

**MEANING AND DENTISTRY: ERASMUS+ DISCIPLINARY
AND PROJECT CULTURE**

**SIGNIFICATION ET ODONTOLOGIE: ERASMUS+, CULTURE
DISCIPLINAIRE ET DE PROJET**

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ABSTRACT: The article reports on the multicultural cooperation experience of three higher education institutions from the Netherlands, Latvia and Portugal involved in the

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Erasmus+ project “Transversal Skills in Dentistry: Content and Language Integrated Approach” funded by the European Commission. Delineating the concept of culture, the article aims at discussing the project culture and the disciplinary culture, namely, dentistry as a hard discipline and linguistics as a soft discipline within the context of the Erasmus+ project. Although disciplinary differences should be taken into account when working on project outcomes, the methods applied profitably exist simultaneously. Successful creation of project culture, which was established at the outset by careful selection of the profile and background of participating organizations, allowed the consortium to agree on the roles and tasks of each organization involved in the project. The level of networking, cooperation and commitment of each partner in consortium to the fulfilment of the tasks in the project resulted in a high assessment of the project by the State Education Development Agency of Latvia. Despite the taken-on challenges of the cultures when developing the project outcomes, the participating organizations established and ran a cohesive consortium with active involvement of all partners and with the common goals achieved.

KEYWORDS: multicultural cooperation experience, Erasmus+ project, disciplinary and project culture.

RESUME : Il s’agit d’un article concernant l’expérience de coopération multiculturelle de trois établissements d’enseignement supérieur des Pays-Bas, de Lettonie et du Portugal impliqués dans le projet Erasmus+ « Transversal Skills in Dentistry: Content and Language Integrated Approach » financé par la Commission européenne. Délimitant le concept de culture, l’article vise à discuter du projet de la culture et notamment de la culture disciplinaire, à savoir l’odontologie d’un point de vue objectif et de la linguistique d’un point de vue subjectif dans le cadre du projet Erasmus+. Bien que les différences disciplinaires doivent être prises en considération dans ce projet, les méthodes utilisées sont à intégrer aussi. La création réussie de la culture du projet, qui a été établie au départ par une sélection rigoureuse du profil et des antécédents des organisations participantes, a permis au consortium de convenir des rôles et des tâches de chaque organisation impliquée dans le projet. Le niveau de mise en réseau, de coopération et d’engagement de chaque partenaire du consortium dans l’accomplissement des tâches du projet a donné lieu à une évaluation élevée du projet par l’Agence nationale de développement de

l'éducation de Lettonie. Malgré les défis relevés par les cultures lors de l'élaboration des résultats du projet, les organisations participantes ont établi et dirigé un consortium cohérent avec la participation active de tous les partenaires et avec les objectifs communs atteints.

MOTS CLES : expérience de coopération multiculturelle, projet Erasmus+, culture disciplinaire et de projet.

Introduction

The landscape of the European Higher Education Area is shaped by 48 countries. They have different linguistic, political, academic, and cultural backgrounds, but they target at common aims. The increase of staff and student mobility in tertiary education as well as the promotion of employability across national borders are key aims of the European Higher Education Area member countries (EHEA, 2019). One of the opportunities to foster academic staff and student mobility is the Erasmus+ Programme, which aims to “tackle socio-economic changes [...] and to support the implementation of the European policy agenda for growth, jobs, equity and social inclusion” (European Commission Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2019, p. 74).

Erasmus+ Programme Key Action 2 aims at promoting cooperation at transnational level, supporting the exchange of innovative ideas, methods and practices and their implementation in partner higher education institutions (HEIs) at European level. Erasmus+ projects are multicultural entities, and the interaction of various cultures of the European Higher Education Area is seen in the light of enriching not only HEIs but also European societies.

This article reports on the multicultural cooperation experience (2015-2017) of three partner higher education institutions - Academic Centre for Dentistry Amsterdam, the University of Latvia and the Centre for Intercultural Studies of Porto, Accounting and Business School of Porto, involved in the Erasmus+ Programme Key Action 2 project ‘Transversal Skills in Dentistry: Content and Language Integrated Approach’ (Agreement No. 2015-I-LV01-KA203-013401) funded by the European Commission. The project comprised a group of academics and students representing various cultures, which not only created rich opportunities, but also posed challenges.

The concept of culture may mean various things to different people. Sarmiento (Sarmiento, 2014, pp. 606-607) argues that “multiculturalism is a judgment of existence: in a same physical or conceptual space, different people coexist, from different cultures (in terms of memories, options, references, values, preferences, projects, expectations, experiences, practices, and attitudes)”. Scollon, Scollon and Jones contend that culture is “a way of dividing people up into groups according to some feature of the people which helps us to understand something about them and how they are different from or similar to other people” and that people may belong to many different cultures at once (Scollon, et al., 2012, p. 6).

Considering the above arguments, multiculturalism within an Erasmus+ project is seen as existence of a group of academics and students from different cultures in the same physical and/or virtual space. Cultural diversity of an international project may increase its success, but dealing with cultural differences may also cause certain misunderstandings. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to address the challenges of multicultural cooperation experience in higher education by focusing on the project culture and the disciplinary culture within the context of Erasmus+ project.

