Developing Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

It is of crucial importance to be aware that, function to different cultures, the meaning that people give to certain activities could be different from your own. The article presents some ways to develop a better EU cultural understanding for the first year students of the University Politehnica of Timișoara. Education means also getting the young generation’s attention to subjects that they are not aware of their importance. If the general social context does not put emphasis on culture, the formal education has to. Students reached an age when their minds are ready and willing to comprehend the cultural value of things, are able to appreciate the value the elements of the contemporary civilization and are able to compare and contrast the experiences of peoples and civilizations with one another.

Keywords: civilization, culture, awareness, ancient culture, young generation;

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization it is essential to know, at least, one foreign language to be able to better communicate, in any formal or informal situation, to be able to better understand any business environment, and last but not least to have better employment chances. It is well known that European Union enlargement has also involved a linguistic and cultural one. The European Communication Policy states that the European values such as: democracy, transparency and competitiveness are consolidated by multilingualism. In the current global marketplace, in order to get a job in an international company besides speaking a foreign language one has to be familiar with “best practices in international settings, to recognize cultural differences, to overcome ethnocentrism, to develop effective intercultural communication skills, to be familiar with codes of ethics, etc.” (Constantin, 2009:25). Nowadays,
scientists do not work isolated from the rest of the world but in cross functional teams. Therefore they need, besides up to date technical knowledge, other skills as well, such as: problem solving, working in teams, communication, etc. Consequently, universities have to prepare students to meet the requirements of the new working environment.

2. Developing cultural awareness

Cultural diversity is a characteristic of our EU society. Becoming aware of our cultural dynamics is a difficult task because culture is not conscious to us. Individuals reflect the opinions, concepts and attitudes of the groups they belong to because the concept of culture “relates to us at much deeper levels which are more difficult to change: levels to do with structures, values and beliefs” (Satul romanesc si maghiar, 2011 in Constantin, 2013:93) which make up the so called “hard core” of our culture. Culture cannot be separated as it is deeply embedded in people’s minds, “since we are born we have learned to see and do things at an unconscious level” (Quappe and Cantatore, para. 5). It is of crucial importance to be aware that, function to different cultures, the meaning that people give to certain activities could be different from your own; even when we speak about table manners, or dress code. Unless you have all the necessary elements to understand the message communication does not take place (Boboc, 2009:10). “Cultural pluralism implies the acceptance of the other, tolerance, plural coexistence, but with the possibility to sustain your own opinion” (Cucoș, 2000, as cited in Constantin, 2013:93). Cultural awareness becomes essential mainly when we have to interact with people from other cultures. Individuals should be aware that it is difficult to think and behave in the context of their own culture within the confines of another culture. Organisations can be compared to cultural mosaics. In a business environment there is no much room for misunderstandings, especially if they occur due to lack of cultural knowledge. When we assume that other people are similar to us we should be aware of the risk that they might be not. That is why it would be better to assume that there are differences, at least until similarities are proven. Each action has a cultural connotation. Experts point out the fact that subtle differences can have a far reaching impact. Being aware of the cultural differences reduces the risks of acting inappropriately. Business people should not minimize the importance of the cultural diversity, as it is not a temporary phenomenon.

