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“THE MULTISENSORY SPACE” – A NEW METHOD FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND SUPPORT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Herein I outline the experiences of a pedagogical development project at Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The idea was to incorporate the concept of a multisensory space into our multicultural studies course which is part of our Social Services Degree Programme.

The basis of the project is “The Multisensory Space”, which means an easily-modified space, where visitors can experience landscape, sounds and objects of a different cultural environment. Landscapes are not authentic; they are mostly suggestive, evoking memories and feelings. The space provides immigrants with an opportunity to “return momentarily” into the familiar home environment as well as to be able to invite others into their “home space”. It is during the process of creating and building the multisensory cultural environments together that the Finnish students and immigrants have the opportunity to learn about each other’s cultural values.

Included in this paper are excerpts from the feedback and self assessments of 74 first-year students in Social Services, with comments about their experiences and insights concerning intercultural communication. On the whole, students were happy to participate actively in the project and to have meaningful interaction with immigrants. However, there were also challenges when attempting to coordinate the needs and schedules of the students and the cooperating institutions.

Keywords: multicultural studies, multisensoriness, project work

1 INTRODUCTION

How do you create an environment where immigrants and students feel comfortable working together and learning from each other? One way is to have them create a Multisensory Space together.

I will describe the experiences of a new pedagogical development project at Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The aim of the project was to develop cultural sensitivity pedagogy as well as to develop new methods for supporting the cultural identity of immigrants living in Finland. The idea was to incorporate the concept of a multisensory space into our multicultural studies course, part of our Social Services Degree Programme.

This paper describes the following:

- the underlying Laurea pedagogy that guided the project
- the inspiration behind the idea
- the aim of the project
- the task assigned to the students
- the learning outcome of the project from both the students’ and the teacher’s perspectives.

2 LEARNING BY DEVELOPING PEDAGOGY

Universities of Applied Sciences have three tasks set by law: research and development, regional development, and pedagogy. A university of applied sciences can be seen as being part of the surrounding region and world of work – rather than existing for it [1].

Laurea's learning concept is embodied in the Learning by Developing (LbD) model. The objective of learning is competence, which is visible as new ways and means of working, and which allows for renewal of the labour market and the field. Learning by Developing takes place in workplace-oriented

projects in which students, lecturers, workplace experts and customers work together to develop innovative solutions. Working together to build knowledge-based skills leads to competence that allows students to manage diverse situations in the constantly changing world of work.[2]

The aim of the learning environment is to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes while supporting the generation and development of new competence. In development projects, all participants are seen as learners, because the projects aim to produce change and generate something new. Partnership also means mutual respect and appreciation for diverse skills. The progress of the development project requires sharing competence and building new competence out of different areas of expertise. The teacher's role in development projects can be described as that of an expert, a participant and a pedagogical leader. The teacher cannot transfer competence to students but guides the student's learning process. As a developer, a teacher is responsible for ensuring the progress of a development project.[2]

3 SKILLS AS LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The Ministry of Education in Finland stipulates the general competences of University of Applied Sciences graduates. These are: learning competence, ethical competence, working community competence, innovation competence and internationalization competence. In addition every degree has specific professional competences. The Universities of Applied Sciences themselves have defined the professional competences for the Social Services Degree, namely ethical competences, client work competences (e.g. the ability to create an interactive professional relationship with clients that supports client participation), service systems know-how, critical analysis and participation enhancement, research and development competence, and management competence.

In this project the objectives were set to promote several general competences. First, the students develop working community competences by working as a group. Second, working with immigrants gives them internationalization competence. Third, the Multisensory Space can be seen as a Social Work Method and students gain experience in client work by working with immigrants.

Significant for competence development is that it is always connected to a specific situation and framework, which means students need this kind of "real-life" situation. Professional competence consists of the ability to integrate information and learned skills into practice according to expectations. Professional competence also manifests an individual's attitude and behaviour in certain work situations [3]

In addition to these general and professional competences, I wanted to provide the opportunity for development of intercultural competences.

