

Negotiating Boundaries in Multi-Cultural Communities

Andreea Pausan

National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, Romania, Email: apausan.ap@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Living in a global, multi-cultural world brings various challenges connected to communication and identity. Dealing with ambiguity and cultural differences become essential skills in a world filled with communication technology and migrants. The current research focuses on three coordinates: language (communication), digital skills (using digital tools), and community (negotiating identity). The researcher takes an ethnographical approach within the social learning theory and community of practice (CoP) framework of analysis on three different Erasmus+ international training courses.

Methods: The article uses the researcher's journal, personal observations, the artefacts created by the participants for the courses, their reflexive feedback and open-ended questionnaires received at the end of each course.

Conclusion: By taking part in such exchanges, the participants gained valuable digital skills and improved their communication and cultural awareness. Sharing practices and personal histories allowed them to negotiate different cultural boundaries, thus creating new learning experiences and shaping their identities to encompass new values.

KEYWORDS: Multi-cultural, Identity, CoP, Digital skills

Introduction

Living in a global, multi-cultural world brings various challenges connected to communication and identity. The school formal learning subject matters are useful to establish a knowledge base where personal values, skills, attitudes, and cultural background are grafted, subsequently topped by negotiation, problem solving, critical thinking - all skills that allow navigation through the rapid organizational and technological changes occurring in the global market.

These skills are gained through experience and knowledge expansion, and allow ease of transitions and better dealing with uncertainties. The migration phenomenon adds to the issue by challenging the identity and cultural heritage of the immigrants. The European Union has an established program called Erasmus that helps people to learn about each other in a safe environment. It also enables them to communicate across cultures to build bridges of common understanding (Erasmus+, 2018). In the crucible of cultures that is

Europe, learning by sharing personal experiences becomes the cornerstone of unity in diversity.

This article will follow three main coordinates in three international Erasmus+ training courses: : language (communication), digital skills (using digital tools), and community (negotiating identity) in a multi-cultural environment, using the theoretical framework of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 2002) within a ethnographical approach.

Literature Review

Within the larger social learning theory, Wenger' CoP theory puts learning at the intersection of experience and practice, including both the explicit and the tacit, and having different modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. (Wenger, 1999a). In the nexus of multi-memberships created by the overlapping circles of vying interests and affiliations in a person's life, the community remains a locus of strength and safety that encourages sharing and peer support, thus shaping and reshaping identity as a duality between participation (active and mutual engagement in the community) and reification (the instruments, creation given form). (Wenger, 1999a)

As the world opens more with the help of technology, new skills and competences are required: analytical and critical thinking, the ability to cooperate and communicate, the ability to adapt to an ever changing cultural and institutional environment. (Date, Type, & Price, 2000)

Changes bring both opportunities and challenges for learning. On one hand, the web has become the primary source of information. Google is accessed 63,000 times per second every day (Google, 2019), while Facebook had 2.38 billion monthly active users as of March 31, 2019. (STATISTA - The Statistic Portal, 2018). On the other hand, trust is an issue with internet information, augmented by a certain intellectual laziness that gives the tendency to reach towards information that confirms existing beliefs, also referred to as "confirmation bias".(Kiviniem & Tuominen, 2017).

Safely navigating the waters of the world wide web requires training. In the Digital Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2010), the European Union promotes a skill called digital literacy as one of its development areas for 2020. For education, a program named after one of the greatest man of the Renaissance, Erasmus, deals with student and youth exchanges to promote the different points on the 2020 agenda, including digital skills and learning to use media in responsible way. (Erasmus+, 2018).

The CoP framework will be used to assess nascent communities whose members step out of their comfort zone and use new digital skills to create artefacts that would share their stories online with the rest of the world.

Methodology:

Ethnography is a methodology based on observation, where the researcher listens to the stories of the people involved, reads their documents and asks them questions. (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016). The researcher was an active participant in the three trainings concerned and used for this article direct participation and interaction, journals, transcription of the participant's responses to the reflective parts of the programs and qualitative thematic analysis of short questionnaires delivered at the end of the programs. The questionnaires held four open-ended questions to assess the participants experience as compared to their previous international exchanges. The themes were linked back to the reflective feedback used throughout the courses.

