The implementation of experiential learning in junior high schools: The case of a Greek school.

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Abstract
From 2013 -2016, a project-based course titled 'Experiential Activities' was taught in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd class of the Greek Junior High School aiming to implement some of the main principals of experiential pedagogy. Many teaching methods and techniques have been used in order to help students acquire and process knowledge. As the course was withdrawn from the curricula, a question arises concerning the implementation of experiential learning to the other school courses. Focusing on junior high students' opinions and beliefs, a research was conducted. Three focus groups discussed how they experienced the experiential activities course, what the pros and cons were and whether it is possible to 'transfer' experiential learning in other teaching courses. The content of the discussions was analysed and thematic categories and subcategories were formed. The results show that student enjoy and approve of experiential learning, recognize the benefits they get, but they are sceptical about the wide implementation in Greek curriculum due to the structure of the educational system and the high demands of the university entrance examination.

Keywords: Experiential learning, experiential activities, high school courses, focus groups.

JEL classifications: I20

Introduction

The project course was taught the recent three years, from 2013-14 to 2015-16, at the Junior High Schools in Greece (Ministerial Decision, 2013) according to the Instructions for the Experiential Activities (Ministry of Culture, Education and Religion, 2015). In its design and instructions are expressed the basic principles of experiential pedagogy, which is considered to be an innovative approach in education. Its modern version claims that impelling the students to gain and elaborating varied experiences, enhances learning and personal development. This contributes to the overall purpose of education, to enable students managing personal, educational and social situations with autonomy, creativity and critical attitude (Matsagouras, 2011:11).

Experiential pedagogy exploits a lot of psychological and sociological theories and researches. The most important one of them, concerning education, is Vygotsky's social constructivism. According to social constructivism, individuals develop knowledge and skills through social interaction. This could not be achieved without the mediation of the social context (Koulaidis, 2007). Concerning the experiential aspect, modern principles of experiential learning review extreme and unilateral versions

of experiential approaches of the beginning of last century. While they maintain the value of active learning and the significance of teamwork, they also recognize that investigation and critical thinking and learning demand an advanced level of cognitive processes and knowledge for which the educator's intervention is required in order for the effectiveness of teaching to be reinforced (Kamarinou, 2000).

Four categories of didactical approaches are mentioned in bibliography: (1) Assimilative learning, (2) Direct teaching, (3) Guided discovery and (4) Inquiring learning (Koutselini & Theofilidis, 2007). Their synthesis could be applied within an experiential learning model that does not abolish the didactical role of the educator who uses complementary direct forms of teaching. Thus, prerequisite knowledge, explanations and skills are ensured, along with the necessary context of educational guidance (Matsagouras, 2011). A generally accepted definition is given by Dedouli (2001): experiential learning is an appropriation procedure of knowledge through experience and simultaneously, the procedure of searching of personal meaning in it. Activities to this direction are research work in the field, observation, interviews, simulations, creative compositions (Dedouli, 2001).

In the training material for the high school project course, the principle of experiential learning is the first of the four fundamental pedagogical-didactic principles exploited in the formation of a standard model for its implementation. According to it, learning results from direct and mediated situations experienced by the students, and should be systematically elaborated for revealing relationships and for reflective assessment (Matsagouras, 2011). At this point, it is very important to note the theorists' ascertainment –in Greece Kleanthous-Papadimitrioun as early as 1952– for the necessity of students' experiences systematic elaboration and for the risk of overloading students with experiences that remain disorganized and serve no purpose (Kleanthous-Papadimitriou, 1952). Processing of experiences is complex, does not exhaust itself in the simple recalling and description. Experiences can constitute a base for learning only when (1) they have personal meaning for the students, (2) they have continuousness, (3) they are examined within their social and natural contexts and (4) constitute subject for inquiring examination (Matsagouras, 2011:24). In this occasion, the resulting benefits are very important, as experiential learning strengthens the inherent motivation of students for knowledge, understanding of the world and communication. It develops their cognitive and social abilities, which are necessary for self-oriented learning and managing dilemma situations and eases the transition of knowledge in new situations (Bakirtzis, 2000).

Teaching of school subjects in Greek high school is governed by the Cross Curricular United Context of Curricula (DEPPS) and of the School Subjects Curricula (APS) (Hellenic Government Gazette, 2003). In the general introductory part of DEPPS the aim and the teaching goals of all subjects are mentioned in a horizontal connection ordinance, which is i) data search and recognition, classification and hypothesis formulation, analysis, interpretation and conclusions outcoming, ii) values, attitudes and behaviours adoption, which determine a person's relation with himself and the human environment, iii) development of sensitivity, reflection and critical capacity to tackle different areas of human activity (Hellenic Government Gazette 303B, 2003; Hellenic Government Gazette 303D, 2003).