4 ORIGIN OF THE IDEA

The roots of this project stem from my previous experiences with multisensory work for disabled people on one hand, and my awareness of immigrant integration issues in Finnish society on the other. As a teacher in the Social Services Programme, and following the Laurea learning objectives, I was looking for a way to raise students' awareness of the issues of multiculturalism and prepare them for work in the social services sector. To this end I developed a model which we call the "cultural" Multisensory Space.

Multiculturalism is a relatively new phenomenon in Finland, as most ethnic minorities are recent immigrants, born outside of Finland. Many immigrant families feel rootless and suffer from a lack of social support networks. This disorientation related to ethnic identity can contribute to psychosocial problems among both youth and adults. In addition, transnational families are increasingly common.

For these reasons a discussion of cultural issues, values and identity is needed in our society. Not only individuals but also different communities need new action models. In Finnish society it is essential to find participative service models to integrate immigrants into society and new communities [4]. In schools multiculturalism requires a new kind of action for integration and prejudice reduction. According to the internationalization strategy of universities for the years 2009 to 2015, one of the aims is to support the balanced development of a multicultural society. Also Laurea's Director of International Activities, Arja Majakulma, points out that there has been insufficient interaction between international students and Finnish students on campus, and with Finns in general. [5]

5 MULTISENSORY APPROACH

There has been criticism of the overreliance on the visual sense in western society [6,7]. Nowadays though, the trend seems to be toward multisensoriness in a variety of contexts. Recognition of the importance of involving multiple senses is being seen in fields as diverse as environmental planning and marketing, as well as education.

Multisensory work has been used successfully in supporting the rehabilitation and well-being of the severely disabled. Equally, multisensoriness has been used effectively in elderly care; in reminiscence work, multisensory triggers are used to stimulate memory recall.

At Laurea, the examined and developed concept of “Multisensory Space” is used in a slightly different way than has been used in work with disabled people.

In our context “The Multisensory Space” means an easily-modified space where visitors can experience landscape, sounds and objects of a different cultural environment. Landscapes are not authentic; they are mostly suggestive, evoking memories and feelings through all senses. The space provides immigrants with an opportunity to “return momentarily” into the familiar home environment as well as be able to invite others into their “home space”. It is through the process of creating and building the multisensory cultural environments together that the Finnish students and immigrants have the opportunity to learn about each other’s cultural values.

6 THE MULTISENSORY SPACE PROJECT

The primary aim of the Multisensory Space Project was to develop students’ multicultural awareness and teamwork skills by creating multisensory spaces. All first-year students in the Social Services Programme were involved in this project. The students, in groups of five or six, were tasked with studying one minority group in Finland and creating a multisensory space representational of that culture. After doing initial research on the culture they contacted members of the group to be interviewed and serve as cultural informants. Together with the cultural informants they planned how to build the multisensory space. The created space was based on memories, stories, and information from the informants as well as general cultural information researched by the students. The space should stimulate all senses so that the visitors “could make a small trip to the culture”. The students invited the cultural informants as well as other students on campus to visit the space. Afterwards each student group submitted a report on the history and culture of that ethnic group in their home country and the history and experiences of that group in Finland, as well as students’ experiences in taking part in the project. In addition every student completed an individual self assessment.

7 RESULTS

In total there were 74 students who took part in the project last year. The evaluation study I report is based on 15 Group reports and 54 students’ 1-2 pages project- feedback and self assessment. I used Nvivo-program to examine learning experiences of the students.

7.1 Learning about culture

According to the student feedback, the project provided new insights into the concept of culture and intercultural communication. They learned first-hand how multidimensional the concept of culture is by experiencing the ways cultures can vary (culture theories in practice). They had to discuss what culture means for each person and how cultures vary in relation to time and place.

Many students regarded the interview as the most valuable experience of the project. Through the process of interviewing the informants the theoretical concepts of culture became alive. At the same time, the students could see that culture is an important, but not the only, aspect of a person’s identity. When informants of one culture gave varying descriptions of their cultures, students also realized that a person’s notion of his/her own culture is highly subjective.