Due to the article limits, each training course is presented below in a few details, with focus on three dimensions that appeared as important in the participants' feedback: language (communication), digital skills (online tools used), and CoP (CoP features present in the group dynamics that allow the formation of a community)

Findings and discussion:

1.1 TURN Online

The first course took place on May 2018 in Holloko, Hungary (90 km from Budapest) with fourteen participants from six countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Hungary, and Spain). The aim of the TURN Online course was to present digital skills and to introduce different digital tools to be used in both formal and non-formal learning environments. At the end, the participants, divided into groups, produced their own course using the new tools. The final works were loaded on Facebook and afterwards presented and commented upon by the entire audience: participants and trainers. The group evidenced signs of a CoP in the coalescing stage (Pausan, 2019), and shared many personal and cultural details throughout their stay.

1.1.1. Language

The main language of the course was English. However, the participants' levels of English were different. M from Greece needed constant translation, however this did stop her from expressing her opinions, while the opposite happened to M from Spain, who was withdrawn and preferred to keep interactions to a minimum, at least for the first days. S from Italy stated that one of the main reasons for coming to this course was to be able to converse in English as he did not have this opportunity back home. Despite the differences in language, the participants were not confined to the smaller country groups, but chose to participate fully and made efforts to get their message across. They reflected and shared their experience using emotion words "We have seen – *feeling* it from our own skin- how teamwork dynamics work analyzing how we were behaving during the boat building" (M. from Spain). The connection which Wenger describes as "shared ways of engaging" (Wenger, 2002, p. 125) kept the group together outside the given assignments: "Since this is a *specific and personal* way to go through, we had a couple of hours [...]"

All previous days were full of *emotions* and *new experiences*.... Even though, in general it sounds as an individual process, we stayed together as a group” (V from Bulgaria).

In their own words, the participants shared their emotions and this allowed them to strengthen the connections within the group.

1.1.2. Digital skills

Although most young people are very familiar with the use of media tools, they do not use it for learning. (Waycott, Thompson, Sheard, & Clerehan, 2017). A. from Macedonia confessed the first days were really uncomfortable, even if he was an experienced social media user.

The participants taught about platforms such as Moodle, Edmodo, or Google classrooms, tools such as Padlet, Google docs, Big Blue Button, Kahoot. They used and appraised their functionalities and ease of usage.

When asked about the impact of technology, K from Greece said that “...in a world full of knowledge, where you have the chance you learn literally anything all you need is to find the right way. In the year we live technology have changed our lives completely and it for the best to use these changes to benefit from it”. This goes back to the metaphor of the “ocean of knowledge” used to describe the digital world. This researcher views it rather as an ocean of information that requests research and context to become knowledge, which here was achieved through testing and social interaction between the members of the group.

M from Spain discussed another benefit of digital tools, constant communication, with a special reference to migrants: “Online tools, in the correct hands, can improve learning and be an opportunity. Another example that comes to my mind, related to my last experience in Greece working with the migrants and asylum seekers who are living in the refugee camps, is the way how online tools make them be connected with their past life, with family and friends who are far away. It is not only a tool for the social media, but they also use it to learn languages or use it to denounce their situation”. She links the new learning with the previous experience working with migrant groups who use ICT to keep in touch. In the same context, M from Greece related her own experience with Syrian refugees, thus bringing a new emotionally charged perspective to the group which allowed new negotiation of meaning in relation to both refugees and own cultural identity as non-refugees.

All the content of the course was loaded onto Facebook. Furthermore, the participants keep in touch a year later on a Facebook group and share news and latest activities, despite the fact that their lives are constantly changing and they are located in different parts of Europe. Technology allows them to feel close, one message away from each other.

1.1.3. Community:

At the end, the participants created five different projects that expressed their individual aspirations and ideas: a Parkour demonstration, a blog about intercultural exchanges and the refugee experience, a public speaking course, a sexual awareness questionnaire, and

an introduction to ergonomics course. The project represent ideas and thoughts translated into documentation, thus reifying the participation to the course (Wenger, 1999a). Even the participants who did not bring their own idea took part fully in the creation of the final projects, sharing their own experience, yet another indicative of the second stage of CoP, namely *coalescing* (Wenger, 2002).

1.2. Let's Digital Story tell

The second training took place in Bucharest, Romania in July 2018 and had twenty-four participants from six countries (Romania, UK, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and Bulgaria), with trainers from UK and Romania. Let's Digital Story tell hosted a mixed group with ages between 18 and 50, with very different background and experiences (from professor to actor to librarian).

