FOSTERING CREATIVITY AND COLLABORATION IN AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COURSE FOR TRAVEL JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATION

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The purpose of this paper is to present the methodology, design and development of an experiential university course that fosters student’s creativity and collaboration and to discuss the limitations, problems and issues for further research and study.
About the course...

The course ‘Travel Journalism, Communication and Social Media’ approaches the scientific fields of Travel Journalism and Public Communication and explores ‘Travel’ as a constituent of the journalistic and communication process of public information, knowledge and engagement as well as a civic awareness and social development issue.

It is an elective English speaking course for students of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications of Aristotle University in which are also enrolled and participate international students from various European and Mundus Exchange Programs that are studying in Thessaloniki for the respective semester.
The course ‘Travel Journalism, Communication and Social Media’ is designed for 5 ECTS, and runs a full academic semester (13 weeks), with an estimated workload of about 125-150 hours.

It combines lectures (traditional and online), indoor and outdoor experiential exercises, applied workshops, field visit experiences and project-based group work.
Learning needs and learning styles

In order to choose the most appropriate learning scenario for our class, we had already prepared three alternative learning scenarios.

A qualitative learning needs analysis and a learning styles analysis were conducted by interviewing each course participant before the beginning of the course.

The interviewing technique was proposed because of the diversity of the students. Apart from students of the home university, foreign exchange students enrolled from different disciplines with different background knowledge. They were students from all around Europe (Erasmus students) but also from U.S.A., Canada and Asia (students from international exchange- mundus agreements) with different level of competency in English. The students of this multicultural, multilingual and multidiscipline class had to be interviewed separately in order to gain as much information as possible for each one and then decide about the learning strategy.

The qualitative data gathered indicated all kinds of learning styles and preferences to different kinds of learning approaches, leading us to the adoption of blended teaching strategies, engaging ICT’s and Social Media in order to bridge and match to a point the learning styles of the students.
Technological Tools and e-Platforms

The tools required for the course:
- a smartphone, or a tablet,
- a camera or a video camera.

E-Platforms and Social Software
- The Learning Management System ‘Blackboard’ is also used for the online short lectures, instructor notes, instructions and supportive learning material.
- A private group on Facebook is used for communication purposes and course announcements.
- A course blog is used for the creative tasks.
Course Modules

1. Introduction to the course subject/ History of Travel Writing
2. Travel Publications and types of Travel Articles
3. Developing a travel story idea and preparing the first draft
4. Travel Photos
5. Public Communication in Travel
6. Communicating Culinary Experiences
7. Communicating Cultural Heritage
8. Video Journalism Techniques for Travel Storytelling
9. Travel Experiences and Digital Storytelling
10. Travelogues
11. Study Week
12. Final Project (two weeks)
First they get acquainted with their partners, then they exchange thoughts and ideas. The next step is to contribute to their group for a written or oral task. Then they motivate each other and work together. Finally they cooperate for a group project, where each of them inspires and works with the others in order to be creative. At the end of the semester all groups present their project to the class and proceed to self and peer evaluation.

Progressive Collaborative Work
In class activities and games

- The first module obtains experiential exercises as ‘Icebreakers’ and ‘Openers’ so that students are encouraged to get to know each other. Then, brainstorming exercises are employed to motivate students and start a conversation.

- A ‘World cafe’ about the types of travel articles and their narrative techniques is also designed. This is an experiential exercise that fosters collaborative thinking and working.

- For the module ‘Public communication in Travel’ participatory games are employed such as a version of ‘Chinese Whispers’. Another role game designed is called ‘Picture it to blind people’ which aims to make students explore and employ all their senses when trying to describe visual content (i.e. a place or a scene).

- The culinary experience module requires in-class group work for exchanging ideas, thoughts, memories and experiences while tasting local delights.
Outdoor activities

- Field visits are organized for this course in order to simulate the work of a travel journalist. These obtain collaborative observation exercises, taking notes, taking photographs, collecting information and interviewing people.

- Guided Walking Tours offer students information about the history and culture of Thessaloniki and Greece. Students work in pairs, take notes and prepare entries for a blog describing their experience.

- The ‘Cultural Heritage’ module obtains a location based game on smartphone or tablet (iOS or android). It is a cultural treasure hunt which requires collaboration because it comprises a game and a tour guide in one. The groups of students unlock virtual chests, find coins and discover facts by solving clues at locations with historical and cultural significance in Thessaloniki.

- Experiencing life in Thessaloniki provides the opportunity for students to participate in different outdoor activities in groups, as a way to experience something and complete the creative task of the module.

