Virtual Learning Communities and the Education for European Citizenship in the Context of Adult Education

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Abstract

Education for European citizenship as a field of adult education is increasingly relevant in the postmodern pedagogical literature due to the multicultural backgrounds and values of European citizens that can be sometimes the apparent cause of conflicts and tensions, in the absence of social and civic competences. Starting from the systematic study of most recent developments in adult education, this paper focuses on the hypothesis that there is a direct correlation between the participation in adult education and the development of social and civic competences. The paper also explores the potential of ICT in the education for European citizenship, highlighting the relevance of virtual learning communities in facilitating the development of social, civic and digital competences for adults.

Keywords: *European citizenship, adult education, European education, ICT, virtual learning communities*

1. Introduction

Education for democratic citizenship refers to training young people and adults to be active citizens of a united Europe, and also to the development of humanistic values and key competencies such as intercultural dialogue, negotiation, solving of community's problems etc. Active citizenship requires knowledge of your fundamental rights, the desire to be an agent of change in society and accountability, selection and ranking of social values, critical perspective and logical reasoning in relation to the discriminatory influences and interventions or decisions of any kind that alter the lives of citizens a state or community, the ability to work in heterogeneous groups, openness to more diverse values, communication and transfer to other value systems.

We can distinguish two different dimensions of the Education for European Citizenship (EEC): one concerning knowledge of fundamental rights and relevant laws and the other relates to motivation and civic involvement in issues concerning personal rights and social issues. Unfortunately in many countries in Europe, especially the new entrants, there are many people who do not know any of their rights nor are actively involved in community affairs. An argument for this would be the high rate of absenteeism in the vote, and the answers to general knowledge questions regarding the main European

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institutions or basic law of the EU. EEC is necessary in the context of globalization, economic crises and ethnic tensions and imbalances due to micro and macro social conditions that exist in a society. For example, the intolerance towards immigrants or people of other ethnicities, races, religions, etc. represents a particularly important issue in the EU that can be explained by for some EEC deficits at the level of individuals, communities or nations. Europe is a conglomerate of nations with different histories and traditions but also with certain core values, integrated through a common ancient roots but also medieval legacy: Roman law, Greek philosophy are just some of the items we have in common collective European culture. But besides these similarities are important ethnic, cultural, economic, social and political distinctions that make up a European value mosaic with small chance of success if we do not identify a strategy that focuses on the common elements (a European strategy) but that also respects the great differences. The instrument by which we can do this is citizenship that is fundamentally democratic, centered on common European values and embracing the differences, which are actually the foundation of the EU as a socio-political entity. Unfortunately at the moment it was found that many Europeans do not know their rights and thus the citizenship is understood as a legal concept and not so much on an actional, practical and pragmatic level. It is therefore necessary an education for the formation of civic skills, especially in adult education as it targets those who now have the right to vote.

The relations between EEC and the *professional education of adults* are complex and can be viewed from two angles: on the one hand EEC affects how adults are trained by introducing conditions and fundamental values for European democracy such as combating discrimination, equality of opportunity between men and women, being aware employee rights (Labour Code), using democratic principles and values in training, such as: student consultation before making a decision, decision by plenary vote, etc. Conversely, the report can be seen by the significant size of the professional education of adults to develop specialists in EEC. As it can be seen, EEC is hardly present in the adult education, and has a more non-formal presence that is visible in the activity og some NGOs. This dimension highlights the acute importance of teacher training in EEC.

The conceptual relations between EEC and *adult basic education* is more visible and covers basic skills that someone should have as an active citizen of the EU. Of course, they are also related to writing, counting, communication and digital skills etc. Adult Basic Education is a prerequisite for EEC, since in the absence of a consistent educational background is difficult to believe that someone can develop a true understanding of the European dimension of education, culture, citizenship etc. A further argument is that a certain EEC deficit can be observed in the groups coming from marginalized strata of society. Therefore they are a target group of EU programs for the development of EEC (but not only). Conversely, civic competence tends to

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become a core competency, at European level. If the development of a European identity is desired, then the exercise of rights as European citizens should be something common, accessible to all, including those with disabilities, who should have access to the opportunity to make a change.

