Testing the Impact of Innovative Pedagogies for Higher Education
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Research Group 20. Research in Innovative Intercultural Learning Environments
Format of Presentation: Paper
Alternative EERA Network: 7. Social Justice and Intercultural Education
Topics: NW 20: Intercultural Education and learning environments in Higher Education
Keywords: Critical thinking, Active listening, Intercultural settings, Diversity, Personal / Professional Learning

Abstract
The experience of a continuing (2007-2010) ERASMUS Intensive Programme (Educational contributions to social cohesion and well being in European social and institutional life) shared by 8 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from 8 different European countries has provided opportunity to explore the power of intercultural settings to support personal / professional learning about a world that is characterised by risk, unpredictability and the certainty of continuous change. The themes of ‘social cohesion’ and ‘well being’ were chosen to ensure that the diverse group of students (student teachers, social pedagogues and human resource managers) engaged with the social, cultural and economic dynamics / consequences of people’s migrations across the enlarging and reforming European region that is widely represented by the participating HEIs.

The report is set in the context of an identified lack of pedagogy for HE combined with the drive within the HE sector to develop students’ flexible thinking and capacity as global citizens for ethical social interaction and problem solving. While pedagogical uncertainty might appear to pose a threat to this aspiration, it is noted within the developing argument of the paper that tutor and student ‘mobililities’ within the 2 week programme provide a pedagogical framework for trialling innovative and interactive approaches that encourage critical thinking and critical engagement with social and economic challenges.

A particular example is that the programme induction process includes student-led enquiries about responses to the challenges to social cohesion and well being. These are initially conducted independently and collaboratively by the students in their own local communities and are presented to and evaluated by students and staff during the first days of the two week programme in the host HEI. They are subsequently reworked and synthesised by the newly formed cross national / cross disciplinary groups of students and ‘presented again’ using different media to communicate the students’ most recently formed understandings that have derived from their interactions. This example illustrates ways in which the diversity of the student group enriches and facilitates a pedagogy of active listening of the kind advocated for use within early years settings (Moss, Petrie, Rinaldi, Dahlberg), re-
utilised here with young adult learners. The transference of this form of active listening into an HE context is supported through the tutors' prior commitments to Friereian forms of participatory pedagogy. This fusion of approaches provides opportunity to discuss the challenge of engaging a culturally diverse group of young adult learners within a liberal and liberating pedagogy with defined social aims.

The analysis and evaluation are supported by the products and accounts developed by the students as they engaged collaboratively in the dialogic / reflective processes of this ERASMUS programme. Thus the report builds on students’ recorded evaluations of their learning that were integral to the pedagogy. These data are used as a basis for an evaluation of the appropriateness of a participatory pedagogy for active listening for engaging HE students in exploring their responsibilities for social cohesion and well being and in developing themselves as critical / flexible thinkers and problem solvers.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used
The students contribute to the research process through participating in the programme’s active listening pedagogical processes. In particular they have been asked to compile photographic diaries of their pedagogical experiences and from these to select one photograph that causes them to reflect deeply on the concepts of social cohesion and well being. This first layer of data – their photographs and their written reflections – have been used as a basis for subsequent interviews by the researchers. These have elicited responses about the relationship of the students’ initial thoughts to their own life experience and developing professional work in the face of social / cultural challenges. This second layer of data becomes a basis for analysing the ways in which these themes are being explored at an individual level within the personal and professional lives of the students. This establishes a framework for evaluating the pedagogical approaches used during the programme.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings
What emerges from the analysis is a recognition that the development of HE students as critical and flexible thinkers and problem solvers in the wider world context can be supported by opportunities to meet first hand with diversity and challenge and to engage in sustained dialogic discussion about these experiences. The identification and discussion of ‘a pedagogy of constant dialogic reiteration’ is illustrated with examples of the participants’ reflections on the pedagogical experimentations during the Intensive Programme. The reflective accounts support the evaluation of decisions that were made at the planning stage of the programme, for example about achieving a balance between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, between educational and social aspects of the programme, about the use of team building activities with incoming groups of students, about the design and definition of independent tasks and the coherence of these with the social and economic substantive themes. There is consideration of the quality of knowledge and understanding that students evidence at personal and professional levels. These reflections contribute to the evaluation of the significance of an HE participatory pedagogy for active listening to the process of promoting skills and values that are relevant to the social, cultural and economic challenges we face.

References


