PROJECT METHOD IN ADULT EDUCATION: SELF-EXPERIENCE ANALYSIS

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Abstract. The project method has swiftly gained ground in education and it has now become integral to the education process offering new ways for modernizing the education environment. Implementing projects provides learning opportunities for all of the involved parties – students, teachers, school principals and parents. In this article the Author has analysed the characteristics of the project method and the differences between project-based adult learning and non-adult learning, and the impact of globalization on projects. Projects can be implemented not only in the scope of specific subjects or specific schools but also as cooperation projects among schools of different countries. Based on the Author's experience in international school cooperation projects and by applying the biographic method, the Author has analysed professional growth in the context of international projects in different project phases – planning, implementation and evaluation. The object of research – to analyse personal experience in participating in international projects by applying the method of biographic reflection and to establish, through self-experience analysis, the potential impact of projects on the upgrading of contemporary school's pedagogical process.

Keywords: project method, project-based adult learning, international school cooperation projects, self-experience analysis.

Introduction

The project method impliesa widely applicable working frame work and contemporary approach to learning. It opens up new experiences by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real life. In literature it has been acknowledged that projects in schools stimulate reflection and cooperation (Toman, 2012). Taking part in projects provides an enriched outlook on the specific study subjects as well as other benefits. The project method may be widely applied – from small projects during classes up to large international projects. In fact, international projects are instrumental for developing learning-oriented cooperation networks (Andersone, 2011). Projects may provide any of these benefits: 1) practical or tangible benefits, and 2) intangible or personal-growth benefits, not quantifiable (Andersone, 2011). In this article, byusing the biographic method, the development of self-experience through implementing international projects has been analysed with a focus on intangible benefits.

Context of research

In order to effectively assess the development of participation experience in international projects and its role, first, it is important to establish the social context of a given time period. Before Latvia regained independence in 1990,

teachers had only limited possibilities to get first-hand experience with learning practices abroad, to cooperate with students and teachers from other countries. The Author's previous cooperation experience was restricted to the neighbouring Baltic countries – Estonia and Lithuania. After the regaining of national independence the opportunities to engage in international projects gradually increased. For that matter, command of foreign languages has always been pivotal for successful international cooperation.

During the previous decade Ventspils Secondary Evening School took part in 5 international projects. It has brought new opportunities and new challenge son institutional and individual level. The Author has personally been involved in all of these projects – in the planning, implementation and evaluation stages. In two of these projects the Author was acting as Project Coordinator. The number of partner schools involved in international cooperation varied from 2 to 9 schools. Below in Table 1 "Participation of Ventspils Secondary Evening School in International Projects" a summary is provided on the international projects where Ventspils Secondary Evening School has participated.

Table 1. Participation of Ventspils Secondary Evening School in International Projects

Project	Objective	Number of people involved (from schools)
1. Comenius language project (bilateral, partners) „*Youth Cultural Activities in the expanded European Union*" 2005 – 2006	✓ To improve the students' motivation andability to communicate in foreign languages; ✓ To improve team-work skills, carry out polls through learning about culture, everyday life and education systems of other countries; ✓ To compare leisure activities of youth from Ventspils and Hamburgand the associated costs, thus creating a singular image of a contemporary European adolescent	7 teachers (mobility activity – 4); 30 studentsof secondary school programmes (mobility - 20, including 1 special needs student)
2. Comenius school project (trilateral, partners) „*Challenges posed by EU expansion: issues – facts – solutions*" 2006 – 2007	✓ To disseminate information on EU-related processes and their effect on our lives; ✓ To initiate and lead activities to improve understanding of the EU expansion process; ✓ To activate and stimulate the students' cognitive activities on EU related issues.	6 teachers (mobility activity - 4); 15 students of secondary school programmes (mobility activity - 5)
3. Comenius multilateral school partnership (7 schools, 6 countries, coordinators) „*ICT – the safest investment in my future (ICT –*	✓ To set up and regularly update websitewww.ictcomenius.eu; ✓ To conduct surveys, interviews, to engage external experts in educational activities;	24 teachers (mobility activity - 7); 66 students (mobility activity - 10); 2 associated partners