Lastly loisir education may have some elements in common with EEC through volunteering dimension, especially at NGOs. There are many NGOs in our country seem to be the guarantors of human rights and democracy in Romanian society (e.g. Pro Democratia). Also, in their free time, many people may have the opportunity to inform themselves and actively participate in various social-cultural activities focused on democratic citizenship.

2. Explanatory theories of education for European citizenship

Many explanatory theories of EEC can be identified in the field of philosophy. In Antiquity, Aristotle and Plato believed that it was a shame for a citizen not to get involved in community affairs. But then of course, a *polis* was small, and every vote clearly counted. This interest seems to have disappeared today in a society where TV and the Internet take the place of the ancient agora, and where the human personality is lost in the crowd. So a first theoretical vein is the ancient Greek democracy theory, perfected by modern liberal theories (through the French branch - Rousseau, the social contract theory was a tremendous influence; Montesquieu and other Enlightenment philosophers and through Anglo-Saxon branch - initially British, then American). We can also observe the influence of hermeneutic and existentialist post-modernism influences. In a legal framework, there are several documents that are extremely important for this field: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights elaborated by the UN in 1948 and subsequent documents that extend and clarify human rights through anti-discrimination package, children's rights, workers' rights, etc. In terms of social analysis, we see that all theories presented above have an impact on EEC in one form or another (Strunga 2014): *Brookfield's critical reflection theory*, by the special importance it has critical view on various ideological and political values, critical judgment and the empowerment of citizens. This theory can also be used for educational purposes by emphasizing EEC and optimizing the situations that exist in certain social system. Then, *social critique theory* (Habermas, Fromm and Marcuse) and *critical consciuousness* (Freire) emphasizes the structuring of society groups that exert an influence on the superstructure (composed of values, culture). Social differences are reflected in the cultural and educational differences, which can be seen more easily from the position of outsider. We would also add *cultural reproduction theory* (Bernstein and Passeron) emphasizing exactly the same issues that I mentioned earlier and the *social phenomenology theory* (Berger and Luckmann) synthesized in the sociology of knowledge. Important contributions were made and other sociologists, as Talcott Parsons (social action theory), Emile Durkheim and many others.

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3. European perspectives over education for European citizenship

In 1973, Copenhagen Treaty emphasized the importance of developing of a sense of European community. Adonino Report from 1985 also marked an important moment in the construction of a peoples's Europe. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which introduces the idea of a European citizenship providing each citizen the right to move anywhere in the EU (reality more refined by the Treaty of Amsterdam by introducing of Schegen Convention in the treaty). Among the most important European documents in this field we could mention (Strunga 2014): Amsterdam Treaty (Article A) which promotes and encourages the idea of European citizenship not only in the legal sense but in the sense of a Europe closer to its citizens. This document stresses the importance of citizen involvement at all decision levels, especially European and importance of education in EEC in the context of social and cultural diversity. Another important treaty for European Citizenship is signed in Nice in 2001. European Commission's 1997 report *Towards a Europe of knowledge* emphasizes the importance of lifelong education in EDC and the need for appropriate policies. The society should provide its citizens with the means to progress and development in life, especially in the field of civic competences which are the vehicle through which Europeans can help one another and shape the EU's future. Education was considered a key issue in another document of the Study Group on Education and Training - *Realising Europe through education and training* and also *White Paper: Teaching and Learning: Towards a learning society*. Another important document is the publication DGXXII - *Education and Active Citizenship in the EU* in 1998 (Strunga 2014). EU involvement in this sector is visible through research and intervention programs financed by the community, such as the European Voluntary Service, launched in 1996, Youth for Europe III, Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci, Europe for Citizens, under the umbrella of Lifelong Education Programme and currently Erasmus+ which include the eligible actions including issues regarind European citizenship, especially for young people and disadvantaged groups.Among the conclusions of various studies we could mention some of the following ideas: many adults lack knowledge, relevant information, skills, self-confidence to be active citizens; non-formal learning and the volunteering-like activities help to more easily correlate the emotional and pragmatic aspects of European citizenship with the cognitive dimension; the increasingly high importance on of intercultural communication skills and the ones related to adapting positively to changing environments. The competences extend the purpose and relevance of learning for active citizenship.

