

Learning for Democracy: Experiential learning of EU as a tool for European citizenship and democratic values awareness

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Promoting EU values in a time of social
distancing

6 - 7 June 2020

Edited by

Foteini ASDERAKI

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Preface

The Erasmus KA3+ program entitled “Teachers4Europe: Setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” (2018-2021) recognizes education as an important vehicle for the promotion of principles and values encompassed in the EU democratic culture. The extensive Teachers4Europe network of 1,200 teachers from European countries and beyond is committed to spreading the European values to colleagues, students and the society, acting thus as inspiring social and cultural agents.

Due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, educational systems are highly affected, working on and promoting significant changes as a respond to new challenges at all levels. In this context, the Coordinating Team of the T4E Program organized the international e-Conference entitled “Promoting European values in a time of social distancing”, which took place on Saturday, June 6 and Sunday, June 7, 2020. The focal topics of the e-Conference were onsite and online education, innovative methods and approaches, and new methodological tools, as regards the teaching of European values at schools under the demanding circumstances of social distancing.

In this Volume, 27 papers were selected to be published, including good practices already implemented at schools by Ambassadors and Teachers4Europe. The particular action is considered to have been an excellent opportunity for a constructive and creative dialogue on issues of common interest and concern, as to educational methods and tools in the time of Covid-19. We do hope the Volume will add value in addressing the tough but exciting challenges posed by this pandemic.

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PART IV: Educational Tools

4.1. Learning for Democracy: Experiential learning of EU as a tool for European citizenship and democratic values awareness

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, the modern democratic framework of higher education has to cultivate students' relevant skills such as democratic participation, cooperation, taking responsibility, strengthen trust in public institutions and constitutions, freedom of expression and decision-making, as prerequisites for future's active citizens. Exactly these goals are advancing in the student communities, the function of which has continuously served the principle of democratic representation. Therefore, through the understanding of learning as a social activity and a vehicle of innovation and productivity in society, we may conclude that higher education can be – and should be a multilevel way for social cohesion and promotion of democratic values by preparing students to be active citizens. The main aim of this paper is to assess the role of higher education in the current challenging circumstances, in the context of addressing new and old problems while fostering fairness, diversity and social inclusion, broadly, democracy and social cohesion. The paper will analyze the importance of higher education institutions in order to achieve that goals, by focusing on the usage of a combination of diverse and innovative methods and new technologies but without undermining academic and institutional integrity. A case study of an EU institution simulation will also be analyzed in order to show the importance of such actions and alternative ways of learning for achieving the enforcement of active citizens. The analysis will lead to policy proposals for integrating new methods to fundamental academic values in the current context in order to foster democracy and social cohesion.

Introduction

Learning as a social activity of creativity and innovation, which promotes societies' modernization as well as societal and sustainable development, is a procedure which has been clearly connected with education, which is widely considered as a lifelong process (Blossfeld and Maurice, 2011). Furthermore, education is also directly connected with modern democracies. Several scholars have claimed that in order for a modern democratic state and society to rise, prosper and develop, it is necessary to create educated citizens. Therefore, an educational system in which democratic values, skills and virtues of democratic citizenship are developed, is necessary for modern democracies and their citizens (Gutmann and Ben-Porath, 2014). Higher education is a crucial part of educational system which plays an important role in democratic development and social cohesion. The lack of education in general and in particular of higher education, the inequalities of access and the exclusive use of long-gone-by formalistic educational methods, may increase learning problems and in the long term, cause social exclusion as well as increase several threats for democracy such as social unrest, populism and criminality (Webster, MacDonald and Simpson, 2006).

The relationship between Education and Democracy

In order to understand the advanced role of higher education in the new technological, social and economic era it is important to analyze the connection of education, in general, with democracy. Thus, it is true that in several countries education and democracy are highly connected. This has been strongly supported in literature, social and education research outcomes. That happens not only because through education democratic values could be developed and thrived, but also due to the fact that people learn how to interact with others, learn about the benefits of democratic participation and get acquainted to voting and self-organizing procedures. Therefore, education can be a useful tool and asset for democracy. Although democracy could have a wide potential base of supporters, at the same time, their motivation could be threatened. Alongside, dictatorship could have a smaller base of supporters, who have stronger motivations. Thus, here comes the role of education and especially higher education. It can increase the benefits of civic engagement and develop the participation in support of a broad-based regime (democracy), by strengthening it against a narrow-based regime (dictatorship) (Glaezer, Ponzetto and Shleifer, 2007).

