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THE “SOCIAL EDUCATION ON THE MOVE” PROJECT AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE USE OF INFORMAL LEARNING METHODS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Keywords: formal, non-formal and informal education, higher education, mobile methods.

The article is an overview and provides information on the aims and objectives of the “Social Education on the Move” project. The project activities and their results are presented from the perspective of the use of non-formal education and informal learning methods in the context of higher education, i.e. formal education. The author reflects on the need to introduce changes in academic education that would enhance class appeal and, above all, make it easier for students to combine theoretical and empirical material with practice. One potential solution explored in the article is the use of mobile education methods. The SoMoveED project is implemented as part of the Erasmus+ programme and the KA2 action, supporting the development of strategic partnerships for higher education.

***Dorota Bazuń** – Ph. D. in sociology; scientific interests: social movements, social participation, social projects, mobile research and teaching methods.

PROJEKT “EDUKACJA SPOŁECZNA W RUCHU” JAKO PRZYKŁAD WYKORZYSTANIA NIEFORMALNYCH METOD UCZENIA SIĘ W SZKOLNICTWIE WYŻSZYM

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja formalna, pozaformalna i nieformalna, szkolnictwo wyższe, metody mobilne.

Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy i zawiera informacje na temat założeń i celów projektu “Edukacja społeczna w ruchu”. Działania projektu i jego wyniki zostały przedstawione z perspektywy wykorzystania metod edukacji pozaformalnej i uczenia się nieformalnego w kontekście szkolnictwa wyższego, a więc edukacji formalnej. Tekst zawiera refleksje nad potrzebą takich zmian w kształceniu akademickim, które zwiększą atrakcyjność zajęć, a przede wszystkim ułatwią studentom łączenie materiału teoretycznego i empirycznego z praktyką. Jednym ze sposobów zaproponowanych w tekście jest możliwość wykorzystania mobilnych metod edukacji. Projekt “SoMoveED” realizowany jest w ramach programu Erasmus+ oraz akcji “KA2” wspierającej rozwój partnerstw strategicznych dla szkolnictwa wyższego.

The article aims to present the project “Social Education on the Move”¹ in the context of the use of mobile methods derived from the trend of non-formal education. The SoMoveED project is implemented as part of the Erasmus+ program and the KA2 action supporting the development of strategic partnerships for higher education.

The text consists of three sections. The first part outlines the context of the project and the assumptions regarding the need to introduce non-formal education methods in higher education. The second part presents the goals and assumptions of the SoMoveED project. The third part concerns the activities carried out as part of the project. In summary, attention is drawn to the effects of the implementation of the activities foreseen in the project and indications for further changes in the nature of higher education.

Project’s context

One of the problems of modern higher education is the difficulty in keeping up with the changing needs of the modern world (Posselt et al. 2018; Chircop et al. 2020; O’Malley 2020). The approach in which knowledge is the dominant component of this education is increasingly being questioned.

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The trend towards holistic education draws attention to the fact that studies should equip graduates with knowledge, competencies and skills. In practice, however, this is not easy to implement. We observe changes in higher education, but universities seem to be more attached to the traditional approach than the change processes at lower educational levels. In this context, academic education is often accused of not adequately preparing graduates for work in the modern labor market.

Considering the three dimensions of adult education – formal, non-formal, and informal learning – “institutional ambiguities create the need to support cooperation between actors functioning in individual qualifications subsystems” (Stęchły 2021).

Formal education takes place within the education system (universities). Organized but institutionalized learning outside the education system is called non-formal, while informal learning occurs outside organized learning. Nowadays, we observe a shift in which non-formal and informal education are becoming increasingly important.

The distinction between non-formal and informal education is sometimes confusing. However, the main difference is that in the case of non-formal education, firstly, it takes place outside the traditional classroom setting. Secondly, it is based on a well-thought-out and planned schedule/scenario/curriculum. In contrast, informal education is less structured and not based on standardized curricula. It is also worth adding that informal learning may consist of developing knowledge and skills needed for work, but it can also be found in developing interests. In this sense, informal learning is close in practice to the development of interests or hobbies.

In this article, we focus on some dimensions and trends present in non-formal education and informal learning. Changing approaches to modern teaching occur faster in the case of earlier stages of education, but it seems to be adapted at universities with more excellent resistance. Meanwhile, universal access to information and ubiquitous noise require the development of a critical and reflective approach to information.

