
"EVEN IF THEY CALL US CRAZY": A DE (DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION) EXPERIENCE BASED ON CLASSICAL LITERATURE TEXTS

Abstract

By means of this article I just want to share an experience on how to apply the global gaze (Education for Development, DE) to the daily routine of a Spanish Language and Literature class, based on an interdisciplinary project carried out together with the teachers of Mathematics and Biology of 3rd Grade ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education).

The project addressed the values of environmental care and global citizenship. The starting point for Language and Literature class was the topic of the "locus amoenus", the myth of the four ages in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and fragments of *Don Quixote of La Mancha*.

Key-words

Literature, interdisciplinary project, environment, global citizens.

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Once upon a time, three ESO teachers agreed to participate in an DE project. The project was called YPGS (Young People on the Global Stage), better known among us as Global Cities; the three teachers were Isa (Biology), Ana Vanesa (Maths) and Raquel (Spanish Language and Literature). The question was how to deal with DE combining so different subjects, and, even more, without very well knowing what this "Development Education" was.

One of the first times I heard the concept was during a training on learning by means of projects. The speaker mentioned Latin as an example of tedious subject... Whoever, like me, enjoyed Catullus' poems or Martial's epigrams, will understand the indignation I felt at the moment. This acted as a spur: my challenge would be to work on an DE project using classical literature texts as motivating elements.

And so we got hooked on Global Cities. One of the central themes of the project is to delve in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and we chose to concentrate on MDG7 (To ensure environmental sustainability). From then on, it all began to fall into place. To speak about a sustainable world that enables the development of human beings in harmony with the natural environment, a person of classical background only needs two words: "LOCUS AMOENUS".

Another goal of the project is to encourage our student's global responsibility, in other words, to awaken their interest in being global citizens. We understand that a global citizen is somebody who, aware that the natural and social environment can be bettered, decides to do as much or as little as he is capable of, convinced that improving what is nearby will have global repercussions. A path to gradually reaching an utopia. The first step would be to observe and analyze immediate reality with a global gaze. We wanted to stimulate active thinking, to explore different solutions for concrete problems noticed at school pertaining to the use of resources. We wanted our pupils to discover that there are different (and better) methods of development, and so to learn to prioritize when making use of their own resources and those of the immediate environment (considering how it affects other levels)...

Finally, we wanted our students to appreciate how their actions transform reality, from the immediate (Primary schoolmates) to other spheres.

Like so many quixotes, fairly reckless but with clear principles, we started this interdisciplinary project with 3rd Grade ESO students. It was born without a name, but, after all the experiences shared during its development, the students themselves baptized it: "EVEN IF THEY CALL US CRAZY" during the closure session.

As an initial approach, we established general goals, on which we worked transversally, and other specific goals related to the unique contents of each of the subjects involved. It was not about creating new teaching units, but about adapting the syllabus' lessons,

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integrating new facets and skills (rethinking the teaching units from a global perspective).

As for the general goals, we started from a very ample notion of sustainability: the adequate use of the available resources to support development. Our concrete personal motivation arose from observing that our students' families suffer a widespread sustainability problem: they spend their scant resources on items that are not basic necessities (for instance, they buy factory-baked goods for the break, instead of preparing a sandwich or a piece of fruit, which would be healthier and cheaper). With the project, we expected our students to become conscious of these paradoxes and to consider a more sustainable way of life at school, so that they could expand these new habits to other contexts (family, neighbourhood...).

These were the general goals of the project:

1. To deepen the knowledge of and reflect upon MDG7.
2. To understand the concepts of "resource" and "sustainability" in a wide sense.
3. To promote attitudes and habits that support sustainable development.
4. To understand the concept of "global citizen" and the matching attitudes, and to begin to act as a global citizen in the immediate surroundings.
5. To observe and analyze the nearby reality with a global gaze.
6. To apply critical and creative thought for outlining different solutions to specific problems.
7. To carry out actions that bring about small local changes (conceive, plan, carry out, evaluate), and so contribute to transform reality from the immediate (in this case, school) to other spheres.
8. To evaluate situations and take group decisions.
9. To identify and apply our capacities (personal resources).

