Community Learning and the Arts in Art Education: Experiences in Montenegro

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Abstract

This chapter presents the challenging process of introducing the concept of community learning in art education in Montenegro. The realisation of this project provides an illustrative example of a very successful community learning practice that has led to the significant improvement of quality of many different aspects of teaching and learning process.

Keywords

community learning – higher education – art education – Montenegro

1 Introduction

In the last few decades, higher education institutions all around the world have faced many challenges. Some of the key challenges are how to equip the students with more transferrable skills that fit modern labor market needs, to find and introduce new pedagogical and methodological approaches, thus make strong links between the higher education system and cultural, social and economic dimensions of a society, strengthening the role and the importance of the community in higher education, etc. Under these circumstances, it is quite challenging to establish a higher educational system which will be both competitive on the labor market and in accordance with the educational goals defined by UNESCO: “I learn to know, I learn to do, I learn to be and I learn to live together”.

Higher education institutions in Montenegro introduced studies harmonised with Bologna Declaration in 2003/2004 as a pilot project in a form of experimental courses, and one year later this concept was introduced in all higher education institutions in Montenegro. Some of the most important

changes included the introduction of the educational system based on three cycles, the introduction of European system of credit transfer services (ECTS), diploma supplement and learning outcomes policy and the establishment of National Qualification Framework which is in accordance with European Qualification framework, among others.

The reforms were strongly supported by legal and strategic documents at the national level following the adoption of the Law of Higher Education, Strategy of Higher Education, Strategy of Science and Research, Strategy of Smart Specialisation, etc., which are continuously improving the quality control and assurance in higher education.

Although at a strategic level, the higher education system in Montenegro is harmonised with EU educational systems, there are still many challenges that the system will face should it want to improve and become more competitive in the European higher education arena. The greatest challenge is the introduction of practice in curricula and harmonisation of learning outcomes and labor market needs, which is formally recognised in all strategic documents, but is still not adequately implemented in higher education institutions in Montenegro. The best evidence in favor of the previous argument are the results of much research carried out by the Chamber of Commerce of Montenegro, in cooperation with relevant ministries, which confirmed that the higher education process and labor market needs are not harmonised at all and that graduate students lack practical skills and competences, as well as communication and soft skills. Moreover, the social dimension of the higher education system is still not recognised as one of the main strategic goals of educational process, nor its importance is fully recognised by different stakeholders in educational process.

Therefore, in order to provide future improvement of the quality control and assurance in higher education in Montenegro, it is necessary to establish and develop educational models which will contribute to the establishment of strong connections between higher education system and labor market needs as well as higher education and society.

2 The Implementation of the Concept of Social Responsibility in Montenegro

Activities related to introduction and promotion of social responsibility in Montenegro have been intensified since the middle of the last decade. In the last few years, several research projects regarding implementation of this concept, its main benefits and challenges, the legal and institutional framework,

comparative experiences in the region and other important issues were carried out. In addition, series of roundtables, workshops and conferences were held and several publications were issued with the aim to promote the concept of social responsibility and share examples of good practice. The UN Global Compact Network in Montenegro has been launched and in 2012, the National Network for Social Responsibility, whose members are representatives of the state and academic institutions, business and professional associations and professional and civil society organisations, was established. In 2013, the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism adopted the Social Responsibility Policy in Montenegro which sets out these key goals:

- Promotion of the concept of social responsibility and raising awareness of the values and importance of social responsibility, through campaigns, research, incorporating the concept of social responsibility into the education system, trainings at all levels, dissemination of information, cooperation among social actors and international cooperation.
- Creation of a favorable environment for the proliferation and faster implementation of social responsibility (the adoption of policies and regulations in line with EU/international policies and guidelines, implementation of incentive instruments, providing financial and other support for the implementation of social responsibility in practice.
- Increase in the number of institutions that systematically apply the principles of social responsibility in their business by development and implementation of corporate social responsibility in the business sector, strengthening the reporting system, trainings and sharing of experiences, improving corporate governance and introducing appropriate standards.

