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Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 9 (2010) 1998–2002

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCLTA 2010

Capabilities for a cosmopolitan citizenship in higher education The experience of the Technical University of Valencia

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Abstract

The capability approach (CA) has focused on how universities can enhance cosmopolitan students' capabilities in order to contribute to a fairer and more inclusive human development model (Nussbaum, 1997). The aim of this paper is to analyze two different initiatives developed at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV) in Spain, which have contributed to the creation and expansion of those capabilities amongst the student community. The first one is a formal space in which, since 1997, a cosmopolitan citizenship curriculum has been implemented (Boni, 2007). The second experience refers to an informal space called Mueve created by UPV students. Based on the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews we will provide some insights into the differences, similarities and synergies amongst those two spaces.

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Key words: global ethics, engineering, teaching, human development, students, cosmopolitanism

1. Context of the study. Formal and informal spaces at UPV to enhance cosmopolitan capabilities

In this paper we would like to analyze two spaces at UPV where we suggest cosmopolitan capabilities could be enhanced. The first one is a formal space in which two free elective subjects entitled *Introduction to Development Cooperation* and *Development Cooperation Projects* have been thought since 1997. The main assumption behind this proposal was that engineering students tend to occupy positions of responsibility in businesses and public administration. In consequence, a strategic approach to human development was to provide them with a serious and objective knowledge of the *third world* including a vision of the interdependent problems faced by humanity, whilst simultaneously raising awareness of the consequences of our actions and attitudes, as well as encouraging active social involvement and volunteering. Consequently, from the very beginning, critical thinking, a cosmopolitan viewpoint and empathy towards "*the different*", were assumed as essential elements of the proposal. The courses incorporated two important innovations. During the years, these two free elective subjects came to be implemented in several colleges and schools of the UPV, including Industrial Engineering, Agronomy Engineering, Civil Engineering, Computer Science, Telecommunications Engineering, and undergraduates in Business Management,

Life Sciences and Fine Arts. According to available information, during the last ten years, more than 3000 students have attended these subjects at the UPV.

The second space is an informal one named the *group Mueve*. Ten students from the technical college, Escuela Técnica Superior de Ingenieros Industriales (ETSII) of the UPV, established at the beginning of 2004 the group. These students, critical with the university environment and the educational approach (to produce ‘efficient’ professionals) decided to take action and promoted analytical thinking and participation among the student community. Some of the objectives of the group were to promote critical involvement and active participation among students. For this purpose, the group intended to carry out direct actions and campaigns inspired by solidarity, diversity, ethical and ecological principles. These campaigns had mainly a didactic purpose, promoting the development of a critical awareness and a social dimension in technical students. Therefore, the goal was to make the students aware of their future social relevance to achieve a sustainable development regardful of human rights and the natural environment. Thus, the group *Mueve* was seeking to generate a change of mind in the university environment to encourage a change in the whole of society.

2. Methodology of the study.

We interviewed a total of twelve people, six women and six men aged from twenty four to thirty years old; all of them with a technical background in engineering. The interviewees were selected as follows: three of them had both taken the subjects and participated in *Mueve*; another three only participated in *Mueve*; three more had only taken the subjects and did not have any experience volunteering for a social group, and finally the last three had taken the subjects and were involved in a social organization in order to acquire practical experience.

During the interviews, we started asking which ones were the abilities most developed during the courses or *Mueve*. Then, based on insights from different authors of the capability and human development school such Nussbaum (1997; 2005) and Walker (2006) and authors from other backgrounds, such De Paz (2007), we proposed a list of abilities to do with global citizenship. The ability list was as following: 1) Critical thinking (an ability to reason in logical and argumentative manner); 2) Empathy (wear somebody else’s shoes); 3) Participation (at local and global level); 4) Coexistence and intercultural respect; 5) Reflexiveness and 6) Curiosity. We asked the interviewees to organize those abilities following two different criteria: first of all, if either the subjects or the group had contributed to develop those abilities and secondly which were the most relevant abilities for them. Finally the interviews normally ended by asking the interviewee to add any other ability or topic that he/she considered interesting. As we will see in the next section new ideas related to the cosmopolitan abilities came to light, adding to the theoretical framework.