In the research context, digital storytelling “profit[s] from the grounded way the method inserts indigenous empirical material into research endeavors”. (Gubrium, 2009). It allows personal, intimate stories to reach a larger audience using images, movies, and text.

The author participated as part of the UK team and one of the challenges was to make a five minutes comprehensive presentation of the country, with common places and little-known facts, with traditions and recommendations. The four people representing UK had all different nationalities: two Romanians, one Irish and one Thai. How to present the essence of a culture with a rich history that none of them was born in became an opportunity to share personal backgrounds and experiences, quirks of the cities each came from, food likes and dislikes, school and jobs adventures, personal observations of people and habits both from outside and inside the given framework. It was a useful bonding experience that translated later as awareness and tolerance of difference into one of the digital stories created at the end of the course.

1.2.1 Language

The common language used was English. At the beginning of the course, when asked about motivations for participation, some participants said they wanted to improve their level of English. For them, it was a challenge to speak and present in English every day. Moreover, while the digital stories were created, transforming personal stories into scripts, images and, at the same time, getting the whole to make sense to a larger audience while keeping the essence of the original idea proved to be a challenge of translation and a task that made the participants become more aware of both their differences and similarities.

Furthermore, because Erasmus+ trainings promote inclusion, two participants from Spain were hearing impaired and they came with a sign language translator. That posed a different set of challenges: the translator had to go from English to Spanish and then to sign language and back for every utterance, which changed the rhythm of the conversation and raised additional issues of patience, understanding, and communication. It also made the participants more aware of things taken for granted, such as the ability to hear and speak,

following which arise an understanding of attitudes such as inclusion and tolerance. It allowed a change of pace in the dialogue, thus according more time to reflection and the negotiation of different boundaries, outside of the individual comfort zone.

1.2.2. Digital Skills

The aim of the training course was to inform on tools to record and present stories. The participants learned to identify narratives in everyday life, script them, refine and distill them and, subsequently, translate them into short story videos with photos, moving pictures, sound, and text. All became literally three minutes films that could be shared with the world using the internet. They used cell phones for filming videos and programs like Video Maker and Sony Vega to put photos and filmed materials together.

Surprisingly, learning how to use the tools was considered less of a challenge than agreeing on the story and how to create it: “beginning difficult work, to collaborate, and little the people adapted” (R from Spain); “some struggles, troubles in the beginning, everything was new” (E from Lithuania). In the end, it became “more about the team [...] because I start things and I give up on them and I admire them for being so persistent and encouraging me” (V from Romania). The comments reveal that, while there is some difficulty related to new skills acquisition, the real challenge lies within the participants’ discovering how to work together.

All the content of the course was loaded onto Facebook on a group that the participants still use to post videos or news that might be interesting to the whole group.

1.2.3 Community building

The six three minutes movies presented at the end reified the participation at the course (Wenger, 1999b), while the themes proposed challenges identity boundaries and misconceptions: isolation vs. inclusion (impaired people and their everyday life), tolerance and hate (gay people) ; climate change (nature and animals preservation,); friendship (passion vs. everyday life).

F’s (Spain) story “talk[ed] about stereotypes and prejudice”. J from Portugal filmed a short video of herself and shared her gratitude with the group, mentioning she is “... going out of my comfort zone, because [...] I needed to do this. We are living our own adventures; we are all on our process with these challenges and everything ... If you wouldn’t have been yourselves, I could not have been myself. It was like a therapy, because you made me so comfortable”. This speaks of the level of connection within the group that created a safe zone where the participants felt comfortable to shed masks and share personal experiences and practices transformed into digital stories. It is also evidence of a renegotiated boundary, allowing personal space to extend to public scrutiny, albeit through symbols embedded in the digital work

1.3. Making culture Gr8 again

The third course took places in Daugirdiskes (near Vilnius), Lithuania, in December 2018.

It hosted thirty-two participants from eleven countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Spain, Italy, Romania, Macedonia, Norway, Portugal, Bulgaria, and Poland). Again, it was a mixed group with ages between twenty and thirty-nine, with people working as librarian, surgeon, freelancer, youth worker.

Among the aims of Making Culture Gr8 again were to train participants on how to create innovative qualitative Erasmus projects; to make culture heritage activities interesting for young people by making them participatory, and using the principles of non – formal education and online tools and technologies.

At the end of the course, the researcher asked the participants to answer four questions about their previous Erasmus experiences, living/travelling abroad, the training course, and their memorable student experiences. The participation was voluntary and eight replies were received, giving the researcher a deeper insight into the motivations of the participants.