Social responsibility has been recognised as one of the key priorities in all strategic and legal documents at national and institutional level, and appropriate legal solutions have been introduced to regulate various benefits, including those regarding taxes, for philanthropically-minded institutions. Numerous institutes and non-governmental organisations whose main activities are focussed on promoting the concept of social responsibility have been formed. Also, several awards for socially responsible business, philanthropy, volunteerism, etc. have been established and awarded annually by different institutions and organisations, including the Chamber of Commerce, Institute for Social Responsible Business and NGOs.

However, despite the significant progress made in the past few years, there are still many issues to be dealt with, especially in terms of the lack of knowledge about the importance of social responsibility, lack of appropriate information regarding strategic and legislative framework, insufficient support of

the media in promotion of socially responsible practices and prejudices about the costs of realisation of socially responsible activities. Although formally recognised in strategic and legal documents at the national and institutional level, the implementation of this concept has not been put into practice in an appropriate way, especially when it comes to the education system, where there were no significant changes in implementation of this concept in the last decade. Therefore, it is necessary to work continuously on raising awareness of different stakeholders about the importance of social responsibility, through media, activities of governmental and non-governmental institutions and organisations, business associations and other stakeholders. This may be carried out by the realisation of different dissemination activities, the organisation of conferences and round tables, publishing and dissemination of publications and other promotional materials regarding social responsibility, strong and intensive promotion of examples of good practices, further improvement of legal framework and the introduction of the concept of social responsibility into the educational the system in Montenegro at all levels.

3 The Introduction of Community Learning in Curricula of the Faculty of Visual Arts

In order to promote the UNESCO philosophy and make it essential part of higher education process, the Faculty of Visual Arts introduced the concept of community learning in curricula as a pilot project in a course on painting. The idea was to reach learning outcomes defined by the curricula of the course by partaking in activities outside the traditional classroom and identifying and solving community problems. In that way, students would become more active citizens who not only take all the advantages and benefits from the society, but also contribute to its welfare. It was assumed that participating in such an activity would improve students' practical, communication, soft, organisational and leadership skills, as well as create a more dynamic, interesting, creative, challenging and motivating atmosphere for learning process.

After the formal adoption of the concept of community learning in curricula at the Faculty's council, students were briefly introduced with the concept itself, as well as some examples of good practices from across the world.

During brainstorming sessions, students decided to undertake the course activities in the children's hospital, situated in the capital of Montenegro, the biggest and the most important institution of its kind in the country. After the formal approval by the hospital management, the prerequisites for the project were met so the activities could start.

FIGURE 8.1 Initial phase of painting the murals

The project lasted for one semester (four months). Twenty students participated in the project activities. The initial plan was to paint the hall of the hospital, an area of 40 square meters, and students were supposed to spend about 4 hours a week on it. The first phase included brainstorming ideas for the mural, making sketches, selecting the final plan and choosing the colours. The second phase included painting of murals themselves.

Though the students were allotted to spend only around 4 hours a week at the hospital, they ended up spending much more time than that. Even on the first day, they stayed in the hospital until midnight, fully aware of the importance of the activities they were carrying out. After finishing the main hall, students continued to work on murals in other halls, operation blocks and waiting rooms. At the end of the course, more than 500 square metres of the hospital were painted.

During project, students gained high level of practical skills and competences. Further, they also improved their communication and soft skills, as they had to communicate with other colleagues, make agreements, negotiations and compromises, and solve conflicts. This is extremely important, especially for the students of art, since different students have different ideas, styles of painting etc., and all their works, in this case, represent pieces of one work of art. Also, it is important to mention that the atmosphere in hospital itself was extremely stressful, with sick children, stressed parents and medical staff all around the students. This forced the students to further improve their communication, organisation and soft skills.

Instead of being passive observers, students became active participants in the educational process, because they actually defined all the phases of the

FIGURE 8.2 Initial phase of painting the murals

project and were responsible for the organisation and realisation of all planned activities. They chose the place where they would carry out the activities, created the idea of the mural, a work plan and timeframe for the project, prepared the sketches, painted the mural, chose the most appropriate techniques, colours and materials, and organised their time, giving value to the process itself.