3. Discussion. Cultivating cosmopolitan capabilities at UPV

Of all the interviewees, only three both participated in *Mueve* and took the subjects. Two of them concluded that the subjects have provided a theoretical basis and knowledge and awaken sensitivities, whereas *Mueve* has given a positive realistic dimension opening the possibility of changes. E. phrased it as follows:

‘The subjects have given me a framework to interpret the world, showing me the structural motives. They were also useful to structure what I already knew. They helped me to reflect and think about social justice [...] *Mueve* had an inspirational spirit. It helped me to generate commitment and understand the changes [...] The subjects and *Mueve* had played a complementing role. *Mueve* was more locally orientated while the subjects had a global orientation. But we could say that they followed a logical evolution from local motives to global ones and from them to global justice. Both of them have provided me with an open mind and opened new horizons’.

Focusing on the specific contribution made by each space, the interviewees involved in *Mueve* explained how the group helped to acquire the following abilities: 1) Work properly in groups, organize themselves in groups and produce collective work. 2) Become aware and discover the ability to do things, and be able to change. 3)

Understand the changes and generate a commitment. 4) Persevere and fulfil obligations. 5) Promote a different perspective on life. 6) Develop a range of problem solving abilities and the capability to deal with stress. 7) Organize and manage ideas.

The answers given by the students who took the subjects point out a different set of abilities not acquire through life and group experiences but nevertheless valuable in the process of developing global citizenship: 1) Knowledge acquisition to understand the complexity of development. 2) Develop critical thinking. 3) The ability to participate actively and express a personal opinion. 4) The ability to listen, to be tolerant with different ideas and to be able to understand the reasons behind others' behaviour. 5) Awareness of the need to consider the context before taking action, particularly when facing situations that involve international cooperation.

These abilities are more reflexive, characteristic of a formal learning context such as the subjects. It is relevant to point out that the abilities described by the students who were involved in volunteer practical experience and the ones without such experience were almost the same. Although the low number of interviewees does not allow us to generalize, we expected the group who volunteer for practical experience to mention the abilities acquired through such experience more than they did. We will go back to this issue in the final conclusions of this paper.

In the last part of the questionnaire the interviewees were given a list of capabilities selected from the work of the authors mentioned in the previous section.

The most consensual cards picked by the interviewees who were involved in *Mueve* were participation, commitment, empathy and coexistence, and intercultural respect. A. says confirming this:

'Mueve was a participation forum, a space to seek agreement and ideas, to produce them, to get answers, positive or not. It was never an introspective or philosophical activity [...] Regarding commitment, *Mueve* contributed to develop group responsibility. If I commit to do something I don't fail to myself but to the whole group. The best proof of it, is that the group is still working. There was a real commitment to ideas [...] As a working space, *Mueve* allows us to confirm that others do not always share our ideas. Even in a relatively homogenous group. This allows you to identify your standpoint and to make an effort to understand the reasons behind others' ideas [...] As an ideas forum we were convinced that cultural diversity did add and not subtract. We could collaborate with students who were here under the Erasmus programme. And this was a way to become familiar with other cultures'.

Additionally, for those interviewees who took the subjects, the most mentioned ability was critical thinking. The rest of the cards were also valued positively but without reaching the level of consensus achieved among the students involved in *Mueve*. However, the importance of this sort of subjects in a technical context is recognized. For example, C. says:

'It's a shame we do not have more university spaces to become involved in [...] The university should be a place to develop culturally and not only scientifically [...] Here the teachers provide us with material but they are not particularly interested in checking whether we put it to good or bad use or indeed if we make any use of it at all'.