1.3.1. Language

The main language of the course was English, however the participants had very different levels of English. Furthermore, almost half of the participants spoke Russian, so the Russian speaking participants tended to band together for smaller assignments.

R from Macedonia revealed her challenge as “transport connection and the language. I think they are like a barrier for me”, an opinion shared by S from Spain who mentioned in a group conversation that “it is difficult for me to explain in English”.

More than the spoken language, a lot of the participants shared common beliefs and history (members of the former communist bloc) and it was something of a shock to discover they knew about other countries’ history from the use of toponymics. When asked to share things on the surface and things hidden in an exercise called “the iceberg”, V from Italy revealed she “...did not do this before and after I did it on myself, I could understand better the others when we shared”. U from Estonia said that “the hardest one for me was the iceberg [sharing] because I live in one small community where everybody knows everybody and when I go across the border I just don’t know”. The boundaries here are physical, as well as emotional (small community vs. big community, Estonia vs. Lithuania) – U underlined the changes happening to her identity as an individual, and as a part of an existing community, which Wenger names “reconciling identities” (Wenger, 1999a, p. 160)

The exercises during the course also revealed different names for common places and confusions because of the differences. Toponymics are part of the cultural identity and history. Similarly, at the cultural presentation night, the participants discovered close customs and habits (such as dancing or putting ornaments on tree branches for luck), making sharing all the more valuable.

1.3.2. Digital Skills

All the content of the course was loaded onto Facebook and the participants still keep in touch on a WhatsApp group. An online badge system was used to make the participants

familiar with the skills and abilities necessary for youth work and cultural awareness in the Erasmus agenda.

1.3.3. Community building

The course was hosted in a remote area which made the participants spend eight days together in close quarters, learning about each other, about their cultural backgrounds, family histories, exchanging ideas, opinions, and words. A lot of the cultural heritage is closely bound by language and is taken for granted. The organizers challenged the familiar status-quo by making the participants experience a local neighborhood through the eyes of artist and through the lenses of stories told by the local community. This change in perspective shed a new light on ordinary things, shifting the focus from the mere objects to the richness of the lived, subjective experience.

The participants felt connected and enthused their feedback with personal statements, such as M from Bulgaria who said that she likes to go abroad, despite the fact that “in my first travel abroad I had to deal with the loneliness. I was shy and didn’t really open to anyone which lead to the feeling of not being understood accepted”, while R from Estonia is glad that she “[...] found out that youngsters like me are almost the same despite their nationality and culture. That we had the same hobbies, preferences, problems and other stuff”

R from Macedonia summarized her experience as” The most impressive things for me are the stories from the participants, their successes, advantages and work. Because these things makes me to believe in myself and to do the things that makes me happy”, which is another example of negotiating meaning and identity where the practice of the community encourages personal development.

D’s (Portugal) reason for enjoying such training: “is to better understand the culture, cultural differences and equalities, of others. This is a vital reason! For one to understand another’s culture, means to think about it, learn it’s ways, learn what’s the core of other values in different cultures, and thus respect... and always respect will lead to a uniform, peaceful world, where people are proud to share and learn about others, their countries, their costumes, their realities, themselves.”

These statements show how important cultural exchanges are, and how the shift in perspective brings about understanding, tolerance, respect, and desire to learn more, all of which can be used to build a successful community.

Conclusions

2.1. Limitations

The researcher was an active participant in the trainings and, as such, her bias might have an impact on the conclusions. To mitigate bias, and external auditor and peer analysis (Creswell, 2002) were employed. Another limitation is the relatively small quantity of data analyzed.

Recommendations for further research: the current research shows the value brought by the Erasmus program to education. Further analysis into the projects done by the participants during the courses and their dissemination in the local communities is likely to give evidence of different degrees of participation and CoP social learning.

2.2 Conclusion

Stories shape individual identities by merging cultural influences with personal histories. By taking part in the Erasmus exchanges, the participants gained valuable digital skills and improved their communication and cultural awareness. Sharing practices and personal histories allowed them to negotiate different cultural boundaries, thus creating new learning experiences and shaping their identities to encompass new values (Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011) and broadcast them online to peers on the world wide web. . Cultural understanding, respect, tolerance, better communication face to face or online tools, and not taking things for granted are the values the participants took away from the courses, which is a testimony of the importance of the Erasmus+ program and community.

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