Naturally, students gained insights into their own Finnish culture, though it did not result in a critical analysis of their own culture. Only a small portion of the students mentioned that they had learned to

look at their own culture from a different perspective. Nonetheless, the act of creating the space forced the students to discuss the concept and different dimensions and values of culture, and in that way the abstract concept became more tangible. They learned to look at multiculturalism and minority groups through different eyes and they became aware of the danger of stereotyping. Some students were troubled by the fact that the information in the books was not consistent with the information collected from the informants. Several regarded the information from the informants as "more correct".

Many students reported that they had learned the types of issues they should pay attention to in intercultural communication, e.g., the difficulty and frustration of using a foreign language, sociolinguistic aspects of language use, and a different concept of time.

"The project was quite fruitful and I was able to learn a lot about a culture which was previously quite unfamiliar to me. In particular, the strong collective nature of Nigerian culture impressed me." KM18

"I learned that immigrants cannot be classified only on the basis of where they have come from. Knowledge of the culture is a useful tool when meeting a member of another culture but all still are individuals, with their different life stories." SN21

7.2 Learning about the background of minorities

In addition to the concept of culture, values and norms, the whole history of the minority group was studied. Even those students who had frequent contact with minorities, such as as friends, mentioned that they obtained a lot of new information about the background of the immigrants.

In terms of learning about multiculturalism, the project proved to be a valuable experience for those students who had no previous encounters with immigrants.

"I knew our interviewee from before, and it surprised me that I knew very little about her home country or culture. We just never talked about this. So it was really interesting to get to know more about my friend's life, and to realize that he had REALLY lived in his childhood in Congo." SN32

7.3 Learning working methods

Most students gave positive feedback about the design and objective of the project, namely that they had to integrate the theoretical studies with practical action. The practical action gave them ideas about how they could support the welfare and identity of immigrants, and they could also envision possibilities of how to apply the method to other client groups. Although students were instructed to invite the informants to the created space, in some cases it succeeded and in others not.

In general, the informants who did attend were very pleased to visit the environment. And the groups who succeeded in having the informant visit the environment had the best learning experiences from a methodological perspective: students could witness how the space functioned as stimulation for reminiscence work and encounters. In the feedback there were many comments reflecting the success of the environment as a multisensory experience.

*"Our informant visited the space that we had created and identified the elements of his own stories from it. He became sentimental while reminiscing about his home country inspired by the space"*KN1

"The best and nicest learning experience was to hear about the informant's personal experiences and feelings she happily shared with us. I learned perhaps most when we were just circling Vantaa together, collecting foodstuffs and objects we needed. Hadn't we found such an eager and active informant, the project would have felt much less sensible." SN36

7.4 Group work

Many students noted that the most important learning experience was learning about group work. They understood the need to prepare processes and timetables and clarify the roles of group members. Many commented that learning how to solve problems in a group and being aware of one's own behaviour in the group were valuable experiences.

Students realized that they had different individual ambitions and objectives regarding the project, and their studies in general, and that meant they had to discuss the role of each student in the group. Some students found this discussion to be a useful learning process, and when the rules of the group work were not actively dealt with, differing expectations about the project threatened the whole process.

On a practical level, scheduling the group work proved to be challenging. The students gave extensive feedback on the scheduling problems, such as finding a common time to meet as a group or scheduling time with the informants. Students attend classes in the daytime and many of them work in the evenings, or even daytime; also the informants had their own time schedules, so the process was difficult.

"I learned most about time management and the importance of openness in the teamwork during the project. It was rewarding to notice how the people understand the matters very differently. After having agreed upon something together, it turned out, after a few days, that everybody had got a very different idea about the matters." SN16

"This caused some misunderstandings but later we discussed and the matters became clear to everybody. So I learned that it is worthwhile to thoroughly and peacefully analyze the project afterwards – in this way, the disagreements can be avoided and the good team spirit is preserved. I also learned to bring up even difficult subjects, to explain my opinions and to stand for my thoughts and ideas." SN10

7.5 Learning about the project process

According to the feedback forms, a large number of students mentioned that the most meaningful experience was learning about project work and how to organize an event.

