

KEEP YOUR BALANCE: WORK, LEARN, SOCIALISE

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Abstract

This paper proposes a framework for enhancing language learning through dancing, as part of a non-formal educational personal programme, with the general aim of improving work opportunities, while also considering good work-life balance. In the fast-paced ever transforming technologically challenging contemporary society, personal and professional development should take into consideration intercultural awareness and sensitivity, social, plurilingual and digital competences, all parts of the proposed framework. The case study presented is an international life-long learning project, Dance Your Way through Other Cultures, which combines language learning, intercultural communication and social dance in an original and innovative way.

Keywords: work-life balance, plurilingual competence, intercultural communication, digital competence, social dance.

1. Work-life balance for the contemporary adult

A well-balanced life is nowadays an important objective for working adults in Europe. This implies a more efficient organization of the job-leisure activities, with the general view of a well-rounded life, in which personal and professional fulfilment should intertwine. In fact, some European governments have taken active steps towards this goal. For example, in France the 35 hour work week was introduced as early as 2000 (following a 39 hour work week already in place; in fact The Socialist Party had proposed the 35 hour week in its electoral Programme in 1981). Besides fighting unemployment, by allowing more people to have a job and taking advantage of modern technology, this measure also enhances working adults' quality of life, by allowing them more spare time to spend with family and friends and with a view to develop personal interests. Sweden is another example: the six-hour work day has been introduced "in a bid to increase productivity and make people happier." (Matharu, 2016)

Harmonizing paid work and private life has become a personal objective for the contemporary European adult. The underlying understanding is that paid work and leisure activities should not be regarded as separate concurrent entities, but as

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complementary parts of a fulfilled life. Integrating career development in a life plan, alongside personal interests, has become a central part of a more flexible, diverse and transcultural European work-scape.

One of the ways of creating an optimal work-life balance is to combine personal and professional development, by always bearing in mind that a happy worker is a better, more efficient worker. Thus, having a fulfilling personal life leads to a better professional one and ultimately to enhanced social interaction and general economic development.

Foreign languages, social dance and new media and technologies are means through which this kind of integration can be done, as the skills necessary for practicing them are the kind of skills one also uses in a professional environment. The emphasis is on acquiring those skills within the larger framework of their subsequent usage for enhanced chances on the labour market. Thus, in context, acquiring polylingual and intercultural competence becomes more important than learning a specific language for accuracy. Or developing non-verbal communication through dance, active listening, self-knowledge, time and space orientation, improvisation through interaction, lead-follow override learning the actual steps of a certain dance style or another. Learning through the use of new media and technologies is something everybody does nowadays without even realizing, thus putting these skills to good use should be central to any learning activity. And together these skills and competences are conducive to increased opportunities on a highly competitive European and global labour market.

2. Language learning and intercultural communication for fun, work and social integration

As a space of multilingualism, the European Union has been preoccupied with creating a common space in which language rights should be recognized as human rights, and in which all citizens should have equal opportunities irrespective of the languages they speak. While striving to preserve local and migrant languages and cultures unaltered as part of a common European heritage, the EU is also promoting plurilingualism.

The advantages are obvious: more opportunities for education and employment, but also the development of autonomous, reflexive citizens with an increased self-awareness and an awareness of others. This leads to developing fulfilled European citizens, who better understand European cultures through intercultural knowledge, sensitivity, respect and celebrations of others. Plurilingualism is conducive to a better understanding of human and citizenship rights and leads to a more flexible and open view upon life in general.

2.1. Plurilingualism for social inclusion and citizenship rights in Europe

As far back as 1995, “The White Paper on Teaching and Learning” showed that all European citizens needed to have “proficiency in three community languages” and the ability to adapt to working and living environments characterized by other cultures. The document underlined the social dimension of language learning – proficiency in languages “helps to build up the feeling of being European with all its cultural wealth and diversity and of understanding between the citizens of Europe.” (The White Paper on Teaching and Learning, 1995: 47)

In 2002, in the Declaration of the European Council Presidency’ from Barcelona, teaching of two foreign languages from a very early age was promoted, as a new common strategy for multilingualism by 2005 had to be created. The European Union’s “unity in diversity” was emphasized, and within it, languages were viewed as “the most direct expression of culture” and a marker of identity (The Declaration of the European Council Presidency from Barcelona, 2002:10)

