

25 Years of the Comenius Project in the Context of Another Crisis



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ABSTRACT

L'article raconte les origines du Projet Comenius au sein du séminaire GERFEC à Klingenthal – Strasbourg en 1988 qui avait comme but la construction de projets d'actions concrètes dans la formation des enseignants et explique quelle était la situation de la Communauté Européenne après l'entrée des pays du sud : Grèce, Portugal et Espagne et comment le programme Erasmus, - né, avec pas mal de difficultés, quelques mois avant,- est sorti d'une crise entre les états membres que jusqu'à ce moment n'avaient pas permis aux institutions européennes développer des actions dans le domaine de la culture et l'éducation.

A partir de cette analyse, le texte indique comment dans le contexte d'une autre crise, la mobilité et l'éducation interculturelle peuvent être la clé pour développer chez les jeunes, des valeurs, très nécessaires dans cette situation, comme la coopération et la solidarité, et anime l'Association Comenius à développer nouveaux projets dans cette direction.

It has been 25 years since the Comenius programme was created, yet in the context of another crisis. Back in the 1980s, the then called European Community languished. It was no able to continue with the integration dynamics of the previous decade and a huge goal was being sought in order to relaunch de European project. In 1988, just two years after Spain, Greece and Portugal entered the European Union, their entry together with the disappearance of the internal borders meant a critical moment for that latent EU crisis. On the other side it represented a response to it as well, as it raised several challenges to the already Member States of the European Community.

On the one hand a very important economic challenge, as we are dealing with three countries with a considerably lower economic level compared to that of the already member countries -and its impact

on infrastructures-. At the same time, a second challenge was set out related to the welfare state: the social services of the newly integrated countries were far lower than the rest. The third of the challenges was of a political nature. The three countries had had a totalitarian regime during the previous decades. Spain was still recovering from the 1981 Coup d'état. In short, they were three countries with very weak and still under construction democracies. Finally there was the stereotypes challenge: the three countries -Spain, Greece and Portugal- were southern countries, and for most European people back in the 80s that meant little more than a good place for holidays, – it would be interesting to know in what way this perception has changed.

When we created the Comenius project in the spring of 1998, the Erasmus programme had only been on-going for se-

veral months. It was also a response to the crisis as it was seen as a milestone for the Europe of citizens, which was meant to make people understand that the decisions taken at the European Community institutions would have a direct relevance to their daily life. In this case the issues related to university education were un-touchable for most of the Member States, since it concerned the fundamental values of the country.

Manuel Marín, who was the vice-president of the European Commission, remembers in one of his articles published in *El País*¹ newspaper, how the Erasmus programme emerged from a serious conflict with some of the Member States.

¹ Marín, M: "Erasmus, un ejemplo de la buena Europa". "El País" newspaper. 12th August 2013. Available on http://elpais.com/elpais/2012/07/16/opinion/1342444890_78698.html (Visited on 25/06/2013)

At that time education and culture were considered an essential part of the sovereignty and national identity, and thus, they could not be object of the Community policies. The European Commission came to the conclusion that the university system could not remain closed, what Europe needed what just the opposite: to boost university students mobility, as well as professors and other university staff mobility. That is why they thought about a risky solution: as they did not have powers to implement community policies in terms of education and culture, they would set out community programmes which fell under the competence of the European Commission. Several Member States, especially the ones which carried more weight within the Community, hindered the emergence of the programme, they feared that their national competences would be reduced. But, the Erasmus programme emerged despite the hostility and the obstacles.

When in the spring of 1988 I attended the seminar of the GERFEC² which took place in the Château de Klingenthal, host of many of our spring meetings, it was my second time in this valued place. The first time took place just a few weeks after the failed Coup d'état in Spain (1981) and I became the centre of attention, though unwillingly. On that occasion the seminar coordinated by Roseline Moreau and Jacques Chevalier had a clear objective: to develop projects of concrete actions which could be set into practice in the near future. Jacques Chevalier and myself analysed the beginning of the Erasmus programme and soon became aware of its potential. It could change the education landscape if its development overcame the administrative burden that was to appear.