Erasmus+ programme Key Action 2 project “Transversal Skills in Dentistry: Content and Language Integrated Approach”

The project “Transversal Skills in Dentistry: Content and Language Integrated Approach” focused on establishing transnational synergies between the HEIs and partnerships with professional dental associations in order to 1) identify the transversal skills required by the labour market in the field of dentistry; 2) assist HEI students in acquiring these skills through a Dentistry and English Language Integrated Learning course, using innovative study materials and open education resources (OERs).

The partnership of the project reported on in this article was built on the successes of the prior academic cooperation and careful selection of the profile and background of participating organizations, which allowed the consortium to agree on the roles and tasks of each HEI involved in the project.

Disciplinary and project cultures

The concept of culture has been much scrutinized, and it can be defined in different ways depending on the context it is employed. The discussion below is restricted to the approaches relevant for the context.

Culture is considered to be as a belief or value system or mental patterns that people of a particular group share. Duranti (1997, p. 27) points out that culture can be seen as a form of specific knowledge. Members of a culture must know certain facts, places, and people; they must also have a common way of thinking and world understanding (ibid.). Thus, members of a culture must share knowledge of a set of communication rules or conventions that people follow so that they can operate in a way that is acceptable to the other members of the given cultural group. This means that members of a project culture need to set internal communication rules and learn this knowledge. Another approach sees culture as communication (ibid, p. 33). Culture represents the world in different discourses such as reports, stories, tasks, theories, etc. Culture as a system of participation (ibid, p. 46) sees that any action, including verbal communication, “has an inherently social, collective, and participatory quality”. This implies that there are ample possibilities for a person to initiate, enter and maintain communication with other members of a culture or cultures. This system of participation also requires awareness that different parties are involved in a communicative act and that they need to share the existing resources such as languages, belief systems, and people (ibid.).

Thus, we can see that the concept of culture is multidimensional, as it comprises different practices, assumptions and attitudes that partners in consortium bring to an international project. The views of culture mentioned above are useful, because they help to shed light on different aspects of human behaviour in multicultural projects due to the complexity of the various cultural systems that may be involved.

According to Räsänen (2011), there are ethnic, local, disciplinary, and academic cultures. Ethnic culture pertains to the cultural background of lecturers and students, their values and experiences; local culture refers to the “source for exemplification of concepts and terms, local and intercultural communication conventions” (Räsänen, 2011, pp. 155-161). The above argument largely coincides with Duranti’s (1997) view of culture as a form of specific knowledge. Disciplinary culture is related to discourse conventions, conceptual frameworks and paradigms, hard vs soft sciences, and academic culture pertains to academic practices, teaching styles, beliefs, and power distance.

Zuo and Zillante defined project culture as “the shared values, basic assumptions and beliefs that the participants involved in a project hold that determine the way they process the project and the relationship with each other in the project environment” (Zuo, et al., 2005, p. 357).

It is very important to establish an effective project culture in order to be outcome-oriented and be able to achieve the overall project goals. This implies that effective project culture has clear aims and objectives for the project, roles and commitment from each project member in the fulfilling of these roles, the project schedule, the project costs, and the project organization (Palmer, 2002, pp. 101-105).

All these cultures are essential for the project under discussion, but the project culture and the disciplinary culture seem to be the most important ones in case of content and language integrated learning (henceforth CLIL) since CLIL methodology is interdisciplinary in its essence: it combines teaching and learning of two disciplines - dentistry and language.

Cultures within the Erasmus+ project

Classification of disciplines into branches of science may be difficult because they may extend across the branches. For example, linguistics may share overlapping features with social sciences (Fløttum et al., 2006, p. 21). Disciplines can be broadly classified into hard and soft ones (Becher, 1990, pp. 333-346). Dentistry, representing the natural sciences, is referred to as hard discipline, whereas linguistics, described as belonging to the humanities, is a soft discipline. Each discipline represents a knowledge base with different characteristics and has its own theories, methods and techniques.

Hard disciplines are said to have greater concern for cognitive goals, for example, the learning of facts and concepts. They have “objective knowledge base” and “scientists act as if they see themselves as discovering the truth, not making it” (Hyland in Fløttum et al., 2006, p. 20). In contrast, soft disciplines are characterized by greater concern for, for instance, critical thinking and such academic activities as the reading of research articles (Becher, 1990, pp. 333-346). In many contexts, the discipline of the humanities is viewed as a hermeneutical one “with subjective interpretation as a prominent feature” (Hyland in Fløttum et al., 2006, p. 21).

The heterogeneous character of the disciplines involved in the project posed one of the challenges because of the assumed different ways of teaching and learning in hard and soft disciplines (Braxton, 1995, pp. 59-64).