It is important to mention that it was obvious that while carrying out the project activities, students developed empathy towards the various groups in the hospital, which significantly contributed to their awareness of the importance of social responsibility and the necessity of its implementation wherever and whenever is possible – i.e. always and everywhere.

Except for painting murals, students also decided to organise different creative workshops for children, in order to make their stay in hospital friendlier and more comfortable. The children were delighted with these workshops and enjoyed the opportunity to make sketches, paint, make different objects from different materials, act, etc. Not only the children, but their parents and the hospital staff were inspired and amazed, and they also took the opportunity to take a part in these events in order to create an inspiring, creative and homely atmosphere where children could feel comfortable and relaxed.

After the the project ended, a survey was conducted among the students and teaching staff, in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project. The results of the survey were extremely satisfactory, especially regarding the different segments of the quality of teaching and the learning process.

FIGURE 8.3 Final phase of painting the murals

FIGURE 8.4 Final phase of painting the murals

On a scale of 1 to 5, students estimated the quality of the teaching and learning processes with an average mark of 5; the creativity, dynamics and challenges of learning process with a mark 5; their own practical skills with a mark of 4.9; their own soft skills as 4.8; and their organisational and leadership skills at 4.7.

These results were compared with the results of the professor evaluations, which included a different model of evaluation than before – instead of evaluating a final artwork and its presentation, professors evaluated all the phases in the realisation of project tasks, as well as students' communication skills, leadership skills, practical skills, soft skills, their level of engagement, creativity, etc. The average mark of the students was 9, which was significantly better than in the previous twelve years, in which the highest achieved average score was 8.1.

It is important to mention that this project was strongly supported by the management team of the children's hospital, who handed awards to students, as well as by the Mayor of the capital city, who organised a special event in order to thank the students for this project and to highlight the importance of this project for the community. The media in the country and the region gave extensive publicity to the work done on this project which, in turn, provided additional satisfaction to students and their professors.

After the end of this project, community learning became an integral part of the curricula taught at Faculty of Visual Arts. Hence, this project paved the way for similar activities to be carried out in children's hospital in Bijelo Polje, the psychiatric clinic and the Centre for Children's rights.

4 Conclusion

The introduction of community learning in the curricula taught at Faculty of Visual Arts was an extremely challenging process during which many issues seen from different perspectives (conceptual, organisational, etc.) emerged and had to be tackled.

The complete educational process of a painting course was moved away from the classroom and transferred to the children's hospital, in order to try to reach all learning outcomes defined in the course curriculum. Thus, teaching was dealt with in a completely different way: the process was rendered as more creative, dynamic, stimulating, encouraging and useful for students. The project was realised by the students, who were active participants in all phases of the educational process, while professors were there to support, monitor and supervise its realisation.

The results of the survey carried out after the completion of all activities have shown that this concept significantly improved the quality of teaching

and learning, as well as strengthened the connections between higher education institutions and the community. Students significantly improved their practical skills and competences, as well as their communication, soft, organisational and leadership skills. Further, the quality, creativity, dynamics and challenges of the learning process improved as well.

Furthermore, it is also important to mention the fact that carrying out the project and its related activities developed empathy among the students and raised their awareness about the importance of social responsibility. The role and the importance of the community integration in higher education was strengthened, and strong links between the higher education system and the cultural, social and economic dimensions of society were fostered and developed. All these things led to the creation of a new higher education framework in which social dimension would prove to be an important and unavoidable part.

Taking into account all the improvements, community learning has become an integral part of the curricula, which set completely new standards in the higher education system in Montenegro. This does not mean that this process is completed – in fact, it is only the initial step towards one continuous and long-lasting process. But this initial step is quite encouraging and it represents the excellent base for the future development and promotion of this concept, which may significantly improve the quality of education system, not only in art education, but in other fields as well.

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