The project's specific Language and Literature goals were:

1. To study the theme of the "locus amoenus" and the Golden Age: Recognition of the wellbeing ideals of the Classic world (Virgil's *Bucolics*, Horace's *Odes* and the "Myth of the Four Ages" in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), retaken in Medieval literature (Gonzalo de Berceo) and the literature of the Spanish Golden Age (Garcilaso de la Vega, Fray Luis de León, *Don Quixote of La Mancha*).
2. To reflect upon literature texts of different periods: development of critical thought so as to identify insights still valid nowadays.
3. To develop oral and written expression, adapting the text's structure and expression to the content, the addressee and the communication intention (realize, encourage, draw conclusions...).

In the Literature syllabus of 3rd Grade ESO, there are several items that can serve as starting point for reflecting on the human being's relationship with his natural

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environment. The theme of the "locus amoenus"², to begin with. We presented this theme working on Gonzalo de Berceo's allegorical introduction to *The Miracles of Our Lady*. In this first contact with the topic, we did not yet refer to environmental or sustainability questions, but encouraged considering the fact that this Medieval writer should choose a natural space as site for an allegory of the divinity (Mary, in this case).

Later on, when introducing Renaissance literature and the revival of the Greek and Latin world, we spoke about Virgil's *Bucolics* and his idealization of rural life, as well as about the use 16th century poets made of the classic topic we got to know with Gonzalo de Berceo. We approached the "locus amoenus" from Garcilaso's love poetry (eclogues) and Friar Luis of

León's religious lyric ("Ode to the Retired Life"). Regarding the project, the task of Literature class was simply to get the students to clearly understand the concept of "locus amoenus" and to imagine it as the most delightful space to be, a place where man can rest, develop and be happy in harmony with nature. Once we rest assured that the concept was clear, Biology threw the next hook: the teacher asked the students to bring a picture of their personal "locus amoenus". They brought a great diversity of images, of places they knew or places they would like to visit, from exotic tropical landscapes to their village's river. And so, starting from the understanding of a classical concept and its echoes through one's one life, Biology's lessons about the relationship of the human being with his environment, where the environmental problems that can destroy natural spaces and the need to preserve the resources were addressed, became much more significant.

Another classic text we worked upon as an example of Latin influence in the Renaissance, was the myth of the Four Ages, included in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. We recognized the Golden Age world as a "locus amoenus", but, on this occasion, we focused on the attitudes of the human beings described in this myth, and we compared them to the attitudes suitable for a global citizen (according to R. Falk). Basing on this account, we thought about the symbolic meaning of each of the ages (Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age) and about the relation between the environmental and the human degradation. The students concluded that the most sustainable would not be the Golden, but the Silver Age, in spite of what may seem at the beginning. For them, the Golden Age was not sustainable because, although man lived in harmony with nature, he only consumed resources and did not feel responsible for his influence on the environment. In the Silver Age, however, people used their intelligence for growing crops or raising cattle, that is to say, they contributed to their own development. This ideas greatly surprised me, for they showed that the group had begun to be aware that nature is not only a supply of resources we can carelessly consume, but a habitat we must safeguard applying all our capacities.

² Literary topic of classical origin, that describes an ideal natural space (grass, flowers, shadow trees and a creek or fountain), whose calm turns it into the perfect scenario for romantic scenes, philosophical meditations or prayers.

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Simultaneously, in Maths, in the Statistics unit, the students collected data from the whole school on the use of resources (water, light, energy and paper) and waste management. During breaks, they observed and noted down which classes turned off the light when going out, which ones left the door closed, avoiding in this way a loss of warmth, how they separated the waste, and so on. After the data collection, they applied statistical analysis to detect the school's main environmental problems. While analyzing their conclusions, they considered how to contribute to the improvement of the given situation, and they decided to begin an awareness campaign to promote attitudes and habits that would favour sustainable development, a responsible use of resources and an adequate waste management. This campaign included posters adapted to different ages, used paper separation boxes for each class (paper that could be used again and paper for recycling) and informative talks to the Primary education pupils.

With this first activity, the students exercised the observation and critical analysis of reality, and tested their capacity for proposing and accomplishing actions of improvement of their immediate surroundings. In this way, they became aware of their capabilities for influencing their environment by means of actions and words (adapting verbal and iconic language to different ages and orally communicating their intentions and goals to other classes).

After this campaign, they repeated the data collection, to make a comparative study and check if the habits of their schoolmates had changed. Their conclusions led them to plan a second action: a general communiqué to the whole school.

This communiqué was based on the myth of the Four Ages, which we had studied in Literature class. The students presented their thoughts on how, in the Golden Age, the human being was good and lived in the best of all conceivable worlds, but he did not do anything to preserve or replenish the resources he consumed, until finally Earth was drained. Starting from this consideration, and from our privileged situation as citizens of a developed country, they suggested the need to participate in the improvement of the space we live in by means of simple daily gestures.

