

eTwinning projects, European memory and democratic participation of the youth in society

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Abstract

The changes in the contemporary society at the end of the XXth century, the appearance of the Internet, with an impressive number of users and services, determined a spectacular jump regarding the evolution of humanity from a simple read of information to Mc Luhan's “global village”. This idea was born through the big scale utilisation of social network platforms such as Facebook or MySpace (eTwinning). The need for exchanging ideas and international collaboration lead to overcoming classrooms and to the discovery of new digital platforms and online instruments, easing the XXIst century specific competency acquiring. This study showcases the results of a three month research project, obtained from applying a questionnaire to approximately two hundred teachers on the eTwinning portal, regarding the impact of activities targeting the growth of students' civic and social competencies, but also their digital competencies. Learning history at school through utilising the eTwinning platform assures a sustainable type of learning based on creativity, critical thinking and interactivity in order to reconstruct and understand different sides of European history. We show a comparative analysis between the answers of Romanian and European teachers on the changes that occurred in their classrooms. The results of the study can be the basis on which virtual history lessons will be created in the near future because they showcase the benefits of using digital platforms and their quality, facilitating the labour market integration of the students.

Keywords: eTwinning, international collaboration, European history

1. Introduction

After 1990, the use of new technologies led to the development of distance learning (e-learning). The changes in contemporary society in the late twentieth century, the advent of the Internet, with an impressive number of users and various services offered have led to a dramatic leap in the evolution of humanity from a simple reading of information to the global village of Mc Luhan.

The Canadian writer Marshall Mc Luhan launched the *global village* concept in 1960. The author issued a theory according to which the world would become smaller after the launch of electronic communication. Citizens from all social categories will be able to meet people from the same environment forming communities, sharing the same interests. "The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of the global village." "There are as many villages as there are interested villagers." "The planet has been reduced to the size of a village by the new media," the writer said. This idea came to life a few years later, through the widespread use of social networks such as Facebook or My Space (eTwinning).

2. European memory and the democratic participation of young people in society

The words of the writer and philosopher George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past, are doomed to repeat it" bring to the attention of the general public the importance of capitalizing on the past and historical heritage. The European continent so troubled by two world wars, by totalitarian regimes, then by the reconstruction of a continent divided by the "iron curtain" after 1945, should be better known to the younger generation.

Europe is one of the oldest continents that cannot be identified as a distinct geographical territory, instead it can be defined as a cultural area of extraordinary value, a keeper of common history and culture. Many of the recent events have their origins in the common historical past of

Europe. Given these considerations, we want to show that the understanding and preservation of the European past, the critical analysis of events determine changes in the mentality of young people and the importance of civic and democratic involvement in society.

The European institutions, particularly the European Commission, aim to invest in the education of young people and to involve young people in civic life and society. Surveys show that voluntary activities are a way to increase young people's participation in society. Direct consultation, participation in debates on various topics, simulation of the vote are ways to facilitate the understanding of the functioning of the European institutions and the involvement of young people in the decision-making process.

3. The eTwinning platform facilitates collaborative learning

The idea behind the eTwinning platform began in the late 1990s, when Connected Intelligence Schools was initiated by Madeira's Autonomous Ministry of Education for remote schools on the island and neighboring islands. It was thus desired to establish a network of schools consisting of middle school classes that have the same common goals: information collaboration and interconnection. Schools interacted, students used different pedagogical tools and created videos. This project received due attention at the Hanover Expo 2000.

At the Brussels Conference in 2005, at the initiative of kind-hearted teachers, the eTwinning network was set up on the basis of the twinning of two schools. Although initially, it started from identifying a partner and carrying out a project with students, later a valuable platform was developed, coordinated by European Schoolnet, available in 21 languages. The Conference was attended by 300 teachers, and since 2005 by more than 100,000 others.