In the framework of DGXXII Citizenship Study, there were identified several conclusion as: some practices have outstanding results focused on democratic and participatory learning; active citizenship tends to become increasingly more a lifelong learning .Some interesting case studies are highlighted in the next paragraphs (Strunga 2014):

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a) An adult education project to support socially excluded women, conducted in the Socrates program in 1994/5, through a partnership between the Spanish Federation of Popular Universities and the Spanish Ministry of Education, together with 8 other states. Socrates Programme has financed about half the cost of the project and involved the participation of 140 low-income women without basic skills. The basic idea was to connect learning to empowerment, so that these women would acquire the skills and confidence needed to participate in social life beyond their households. The training providers were adult education trainers and social services representatives. The teaching methods have placed a particular emphasis on interaction and group dynamics as a facilitative context of effective learning. The participants were encouraged to think critically about their own status as a disadvantaged group and the collective strategies to optimize their life (both individual and collective).
b) Another project carried out under the program *Youth for Europe* in 1996/7, in Finland, 25 young people from various ethnic backgrounds had to make a hip-hop music video that would both represent a larger group of young people and would also be entertaining for those involved directly.The focus was on combating racism and the multicultural society was brought in video themes. Many of the project objectives have been achieved through participatory education.

4. Education for European citizenship in Romania

One example was AGGR's (Romanian Guides Association) *Education for Democracy* project which aimed to develop the concept of Leadeship and democratic behavior among its members. The main goal of the project was to strengthen the role of young people, especially girls and women, as volunteer leaders actively involved in decision-making both within the Association and in the community they live in. AGGR conducted adult education seminars in the framework of this project under the motto 'I am a leader guide / a leader in my community Guide!' in eight local centers and a territorial center: Adjud, Barlad, Botosani, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Focsani, Smelly Town, Municipalities and Mountain Meadows under Oarţa Lower/ Maramures County. APD (Association Pro Democracy) also facilitates extensive public information and actions of its members on legislation, rights vs. responsibilities, and indicates various deficiencies or manipulations of decision-making bodies. Some of the NGOs involved in EEC developing European projects in this field are FDSC - Civil Society Development Foundation, Civic Alliance of Roma in Romania, Amare Romentza, APADOR CH, Arin, Association for the Promotion of Women in Romania, Junimea Association, Motivation Association, For You Partners Association, the Association for Euro-Atlantic Civic Integration, Association for Regional Rural Development, Sustainable Sighisoara Association, South

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West Romania Association, the Association for Urban Transition Centre for Partnership and Equality, PACT, For Partnership Foundation, Mare Nostrum, Master Forum, For You, Pro Women, Save the Delta, Terra Millennium III, etc.

In our opinion, EEC is very underdeveloped in Romania, especially in the field of adult education, and it is being developed in particular through the NGOs activities, rather than in a more formal, institutionalized context. We rarely see cultural events at state or popular universities, always without much interest for public. A very important role in the propagation of EDC plays mass-media, and Romanian broadcasts of debates, talk-shows, etc. It may be also be noted the low interest degree of adults (and the students) for this kind of courses. State Ministries (e.g. Ministry of Education) do little to develop a strategy for citizenship education. From this point of view, Civic Education is the only discipline that requires EEC, but at the undergraduate level. The remaining subjects (human rights education, peace and inter / multi-cultural education remain in the (rare) or optional curriculum or squeezed as tangential proposals within the framework of educational objectives.

As some European studies note, in Romania is a very high level of ignorance towards the concept of European citizenship, which is not interesting unless it has immediate consequences on the living standards, emigration policies or facilities, shopping etc (Strunga 2014). Romanians are not very familiar neither with European institutions, and the related legislation. This is also the reason why it scores so low in surveys of tolerance (*Young in Romania* and other studies).