Project	Objective	Number of people involved (from schools)
information and communication technologies)" 2008 – 2010	✓ To make video guides on the safe use of computers and other IT appliances; ✓ To research, summarise and present through video conferences information on career-building in one's own country and in some of the partnering countries; ✓ Making presentations on the use of ICT tools in schools for curricular & extra-curricular activities and for running the school; ✓ Developing an electronic news bulletin.	(Ventspils University College, Ventspils Digital Centre).
4. ERAF Latvia and Lithuania cross-border cooperation project (Ventspils Municipal Board of Education, 9 schools, partners) *„Improving the Quality of Natural Sciences Education in Western regions of Latvia and Lithuania"* 2010– 2011	✓ To upgrade theinfrastructure of math & natural sciences' classrooms; ✓ To equip classrooms with modern study aids and technical facilities; ✓ To develop an elective environmental education course for 1st -10th grade „Preserve the environment – protect our future"; ✓ To develop methodical materials for elective classesand to compile them in a Manual; ✓ To learn about the partners' experience, incl. Finland's experience in teaching natural science subjects.	12 teachers (mobility activity – 6); Students of grades 1st-12th – indirectly (equipment for classrooms and methodical materials for classwork)
5. Nordplus Adult Programme– a project (trilateral, coordinators) *„Enhancing e-learning with video conferencing"* 2012. – 2013.	✓ To learn how adult education is organised in other Baltic countries and Nordic countries; ✓ To establish thematic cooperation networks for developing new projects; ✓ To master new skills in the use of new web-based tools, i.e., video conferencing tools; ✓ To organise web meetings and to use public access tools in everyday work	14 teachers, partners from Ventspils University College (mobility activity – 11 teachers, 1 – university lecturer)

Research problem

Based on reflections on self-experience, the personal pedagogical benefits and benefits for fellow teachers have been assessed as well as the benefits gained for the school as an educational establishment out of participation in international projects. However, among the public and teachers themselves it is not yet uncommon to see participation in projects as entertainment rather than a profound, alternative form of the study process. Therefore it is important to address the question whether participation in international projects should be seen as a purposeful investment in fostering the further growth of schools and their human resources or rather as a self-centred goal driven by a wish to travel (to visit European countries)? Given the Author's professional background as a principal of Ventspils Secondary Evening School, the role of international projects in the professional growth of teachers and principals will be analysed from the point of view of both the teacher and the principal.

Theoretical framework of the research

In order to carry out a quality self-experience analysis in international projects, let's begin with a brief overview of the project method. In Latvia there have not yet been any detailed theoretical studies on the project method. In Germany U. Schaefer incorporated in his bibliographic compilation on the use of project method between 1895 and 1982, in total, 7400 records on the history, theory and practical examples of the project method spanning 40 countries (Schaefer, 1988a, 1988b). Bibliographic information analysis leads to the conclusion that main credit for the development of the project method goes to Germany and the United States, and in the early 20th century – also to the Soviet Union. J.Dewey and W.H.Kilpatrick, representatives of the American progressive education movement have written and reflected on this subject extensively. Also in Germany there is long record of extensive discussions on the project method, project-based learning and project weeks (Knoll, 2011). Great variety of studies on the project method and project-based learning can be found also in contemporary German literature and publications.

The project methodis an open form of learning oriented towards local specifics and students' interests (Toman, 2012). As H.Toman notes, the project method does not have a specific definition and it is based on the experiences, active participation and versatility of those involved in the project. Project, in this context, means a learning activity undertaken by a particular group, thoroughly planned and executed (Frey, 2012). The group itself selects the area of activity and the problem to be addressed based on their interests. As K.Frey puts it, the project method is a way of learning for both students and teachers, it is a process based on contextual meaning. Depending on the duration and the number of people involved, projects are grouped into small, medium and large-scale projects. According to K.Frey, the project method comprises these

components – project's initiative, formulating the idea (project concept), drawing up the project's plan, implementing and completing the project, meta-interaction (discussions, talks). According to D.Hänsel, project is a practical problem-solving method, the ideal form for child-oriented learning (Hänsel, 1997). Project-based work is rooted in the concept of self-driven learning (Traub, 2012a, 2012b). In his studies S.Traub compares the project methods and project-based work described by such distinguished German authors as W.Emer, K.D.Lenzen, K.Frey, H.Gudjons, D.Hänsel, H.J.Apel and M.Knoll by focusing on learning to cooperate and self-driven learning individually and in groups.

H.Gudjons has listed 10 parameters of project-based learning: acknowledging the given situation, orientation towards the interests of those involved, importance for the public, relevance, goal-oriented planning, self-organisation and self-responsibility, involvement of other parties interested, social learning, product-oriented approach, interdisciplinarity, clear limits (Gudjons, 2008).