Starting from this example, the guest Derrick De Kerkhove, the creator of collective intelligence and a close collaborator of Mc Luhan, participant in the first eTwinning conference in Brussels, in 2005, foreshadowed the direction that eTwinning 1.0 will develop.

eTwinning (including eTwinning Plus) is an official action, part of the Erasmus + Program, implemented with the agreement and support of the ministries of education of the member countries.

Since its founding, eTwinning has become a major catalyst and supported the expansion of collaboration between European schools. Since 2007, it has evolved from the platform stage to the virtual space included in the Lifelong Learning Program. After 2008, the role of social network is emphasized, being a space that offers professional training and a virtual cafe. After 2014, with the new ERASMUS + program, the role and importance of eTwinning has increased, adding new options such as training or networking, online working groups. Currently, the community has a total of 823,109 teachers and 108,226 projects.

4. Materials and methods

This article presents the results obtained from the application of the questionnaire "eTwinning projects, European memory and democratic participation of young people in society" which was addressed to teachers in pre-university, primary, secondary and high school, participants in the eTwinning program, who teach History and Social Sciences. The respondents were 119 teachers from Romania and the Republic of Moldova, respectively 102 teachers from different European eTwinning member countries.

We selected the target group of teachers who responded to the questionnaire by consulting their profile, posted on the eTwinning pages. After completing the questionnaire I used the Data Analysis Tool in Microsoft Excel using "ANOVA two factor without replication".

5. Methodology

The aim of the research was to study the opinion of teachers on the possibilities of developing social and civic skills in History and Socio-human classes and the democratic participation of young people in society through involvement in eTwinning projects.

We made comparisons between the answers of the two samples Romania and the Republic of Moldova, respectively other eTwinning and eTwinning Plus states and we formulated conclusions. Regarding eTwinning and eTwinning Plus, we referred to History teachers from eTwinning Member States, eTwinning Plus, members of the Mediterranean partnership, countries within the European Union and outside the European Union, with membership status of the partnership. (e.g. Tunisia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, etc.).

6. Results

The first sample, consisting of teachers from Romania and the Republic of Moldova was made of 91.6% female and 8.4% male; as for teachers from different countries of the European Union or non-members of the European Union, they were 74.5% female and 25.5% male. This has shown that the majority of female teachers are predominant, although a greater involvement of men in the pre-university environment would be required, offering equal opportunities to all. Another observation found refers to the age of Romanian and European respondents, namely most of the respondents were between 41-45 years and over 50 years (24.4% and 37.8%, in Romania and the Republic of Moldova) and 32.4% and 34.3% eTwinning Member States. Regarding the age and teaching experience, most of the participants are over 25 years old, 42.9% of Romanians, and 28.4% the European colleagues. The distribution on the country of origin showed that most of the answers were provided by eTwinners from Romania 104, Moldova 15, Spain 13, Italy 12, Turkey 13, Greece, Portugal, Poland 9, Albania 7, France 6, Armenia, Bulgaria, Hungary 3, Croatia, Georgia, Macedonia 2, the rest of the countries have 1 answer Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Cyprus, Serbia, Slovakia, Tunisia, Ukraine, Great Britain. The urban-rural distribution of teachers and schools involved reveals the preponderance of urban schools (77.3% urban and 22.7% rural in Romania and the Republic of Moldova and 66.7% urban, 33.3% rural in eTwinning and eTwinning Plus countries).

Regarding the first item of the questionnaire, namely the role of European history in understanding recent history and appreciating the common European heritage, 98% of Romanian and Moldovan respondents consider that the European collective memory is particularly important, as well as 95.1% of partner states eTwinning and eTwinning Plus.

