

Learning in-between Cultures:

Intercultural Learning and Student's Mobility in Europe

Formal education systems convey political, civil as well as cultural ideas and values, and are important for the socialisation of young people. Qualifications which youth adopts especially during their formal learningⁱ processes still have a high and important value in society and especially on the labour market. However, in the past few years, non-formalⁱⁱ and informal learningⁱⁱⁱ have attracted attention in modern society (see European Commission, Education & Training 2012). Due to the raised importance of diversity in European countries, intercultural competences are being attached a high value. Accordingly the significance for learning mobility as means for intercultural exchange within Europe increased as well.

1. Intercultural Learning

In recent years, the social, ethnical and cultural heterogeneity within Europe has increased. This trend can also be observed in classrooms and implies the necessity to deal with the challenges of diversity in educational institutions. One of the tasks of school systems is thus to prepare students for a multicultural society with its different facets (Binder 2004, 67).

One instrument to cope with this is to implement *intercultural learning*. According to the guidelines which have been introduced by the Austrian Ministry of Education “intercultural learning, besides getting to know other cultures, wants to evoke realisation and experience of other cultural norms and manifestations. It should lead to curiosity and interest in diversity

through the educational environment. To increase sympathy for differences and appreciation for each other are two further aims” (BGBl. 439/1991).

Intercultural learning following this concept means that it is incorporated by the teaching staff during lessons in any subject, no matter if it is geography or math. The aim is to encourage students to reflect on their own cultural background and surrounding, to increase intercultural sensitivity and recognition, and to think and act in such a way that diversity is respected. Thus, teaching lessons comprise intercultural and global topics and focus on the ethical, linguistic and social backgrounds of the students (see Natmessnig 2012, 15-21). Students are encouraged to discuss, to reflect and visualise one’s own norms and values (see Steindl 2008, 8f.). Trying to reduce prejudices goes hand in hand with avoiding to deepen stereotypes or to create new ones. Stimulating intercultural sensitivity of students may raise flexibility and open-mindedness, as well as to deal with new situations more easily (see Steininger 2008, 5; see Fillitz 2007, 63-75).

While educational institutions are important for stabilisation, circulation and strengthening of cultural norms, the responsibility for intercultural learning ought to be put also on other sectors of society (see Binder 2004, 272f.). In other words, stressing a holistic perspective about the benefits of intercultural learning approaches, they have to be incorporated in various formal and non-formal programmes of education. By surmounting formal education the concept of intercultural learning is an asset for the whole society, as it can lead to a general acceptance that every person has its own place in a multicultural society.

For instance, conditioned by their colonial history, many British are aware of their multicultural society and diversity is visible within the public dialogue: “Official signposts and announcements also reflect the consciously multicultural vision of the British school as a

mosaic of many identities co-existing under one roof” (Baumann and Sunier 2004, 24). By contrast, the Austrian education system, for example, as a representation of the societal standards still has to catch up with the implementation of intercultural topics to foster attitudes which will be reflected respectively in the public dialogue.

Transcending national perspectives also European exchange programmes for students can be a crucial tool to promote intercultural learning which will be shown in the forthcoming section.

2. Intercultural exchange programmes

An important object of the European Union is to advance the motto “United in Diversity” and to encourage young people to take advantage of an open space in terms of mobility. As European exchange programmes operate in a transnational space and are accessible to people from all European countries and with different cultural backgrounds, they can be a perfect means of spreading intercultural concerns.

The demand “learning European by doing European” refers to the “learning-by-doing” principle (Scholten 2012). It finds its expression in different exchange programmes on different levels (schools, universities), building a framework for sharing ideas and mutual understanding.

As one example on the level of secondary education a specific project within the COMENIUS programme is worth to be mentioned. This project is called “Be a Stranger, be a Friend 1939 – 2009 – 2050” and has been realised through creative theatre workshops. As starting point pupils watched a film in their home school about the tragic story of a friendship between a concentration camp director’s son and a concentration camp prisoner. Afterwards the participants met in different countries and attended theatre workshops (see Scholten, 139f.).

This project is an example for implementing “intercultural learning” in classes and other learning spaces. It offers an entry for making students familiar with intercultural topics. With events like that, curiosity about other countries and their cultural habits starts to increase and intercultural learning appears of its own volition as a positive side effect (see Scholten 2012, 141).

Such activities have a huge impact on social and intercultural competences and can lead to a rising participation in a heterogenous society (see Scholten 2012, 138f). As soon as intercultural appreciation is internalised intercultural topics will be taken for granted and be put in practice more often.

