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RAISING CIVIC AWARENESS AND INVOLVEMENT THROUGH
URBAN REGENERATION: AT THE PLAYGROUNDS, MĂNĂȘTUR

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Abstract

Any scientific inquiry and didactic activity needs to have a positive impact on the target group in order to reach the desired objective, in this case, raising awareness in an academic community by excellent teaching. To do so, the activities that took place during an internal fellowship in Babeș-Bolyai University not only helped the participants understand the importance of the matters discussed, but also engaged them into the process of learning. To understand what impact the activities had on the participants, the questionnaire was an appropriate tool to measure it. Answers reflected what participants appreciated and did not during a specific field activity regarding urban regeneration initiatives in Mănăștur Neighbourhood, within Cluj-Napoca urban area. Moreover, the statistical data generated by the questionnaire showed participants' involvement degree. They considered that observing directly the way one urban space was organised and designed was one of the strengths of the activity, as well as the fact that they received all this new and specific information from those who were part of an urban regeneration project, involving the community. Last, but not least, being present on the field and having the possibility to see the results of the previous actions was relevant also for participants' professional training.

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Keywords: Learning results, assessment, field trip, urban development, improvement of university education.



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1. Introduction

In the last decade in Cluj-Napoca (Romania), we notice a shift of paradigm in how urban regeneration is taking shape. Before 2015, the Municipality hardly linked the projects of civil society to the urban infrastructure projects. After a protest on the Someșul Mic River, which is passing by the city centre, protest that was advocating against the extension with an extra lane of an important street, to the detriment of the green bank of the river, the authorities started to understand the local civic actors' importance. Authorities are now trying to integrate the bottom-up initiatives into their urban regeneration projects and local agenda, using different tools: debates, participatory budgeting, and integration of citizens' ideas in design theme. In other words, the top-down politics understood the political power of bottom-up projects arising from the citizens and new urban actors. A new force appeared in urban regeneration projects. As Harvey (2012) put it, "this 'something different' does not necessarily arise out of a conscious plan, but more simply out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their city lives" (p. 17).

Therefore, urban regeneration projects are much more effective and adapted if they are a result of joining forces both from top and bottom-up initiatives (Medeșan & Panait, 2012). But how can urban issues that are very appealing for the usual suspects (activists, urbanists, architects, geographers, socio-anthropologists), can become daily-life conversation for a larger part of the citizens? Since, urbanity is produced mainly where the population density is high (Wirth, 1938), civic education in universities can be an answer to bring together citizens and experts in order to create civic awareness.

Universities should change the way it educates the experts. Architect Till (2005) is proposing a new kind of expert: "Experts feel most comfortable when the object of their scrutiny is abstracted, because then their specialist knowledge can be applied without disturbance. However, this state of sharp but distanced focus is hard to reconcile with the reality of the spatial, social, world" (p. 29). The new expert should "know from within" (Shotter, 1993), should intervene in the real-world situation in order to understand and act upon it: "The architect should, in effect, be an expert citizen as well as citizen expert" (Till, 2005, p. 30).

Epistemologist Haraway (1988) discusses the need for a "perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, [...], knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination" (p. 585). In urban space production, this means abandoning the bird's eye view of the expert and taking into consideration the users' experience.

"La Terenuri" ["At the Playgrounds"] is a participatory project localised in Mănăștur Neighbourhood in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The project involves inhabitants next to "At the Playgrounds" area in cultural events, workshops, activism, to create a critical mass of users who can change its perception from a marginalised residual space into a potential park and meeting space, and to create it together (Medeșan, 2016). This project offers to the participants (the experts), at the activities that took place during an internal fellowship in Babeș-Bolyai University, the possibility to observe and to intervene upon a specific urban situation.

Organising a visit to one of the urban regeneration activities, where the local community was involved, took into account research on educational strategies (Cuc, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014b; Jucan, 2015), on students' learning styles (Chiș & Grec, 2017), on learning through cooperation (Chiș, Magdaș, Dulamă, & Moldován, 2019), on streamlining didactic communication (Cuc, 2013a, 2014a, 2014b; Muste,

2016), and on assessment (Jucan & Orian, 2013). Moreover, we aimed at developing the participants' competences to explore, present and represent the urban space (Ursu, Dulamă, & Chiş, 2019), while considering the role of universities in promoting the academia's personal development (Stan, 2014; Manea, 2015) and enhancing thus academic success (Cuc, 2019; Muste, 2014). However, previous studies have shown that learning activities in nature are better perceived than those in classroom by both beneficiaries of the educational process and teachers (Deac, Ilovan, Chiş, & Dulamă, 2019; Dulamă, Ilovan, & Magdaş, 2017; Dulamă, Ilovan, Bagoly-Simó, & Magdaş, 2019; Magdaş, Buzilă, Dulamă, Ilovan, & Buzilă, 2017; Magdaş, Dulamă, Ilovan, & Crişan, 2018). Therefore, such activities should eventually be part of the educational institutions' identity, marketing strategy and practice (Manea, 2015; Precup & Chiş, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

The low awareness and low civic involvement of the students in the Faculty of Geography, of Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, were the main problems this research answers to. In addition, we also considered the hypothesis that the above-mentioned issues could be characteristic of the academia of this university, in its entirety.