Most teachers in the eTwinning community acknowledge the importance of the construction of Europe, the significance of the first international elections for the European Parliament in history, held in 1979 (89.1% of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, 83.3% of European countries and eTwinning Plus partner countries) and consider it important to discuss with their students about the role of democracy and free elections, as well as the importance of having representatives in the European forum, participating in decision-making. Analyzing the answers about the evolution of Europe over time and the importance of preserving the European memory in order to understand the common European heritage, I found that opinions were different, from enthusiasm and interest, desire to share experiences to prudence. Both European history teachers and Romanian history teachers have stated that Europe is the cradle of human civilization and that there can be no present and no future without knowing the past. The enrichment of the national memory, the rediscovery of the past contributes to the configuration of the common European memory. Here is a opinion from a teacher: " *I think that European history includes key moments in our society and that the youngest need to know and remember in order to lead better their own generation. European memory is not only important but also vital, so that to protect values, such as peace, democracy, freedom, equality, solidarity, social justice, social and political rights*".

Regarding the 1979 European Parliament elections, the teachers surveyed say it is a milestone in Europe's history, when democratic values and the involvement of millions of citizens have gone together to build a better common future. *“Democratic principles are introduced and form the basis of the construction of Europe through the elections”*.

Another item referred to the difficulties encountered by teachers during the History and socio-human classes. On the school curriculum from Romania and the Republic of Moldova, teachers note that it is much too loaded (42 to a large extent, 57 to a medium extent, 15 to a small extent, 5 totally disagree). European teachers consider the school curriculum very busy (42 to a large extent, 45 to a medium extent, 13 to a small extent, 2 to disagree). Comparing the results I find that the problems faced by teachers are similar, namely the small number of hours, the curriculum is essential in European countries, emphasizing those fundamental themes of civic and social skills training and understanding of national and European history. One of the complicated problems faced by teachers in Romania and the Republic of Moldova are the poor material funds for modern teaching materials (computers, multimedia applications, ICT laboratories that allow access to the Internet and learning platforms). The results of the questionnaire show that the lack of modern materials is a problem to a large extent, for 70 respondents, on average 33, to a small extent 11, and 5 disagree. European teachers appreciate that there are sufficient funds allocated for materials in order to carry out an effective learning process, 26 to a large extent, 44 to a medium extent, 22 to a small extent, 10 to disagree.

Regarding the opinion on the changes observed in students after accessing and involvement in eTwinning projects, we find that 73 are largely involved, 44 on average and 2 to a small extent, in solving tasks using critical thinking. Another goal was to exchange ideas with other students from other countries, which contributed to the change of attitude towards colleagues and teamwork through cooperation in History lessons, 73 largely, 43 on average, 3 to a small extent. Teachers identify changes in the teaching process 85 to a large extent, 29 to a medium extent and 5 to a small extent. The changes produced in students do not stop here, but continue, influencing behavior, becoming responsible active citizens, both in everyday life and in the online environment, 61 to a large extent, 50 to a medium extent, 7 to a small extent, 1 disagreement.

Another noteworthy aspect is the use of digital tools, the eTwinning workspace, which has led to an increase in students' autonomy, increased responsibility for their own education. Thus, the results of the survey show that teachers appreciate the increase in students' autonomy (50 to a large extent, 58 to a medium extent and 11 to a small extent).

According to the teachers surveyed, regarding the changes made to students in order to form civic and social skills to support diversity, respect for values and privacy 76 consider that there have been changes to a large extent, 35 in medium and 8 in small measure. European eTwinning and eTwinning Plus teachers appreciate that they have noticed the following beneficial effects: involvement in solving tasks using critical thinking 58 to a large extent, 38 to a medium extent, 4 to a small extent and 2 not at all; the exchange of ideas with colleagues from other countries, the interaction and change of behavior and attitude towards other classmates, a fact observed by teachers 65 to a large extent, 27 to a medium extent, 10 to a small extent. Increasing students' motivation for study and collaborative teamwork in classes on various topics of History and socio-human sciences, were other positive aspects recorded by European teachers, 69 largely, 27 on average, 5 to a small extent. Identifying online historical sources, critical analysis, the opportunity to exchange information contribute to increasing innovation. Applying opinion polls, signing online petitions, involving young people in the legislative process, participating in actions for charitable causes are all attitudes and behaviors that have influenced behavior to determine the active citizenship of young people, increasing their involvement in the physical environment but and online. The applied questionnaire revealed that European teachers perceive the importance of active citizenship and the actions they take in projects. Their actions changed the behavior of