The literature review on the subject showed a significant discrepancy between the latest achievements in social sciences and academic practice. In teaching, trends such as the “relational turn” (Donati 2017), the “mobility turn” (Urry 2009), “m-learning” (Klimova, Poulouva 2016), and “walking methodologies” (O’Neill, Roberts 2020) are not adequately reflected.

For many years, the European Commission has promoted the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in higher education (Recognition of prior... 2013). As early as 2005, ministers responsible for

higher education drew attention to the recognition of non-formal and informal education, stating that: “[w]e will work with higher education institutions and others to improve recognition of prior learning including, where possible, non-formal and informal learning for access to, and as elements in, higher education programs” (The European Higher... 2005).

The integration of formal, informal, and non-formal education is considered necessary for lifelong learning. Continuous training of future staff requires openness in terms of the methods used. The SoMoveED project, which will be presented later in this article, is an example of the use of approaches more often found in non-formal education and informal learning.

The goals and assumptions of the SoMoveED project

The SoMoveEd project responds to identified trends, problems, and needs related to contemporary social life and academic education. The aim was to bridge the gap between the universities participating in the project and to influence other educational institutions.

The ways of working with students at the individual universities participating in this project are very diverse. In many institutions, however, the traditional, passive form of information transfer, in which the teacher is the sender and the student is the receiver, still dominates. Classes conducted traditionally were often perceived by students as:

1. outdated in content delivery;
2. inadequate to the changing needs of students and the labor market;
3. unattractive for transmission.

The objective of the SoMoveED project was to develop, implement, and disseminate an innovation in the form of mobile social education in higher education. Its feature is the organization of the teaching process in motion, outside the university walls, and with stakeholders from outside the academic environment (citizens, representatives of institutions and organizations, activists, people at risk of marginalization, guides to specific contexts and social spaces).

This model combines three essential features of the educational process: (1) mobility; (2) participation; (3) inclusion. The characteristics listed refer to the content and form of the designed teaching tools and classes. Based on the pilot classes, the project partners believe that the organization of teaching classes in motion, with the active participation of students and other people, promotes better preparation for social life, including the role of an active citizen. Thanks to the introduction of the mobile social education model, the didactic offer at the universities participating in the project is (a)

more up-to-date compared to the traditional model, (b) more adequate to the needs, and (c) more attractive for class participants. The model consists of three modules:

1. exploratory (research) walks;
2. study visits;
3. educational games on the move.

The target groups of the project were (a) mainly students, for whom changes in the scope of curricula and didactic methods were introduced; (b) academics and teachers in general, because they have a significant influence on the shape of the classes; (c) future employers of social and humanities graduates were also an indirect target group.

The essential features of the mobile education model:

1. The model attempts to respond to the continuity of content in a traditional educational model associated with rapidly changing social life, with which program changes cannot keep up. This model involves, among other things, joint field activities and allows attention to be focused on new phenomena and problems that are directly noticed (e.g., changes in space related to global warming, spatial manifestations of divisions and social inequalities, social behavior, and relations in public spaces). The emphasis is on experiencing (seeing, listening, speaking, feeling) and then on the knowledge that can be generated, depending on the needs, before or after the mobile classes, so that you can already relate to these experiences.
2. The model described also attempts to respond to the growing needs of students who want to acquire new skills and competencies, including communication and organizational skills. The traditional model encloses students within the university walls, limiting their activity and subjectivity. The mobile model provides more significant training and independence for class participants who will act as organizers, experts, guides, players, and partners for external stakeholders. Reflexivity, criticality, and autonomy are also needed from the point of view of the labor market.
3. The mobile model increases the attractiveness of the learning forms, not only because of the active role of the students but also because of the participation of external stakeholders (experts, employers, activists, people at risk of marginalization) in joint activities).

Eleven partners are involved in the project. Eight are universities, two are non-governmental organizations, and one is an educational company.

The project partners come from different European countries, as shown in the map below.



Figure 1. A simplified map showing the countries of origin of the SoMoveED project partners.

Source: Noemi Napierała, map's author.

The activities carried out as part of the project

The SoMoveED project was a complex undertaking carried out by 11 partners representing social sciences, humanities and other related fields. The SoMoveED project included the following activities.