The suggested methodological approaches include investigation and discovery, working on the field and visits to the environment, teaching in groups. Especially the study of the curricula shows that they are governed by general principles, aims and didactical approaches that converge and have common elements.

Teaching in high school, whether regarding the project course or other subjects, is a united procedure that aims the activation of the complex learning mechanisms (Chrisafidis, 2008). The overview of theoretical framework, objectives, methodology and benefits of teaching the project course and consideration of propositions of the Pedagogical Institute, as they were finalized in ΔΕΠΠΣ, reveal the common objectives of all school subjects teaching. At the same time, common methodological approaches concerning the discovery, experience processing and research highlight experiential learning elements across all high school subjects (Chrisafidis, 2000). However, all these theoretical findings raise the question: "What is the opinion of the students about the connection of project course with the other school subjects, through the application of experiential learning principles?"

In order to answer this question, we designed a research that aims to reveal students' opinions and experiences concerning the possible connection of the project course with other school subjects teaching. The subjects of research were high school seniors. Specifically, we investigated:

1. If students have experienced some experiential learning principles at the project course, and if yes, which ones in particular?
2. If students have experienced some experiential learning principles at other school subjects during their school life, and if yes, which ones in particular?
3. If they believe that experiential learning principles could be applied to other school subjects, and how.

At this point, we should clarify some things. The first clarification is about the research content and objective. This research investigates: a) students' opinions after the application of the project course and b) their experiences of other teachings with experiential methods. Our interest focuses on how students have experienced these teaching and not on the way of teaching implementation. That is why there is no reference to the way of implementation of each of the three projects realized during the school year. What is presented and investigated is not the activities themselves, but the way that students experienced these activities. The aim of the research is not to present the teaching venture, nor to investigate the teaching method and procedure. The aim of the research is to present the thoughts and opinions of the students a posteriori. Of course, through the interaction of the members of the focus groups and the production of rich and composite data, the teaching method of the project courses will implicitly come out, as well as the principles and teaching method and other elements concerning their implementation. These elements will be exploited in date analysis and in conclusions derivation, in relation with the initial question.

The second clarification concerns the use of terms "team coordinator" and "thematic project". These terms are mentioned in the discussion and are not explained in the theoretical framework, because they are analysed in curricula and in the training material for the school subjects. Also, the term defines clearly its content.

Methodology

Focus groups were used for the conduct of the research. Qualitative content analysis method was used for date analysis. The dynamics of the focus groups method lie in the production of natural and fruitful discussions that derive rich and composite data, and this is actually its main advantage. Its implementation simulates the everyday conditions of the

school life, since class, intermission and school life generally are not solitary procedures as students comment and discuss about everything happens, everything they learn, believe, think and hope (Myers & Macnaghten 1999:173-185). Furthermore, investigation through focus groups is suitable if we take in consideration i) the shift of interest to the methods that reveal the interpretations of the active subjects, which is observed in recent years on educational research (Robson, 2007: 442-443), ii) the absence of previous data on this subject, iii) the characteristics of the sample, which was locally and numerically limited, iv) the aim of the research, which was investigation and not generalization (Iosifidis, 2008; Bonidis, 2004:128-132).

Formation of groups

Focus groups were formed according to the recent modifications on the classical rules of the focus groups that arose after the use of focus groups in social sciences. According to them, it is suggested that flexible focus groups are formed which serve the research questions and maximize the interaction among their members. Thus, the groups can be "naturally" formed so that group members belong to a pre-existing group in everyday school life. Yet, in the discussion, disagreements between group members are encouraged, in contrast to the traditional groups that aim at the final agreement between them (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Puchta & Potter, 2007). The model used for the design of the specific focus groups is the single-category-design. According to this model focus groups are formed of members that offer rich informational material to the group and the discussion is completed when the produced information are recycled (Krueger & Casey, 2000:30-31).