3. Developing the cultural background of the UPT first year students

Having to teach a new course on culture and civilisation in a technical university is rather challenging. The social context is not of much help, as nowadays less and less emphasis is put on culture. For the design of the course we had this background information: number of students: 98; year of study: first year; length of the course: 7 weeks - two hour course; 7 weeks- two hour seminar; age of the students: 18-21; students: University “Politehnica” of Timisoara, Faculty of Civil Engineering (1 group) and the Faculty of Eletrotechnics and Telecommunication (2 groups); language of instruction: English, i.e. second or third foreign language; language level: mixed group ranging from A2 to C1 (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Useful information about the course content was provided by the discussions with the former lecturer whose courses focussed mainly on European Union institutions/ policy. This information was combined with the findings of a PhD thesis on communication on EU funds (Constantin, 2011) which revealed a reserve attitude as far as EU is concerned, not only in Romania in all European member states and a tendency of the European citizens to distant themselves from the EU matters. We decided to provide our students with the opportunities to explore and learn about ancient European cultures and civilisations thinking that in this way they will probably associate European Union less with the present day politicians and more with the prospect of a free war Europe. Therefore our Culture and Civilisation course was designed to focus on challenging the students to experience and enjoy the richness of various cultural epochs. We agree with Schneider and Barsoux’s opinion according to which “much too often the power of culture comes in retrospect” (2003: xi) and consider that the true value of European culture cannot be understood without bringing ancient history to life. Considering the limited number of hours at our disposal we decided to focus the courses on the evolution of the European culture and part of the seminars on EU member states. To follow the tradition of intellectual development the first courses were focussed on ancient cultures. We think that we should not deprive our students the opportunity to have another look at ancient culture with the eyes of a young person in his twenties, preparing to become an engineer. Even today, in the plurality of approaches to the studies of cultures, people talk about Mesopotamian culture, Dante, Michelangelo, and visit Chartres; then why not give our students a chance to recycle previous knowledge or why not may learn new things. In the seven week course students were
reminded about the beginning of the human race, the Neanderthal man, the first megalithic constructions (Stonehenge and Temples of Malta), the paintings of Altamira, the Mesopotamian culture, etc. Due to time restraints, after a short presentation of the Mesopotamian culture we focused only on the European culture and civilisation. The course was conceived as an interactive one; students having the possibility to intervene with questions and comments, critical thinking. Since it is not easy to keep 98 “advanced technology epoch students” interested for two hours, all the information was also accompanied by representative illustrations/music. They were shown pictures of famous places, of work of arts, as we cannot ignore the refinement of the culture’s visual language. Students’ feedback after the course on Mesopotamian culture proved that the decision taken about the content of the course was good. At the beginning of the course students were asked to listen to a fragment of a song (Dance with me till the end of love by Leonard Cohen) and identify the name of the town. They identified very quickly Babylon but very few could locate it nowadays. The presentation of Babylon was accompanied with the video presentation of the best-known Verdi’s Hebrew Chorus Slaves. Many students listened to it for the first time. However the most rewarding job satisfaction was their suggestion to go to see this opera together. Their suggestion also proved that they reached an age when their minds are ready to comprehend differently the cultural value of things. We continued our cultural trip through Middle Ages, Renaissance up the formation of the European Union. To develop a better EU cultural understanding, at the seminar, the 98 students had to make and present a project on a European member state. The presentation of each of the 28 EU members states had to follow the same plan, i.e.: general information about the country, national holidays, social customs, traditional food, business culture, five important places, five important personalities, dos and don’ts of communicating internationally, and stereotypes.

Each group had to use for each part of the plan three different sources of information and 5 minutes were allotted for each member of the team for the oral presentation; no rules were imposed as far as the presentation was concerned. There were two major drawbacks, i.e.: the seven weeks of the course/ seminars coincided with the first seven weeks of their student life and the fact that for one group, Civil engineering, the room allotted for the seminar was not equipped with video projector and they could not have power point presentations. Since the first year students did not know their colleagues, the teachers had to decide the team members. There was a random choice and to avoiding potential problems only the students present were distributed into work groups. Then each group representative had to draw lots to find out the EU state member they were going to write about. The last step was to choose the week they wanted to give the presentation and hand in the written report. The second problem was solved by the maturity of the students who used leaflets and posters to compensate the lack of equipment; their presentations were very good.

4. Experiment findings

In our opinion the experiment was extremely useful. First of all, the project has helped the students improve not only the cultural background but also their, negotiating skills as they to solve these problems: work distribution, written report made in time, order of the presentation, etc. The individual presentation was marked individually as there is universally acknowledged that if the individual contribution is not identified and recognised than there is the danger that only one person works in a group and the rest takes the credit. Secondly all the students were made aware of at least two different cultures, their own culture and the one they had to make research. By doing so they saw themselves in perspective. In each group we had around 8 European countries presented. Students were supposed to take notes during the presentation and ask questions to their colleagues. Those who had already presented their countries were required to find out 5 similarities and 5 differences in the way of doing business of the countries presented in that day. Besides the development of the cultural awareness we think that the cultural background was also developed since the exposure to so much information: five personalities and five important places, for 8 European countries, cannot avoid “side cultural effects”. More than this, students could speak about the places they visited and their experience there, improving thus team building and communication skills.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion we can say if the general social context does not put emphasis on culture, the formal education has to. There is no much room for misunderstanding in a business environment especially if they occur due to lack of cultural knowledge. Education means also gaining the young generation attention to subjects that they are not aware of their importance (Constantin, 2012). The advantage of teaching culture and civilization to students in the first
year is that they reached an age when their minds are ready to comprehend differently the cultural value of things. The courses on ancient culture develop their personality as there are a lot of things to be learned from antiquity. Qualitative information about ancient cultures help young people better assimilate the moral values that society impose, understand principles, standards and moral values and finally accept them, and by perceiving the differences tolerance level can be enhanced. People have to accept in others even those things that their culture forbids for them; people should have greater tolerance for others. But most of all they have to be aware of the cultural differences.

References