1. Researching mobile methods.
2. Exchange of good practices in the field of mobile social education.
3. Conducting pilot classes evaluated by the participants.
4. Preparation of an instructional video.
5. Development of a student handbook.
6. Developing a guide for academic teachers (teacher's toolkit).
7. Developing the MOOC training course on the education on the move.
8. Modifying the curricula of the partner universities by adding mobile methods.
9. Conducting partner meetings and disseminating the results.

The figure below shows the outputs of the project.

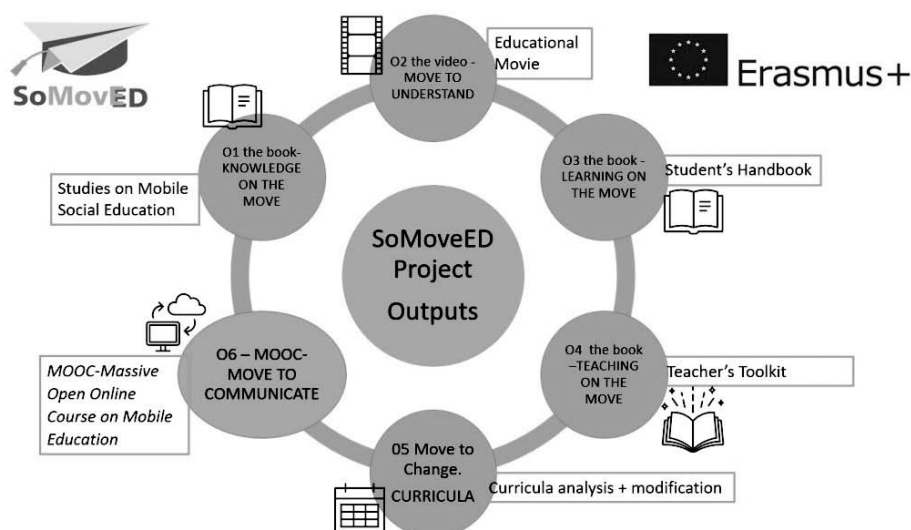


Figure 2. A diagram showing the types of outputs in the SoMoveED project and their interrelationships.

Source: Author's own work.

We have prepared three publications based on previous experience and knowledge, enriched with new skills and knowledge based on the exchange of good practices. Three books have been published and are available in open access.

1. “*Knowledge on the Move. Studies on Mobile Social Education*” – a collection of jointly created scientific texts (theoretical, methodological, empirical) on mobile, participatory, and inclusive methods and their application in academic didactics. Studies provide a common intellectual basis for project partners, institutions, and people using mobile methods (Roy et. al. 2023).
2. “*Learning on the Move. Social Education Handbook for Students*” – contains descriptions of good practices in applying innovative educational tools in the social and humanities education field. The handbook also shows how students can use these methods in future professional practice (Bazuń, Kwiatkowski 2023a).
3. “*Teaching on the Move. Social Education Toolkit for Teachers*” – contains tips on using such methods as walks, study visits, and educational games by teachers (Bazuń, Kwiatkowski 2023b).

In addition to the publication of books, we worked together on three other outputs². All results are interrelated. For example, experimental classes were often filmed, and parts later became elements of an instructional film. On the other hand, we use the material contained in books and collected during experimental classes in MOOCs.

1. *Instructional video* – a short video containing tips on conducting classes using study visits, research walks, and educational field games.
2. *A new program content* - innovative social and humanistic education forms and tools.
3. *The Massive Open Online Course* on Education on the Move is for those who want to know how to conduct activities based on mobile methods.

Key action 2 of the Erasmus+ program is to support the development of partnerships in the higher education sector and to strengthen international cooperation of universities with other universities and stakeholders. Therefore, it is worth mentioning the different added values of the project. The implementation of the SoMoveED project has already brought many benefits, but we also expect long-term benefits. The most important benefits are listed below.

1. Development of a solid international cooperation network.
2. Incorporation and use of new curriculum content for selected academic subjects and mobile methods of social and humanistic education increased the attractiveness of studies for students and improved teachers' satisfaction.
3. Influencing partner institutions by adapting and implementing good practices in teaching practice has contributed to a better adjustment of classes to the needs of students and the labor market.