There are many cases of countries in all over the world that have recognized the importance of education and its contribution to developing free, democratic and responsible citizens. As Rowland (2003) highlight, in several countries with different background such as the UK and South Africa, national education comprises the main tool in order to enhance democracy. For instance, in South Africa the National Educational Policy Act clearly declares that education enhance democracy. Similarly, the British Dearing Report declare that the development of democracy is one of the main objectives of Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997). Accordingly, the US report on Higher Education for American Democracy is commonly accepted as an influential statement on the capacity of higher education towards democratic advancement and practice (Hutcheson, 2011), due to the enforcement of equal opportunity as a socio-economic good as well as the cultivation through education

of democratic values, citizenship and participation. Respectively, in Greece the Constitution refers that “Education is a basic mission of the State and aims at the creation of free and responsible citizens” (Greek Constitution, article 16(2)).

Education: a social right and a tool of social cohesion

Social cohesion, which includes all interactions, attitudes and norms among citizens, is crucial for the democratic development of modern societies as long as it may increase the sense of belonging and democratic participation, namely, create a viable social capital. In order reach that objective, education system and especially higher education, is the main amplifying institution as long as it can re-orientate citizenship education using formal and informal educational methods as well as experiences of active participation.

In international literature issues such as social protection, social insurance, education and health are included as social rights (Marshall, 1965), where exclusion from equal access describes the modern meaning of social exclusion. Furthermore, inequalities in education is a crucial factor of social exclusion and they can be detected by illiteracy indicators, the percentages of compulsory education and the level of adult education. Old and recent empirical findings have shown the need of localization of social and personal factors which can lead to exclusion from work, such as family difficulties, education, debts or lack of skills (Pillinger, 2001; Ditch and Roberts, 2002). Several indicators have been connected with social exclusion and have been supported by researchers and technocrats as long as they seem to be connected with poverty. These are: low income, youth unemployment, regional cohesion, percentage of young people at the ages of 16-24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) (Committee of Social Protection, 2001).

Consequently, we could support that the term of social cohesion is based on values and principles that aim to develop the participation of each person to social processes and education while decrease at the same time the existing trends for discrimination (Booth, 2005). Even if it is clear that education is one of the most important factors that support the social cohesion process, we should highlight that not only its definition, but also its implementation may differ between different cases of educational systems and cultural frames, as well as inside them (Dyson, 1999). Education that includes the form of comprehensive inclusion also in its highest levels promotes the specific value and idea of inclusive society, which is not focused only on the cohesion of socially vulnerable groups or people with special needs, but also includes all members of society regardless of nationality, sex, language, economic condition or each other distinctive characteristic.

Education as a fundamental process that aims at the creation of an equal society, has to include a wide scale of special needs. Moreover, when education plays a critical role to social cohesion, mainly it aims to social justice, equality and the assurance of social rights. Respectively, education constitutes the basic element of participatory democracy (Barton, 1995). Furthermore, the aim of education for each and every citizen (inclusive education) is to deal with multilevel discriminatory issues, ensuring the cohesion for all under conditions of redistribution (Unterhalter and Brighouse, 2007).

New trends of democratic, participatory and interactive higher education: a democratic and social cohesion multiplier

In order to achieve the abovementioned objectives, a new and innovative way of learning has been developed the last decades. This is non-formal education through implementation of conferences and simulations of national and international institutions and organizations as well as workshops for students, where young students and researchers are more involved in non-formal education and learning activities⁴. Thus, with such activities all levels of education and especially higher education could foster self-activity procedures that can lead to interactive capacity building. This form of education and training is a method of experiential learning that cultivates empathy, democratic participation, coexistence and co-decision (Kuk and Holst, 2018). This experience could be expressed through workshops, simulations, debates, creativity and self-realization games. Thus, it implicitly comprises an important innovation that creates the opportunity for democratic skills' capacity building for higher education students.

Higher education which involves both formal and non-formal activities and teach students the use of new technological tools could enhance participation and cultivate democracy and active citizenship. This is possible given the fact that young students not only learn with a formalistic way but also and most importantly, through their emulation and thus, through active participation. This non-formal way of education could also become a wave effect among young people/citizens as long as they will spread the awareness on the issues of democracy, participation and debate on contemporary problems and challenges. This wave effect will work as a democratic multiplier, creating a positive impact on the society towards democratic participation and citizenship awareness.

It turns out that higher education should empower students with a combination of formal and non-formal methods in order to enhance the notion of citizenship and thus, build a more cohesive society, with awareness and respect of diversity. Only this holistic approach can, in theoretical as well as in practical terms, prepare and achieve the essential and integrated democratic identity of an active citizen in the 21st century.