If we regard the European Union as a constantly changing and growing construct, it is important for young people to get a chance to exchange with other European citizens in different ways and levels. In the following, we will present the Erasmus programme as an example of mobility in tertiary education and its impact on intercultural competences.

2.1. The ERASMUS Programme

ERASMUS („European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students“) can be considered as the most renowned exchange programme for students in Europe. It places great importance on mobility and furthering career prospects through studying in another European country. ERASMUS is considered the EU’s flagship of exchange programmes in higher education. The programme not only supports mobility, mainly of students, but also provides co-funding for higher education institutions collaborating with transnational cooperation projects. The exchange programme was started in 1987 and since then, 2.2 million students have studied abroad and spent one or two semesters in a different European country (see

European Commission, The ERASMUS Programme 2012). During their study period at a foreign university and most often in a foreign language, young people usually participate in various social events and get in touch with other exchange students from different cultural backgrounds.

ERASMUS can be understood as a framework which, besides a professional academic qualification, provides a possibility to deepen intercultural sensitivity. Although this may not be planned formally in a concrete way, students acquire various social qualifications through non-formal and informal learning, as we will exemplify in the following subchapter.

2.1.1. The Impact of ERASMUS on Intercultural Competences

Intercultural competence has recently received much attention due to the internationalisation and globalization of modern society. As a part of social competences it implies self-reflection and openness towards other cultures. In order to develop intercultural competences, empathy, flexibility and knowledge about one's own culture and other cultures are required. According to Thomas (2003) intercultural competence includes the ability to capture, respect, appreciate, and use productively cultural conditions and parameters regarding perception, evaluation, sensation and action concerning oneself and others. This aims for mutual adjustment, tolerance towards incompatibilities and the development of synergetic forms of cooperation. On the basis of this definition we will now show how ERASMUS contributes to the increase of intercultural competences.

Results of a qualitative research on the impact of the ERASMUS Programme on exchange students illustrate that, to a certain extent, intercultural competences can be acquired and deepened in the framework of this mobility programme (Steinacher 2012).

The empirical research consisted of qualitative interviews with ERASMUS students that attended the programme in Austria (A) and the Netherlands (NL). One of the goals of these interviews was to explore the effects of the ERASMUS Programme on social and intercultural competences, identity and sense of belonging.

ERASMUS students had several types of motivation for taking part in this “experience abroad”. Many of those factors which led them to leave their country temporarily can be related to intercultural topics: the improvement of language skills, the eagerness to meet people with various backgrounds and the curiosity to get to know new cultures.

As they went abroad, most students experienced an intense and affiliated interaction with exchange students from other European countries, as well as with students from other continents, whereas at the same time the contact with people from the host country remained limited, which was regretted by many students. However, their “ERASMUS-experience” seemed hardly shareable with students who have not participated in an exchange programme. Considering the short time period of their stay, these young people do not acquire real integration into the culture of their host country. But they do experience countless intercultural encounters with people from all over the world.

Intercultural encounters are either organised by programme officials or self-organised and sometimes they just happen by chance. ERASMUS students often felt that such encounters had a stimulating effect to reflect on and learn about themselves and others. A participant of the programme in Vienna pointed out the following: *“I think you learn a lot of things about the others and also about yourself, like how you react, because it’s not like your natural environment”* (Steinacher 2012, 96). A young female student from Italy for example claims that she deepened intercultural sensitivity during her exchange semester: *“... now I am more*

open-minded, also because I've met people from cultures that I didn't know a lot about before. And now, yeah I am more comfortable with them [...]. I mean it's like now I see fewer boundaries than before. I am more linked to other countries without any limits or prejudices” (Steinacher 2012, 97).

Self-organised social encounters as well as organised activities are an opportunity to incorporate intercultural sensitivity linked with openness and curiosity for the “new” and “unknown”. One example of how ERASMUS students may learn something new about another culture in a non-formal way is “the international dinner” organised by ESN (ERASMUS Student Network). The idea of this event is that every participating student cooks a dish from his or her home country. Students then have the opportunity to taste different food from all over Europe, and also to get in touch with other ERASMUS students.

The interviewees experienced Europe as a mobile and open space which gives them and their peers the opportunity to travel, study, and work in other European countries. Some students even stated a slight enhancement or deepening of a European identity for themselves due to the ERASMUS experience, while others showed no such effects at all. Regardless of whether they showed an increased sense of European identity or not, the students predominantly developed an “ERASMUS identity“ (Steinacher, 2012).

In some cases, students even seemed to have strengthened a cosmopolitan mindset. Such a cosmopolitan orientation “is first of all [...] a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (Hannerz 1992, 239). According to Hannerz (1992, 238f.) cosmopolitans integrate in a new arena and experience new cultural habits.