Moreover, the idea of a plurilingual Europe was central to the document “From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education: Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe”, which in the chapter “Plurilingualism and democratic citizenship” considered it “an essential component of democratic behaviour,” as it leads to respect for all its citizens, including linguistic minorities. Languages and intercultural communication are a direct component of democratic citizenship. (Beacco, 2007: 37)

In a subsequent “Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education” from 2010 the connection between these two competences is further emphasized:

Plurilingual competence refers to the repertoire of resources which individual learners acquire in all the languages they know or have learned, and which also relate to the cultures associated with those languages (languages of schooling, regional/minority and migration languages, modern foreign or classical languages). Intercultural competence, for its part, makes it easier to understand otherness, to make cognitive and affective connections between past and new experiences of otherness, mediate between members of two (or more) social groups and their cultures, and question the assumptions of one’s own cultural group and environment. (Beacco et al., 2010: 8)

Foreign language education is thus regarded as a complex of information and knowledge of how languages function, in addition to a process of self-reflection and reflection about “otherness” in order to become aware and sensitive to

difference. It is ultimately an instrument of personal development, extremely useful in the increasingly complex and volatile labour market.

2.2. The intercultural praxis model

Intercultural communication is more than just an object of study in itself, it is a way of being, thinking and acting. Thus it is something one learns throughout one's life as a competence necessary for personal development and also for social integration. Moreover, in the transnational borderless labour market nowadays, this is a survival competence.

In the Chapter "Globalizing Intercultural Communication. Traces and Trajectories" in the Reader *Globalizing Intercultural Communication* (2016), its editors Kathryn Sorrells and Sachi Sekimoto describe their intercultural praxis model, which includes six dimensions: inquiry, framing, positioning, dialogue, reflection, action.

Intercultural praxis entails (a) being willing to ask questions and suspend judgment (inquiry); (b) clarifying cultural frames from micro to meso to macro levels (framing); (c) examining who/where you are in relation to others in terms of power relations (positioning); (d) engaging in open exchange of ideas (dialogue); (e) looking back and accessing your thoughts and action (reflection); and (f) taking informed and ethical actions toward a more just and equitable society. (Sorrells & Sachi, 2016: 4)

Thus, engaging in intercultural communication is, according to the authors, a means of becoming more self-reflexive, thus improving self-understanding, while also showing more social awareness and responsibility. It is both an exciting and daunting process of awareness of the self and of society. But a necessary process, nevertheless.

3. Dancing: cultural practice and identity

Social dancing is a cultural practice which encourages interaction with people from different backgrounds and cultures. It is a marker of identity at the intersection of several categories, such as social group, nationality, gender. Also, it encourages discipline over one's body and one's moves, but also social discipline, as it is always done in a community. There is a specific dancing environment which one becomes aware of, learns and eventually uses to its maximum potential.

While dancing, one creates an image of the self for the self and for others, with the emphasis on certain categories: the healthy body, the sexy body, *the body beautiful* etc. Moreover, dancing encourages cultural exchange and interaction with other

bodies, it is representation and also interpretation. Thus, dance is a “system of meaning,” (Foster, 1986: xvii) which can be read and interpreted.

Bodies do not only pass meaning alone, or pass it along in their uniquely responsive way. They develop choreographies of signs through which they discourse: they run (or lurch, or bound, or feint, or meander...) from premise to conclusion; they turn (or pivot, or twist...) through the process of reasoning; they confer with (or rub up against, or bump into...) one another in narrating their own physical fate. (Foster, 1996: x)

Nowadays, the emphasis is on the democratization of dance and on accepting all types of body shapes and movements. Aiming to perfection is not a must anymore; on the contrary, enjoying oneself by moving and at the same time socializing and meeting new and diverse human personalities and cultures have taken precedence.

Social dance also has relevance in a professional development context, as it contains elements that can be made use of at work. Discipline, social interaction, creativity, are all components of a solid background for enhanced work opportunities.

4. Digital competence for leisure and work

When we surf the internet or post on social media, or even when we play some game on the internet, we use digital competences without sometimes realizing their importance and necessity at work, as well. For the new media and the new technologies have become so much part of our lives today that we can't even remember a time when they were only a promise for the distant future.