For countries that are lagging behind in terms of integration, it seems that higher education policy, if really focused on the democratic ideals through formal and non-formal methods, could provide opportunities for future social cohesion and development of social capital along with human capital investment (Tzagkarakis and Ieronimakis, 2019). However, such an investment does not seem to be applicable, while the risk of wandering in a larger crisis

⁴ Two cases of non-formal education initiatives helping university students to understand, train and learn the democratic values and develop their skills are the National Model United Nations (NMUN) and the Model European Union Strasbourg (MEUS). NMUN is a recognized Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) formally associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communications since 1982 and a UN Academic Impact member since 2013. They simulate the UN institutions for students, developing students' understanding about the role of UN, increasing their democratic skills capacity, learning to cooperate and debate and gaining experiences for some important issues such as regional conflicts, gender and child rights, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, human rights, economic and social development and the environment (<https://www.nmun.org/about-nmun/mission-and-history.html>). The MEUS is a simulation in which students can take over simulating roles as Members of the European Parliament (MEP), Ministers of the Council, Journalists etc. It is organized by Bringing Europeans Together Association (BETA Europe) AISBL which is a politically independent and non-profit association, seated in Brussels. They aim through their simulations to inspire students and help them learning through practice, gain experience and develop soft skills while learn about politics by discovering the founding principles of Europe through the experience on democratic processes and procedures. See: <https://meu-strasbourg.org/simulation> and <https://www.beta-europe.org/about/>

of values and knowledge is visible, due to the gradual prevalence of intolerance in several countries (see for example the governmental illiberal policy of Hungary and Poland). But it is the duty of social scientists and educators to highlight the problems and propose solutions. In this case, phenomena such as migration could become opportunities for building multicultural and tolerant societies but only if higher education is at the service of the fundamental democratic values, namely at its roots, necessarily but through the combination of new and old methods.

A case of experiential learning of EU as a tool for European citizenship and democratic values awareness

In December 2020 a European Parliament Simulation exercise (with the participation of University students and Lyceum pupils) was virtually conducted, due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, by the Hellenic Association of Political Scientists (HAPSc), under the academic coordination of Prof. Fotini Asderaki and under the framework of the project Teachers4Europe⁵. HAPSc prepared and organized this simulation exercise, including a detailed study guide. This simulation aimed to teach participants the way the European Parliament function and thus, deepen the importance of democratic institutions.

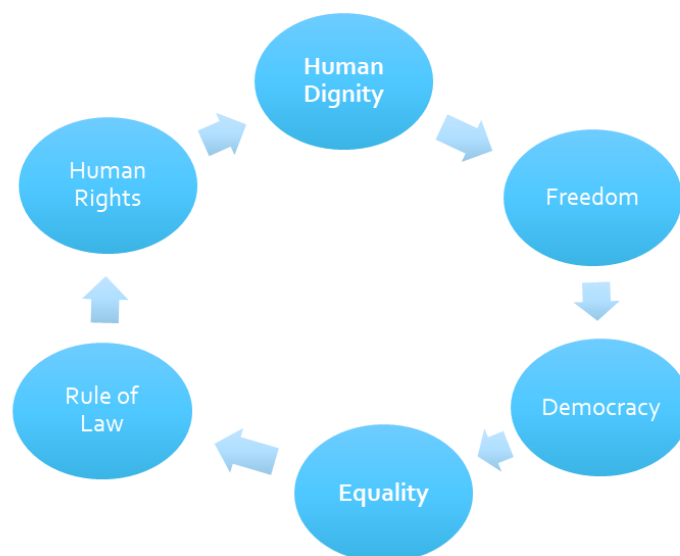
The consultation and legislative process of the European Parliament were simulated, through the performance of the main roles from the participants (Members of different groups of the European Parliament, Board members of the European Parliament). Participants were able to understand both the functions of the institutional preparatory process and the differences between party groups based on their different ideological backgrounds (Asderaki & Sideri, 2020).

It should be noted that participants did not learn about the decision making procedures of the European Parliament through a formalistic way but through their emulation and thus, through active participation in policy formulation. Especially, they discussed the new Erasmus program for the period 2021-2027. Therefore, the implementation of the simulation offered the opportunity for enhancing participatory democracy and European citizenship as long as it empowered young participants through the experiential learning of a European institution functions and thus, enhanced human rights, tolerance, solidarity, youth engagement, gender and general equality through increasing the awareness on European citizenship.

Experiential learning tools through European Parliament simulation generated democratic awareness to young people as long as they actively learned how democratic decisions at a higher level are taken. At the same time, participants experienced the common European way of life and the common frame of values, building and increasing the sense of belonging for the next European generations through the discussion on the topic of the new Erasmus program the period 2021-2027.

⁵ For more details please visit: <https://teachers4europe.eu/simulation/>

Figure 1: European citizenship values enforced through simulation action



Conclusion

Educational systems and their values, as they were introduced the last two centuries, have been spread all over the world. The fundamental role of education is the evolution of the society, the promotion of social development and the enhancement of equality. Therefore, education that fosters comprehensive inclusion in all its levels and especially in its higher level, can promote the idea of an inclusive society. Last but not least, the new ways of formal and non-formal democratic, participatory and interactive higher education and the use of innovative methods and new technologies, as this paper has already shown through especially the case study of the European Parliament simulation virtual action, could pave the way for the promotion of the future democratic and active citizenship, bringing a better future with more democratic and cohesive societies.

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