- The experiences offered are ‘nautical’, a sailing experience in Thessaloniki, and participation to events organized for young people by the municipality of Thessaloniki.
Creative Tasks

- Most modules are accompanied by an after-class creative task.
- Students act as travelers, stroll around in Thessaloniki, take photos with a camera or a Smartphone and upload it to the course’s group on Facebook.
- They also work in groups and develop travel story ideas.
- They also have to participate in a collaborative digital storytelling exercise. After the first field visit at the port of Thessaloniki, students develop a story describing their experience as in a travel diary. The first sentence is written by the instructors and then each student contributes by writing and continuing the story, one after the other.
- The gastronomy module requires from students to taste local foods offered to them during the class, to work in groups and find a way to communicate their culinary experience and promote the local food.
The final project is: ‘Thessaloniki through your eyes’. Students become travel journalists in Thessaloniki and are free to choose the way in which they will present their project. Some guidelines are given to them in order to help them, but they are free to choose their own way of expression. According to the instructors’ guidelines, they can prepare a series of travel articles and stories, a photo reportage, videos or podcasts with their experiences, travelogues, or Thessaloniki’s Portfolio with presentations, travel information, articles and stories. They can also choose their own way to present their creative work.
Peer Assessment

Peer-assessment of the projects is also employed so that students take responsibility for the learning outcomes, become deeper engaged with course material in order to set criteria for assessment and to develop assessment skills.
The learning strategies that involve experiential exercises and games seem to offer a lot of benefits. They encourage students not only to play but actually engage in a game, to operate effectively in collaboration and to share knowledge either for problem-solving or for the completion of a task or a mission. Through such games, students can develop, apart from deeper learning, communication and social skills and prepare themselves for real life social and professional situations. Role games demand active participation and equal contribution. Students learn to respect and follow rules, trust each other, depend on each other and motivate the members of their team.

In addition to the experiential role games, collaborative digital storytelling tasks offer inspiration and foster student's creativity. The implementation of social media and online platforms support and enhance the collaborative storytelling as well as the peer reviewing process.

The final group project for the course requires from students cooperation and collaboration in order to fulfil the assignment resulting to outstanding outcomes and offering diverse creative works. Students are given the opportunity to discover their particular interests and talents. They are free to choose the way to present their work and they all prove to be creative to some degree.
Results

- At the end of the semester we prepared a semi-structured questionnaire and asked for volunteers to be interviewed, evaluate and discuss about the course. From the 37 course participants only 4 persons refused to participate since they had already answered the typical evaluation questionnaire the university provided.

- The feedback we had from students about the whole course was that they all enjoyed it, had fun, met new people, and made some new friends. Foreign students were very satisfied because they were given the opportunity to explore Thessaloniki’s culture, history and everyday life. We had similarly positive feedback from local students who were grateful because they had the chance to explore their home city and were surprised about so many new places they discovered even in their own neighborhood. Some of their comments were:

  ‘Amazing how many things we ignore about our town…’

  ‘We learned so many things about places we knew nothing about despite the fact that we see them on a daily basis’,

  ‘We discovered many things in our city in a funny way. Walking as tourists in Thessaloniki turned out that we were actually tourists...’
Results

- About the use of ICTs and social media during the course, the 30 of the 33 interviewed students seemed to be excited about it, because they are used to live a networked life, post, comment and share experiences virtually, so this course offered knowledge about new ways to use technology for specific purposes.

- Other issues mentioned in the interviews about the experiential activities: a) some students were not sure if they helped them finally to understand the learning content and b) some of them didn’t enjoy the outdoor activities and would prefer a lecture-based course with traditional study.

- The most controversial issues were the collaborative learning tasks and the peer assessment. As far as the group work is concerned the most of the students admitted that not only enjoyed group work but also gained knowledge through the exchange of ideas, and also helped them build strong friendships with some of the group members. On the other hand 6 students interviewed said that they didn’t like working in a group for a project because they thought that not everyone in the group contributed the same, some believed that other group members took advantage of them and some of them felt that communication and cooperation was not easy with all group members.
The learning outcomes and the outstanding creative works of all students indicate the success of the learning strategies opted for this course.

Collaborative learning also proves to have positive contribution to the learning outcomes and student motivation although students are not always willing to participate.

From our (the instructors’) point of view, the specific course was very demanding, in research, study, as well as in time and energy, but also offered us a unique opportunity to face some of the most challenging issues in education.
Thank you!

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