On the level of possible solutions, it is clear that EEC is absolutely necessary in Romania, both in initial education and in adult education. The initial education curricula should be improved but not necessarily broadened by incorporating participatory and active methods, and targeted to exploit the potential cross-disciplinary objectives. Many solution could use the potential of EEC education like: inter-school projects, international mobility, and especially training sessions for teachers to be active agents. In the adult education, some suggestions would be to organize teacher training courses, projects for the marginalized groups and increasing the involvement of NGOs in the field.

5. Virtual learning communities and the Education for European citizenship professionalisation

As we mentioned in a previous paragraph, the training of trainers in this field is essential, particularly in adult education, where there are not so many initiatives as those for pupils (in initial education). Civic competence is seen by specialists as having three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and pragmatic. It is important for trainer to to encourage especially the development of those emotional values related to European citizenship and democracy and to use participatory methods involving all the learners (Strunga 2014). The main competence of the specialists working in this field must be related to efficient

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communication, leadership and ability to cooperate and to organize groups. It is also important the ability to identify target groups (including disadvantaged and marginalized groups), the use of media education, and ICT educational strategies (computer, internet etc.) together with the ability to design research and develop European projects.

Virtual learning communities can be integrated as a very powerful tool in the Education for European citizenship. We have identified several advantages of using such platforms in initial education that can also be used in adult education as (Strungă, 2014; Strungă, 2015):

- Virtual research and study of the learning behavior of students is one of the most important advantages of using such a platform in the field of Education for European citizenship: we can measure the level of interest, hours spent on platform, the number of contributions in the virtual learning space and other useful parameters. The students have also the opportunity to create surveys using external web services such as Google Forms (for questionnaires).

- Virtual curriculum for the field of Education for European citizenship, in comparison with the traditional version offers many advantages as well: the possibility to change the manuals (considering they are used in the form of a e-book) almost instantly at no cost for students or professors; multimedia content in courses – video, audio and interactive text (i.e. integration of Merriam-Webster dictionary or Wikipedia plugin) that is more intuitive and facilitate the learning process; the possibility of inter-platform integration (combing the use of multiple services such as Google Documents, Evernote, Dropbox etc. in order to assure a better flexibility for students' learning).

- Virtual evaluation and assessment, that is extended, in comparison with its traditional counterpart for all the learning activity of the students in the field of Education for European citizenship: the professors can take into account the contributions done in the free time, holidays and using all types of content available to express one's ideas; also this will lead to a more authentic formative education, that has transparent criteria and encourage the opinions and judgments of the whole group.

- New constructivist virtual learning and teaching strategies that start from the premise that students can learn anytime they want if are adequately motivated to use the new technologies of information and communication. Every time one student logs on the internet or reach out to entertainment websites (such as YouTube or TED) is an opportunity to learn, organize what they learn, share the news with their peers and instructors and create new knowledge based on that.

- Building international virtual learning communities is arguably the greatest advantages in the field of Education for European citizenship because it promotes social learning at European level in a framework that is especially constructed to facilitate students' learning. Students get to know foreign colleagues and teachers, learn their culture in context, exercise intercultural

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curriculum and competences, promote intercultural dialogue and cooperation, approach transcultural issues more easily and so on.

- Developing efficient mentoring and particularly eMentoring (maybe in the context of a European project) is one of the best ways to reduce the gap between the current civic competences of adults and the necessary necessary for the „Europe of knowledge" that values both diversity and interculturality. According to education sciences experts mentoring means (Mitzke apud Ungureanu, 2001): to facilitate learning, growing and development of another person, usually an adult; to assure the evolution in knowledge, work, thinking, life perspective of the mentee with the help of a mentor; a way to help another person to become what he/she wants to be, in realistic and reasonable conditions;

In conclusion, all these suggestions can be integrated in a more complex model of empowering adults to develop their European citinzenship by using virtual learning communities. It is worth mentioning the case of virtual universities that are using learning communties for adults that can be a solution to improve access for people living in remote areas, in order to develop their digital competences and to create bridges between seniors across Europe and various groups of professionals interested in this field.

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