"During the project, I did not feel I was especially learning about event management. Only in the evaluation seminar I understood that I had been so engaged with the creating of the space that I did not consider it at all as learning, which is good" KN16

Difficulties were also reported: Many groups had trouble getting the process started; others had difficulty finding an informant of the designated ethnic group to interview. Because this was the first major study project for these first-year students, they were surprised to learn how much time was needed to plan and coordinate the group work and cooperation with the outside informants.

Unfortunately, for a few students the process was not felt to be successful. They weren't able to participate in the interviews, and they did not understand the meaning of the whole project as a learning opportunity. The reasons for this need be examined further, though one significant factor was the logistical problems in the process.

"I am interested in different cultures, of course, and like to listen to stories by people from different backgrounds. But I did not understand the concept of the multisensory space. I have never been an eager interior decorator so I regarded the project as unfamiliar to me. I also was a bit astonished why each group was allowed to decorate the space for only a single day" SN17

In spite of the various difficulties the process was generally regarded as a success. Students were pleased to have had meaningful interaction with immigrants. They liked the working method which combined practical and theoretical methods. It was gratifying to see the concrete results. And in the end the challenging process was seen as a valuable learning experience. Most students appreciated having learned teamwork skills, project management skills and awareness of cultural differences and multiculturalism.

“When the space was completed, the feeling was quite different, of course. Already the interview made me think much more positively about the project. But it was a powerful feeling, indeed, when the space was finally manifested in front of my face! The beginning had been difficult and the whole theme of Sweden had actually irritated me. However, the final result was such a good experience.” KN10

“All in all, the project has been very interesting and discussion provoking. I have thought much about the culture and situation of Iraq with the other students. We have compared it with our own culture. So, briefly said, the project has been interesting, it has offered much new information and it has created lots of feelings. My present understanding of the project is quite different from the time of the initial introduction. Furthermore, the media criticism was greatly emphasised in our project.” SN31

8 REFLECTIONS

8.1 Did students acquire the intended competences?

Taking part in the project provided students the opportunity to develop many different general competences, as defined in the curriculum. They learned ethical issues connected to working with minorities as well as working in a group and taking responsibility carrying out the project together (working community competence). Working with new methods gave them innovation competence. Work with immigrants promoted internationalization competence. Students gained also some experience working with clients, which is a social work subject-specific competence

8.2 What could be done better?

At the organizational level many details did not go as planned. The challenges were linked to very practical issues such as how to organize the process in a more structured way, how to make the objectives clearer and how to organize the tutoring better.

For next time these areas should be improved:

- More tutoring and closer monitoring of the student groups throughout the process
- More discussion about stereotypes. It is certainly not the intention to oversimplify the concept of culture or reinforce their stereotypes of the ethnic minority groups.
- The multisensory space must be used as a stimulus for the encounters and discussion about cultural and individual values. The method should be used to make some difficult theoretical concepts more tangible.
- More time for the whole process. Each step of the process should be managed and kept on schedule.
- Students should be recommended to have increased contact with the informants so that they become part of the whole process. In future, we could use permanent partners, such as immigrant associations. This time the students found the informants by themselves.
- It is challenging to coordinate the needs and schedules of the students and the cooperating institutions. At the start, more attention should be paid to the practical arrangements.

8.3 Final thoughts

According to the estimates made by the Finnish state, internationalization is one of our biggest challenges. Our experience of developing the multisensory space can, as a part of further research and development, provide interesting new initiatives and solutions to enable the internalization problems to be turned into opportunities in our innovation system.

The next step for me is to pilot multisensory spaces and activities in public schools, museums and libraries. In this endeavour Laurea is cooperating with municipalities and third sector organisations.

If you are interested in applying this method with your students, I am interested in sharing ideas.

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