One of the authors instructed the project course and undertook the task of groups' coordinator, addressed the general questions to the groups, reinstated the discussion to the questioned issues and encouraged the participation of all members. This decision was based mainly on the general theoretical starting point of the research method concerning the natural data production through the interaction of group members and looked upon the creation of conditions similar to the everyday school life. During the project course implementation, the presence of the educator was given and integrated to the school environment, in which discusses took place, ideas, thoughts and views were exchanged. Therefore, her presence in the focus groups was expected and resembled the "natural" environment of the preceded activities, as natural continuousness of the class (Krueger & Casey 2000:97-115).

Participants' profile

Three focus groups were created among the 78 students of the C class of the year 2015-2016. These students attended the project course in all three years of the junior high school. The choice of the group members was based on the general principle of qualitative researches and especially those that deal with the oral speech. According to this principle, the objective is variety and heterogeneity and not representativeness (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1: Sample characteristics

GROUPS	GENDER		ORIGIN		PARTICIPATION IN CLASS COUNCILS	
	B	G	GREEK	OTHER	YES	NO
1η	4	3	5	2	3	4
2η	4	3	5	2	2	5
3η	3	4	5	2	3	4

Thus, the general pursuit was the synthesis of a balanced sample that includes the basic categories of the student population of the school. Of course, the categories undertook by a researcher are not the same with those recognized by the subjects of the research. However, in the framework of this work, we tried to conclude all the possible relative students' categories (Krueger & Casey 2000:69-81). The third category is related with the social acceptance and the students' presence in the school procedures, which is important for the place and the age. Thus, in the groups were included popular students and others who were not so popular with lower profile. The criterion for the choice was the participation in the class councils and the participation in the school council.

Conduct procedure of the focus groups

During the conduct of the focus groups, students were asked to discuss around three topic centres. The formation of the topic centres was based i) on the "Counterproposals of experiential pedagogy against choices of traditional pedagogy", recorded in the training material for the experiential activities: From the experiential learning to the collaborative model for experiential activities (Matsagouras, 2011:12), ii) on the central questions of the research. Specifically, the participants were asked to discuss:

Topic axis A: Experiential activity course teaching at high school.
Questions: In which way the experiential activity course was taught? How did you feel during the lesson? What is your opinion of the experiential activity course?

Topic axis B: Other high school courses teaching until now.
Questions: In which way the other general subject courses were taught? How did you feel during the lesson? What is your opinion of the teaching of these courses?

Topic axis C: Connecting the teaching of general subject courses with the experiential activity course.

Questions: Do you think that there could be a connection between the way of teaching general subject courses and experiential activity course in junior high? What would the lesson be like? How would you feel?

Data collection took place on April 24 of this year, by recording the discussions. Later, the data were transcripted and then the characteristic symbols of oral spiel were added (Pavlidou, 2006). For the data analysis, the method of qualitative content analysis was used (Cohen, L. et all, 2007· Bonidis & Chondolidou 1997: 189). Analysis procedure was time consuming and went through many stages and modifications (Bonidis 2004: 130-132). It started with multiple readings of the transcripts to seek and reveal thematic areas, as to the content of the subjects' oration. A classification of discussions in thematic topics was done followed by a rearrangement of the parts of discussions and reconstruction of topics and subtopics.

Results – Discussion

From the discussions' qualitative content analysis of the three focus groups arose categories and subcategories of the content, as described in table 2.

Table 2: [Categories' system] System of categories

CATEGORIES [SYSTEM] PER THEMATIC AXIS		
A. PROJECT TEACHING	**B. OTHER COURSES TEACHING**	**Γ. CONNECTION OF TEACHING PROJECT AND OTHER COURSES**
1. Team teaching	1. Team teaching	1. Team teaching
1.1. Group formation – Roles 1.2. Theme choice – Conformation 1.3. Group working method	1.1. Elements found 1.2. Elements absent	1.1. General negative assessments 1.2. General positive assessments 1.3. Considerations per subject
2. Learning–Learning environment	2. Learning–Learning environment	2. Learning–Learning environment
2.1. In class 2.2. Out of class	2.1. In class 2.2. Out of class	2.1. Positive assessments 2.2. Negative assessments
3. Course requirements	3. Courses' requirements	3. Courses' requirements
3.1. Information 3.2. Team work	1.1. Differentiation in subject 1.2. Differentiation in the teacher 1.3. Differentiation in the context	3.1. The role of infrastructure 3.2. The role of teacher 3.3. Suggestions
4. Estimations for the course - Assessment	4. Estimations for the courses - Assessment	4. Estimations for the courses - Assessment
4.1. Amenity - difficulty 4.2. Interest 4.3. Emotional response 4.4. Expectations 4.5. Final benefits	4.1. Amenity - difficulty 4.2. Interest 4.3. Emotional response 4.4. Cognitive assessment 4.5. Other	4.1. Amenity - difficulty 4.2. Interest 4.3. Emotional response 4.4. Cognitive assessment 4.5. Other