Teaching can be grouped into two main categories: teacher-centered and student-centered approaches. Academic staff who consider teaching as transmitting knowledge and who consider themselves as exclusive content experts are more likely to adopt a teacher-centered approach, whereas in student-centered approaches, the academic staff and student are in a more cooperative situation. In the former, more emphasis is on presentation methods, that is lectures, presentations, use of text; in the latter, there is more stress on participatory and discovery methods, and problem-based learning, namely students engage with the teacher, do projects, pair and group work, research, and discover knowledge for themselves (Rogers, 2002, p. 249).

Osama and Lesley (2016) used seven-year-quantitative data from a survey of USA and Canada universities aimed at assessing the trends of different teaching practices and learning outcomes in hard and soft disciplines. The yielded results confirmed Entwistle, Skinner, Entwistle, and Orr's (2000) study (in Osama et al., 2016) that student-centered approaches to teaching used in soft sciences had a positive impact on deep learning, while teacher-centered approaches which prevailed in hard sciences affected the learning outcomes negatively, as students adopted a surface approach to learning with an emphasis on consuming knowledge. Thus, when developing materials for the course in dentistry and language integrated learning, this distinction between the disciplinary cultures was taken into account in order to ensure deep learning of dentistry students.

On the whole, there is a close correlation between the student-centered and teacher-centered approaches; however, in dentistry, presenting structured knowledge of the subject-matter is of utmost importance, while in language learning, facilitating understanding and developing skills and language use which stimulate conceptual and intellectual progress are more essential.

It is plausible to assume that successful consideration of the disciplinary cultures has allowed the project partners to work out the manual on the CLIL methodology, develop and successfully pilot a course and study materials in dentistry and English language integrated learning.

The training content for the course "Dentistry and English Language Integrated Learning" designed for would-be dentists enrolled at a tertiary level professional study programme in dentistry aimed at developing synergies of professional and linguistic

competences. The course objectives were set to 1) develop learners' professional para-clinical and clinical competences, 2) foster the linguistic competence in order to apply the language structures and metacognitive strategies in the domain-related contexts and in interactional and transactional communicative events. The developed study materials and OERs assisted the relevant target group with acquiring transversal skills in dentistry.

Besides the disciplinary culture, there is also a culture at the project level which has more power to decide how project participants behave across different stages of a project. The establishment of an effective Erasmus+ project culture during the preparation stage and later during its implementation was aimed at setting achievable aims and objectives of the project and at outcome-oriented communication. Important aspects of effective project cultures were also providing the partners in consortium with clear roles and the commitment from each project member in the fulfilling of these roles, drawing up a realistic project schedule and costs as well as meeting the deadlines and costs.

As a result of successful cooperation, in addition to the blended mobility of higher education students organized in 2017, the following six intellectual outputs were produced. The survey report on synergies between higher education and labour market in dentistry aimed at re-evaluating the academic and dentistry-related competences as well as the transversal skills required for a career in dentistry. The manual on the CLIL methodology for the target groups set guidelines for the course in dentistry and English language integrated learning and the study materials developed. The project website (see <http://paol.iscap.ipp.pt/erasmusdent/>) helped to disseminate the intellectual outputs and good practice. The course "Dentistry and English Language Integrated Learning", the developed study materials and OERs for the course helped to equip the students with the transversal skills required in the professional setting. The intellectual outputs produced as a result of the established synergies between the HEIs and partnerships with professional dental associations were disseminated with the help of a comprehensive leaflet.

No doubt that the lead partner in consortium is responsible for a healthy project culture that comprises the understanding of each partner's roles, expectations, and values, high level of personal and institutional commitment, effective communication, a capacity to quickly identify and resolve problems, and collective decision-making.

Conclusion

Increased mobility not only provides great personal enrichment for students and academic staff, but it also represents a significant contribution to understanding the plurality of cultures.

The concept of culture is not limited to national cultures. Culture can be focused on cross-disciplinary perspective. Dentistry as a hard discipline and linguistics as a soft discipline seem to be defined by the object they deal with, and, although disciplinary culture differences exist, when developing study courses and materials a learner-centered teaching approach should prevail as it may ensure deep learning.

A project culture perspective implies that successful project implementation in multicultural contexts depends on multifaceted aspects, including the ability to comply with each HEI's organization of communication processes, which need to be matched against the goals and objectives of the project. Maintaining multicultural communication is a team effort, and for a project to be successful, HEIs participating in multicultural projects need to understand the effect of their communicative actions in achieving the project goals. Therefore, the organization of the project communication process needs to be monitored to support these goals.

Success of multicultural communication depends on how well management communication, such as planning, organizing, coordinating, and monitoring, is understood and organized as a holistic project communication system, where each partner has his/her own responsibilities geared towards fulfilling project goals. If the functions and the system do not work properly, most likely there will be problems in the project culture and in the quality of project outputs.

If partners in consortium do not adhere to common goals and practices, the project is unlikely to function effectively. In projects with different cultural affiliations, HEIs require critical reflection on the relationship between the cultural groups to which those involved in the project belong and respect for the cultural affiliations of others.

Level of networking, cooperation and commitment of each partner in consortium to the fulfilment of the tasks in the project resulted in a high assessment of the project by the State Education Development Agency of Latvia.

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