young people causing the acquisition of civic and social skills, and teachers' opinions on this issue are: 53 to a large extent, 41 to a medium extent, 5 to a small extent, 3 to disagree. Another positive aspect pointed out by European teachers was that during the classes by accessing eTwinning, young people can go through the tasks of working independently, becoming autonomous but at the same time responsible for the learning process. They also have access to the project at home, asynchronously, when they need to resume essential information. The results of the survey show that teachers appreciate that students have become responsible and have the ability to self-teach to a large extent 42, on average 49, to a small extent 9 and disagree 2.

These above ideas are reflected in the answers of European teachers to the questionnaire, stating that participation in projects on history causes changes in the formation of civic and social skills of young people, largely 56 participants. , on average, 39 participants and to a lesser extent 7 participants.

Figure 1. Changes at the level of students regarding the formation of social and civic competencies through involvement in eTwinning projects, Romanian and Moldovan teachers

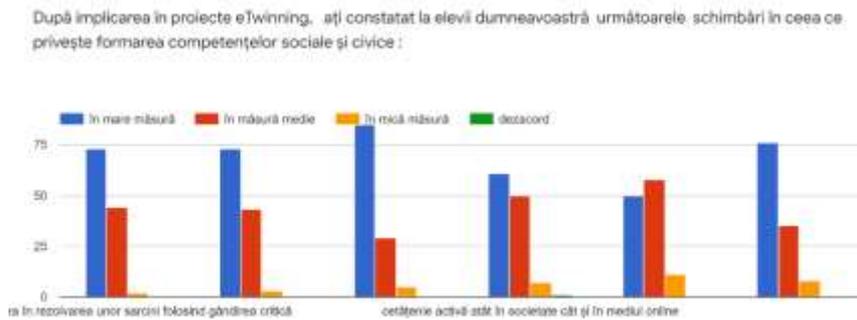
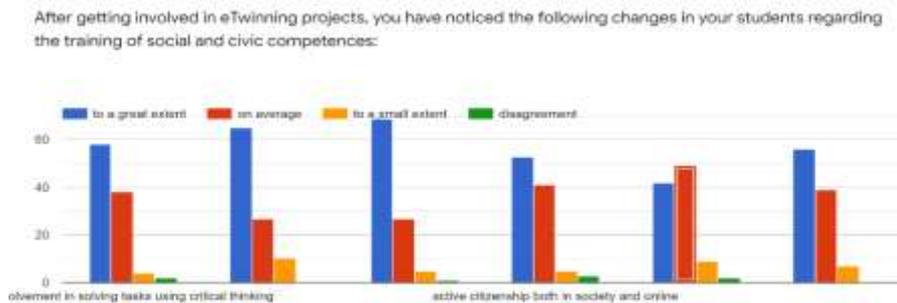


Figure 2. Changes at student level in the training of social and civic competences through involvement in eTwinning projects, European eTwinning teachers and eTwinning Plus



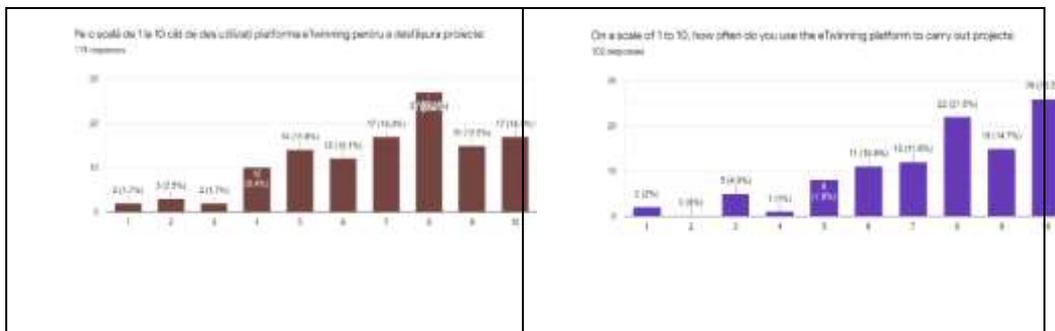
The conduct of History classes on the platform led to changes in the level of civic and social skills acquired by Romanian, Moldovan and European teachers. Thus, the lessons conducted