O.Jäger, in his turn, analyses the project method in the context of project weeks. He lists 12 inter-linked criteria: co-deciding, relevance for the general public, educational value, profundity, uniqueness, holistic aspect, rhythm, social learning, lucidity, successful experience, documentation and reflections (Jäger, 1998). These criteria will facilitate drafting project ideas and will be helpful in planning and implementing projects. They can be applied also as guidelines for evaluation or as a tool for identifying project's weaknesses and flaws. O.Jäger believes that reflection in particular is one of the most significant criteria.

During the project reflection phase answers to the following questions are sought: whe ther the set goals have been achieved, has there been any growth on cognitive, social and emotional levels or in behaviour. By working in groups, participants should reflect on any conflicts had and on the ways they have been resolved, on any mistakes made that should be avoided in the next project. K.Frey has identified 4 elements of reflection – orientation towards goal, interaction, remote situation assessment and specific reflection.

In schools, when applying the project method, the teacher organizes the reflection process. Conscious reflection may help taking better, smarter, informed decisions (Bartolotti, 2011). Reflectioncan also be complemented with intuition. Besides, reflection is also a form of learning, and, as such, it may contribute to experience-building (Koķe, 1999). The teacher's insight and ability to do quality reflection is incremental for the quality of reflection done in projects. The teacher as an adult will do it in a more purposeful, mindful way, as adult learning, in fact, is based on learning from one's own experience, the drive to apply new knowledge in new, unfamiliar situations.

International projects are basically a modern transformation of project ideas and the project method. They can be oriented towards both students and teachers depending on the project's objectives and tasks. Participation of teachers in projects, incl. international projects, is a form of learning in the workplace for

teachers, an opportunity to improve their general and professional competencies. In that way learning and growth can be achieved not only within the school's environment, but also based on the experience of other countries and partners. For teachers it provides an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, to discuss it with others. Experience may come in two forms: self-experience which is acquired through direct perception, and indirect experience, which is acquired through language and communication (Koķe, 1999). Studies show that auto-biographic reflection for teachers' professional growth may help acquire new knowledge through reflective practice (Choi, 2012).

Self-experience is the basis of each individual's competencies. It comprises knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired and tested through the course of life (Špona, 2006). Self-experience may take either of the two forms: primary and secondary self-experience (Brigmane, 2012). According to the S.Kemmis and R.McTaggart model described by B.Brigmane, a person assesses one's current experience, identifies new needs and sets goals, and then, by learning through practice, applies one's existing knowledge. Then, by using reflection, knowledge is evaluated. As a result, new or secondary experience is acquired.

Conscious and high-quality reflection constitutes the main difference between student learning and teacher or adult learning through applying the project method. When forming new understanding, a person is able to reconstruct one's previous experience and to develop new techniques to be applied in future in similar situations (Hickson, 2011). By reflecting on their newly acquired secondary experience, adults establish the potential situations where this particular experience could be transformed.

Research methods & activities

Biography is a subjectively experienced and related life story, a collection of individually interpreted lifetime achievements and experiences. Biographic studies are the basics for adult learning studies. Hence the biographic study is being done in an institutional context to allow for institutional and biographic relativity. During one's lifetime different actions follow one another, without always being duly reflected upon. Only by looking back to the past, one can establish which of the biographic changes that have taken place as a result of specific actions have made a lasting impact (Benedetti & Kade, 2012).

T.H.Choi believes that the biographic method is a social outlook on building of knowledge, the need to contextualise knowledge, previous experience in a new learning situation, basing experience in theory, self-growth reflection. It is a transformative learning process towardsone's professional growth (Choi, 2012).

Personal reflection and social activity are closely linked. According to C.Stewart and K.McKnight Casey, they are circumstances which contribute to one's experience and that of other people in the context of versatility. Besides,

reflection here does not simply mean random associations but rather structured processing of experiences (Stewart & McKnicht Casey, 2013).

Three out of five international projects undertaken by Ventspils Evening Secondary School (see projects No. 1, 4 and 5 in Table 1 above) have been the most significant for the Author's professional experience. In this article the Author has evaluated and analysed the experience gained during different project phases – developing and planning the project concept, implementation, evaluation, further application of the experiences and results acquired. Comparative analysis has been done on the changes occurring in regard to professional needs, perception, understanding and evaluation quality based on the experiences accumulated through participation in international projects.