In general, most students reflected critically on ideas of belonging and identity. They didn't believe in fixed identities and questioned the concept of a single identity and nationalistic attitudes. This goes in line with recent debates on identity in social sciences which stress the plural nature of identity. It seems that the educational framework in which the "ERASMUS experience" is embedded facilitates plural identities: "Friendships, shared experiences and interaction with other European nationals may be important for the development of multiple identities" (Van Mol 2009, 10).

Regarding personal development the students reported increased self-confidence and open-mindedness concerning new social contacts and interpersonal exchange. The ERASMUS time can thus be understood as a phase of personal growth.

As ERASMUS students often overcome language barriers and improve their knowledge in foreign languages, they acquire skills and transnational contacts that likewise contribute to the acquisition of intercultural competences.

The study on ERASMUS participants reveals that the programme has an impact on "*openness towards new experiences*" and "*expansion of one's horizon*" (Steinacher 2012, 96f.). These effects can be regarded as a deepening of intercultural competences defined as a social ability which includes openness and curiosity towards "others".

3. Critical reflections

Intercultural sensitivity and competence are nowadays key qualifications in many parts of society. They are highly demanded in education, politics and private industry. Therefore, it is very important to promote intercultural topics within the formal education system in European countries. But the realisation of this concern differs from country to country. In Austria for

example, especially in most higher education programmes for teachers intercultural topics are still rarely mentioned. The few advanced trainings concerning intercultural learning are mainly attended by teachers who have already recognised the importance of such topics for their teaching work. Insofar the implementation of such teaching concepts depends on the commitment of a dedicated teaching staff (see Fillitz 2007, 73).

Although intercultural learning may lead to flexibility, adjustment to new situations, and to successful coping with new cultural surroundings, none of the presented learning fields guarantee an advanced intercultural competence. Intercultural sensitivity is nothing that can be taught only by a simple training or a one-time intercultural encounter. Nonetheless there are “intercultural natives” (Scholten 2012, 143). This notion, which derives from the concept of “digital natives”, refers to pupils and students who internalize their intercultural competence through interactions in their peer groups and social networks. But even if somebody is an “intercultural native”, he or she still can benefit from intercultural educational actions. These are opportunities for them, but also for others who have not developed such a level of intercultural sensitivity, to reflect on their intercultural competences and update their knowledge about processes of change within Europe and modern society in general (see Scholten 2012, 44). In any case this competence draws from mobility and needs continuing reflection. Even a heterogenic family background as well as extensive travelling and long stays in foreign countries often can only be seen as a starting point for intercultural sensitivity.

As we have illustrated, the increase of exchange programmes and rising options for mobility programmes in Europe nowadays offer the possibility for young people to spend some time abroad in a foreign European country. As such they provide a framework for the acquisition of intercultural experiences and learning. These experiences may offer personal empowerment, broaden horizons and deepen intercultural competences.

The ERASMUS programme may initiate increased mobility, personal development, transnational exchange, and a European and international perspective. Furthermore, it carries the potential to question and reflect upon prejudices, dead locked imaginations and stereotypes. The ERASMUS experience fosters a decrease of preconceptions and deepens open-mindedness. The network not only enables a transnational and intercultural exchange, but represents a non-formal and informal learning option.

But that does not mean that the majority of exchange students are intercultural experts or even cosmopolitans. By no means do all students who participate in such programmes necessarily benefit from the programme to the same extent.

European exchange programmes are officially open for the majority of European countries and therefore ensure that students from the participating countries can use these offers to their advantage. At the same time this means that not all young Europeans can join the programme: non-students and students with minor financial and social possibilities are either excluded or are confronted with difficulties to take part. While the dimension of such programmes should not be overestimated, it remains an obligation to encourage and support these young people, for instance through special European grants. The fact that only a rather small and privileged group of people are in the position to enjoy a mobile and open Europe remains as a challenge for the responsible bodies. It still seems to be a long way to achieve that everybody who is interested in intercultural exchange within the European Union feels addressed (see Scholten 2012, 146) and is able to participate.

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ⁱ “Formal learning is typically provided by education or training institutions, with structured learning objectives, learning time and learning support. It is intentional on the part of the learner and leads to certification.” (European Commission, Education & Training 2012)

ⁱⁱ “Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. However, it is intentional on the part of the learner and has structured objectives, times and support.” (European Commission, Education & Training 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ “Informal learning results from daily activities related to work, family life or leisure. It is not structured and usually does not lead to certification. In most cases, it is unintentional on the part of the learner.” (European Commission, Education & Training 2012)