In the discussions of the thematic axis A, the issue of teaching in groups was highlighted by the students. They acknowledged that teaching of the project was based on teamwork. They pointed that work groups were formatted either by students' choice or by teacher's choice and that difficulties arose in the functioning of the work group, as the members of a group did not contribute on the same level and were not all cooperative, while all the team was praised for a good piece of work. They also mentioned that staffing groups with members of different interest, without pre-existing friendships, resulted in an unknown collaborative environment and led to extremities, either to failure or to great success.

C: [ ] We can work better (2)
K: Cooperate with those who would not/
M: … and you see your strengths
C: You cooperate because you want to get the job done

Some students indicated that the role of group coordinator was underexposed because she could not convince unwilling and inconsistent students. This resulted in the phenomenon that only some of the students, and always the same ones, continued to work and produce results. Most students agreed that

the choice of the project theme was very important and that they would prefer to be chosen by the students.

Of course, they stated that they have learned through other students' information and through elaboration in the classroom. Most of the participating students acknowledged that working in the classroom was pleasant and that there was deconstruction of the usual teaching environment, where what usually prevails is silence and seriousness. Students admitted, with guilt, as if it was unacceptable, that they laughed in the classroom, they debated intensely and they stated that there was "…disruption of the lesson". Homework was also pleasant and, as for the feeling during the visits outside school, it was especially good. Students particularly mentioned the requirements of the course and agreed that collecting information and collaborative teamwork were consistently required during the course. Variations existed in the way of processing information, the working method of the groups and the students' interest. Generally, the project course was considered as an easy one. There were some difficulties related to the coherence and the collaboration of the teams. The great majority of students agreed that they liked the project course, because of the specific way of teaching.

K: We have learned who we do not get along with/
A: we have learned to tolerate each other (2) we have learned our limits/
F: you appreciated each other as a whole.

At the beginning, the students hoped to have fun in the course and to achieve a high grade just copying information from the web, but finally they concluded that, through the project course, they learned a lot and gained experiences.

An: [ ] we learned how to listen
Cho: During the field trips, (3) we saw things (3) we laughed/
Ch: but we also did the job.

In the discussions of the thematic axis B, the vast majority of students stated that they did not experience a collaborative teamwork teaching in other school courses during the previous years. Some stated that they had participated in some thematic projects at the primary school, but not in the framework of the curriculum courses. These projects were interesting and included out-of-class activities. Many stated that they did not do even these. Some mentioned the courses of Technology and of Informatics in high school, where students worked in groups, but their accounts do not reveal a structured method of teamwork teaching. Many students especially mentioned the music course as an interactive one with teamwork procedures of creativity and expression. However, some students said that "… it is not really a school subject".

Cho: This year, in the subject of music, we dealt with theater and opera (2) what else;
F: Advertisements/
A: …this does not count … it is not a school subject

It seems that the concept of the school subject is associated with the characteristics of traditional teaching and lesson style, which are elements that did not appear in the music course. Learning is commonly combined with memorization, homework, individual performance, completion of the school curriculum within a context of tranquillity and attention. Out-of-classroom activities do not seem to be considered related to the teaching subjects which are characterized by decreased interest. The requirements of a course depend on the teacher and on the subject itself. However, imperative requirements are studying at home, individual

examination and written tests. Participation in group discussions and the teacher questions is also required.

D: Everyone works for himself in the course.

Students acknowledge that most courses have a standard framework of relationships and activities permitted or forbidden which take place simultaneously for all students, without any deviations. Most courses are considered to be difficult, except music and arts. The general impression that prevails in discussions is that courses are of decreased interest, while usually the teaching subject is of interest and the teaching procedure is a necessary evil. There are very few students who like the courses as they are instructed. While all students acknowledge that they learn with the traditional teaching procedure, when they try to assess what they have learned, they realize that little knowledge remains. When they try to remember, they recall several incidents and events, but not the content of teaching.

