both in its material aspects and in its spiritual ones. An important objective of this association aims at training and formation actions of the youth through art and culture so that a partnership between the university and such an institution has become desirable for the objectives of both parties. The main objective of the agreement between the two institutions was the organisation of practice workshops on different themes held in Bucerdea-Vinoasa, Alba County, at the
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Ethnographic Museum and the Workshop of Weaving and Sewing. Governed by the principle ‘Living with Traditions’, the weekly workshops came to replace the practical aspect of the lecture Ethnology and Folklore, offering an alternative and stimulating creativity and curiosity.


It was proved thus that the projects of the organisation aim at memory preservation and the preservation of the tradition of some crafts that seem to be slowly forgotten, at recovering and preserving patrimonial objects, at learning specific techniques and operations, at understanding the rural life and mentality, as well as at noticing the symbiosis between old and new, rural and urban as well. An important aspect is the non-compulsory character of the activities for the students, the statistics showing that more than half of the students that study Ethnography and Folklore in their first year participated constantly to all the activities. Another essential aspect is the involvement of the university into the project, by ensuring the access of the students to the pre-established periodical activities.

4. Author’s contribution on the topic

We detail some examples of activities with a complex character, without neglecting the concentric principle that lay behind the entire process:

A1: To learn the notion of “patrimony” and the types of possible patrimonies according to the legislation, e.g. Law 182/25 Oct. 2000. Some juridical, but practical aspects were discussed, paying special attention to the nuances of terminology (mobile and immobile patrimony, national and universal patrimony, UNESCO patrimony, fund and thesaurus etc.). Objects were used as examples, e.g. an old icon from the 18th century by Simon Oprovici and other objects from the domestic rural environment. The objective was to create a direct contact between the students and the treasury objects and to make the students understand that this kind of objects might be present any time around. The attitude towards the patrimony objects ought to be not a rigid lab one, but an interactional one.

A2: To situate the area correctly from an ethnographic point of view. The specialist presented the map of the county, chromatically divided in ethnographical areas: Secașele, Târnavele, Moșnilea Amapaului and Arieșului, Țara Moților, Bazinul Mureșului, Țara Vinului, Valea Frumoasei, Valea Sebeșului. Every area was presented in its characteristics.

A3: To complete an exhibit sheet. The Ethnographic Museum hosted a reconstructed rural house and the workshop represented a recreation of a village sitting with /women people in the area. The museum has detailed sheets for all the exhibits, containing photos and information such as: FAE number, inventory number, the name of the exhibit, its title, provenience, author, date, material, technique, dimensions, its patrimonial importance, the state of preservation, description, acquisition price, restoration etc. After a little practice on some exhibits, every student was able to complete an inventory sheet for a patrimonial object.

A4: To read legends and to obtain information about folk superstitions and believes.

A5: To learn lexical dialectical elements, together with technical terms necessary for the tolls in the workshop (i.e. the students received worksheets with terms used in the process of fibre processing – special scissors to cut the wool, combs, distaff, reeling device, reel, warping device winch, weaving loom – then the objects were identified. Some of the objects date from the 20th century and are still functional). Some of these activities turned into seminars of dialectology or language history as students come from different rural or urban areas as well as from different ethnographical regions.

A6: A local history lecture was delivered in order to valorise the archaeological and historical patrimony: catalogues and images from Apoloul Dacian Fortress / Piatra Craiului, situated very close to the village at a height of 1078 m, a very well-known archaeological site, also mentioned by Ptolemeu, and which used to be an
important military, economic and spiritual centre. The Museum also revealed the existence of an archaic religious life, reflected into 18th century paintings by Simion (Oprovici) Bălgrădeanul and presented an old photographic exhibition which spoke of the history of the village.

A7: To present a history of the processing of textile fibres (by reviewing the already known terms but also by introducing new ones as well as some historical data and terminology, including here Herodotus’ mentioning that culture). Students received written materials that had been presented during the practical activities. They had the possibility to observe closely the fabrics and the textile fibres, as well as to familiarize with the raw materials and the stages of the process.

A8: To watch a documentary film made by the members of the local community, the members of which recreate the event of “The Wheat Crown” annually. Elements of folk costumes were also discussed, together with aspects related to the agrarian calendar.

A9: To create a finite product (a peasant knapsack) by going through all the stages (plaiting the rope, ornaments, overcasting the material etc.). The activity developed during all the meetings, encouraging team work and individual competition, with the specific purpose for the students to create a useful object of their own and underlining the importance of such an activity.

For future optimal activities, we suggested a reporting person – a student to keeping evidence of all activities by writing a diary where new words, activities, sheets, boards, objects, etc. would be mentioned. Other conclusions were drawn through the direct observations made by the teacher: the importance of such activities is undeniable, as the results prove it, despite the “sacrifice” of some theoretical activities; the students’ presence during these activities was not compulsory and the examination subjects had no reference to these extra activities so they had no influence upon the final exam mark.

Conclusions

A SWOT analysis of our activity for one semester brings out the following observations on behalf of our students, as the final questionnaires show: **Strong points**: to learn specific terms of ethnology and folklore, to learn traditional methods of sewing and plaiting, to get to know the traditional domestic objects, especially for sewing and weaving; team work and the development of such spirit; a pleasant environment and open communication among students and between the students and the teacher; to learn different skills with the help of a competent person; **Weak points**: not all students are willing to get involved during the activities; the refusal to allocate time for this type of activities by some students; to renounce some of the planned activities on account of the lack of means of transport; the small amount of time dedicated to this type of activities; **Opportunities**: to apply theoretical knowledge related to folklore; to open new horizons for choosing a profession; to make traditional objects; to value abilities and skills acquired during the practical activities; to visit the local ethnographic museum; a direct contact with rural communities; **Threats**: to lose the perception of traditions and customs; the degradation of some materials in time; the impossibility of future generations to have access to correct information and authentic objects.

Far from being real field work, these informal meetings (sometimes under the form of “garment”) represent authentic, real, unique learning situations, impossible to be recreated in other spaces. They have enlarged the field of competencies and skills for the students and contributed to the group cohesion, to the development of the individual and group identity and to the students’ self-esteem. The positive aspects of this type of activities also consist in a better acknowledgement and dissemination of the local cultural patrimony.

References