For self-experience assessment, partially the self-experience assessment criteria and indicators as proposed by B.Brigmane in her doctoral thesis have been applied. To begin with, one needs to identify existing experiences and to formulate needs. Next, one proceeds to awareness and under standing of new phenomena linked to co-experience. The new experience can then be applied in practice and assessed accordingly resulting in improved competencies, and thus new or secondary experience is acquired (Brigmane, 2012). Self-experience assessment is done by applying the follow ing criteria:

- Activation of primary self-experience;
- Assessing secondary experiences;
- Transfer of secondary self-experience competence.

Results of research

In each of the project phases (planning, implementation, evaluation, application of experience & results gained) the experience acquiredis different. Reflection and self-experience analysis can be used as tools for assessing how these can be used in the future, for both professional and personal growth.The scope of school's participation in projects has expanded, after the completion of projectstheir impact on the school's development and upgrading of the pedagogical process has become more profound. However, not always enough time or effort is put into analysis of benefits and reflection. Reflection is instrumental for establishing whether the planned results have been achieved, are they are sustainable, and what changes, if any, have taken place. Table 2 "Primary & secondary self-experience in international projects" structured summarize of the Author's reflection on three major international projects.

Table 2. Primary & secondary self-experiencein international projects

Project	Activating primary self-experience	Assessing secondary self-experience	Transfer of secondary self-experience competence
„Youth Cultural Activities in the expanded European Union" (2005– 2006)	- no previous experience in international projects; - foreign language skills–at minimum level.	- cooperation experience with German peers; - organising & coordinating various work groups(mixed); - use of foreign languages; - wider use of electronic communication tools, - reconciling needs & interests among the partners, teachers and students, - financial management skills - experience in preparing project documentation	- searching new cooperation partners; - better understanding of international cooperation; - improved documentation preparation skills, - switching roles with students; - improving foreign language skills.
„ICT – the safest investment in my future " (2008 – 2010)	- no previous experience as project coordinator; - no previous experience in working with so many partners; - highly varying foreign language skills among students and teachers;	- learning about the culture, traditions, education system, experiences of the 6 involved countries; - assessing and summarising the experience gained during the teacher exchange visits in schools in Germany, Bulgaria and Austria; acting as the host-school; - joint planning for each next project stage and discussions (with all partners); - conflict solving with partners, seeking compromises, harmonising mutual interests.	- inter-cultural skills (incl. conflict solving); - generatinginnovative ideas for school's growth in work groups (distance learning, safety & data securityon the web); - reflection skills in groups and individually, understanding their importance - know-howon safety & data security, use of IT; - foreign language skills; - basic skills with Moodle; - developing & licensing a distance learning programme

Project	Activating primary self-experience	Assessing secondary self-experience	Transfer of secondary self-experience competence
„Enhancing e-learning with video conferencing" (2012 – 2013)	- no previous experience in cooperating with Nordic countries, - no previous experience with Nordplus grants (the coordinator responsible for financial management).	- the school's best practice examples that could be presented to other partners have been identified and assessedby working together; - summarising previous experience on distance learning by working in small groups; - joint planning of contents &finances; - practical workshops and tasks on use of ICT tools (in the context of distance learning); - division of responsibility and tasks among the partners	- cooperation and communication skills, in particular, use of online tools in e-environment; - ways for applying IT tools more effectively; - mutual learning and fostering the culture of learning in the workplace in schools; - foreign language skills; - bettering skills for effective application of Moodle by way of mutual cooperation

Conclusions and items for discussion

Reflection is essential for any learning process. However, when applying the project method in the implementation of various projects, sometimes not enough time is given for reflection. So, one should keep in mind that when applying the project method it is not only the result to be achieved that matters, but also the process itself, therefore reflection on any given project must be done on a systematic, structured basis for the whole duration of the project.

Based on self-experience, one may find that individual needs become increasingly more lucid already in the planning process. In addition, evaluation and reflection skills gradually improve and so does the quality of the associated skills. During the drafting of the project application more active discussions take place regarding the contents and each partner's responsibility and required contribution. As from the moment the project idea is formulated, there is an increasing need for high-quality feedback and for establishing future needs. Precisely formulated ideas for the school's and personnel's professional growth will contribute to more substantial project's impact on both the personnel's professional growth and the school's development. Then, when working on every next project, there are more and more discussions on the potential benefits on a professional and institutional level. It also leads to better awareness of the increasing demands related with the changes occurring in the field of education. So the following item for discussion has been put forward: *how to bridge the gap between the growing needs of teachers and those of the school as an institution, and the ability to reconcile and meet these needs?*

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