In this sense, as we were both working at higher education institutions in the area of teacher training, we knew that the success of a mobility programme depended

² GERFEC: *European Group for research and training of teachers holding Christian and other beliefs and convictions*. Cfr: <http://www.gerfec.eu/index.php?lang=en#3>



on cooperation among institutions. We thought that it was quite difficult for the institutions to accept what students had done at other universities if they did not know in detail what students had done there, the context, curriculum, etc. At the same time students and professors mobility implied breaking away from customs and stereotypes which were important at that time. And finally we understood that it was necessary for any exchange-programme, especially in education, to know some cultural aspects as well as the educational system context of the country of destination.

That is why we designed the Comenius project, with the idea of developing the intercultural education, which at the same time would be a guarantee for the development of mobility programmes. Initially we thought of a programme which would respond to three premises:

- To allow the professors and coordinators in charge of mobility the establishment of personal contacts which facilitated the understanding of foreign institutions. This would be the first step towards mobility in the future under the Erasmus programme.
- To guarantee the understanding of the other countries educational system both from theory and practice.

Several training periods in other countries schools were to be included. The teacher training programme was also to be introduced as well as the participation in host institution lectures.

- To facilitate student participation by setting out a quite economic project; students should pay their travel expenses and they would be hosted in the families of the host institution students. Families and host institutions would pay for the students meals.
- To include in the programme cultural and touristic activities which would allow a basic knowledge of the teacher training school surroundings.

Although the exchanges set up in the project were meant to last two weeks in each of the institutions, the first exchange lasted just one week due to organisational and economic reasons. So, at the beginning of February 1988 a group of seven students from the Escuela Universitaria de Formación del Profesorado "Edetania", formerly attached to the University of Valencia, and myself as a coordinator visited the "Ecole Normale du Brabant Wallon" in Nivelles (Belgium). We attended a one-week educational and cultural programme. My students

learnt that Belgium was very cold, it was snowing for two days; they also learnt that Belgian people got up and went to bed quite early, that sometimes Belgians ate raw meat, that they had a Normal School quite different from ours, with a lower number of students. My students had the opportunity to know a primary school very different from ours which was very interesting for them. A few weeks later, the same group of Belgian students which hosted us, coordinated by Jacques Chevalier, came to a spring like, warm, festive Valencia. They knew our teacher training school, our way of life and our primary school, which was interesting and different for them.

Soon other schools from Madrid, Alkmaar, Lille and Paris joined us making the project grow. In 1993 it was already part of the International Association "Comenius" which continued with a work you can follow on the Association website³. I have been asked several times why we called the project "Comenius". We have to take into account that the European project "Comenius" which became part of the European macro-programme "Socrates" and next "Erasmus for all", did not exist at the time. Only the Erasmus programme had been created. We looked for a European figure who represented

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<http://associationcomenius.org>

both the pedagogue and mobility, and in that sense the overall pedagogic vision of Comenius together with his contribution to the educational and teacher training methodology, as well as his stays in several countries, made us think of him as an example of the European mobility that we were willing to develop with our new Erasmus programme.

Many times I have been considered an 'educational wanderer' which I think is an honour. To run a doctorate programme between different universities or to teach an indigenous community in the Amazon rain forest are not activities as different as people may think. Both situations involve establishing a communicative and cooperation situation with people. Twenty-five years ago it was unthinkable that, as sometimes happens to me, I could be teaching in my faculty at Valencia University in the morning, taking part in a masters at the Sorbonne in the afternoon, finally participating in the meeting of a project at Charleroi or monitoring Erasmus students in Leuven. Nowadays with low-cost flights and high speed trains, the problem is not the means but our ability to adapt to different contexts that need to be known beforehand.

Over these 25 years much has been said about the Erasmus programme, whether or not it was something more than party and tourism. Some European politicians, as our current Minister of Education, have made some statements underestimating the academic results of the programme and questioning the grants of the programme in times of crisis as they do not reach excellent students. They have not understood that regarding mobility of higher education students, results are not all what matters, as they are not the only objective of mobility. Learning experience and personal maturity together with the intercultural experience of living abroad and absorbing other cultures are also very important aspects of mobility.

In the International Association "Comenius" we learnt time ago that the development of the intercultural education was one of our main goals. It involves interpersonal knowledge, cooperation, shared experiences and understanding of our institutions. To develop Europe in times of crisis means continuing this way, looking for new methods to ensure our programmes and projects in a situation of economic difficulties. Cooperation and solidarity, values we wish to strengthen in our students, arise from truly intercultural education experiences.

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