Since 1995, the EU recognized their role in education and stated that member states must “draw on the new communication technologies and harness their full potential. In the long run every class should have the necessary equipment allowing young people access to the world of computers.” (The White Paper of Teaching and Learning, 1995: 34). In 2002, in the Declaration of the European Council Presidency' from Barcelona, it was claimed that internet usage had to be generalized throughout European education and secondary school pupils had to obtain a computer user's certificate. (The Declaration of the European Council Presidency, 2002: 19)

Language learning can also take advantage of the new technologies and of their usage on a large scale by learners throughout Europe. They have the potential of creating virtual communities beyond time and space by reconfiguring the relationship between individual, time and place, thus changing the traditional understanding of the term and the notion of community. Also, the new media links up with a social framework within which individuals assume responsibility for

their own learning, which in its turn, boosts their confidence and self-esteem. Mobile technology helps make “the shift from modernity to reflexive modernity”, as teaching is no longer just a “process of delivery.” (Williams, 2012: 44)

5. “Dance Your Way to Other Cultures”

To achieve a better work-life balance and to combine personal development with professional aims, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, through its Department of Modern Languages and Communication in Business, proposed the project Oportunidance “Dance Your Way to Other Cultures” (2015-1-RO01-KA204-015155, 31 December 2015 – 31 December 2017). It is a life-long learning project of non-formal education which addresses adults who are passionate by foreign languages, dancing and European culture and civilization. The European partners of the project are two other universities: Université Libre De Bruxelles; Universidade De Lisboa, a language school: Escola Oficial d'Idiomes de Barcelona-Drassanes, and a dance school: Association Club Vertical/Dance School Oportunidad, Bucharest.

The participants will be able to present themselves better on the job market, while at the same time they will be more motivated to develop skills conducive to enhanced chances for better jobs, among which social interaction, communication in several foreign languages, as well as non-verbal communication through dance, active listening, self-knowledge, time and space orientation, improvisation through interaction, digital skills, etc. Through direct involvement in motivating and innovative activities of linguistic and intercultural education, social dance, personal development, and artistic expression, participants will achieve their personal objectives in a creative manner.

The main objectives of this project are consolidating linguistic competences in six foreign languages – French, Romanian, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese and English – for three language levels and within four modules: general language, language for dance, professional and business language and intercultural communication, culture and civilization; consolidating social dance competences, in order to involve as many beneficiaries as possible in creative and socializing activities, pertaining to a healthy life style; and consolidating digital competences, through online learning modules, to improve usage of contemporary communication tools. Through them, participants will eventually improve labour access opportunities, access to different types of information in the project languages, for a balanced social life and enhanced personal development.

The outcomes of the project will be posted on a free of use and open access online platform, so beneficiaries will extend over the main target audience directly involved in the project’s phases and activities. There will be an online platform

containing learning courses for six languages, for three levels (A1, A2, B1), in four modules, as well as dance video tutorials in the project languages for different styles, for three difficulty levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced). Also face-to-face dance and intercultural communication workshops in the project languages will take place. Different articles and scientific publications on the project topics will be published to disseminate its results and make it known to a wider audience.

6. Conclusions

In order to achieve a well-balance life nowadays, one needs to take in consideration its many aspects and the diversity of possibilities both paid work and leisure activities offer. Personal development and career are not disconnected entities in competition with each other, but together they create a unitary framework of development of the individual. If this is done harmoniously, society at large can only benefit.

The illustration above took into consideration soft skills and transdisciplinary competences one benefits from both on a personal level and professionally. Foreign language education, together with plurilingual and intercultural competence acquisition are compulsory in today's Europe, as knowledge of languages is not enough, but needs to be complemented by understanding, respecting and celebrating linguistic and cultural diversity in all its forms and shapes. Dancing as a meaningful way of achieving social skills and of developing creativity is also a relevant path towards boosting self-confidence and community understanding. Moreover, digital competence is undeniably useful in leisure as well as work activities.

Putting all of those together creates a meaningful framework aimed at improving work opportunities, while also considering a good work-life balance. The project Oportunidade, presented as a case study, is a perfect example of this framework.

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