MDG7 seeks a sustainable world, the dream of a world free from pollution and injustices... For many, it is an instance of "utopia", for us, the desire of returning to the Golden Age of Don Quixote. And this was the next classical text we used to consider individual responsibility in the improvement of the environment. Starting from the speech of the Golden Age, in chapter XI of the first part of *Don Quixote of La Mancha*, we thought about how the Utopian attitude of this character and his awareness of global problems are still valid nowadays. Don Quixote is conscious of some of his age's problems and wants to solve them, but his inefficiency is due to specific factors (without going into his questionable mental state): he is not efficient because he acts by himself; because he reacts to what he encounters, without a specific plan of action; because he interprets the world only from his own perspective, idealizing the past; and

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because in his surroundings he only sees the flaws and not the resources available for solving the problems he worries about.

All this learning was not confined to theory; in the context of the project, as a practical implementation, the students organized two more actions. In the first place, they encouraged waste separation by means of a campaign called "Sweets for Waste". As the use of garbage bins during the Primary education breaks had obtained the worst results in the campaigns they carried out, they decided to give sweets to students who adequately dumped their trash. They sealed all the courtyard's garbage bins, so that all children had to pass by the garbage cans they had prepared... The first day, it was a disaster, because they could not control the children, who leapt on them grabbing at the sweets. As beaten *quixotes*, we put a stop to the activity, but, unlike the hero of Cervantes, we stopped to analyze the situation. They decided to write a letter explaining what had happened, how they had felt about it, and what they needed. They themselves read it class by class, to make sure that everyone knew and understood our objectives. From then on, and with some organizational readjustments, the activity became a success. This experience turned out to be an excellent opportunity to deal with frustration management, assertive communication and the effective organization of team work.

Finally, thanks to the organizational capacity the group had acquired, the Directory Board put us in charge of preparing one of the activities of the school's celebrations: all students were to paint the wall of the pre-school courtyard. As our project had focussed on the sustainable use of resources, they asked us to take care of all the resources necessary for this activity: controlled use of paint, minimum water consumption, care of the brushes... Once again, despite the initial nervousness and the scope of the event, the members of the group proved that they had learned to organize themselves and to work as a team.

CONCLUSIONS

In words of the students themselves:

«After studying Ovid's Myth of the Four Ages and the Speech of the Golden Age of Don Quixote, we understood that when we live in a world full of resources, we have to take care of them. We also compared the features of a global citizen with Don Quixote's attitude when confronting the problems he found in his age, and so we understood that, when confronted with problems of the environment, we cannot stand still, we have to act. And, what is most important, we cannot act alone or improvise, we have to act as a network.

With this project we have learned lots of things from very different subjects, as Maths, Literature and Biology, like what it means to be a global citizen, that our planet could be a "locus amoenus" thanks to sustainable development, and that alert observation and

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statistical analysis are the first steps to detect problems, and then we can suggest solutions.

But we not only acquired academic learning, we also learned for life, for we have realized that we can improve our immediate surroundings by means of small gestures, and so contribute to the improvement of the planet. We have learned to identify our qualities, and the qualities of our schoolmates, and that these are also resources... We are learning to be more responsible, to take decisions about what we have to or want to do, to organize ourselves without hints of the teachers, we are learning to correct our errors and to keep trying, even if the results are small...»

In classical literature, different voices remind us of the need to live in harmony with nature, to become aware of the environmental and social problems of each historic context and of how they affect the human being. Classical texts of different periods help us to think about how our individual actions contribute to aggravate or to solve these problems. In this way, from the work on classical literature texts, the activities about environment or education for development can become more significant.

To change established behaviour patterns in the families and the neighbourhood is very difficult, but during this project we have seen how the students have learned that it is necessary to adequately manage resources and waste. We also valued their responsibility in carrying out specific actions that demonstrated and encouraged electricity, water and paper saving, waste separation to simplify recycling, etc. But resources are not only external: recognizing and valuing personal resources (own personal resources, resources of the schoolmates and as a group) is doubtlessly the great contribution, the main realization of this adventure, for, as they themselves declared in their presentation to other Madrid schools: «Little by little, we are turning into global citizens, contributing ideas to improve the world, from who we are and from where we are, **EVEN IF THEY CALL US CRAZY...**» ©