on eTwinning led to better knowledge of students by the teacher, observation, planning and preparation of learning focused on student needs, better management of student behaviour and increased interactions within the group of students, appreciation practices and beneficial assessment for students, communication and collaboration with colleagues from other specialties in interdisciplinary classes, team building, better emotion management, designing effective inclusive activities and participating in volunteer activities.

Asked how often they use the eTwinning platform, Romanian and Moldovan teachers answered on a scale from 1 to 10, in which 10 is the most, that 17 of them access daily or several times a day (10), 15 of them quite frequently (9), 27 of them frequently (8), 17 teachers less frequent (7), 12 teachers rarely (6) 14 teachers very rarely (5), 10 extremely rare (4), 2 sometimes (3), 3 almost not at all (2), 1 not at all (1).

Figure 3. Use of eTwinning by Romanian and Moldovan teachers for projects

Figure 4. Use of eTwinning by European and eTwinning Plus teachers for projects



The opinion of European teachers and eTwinning Plus on the use of eTwinning to run projects was as follows: 26 consider that they access it daily (10), 15 access it almost daily (9), 22 use it frequently (8), 12 teachers use it less frequently (7), 11 teachers access rarely (6), 8 less frequently (5), 1 extremely rarely (4), 5 teachers use sometimes (3), 2 teachers not at all (1). From the above we find that European teachers are more active, being aware of the benefits of using online tools provided by eTwinning: it does not involve costs, being a free platform, facilitates learning using supporting materials (photos, videos, animations), student interaction is made in the project's Twinspace, they can add comments or materials made by them, the historical information can be accessed from anywhere, at any time, from any computer or mobile phone that has an Internet connection.

Regarding the use of the eTwinning platform by Romanian history and socio-human teachers, most 22.7% appreciate that collaborative disciplinary or interdisciplinary projects can be carried out. 12.6% and 14.3%. European teachers enter the platform almost daily to work with students in class or at home 25.5%. There are few teachers who access the platform just to participate in training courses or just to look for partners for a future ERASMUS + project. All specified the quality of projects and vocational training for career development and benefits in terms of preparing students for their future integration into the labor market.

Conclusion

The results presented in the research highlight the significance of preserving European memory, as well as the importance of training future citizens, achieved in History and socio-human classes using new technologies and especially the eTwinning platform. Analyzing different

points of view of the teachers participating in the study, we conclude that the formation of civic and social skills using historical sources seen from different perspectives, activity in groups, is possible and is supported by the use of cooperation and collaboration in work teams. eTwinning. At the same time, young people need guidance to successfully exploit the pedagogical tools provided by eTwinning. In order to achieve authentic learning, students try to make connections between personal research and those provided by the teacher, while questioning information to remove false news, using only verified sources. Interactivity and use of Twinspace, Web 2.0 tools have allowed the reconstruction and increased understanding of different aspects of European history. The memory of history, the knowledge of the troubled contemporary European and national history of the twentieth century determined the critical, creative reflection and involvement of young people in decision-making by voting, at national and European level, for respect for human rights, equality and understanding, respect for democratic values. The results of the study revealed that History lessons conducted in the virtual environment have a huge impact on the training of young people, increasing their interest in studying and applying knowledge in a creative way, training skills to learn to learn and digital skills, later facilitating access on the labor market.

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