Why is SoMoveED innovative? Because such methods were rarely used at the partner universities. We did not change the entire teaching system at the partner universities. Instead, we complemented an already existing approach by adding mobile methods where it was reasonable and possible. The SoMoveED project complies with the following definition of innovation: “the process of introducing new elements into a culture through either discovery or imitation” (Schaefer 2012; Tearney, Lanford 2016). We have identified some essential benefits of innovation using mobile methods.

²Available at SoMoveED website <http://www.somoveed.is.uz.zgora.pl/>.

1. *New educational content* – Thanks to fieldwork, new educational content has a chance to appear somewhat naturally due to joint observations of behavior, relationships, and spatial manifestations of social phenomena. According to the findings of modern researchers, learning about social reality in motion brings important cognitive values (O’Neill, Perivolaris 2020; O’Mara 2019). Going outside, observing, and experiencing more sensitizes to certain phenomena. It also lasts longer in the memory than absorbing the same content from a publication or a lecture.
2. *New forms of academic education* – New forms of education in the form of research walks, study visits, and educational games on the move are used in educational practice, but in an incidental way. The SoMoveED project introduces these forms as intentional and interrelated, systematically used to achieve a specific effect by increasing public awareness, commitment, responsibility, and the potential for change among students and academic teachers. The introduction of these forms is primarily associated with the review and change of curricula at partner universities and their promotion at other universities.
3. *New roles of participants in the education process* – The use of mobile methods during classes allows for a much broader range of student activity and commitment. Joint educational activities assume that students are co-organizers, guides, experts, and collaborators. Participation involves collaboration with academic teachers and various external stakeholders. In the field, approaching a given topic in motion also flattens the hierarchy in the student-teacher relationship, making them more partners in the educational process.

The SoMoveED project was carried out by a very international team. Eleven partners from ten countries created an extraordinary mosaic of cultures, competencies and knowledge. What criteria were used to select the partners?

1. The first criterion was *diversity*. The aim was to build a network of entities with different experiences, competencies, and functioning in other contexts – to exchange experiences and knowledge and to create a synergy effect. The basis for this diversity was internationality and different levels of experience in using mobile methods.
2. The next criterion was *previous contact with the partners*. Previous positive experiences and personal connections with people associated

with institutions and organizations were important in the selection of partners.

3. An important criterion was the *level of interest and motivation of potential partners*. We assessed this on the basis of the type of contacts that accompanied the cooperation at the initial stage. We considered quick and substantive responses as a good indicator of future collaboration.
4. *The cross-sectoral origin of the partners* – The project involved (a) universities, (b) non-governmental organizations, (c) enterprises, and (d) very diverse stakeholders. Thanks to this, we had the opportunity to combine and exchange various types of potentials (experiences, knowledge), which responded to the need to develop the practical usefulness of education.



Figure 3. Students during an exploratory walk in Broniszów, a historical village in Poland, class run by Magdalena Pokrzyńska.
Source: Photo by Dorota Bazuń.

Conclusions

The SoMoveED project still requires in-depth evaluation studies, which are planned after its completion. However, we can already draw some conclusions about the use of mobile methods in higher education.

Firstly, there is no need to transform all classes into those that take place outside the university walls. However, it is worth doing at least one such course per semester. In addition to the effect of diversifying the didactic process, it gives a chance to change the relationship between the group members and the teacher. Secondly, despite appearances, mobile classes require excellent preparation and are very time-consuming for both teachers and students. It is not always possible to organize classes according to the schedule. More time is often needed to visit a place or an organization because the commute is not always short. But even if the distance is greater, this option is worth considering. Instead of taking one class, you can plan to accumulate them over two weeks. Thirdly, outdoor activities also require preparation for possible unforeseen circumstances due to the weather, the presence of bystanders, and various difficulties. Fourthly, when students actively participate in the preparation of classes and have a sense of influence on their course and shape, unobservable things begin to happen in the university class environment. The commitment and creativity of the students are often revealed, and even after the classes are over, they sometimes feel the need to contact the organization they have visited or the people they have met. From passive recipients of "knowledge", they more often become participants and creators, influencing social processes in a group or local community.

The mutual exchange of knowledge, information, and experience has led to an increase in the use of mobile methods by teachers who took part in the SoMoveED project, as shown by the evaluation study carried out during the project. The awareness of academic teachers about the potential and barriers of using educational methods on the move has also increased.

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