Following a similar line of thought, J. says in relation to the engineers' curriculum:

'It is important that not everything is economically orientated [...] after all we are going to become professionals with a certain level of power in our hands to take important decisions [...] this year I am becoming aware that most of this degree is economically orientated [...] We are only exposed to different criteria in this subject'.

Finally, we would like to mention three new abilities proposed by the interviewees. For example, E. suggests self-awareness as an essential ability, adding a suggestive nuance to reflexiveness.

'Being self-aware of the direction you want to take in life [in this way] stops you from seeing yourself as a person who goes with the flow and changes you into an active agent. This awareness to be able to change

or not is generated from critical thought and participation. Sometimes there are negative aspects because you can end up feeling paralysed, at a stand still. The excess of self-criticism can paralyse and frustrate us’.

Another two interviewees, who were involved in *Mueve*, mentioned the following abilities promoted by this space. JD adds two new capabilities, the ability to surprise and respect:

‘The ability to surprise [...] to give presents, not to buy them but to make them [...] surprises, many surprises [...] to be excited about doing something for others and to know that it will make them very happy’. ‘Respect [...] avoid judging prematurely [...] to respect somebody else’s decisions in their circumstances [...] we have experienced personal conflicts and the group has always behaved in a respectful way, each member giving their own opinion when asked but always respecting the other member’s decisions’.

DC emphasises another two abilities: initiative and lack of fear of change.

‘If you are socially committed, you want to participate in society and you can identify your role in it; all of these generate an initiative’. ‘Lack of fear of change or of challenge. At the beginning we had a strong pyramidal vision of the university organization so we convinced ourselves that a group of ants could do as much as a single person at the top of the pyramid’.

4. Conclusions

As previously mentioned in this article, this study allows us to venture some ideas regarding the potential of the university space as a driving force behind a transforming cosmopolitan citizenship.

The group *Mueve* appears as a space with great potential. The interviewees coincide that during their experiences in the group, they acquired new abilities related to organization and relationship skills (group work, problem solving, structuring ideas). Moreover, they said the platform had been for generating opportunities for practical actions to bring about change, thus challenging the preconception that those changes are almost impossible to achieve. It could be said that *Mueve* works towards a cosmopolitanism based on the local sphere as a place of action.

On the other hand, the subjects appear as a highly valued space by the interviewees, who emphasized the importance of such forums in a technical environment. Unlike *Mueve*, more experienced orientated, the subjects work towards a more reflective and conceptual cosmopolitanism: provision of relevant knowledge to understand the complexity of development, development of critical thinking, inner thinking, considering context before taking action, etc. All of the above are abilities mentioned in the interviews. However, contrary to our initial assumptions, the space offering volunteer experience in some subjects does not seem as much of an action booster as *Mueve*. This leads us to propose research into the differences between a temporary volunteer experience related to the subjects and the involvement in a university social forum.

Regarding the authors used as reference to create the theoretical framework and as inspiration of the study method, we would like to emphasise the potential offered by both the authors working on cosmopolitanism under the CA framework and other theoretical references outside this framework. Starting with the former, Nussbaum (1997; 2006) enabled us to ask about a list of cosmopolitan capabilities, which had previously been supplemented by input from outside CA. Also, Delanty (2006), Beck (2006) and Pietersee (2006) helped us to broaden the list of cosmopolitan abilities, as well as setting the difference between different types of cosmopolitanism, a question hardly dealt with by CA authors.

Looking at the study method it has been easier for us to promote discussion among the interviewees about the list of cosmopolitan abilities, which resulted in the proposal of new abilities by some of them.

Finally, with the help of evidence from previous research (Boni and Pérez-Foguet, 2008), we believe that both the subjects and *Mueve* are good forums to promote global citizenship. They are also complementary spaces, which can

be useful and inspirational to draw an outline for a future strategy plan to promote a transforming cosmopolitan citizenship at university.

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