In the discussions of the thematic axis C, students try to imagine the teaching of other subjects in the form of project course teaching. The first thing that was observed throughout the discussions of the focus groups, but especially in this third part, was the distinction between 'subject' and 'project'. All the other general subject courses described in the second part of the discussion, fall into the 'subject' category. On the other hand, the project course described in the first part of the discussion falls into the 'project' category. The music course, which was taught experientially with the project method, confused the students, because while being a 'subject', it was taught as a 'project'. This perception has dominated ever since the beginning of the discussion of the thematic axis C. What is very interesting is that the rotation of the discussion and the interaction among the groups' members guides the students to conclude in very different opinions from those they had in the beginning. When asked if there could be a connection between the teaching of other school subjects with the project course, students initially respond negatively.

Kr: Not the basic subjects
M: No, because you are obliged to study
Kr: There would be chaos in the classroom
P: You have to be focused
M: Teamwork in all subjects (2) is not good

However, when the discussion comes to specific subjects or subject groups, then assessments change. Several students are beginning to argue that courses like Ancient Greek, Language, History, could include elements of experiential teaching. An important turning point in the debate was the argument for mutual aid in the difficult lessons.

Fe: [ ] it would be good to do it in the difficult subjects … .To help each other

This argument brought about fruitful reflection regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the possibility of teaching in the form of project course. Improvement of student relations and positive atmosphere in the class would be the result of such teaching, while doubts were expressed concerning the effectiveness of such teaching in learning difficult lessons. However, students would like the teacher to include certain "project" activities in other courses. Such activities are dramatization, watching movies, information elaboration in groups, participating in experiments (not just watching), and excursions. Discussions also highlighted also the issue of space and time in implementing the new form of courses. Laboratories, reading areas, means and infrastructure would

help. An interesting turning point in the discussion of two focus groups was the student attempts for the realization of the "reformed" courses in the existing infrastructure of the school. They designed hypothetical timetables, removed parts of the school curriculum, proposed team teaching, reclaimed corridors and created a hypothetical school-operating scenario, where school courses could be taught as projects. The key-point of the discussion was the question placed by all the focus groups concerning the ability to continue studies at the senior high school and the national entrance examinations in higher education. Although the evaluation of teaching these 'new' courses was positive concerning the students' interest, participation, class atmosphere, positive attitude towards the course, convenience and understanding, the connection with the next level of education and the potential difficulties (because of the requirements of senior high school and of the exams), enforced students to come back to reality and consider their proposals as utopian.

Through content analysis and formation of categories and subcategories, the attribution of all shades and different views of students was attempted. For this purpose, during the analysis, all statements of all members were taken into account, whether they were generally accepted or not.

Conclusions

The aim of this research through focus groups was to investigate the views and experiences of junior high school graduates regarding the possibility of relating teaching of the project course with teaching of other high school subjects through the application of experiential learning principles. Three categories arose from the qualitative content analysis of the data.

The aim of the analysis of category A was to answer the question whether students experienced some of the experiential learning principles in the project course. It was ascertained that teamwork, processing of information and production of common work, despite the implementation weaknesses which arose, urged students to search, discover and act, to be emotionally involved and remain interested. Therefore, students believe that a significant part of the experiential learning principles was applied (Dedouli, 2001; Matsagouras, 2011). The aim of analysis of category B was to answer the question whether students have experienced any experiential learning principles in other school subjects during their previous school life. It was found that students did not have experiential learning experiences at primary school, while some elements of active participation and creativity they had experienced from thematic projects left them with a very positive feeling. They still do not have experiential learning experiences at junior high school courses, with only few exceptions. The aim of analysis of category C was to answer the question whether students believe that experiential learning principles could be applied in other high school subjects. It is found that students are sceptical about issues regarding curricula, infrastructure, traditional learning and memorization while they acknowledge the multifaceted benefits of experiential learning. They believe that active participation, research, personal interest, interconnection of the cognitive subjects and creativity can potentially be incorporated in high school subjects. However, transition to the next level and the existing requirements make this change impossible.

Since the purpose of education is to enable students to manage personal, educational and social circumstances, individually or collectively, with autonomy, collaboration, a critical attitude, effectiveness and responsibility, then applying the principles of experiential learning in high school subject teaching is very important (Trilianos, 2004). Educators are not the only ones who should contribute to this end, but mostly

scientific education officials, providing practical assistance and proposals for experiential teaching of specific subjects. Reframing of the course and re-negotiation of the school knowledge is considered to be self-evident.

This research was applied on a specific sample of subjects and obeys the principles and purposes of qualitative research of oral speech. Its contribution is important so as to draw conclusions at the level of school unit and to give feedback to educators. However, its findings can be a motive for a wider research with different methods and research tools, for the application of the principles of experiential pedagogy in education.

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