3. Research Questions

Our research questions are related to measuring the impact of the proposed field trip activities within a fellowship project, held by Associate Professor Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Ph.D., and dealing with excellence teaching considering societal issues and participants' living environment. In this context, we focused on the following questions: Which are the features of such case study-based activities in the field? Which are those features leading to improving the learning process?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to assess such an educational activity and identify which of its features lead to learning improvement.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Data collecting and processing

We collected the data through the observation method during the visit to the "Dacia" Cinema Hall, along the Calvaria Creek and "At the Playgrounds". After the fieldwork, the participants completed a Google Drive questionnaire, available online. We gathered information about the participants (age, occupation, their residence area) and their findings, opinions and proposals on urban regeneration for several places in the Mănăştur Neighbourhood, of Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

5.2. Participants

During the field trip organised "At the Playgrounds", 32 people (26 Bachelor, M.Sc. and Ph.D. students and six professors and researchers) attended. The questionnaire was filled in by 27 people (85.2%

under the age of 30, one person aged between 31-40 years old, two people in the 41-50 years old range and one over 50). Four respondents are in the category of university teaching staff (one lecturer, two associate professors, one professor), 16 are Bachelor's degree students, five M.Sc. level students, two Ph.D. students. Out of the respondents, 55.6% come from an urban area and 44.4% from a rural one.

5.3. Research material

It was made up of the observations conducted during the visit to the geographic space ("Dacia" Cinema Hall, the Calvaria Valley, and "At the Playgrounds") and of the participants' activity (questions, answers, presentations, explanations). We analysed the data collected with the questionnaire, more precisely about the participants and about several aspects related to this case of urban regeneration.

6. Findings

6.1. The motivation to participate in the field trip

In the top of the participants' preferences or motivations, the first place, with a share of 55.6%, belonged to the opportunity to obtain directly information about a case of urban regeneration in Cluj-Napoca, from people involved in this process. Participants were also motivated by the desire to find new ideas (51.9%), by getting to learn about a less known or an unknown place in Cluj-Napoca (44.4%), or a regenerated urban landscape (40.7%).

6.2. Clarity of presenting the information

The clearest presentation (mean value - 4.6) was the one regarding the urban landscaping manner in the Mănăştur Neighbourhood, through the proactive and voluntary involvement of artists and landscapers from Cluj-Napoca (Table 1). On the second place (m - 4.3), there are other three presentations: how to involve the neighbourhood community and the City Hall in the renovation of the "Dacia" Cinema and the use of this urban space; how to arrange and make rural use of the eastern slope of the Calvaria Valley (vegetable gardens, orchards, tools sheds and agricultural products), with adaptations to the urban environment (garages, illegal connection to electricity) and the presentation, as a case study, the "At the Playgrounds" area with land ownership issues, using it according to the PUZ (Zonal Urbanistic Plan), the use of space by locals, and short-term uncertain solutions. The last places in the presentation quality hierarchy (m - 4.2) is the presentation of the history, description and observation of Calvaria Creek as a space for the relaxation of the inhabitants and the history of the temporary use and of the activities in the space "At the Playgrounds".

Table 01. Clarity of information presentation

Categories of presented information	Mean
Presentation of urban landscaping means	4.6
Presentation of the neighbourhood community's involvement and of the City Hall in the renovation of the "Dacia" Cinema and the use of this urban space	4.3
Presentation of rural landscaping and urbanisation, with adaptations to the urban environment of the Calvaria Valley eastern slope	4.3
Presentation as a case study of the space "At the Playgrounds"	4.3
Presentation of the history, description and observation of the Calvaria Creek	4.2

Presentation of the history, of the temporary use means and of the activities carried out in the space named “At the Playgrounds”	4.2
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6.3. Relevance of information for the professional development

All the information obtained during the field trip was assessed as important and very important for the participants (an average above 3.9) (Table 2). The most relevant information for their professional development was the evaluation of the urban landscaping in the Mănăştur Neighbourhood by artists and landscapers from Cluj-Napoca (m - 4.3), the involvement of the neighbourhood community and the City Hall in the renovation of the “Dacia” Cinema and the use of this urban area (m - 4), the rural development and use of the eastern slope of the Calvaria Valley (m - 4) and the presentation as case study of “At the Playgrounds” space (m - 4). The smallest weighted average of 3.9 is for presenting the history, description and observation of the Calvaria Creek as a space for locals’ relaxation, and also history of the temporary use and of the activities in the area called “At the Playgrounds”. The important skills represented by critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, negotiation and management help participants become autonomous thinkers as they move from surface issues to problem areas of thinking.

Table 02. Relevance of information for professional development

Categories of information	Mean
Urban landscaping	4.3
Involving the neighbourhood community and the City Hall in renovating the “Dacia” Cinema and using this urban space	4
Way of planning and using the countryside with urban adaptations, of the eastern slope of the Calvaria Valley	4
Case study, the space “At the Playgrounds”	4
The history, description and observation of the Calvaria Creek	3.9
History of the temporary use and of the activities in the area called “At the Playgrounds”	3.9

6.4. Activity strengths

Participants were asked to express their opinion on the strengths of the learning activity unfolded during the field trip. 81.5% of the participants considered as being the most valuable from a learning outlook the fact that the information on the process of urban regeneration carried out on “At the Playgrounds” was provided by a person who participated directly in this process. Half (51.9%) of the participants considered as important for the learning the fact that they received new information, but fewer of them appreciated the value of this information (18.5%). Fewer participants considered as strong points the study and the direct observation of the way of planning the urban space “At the Playgrounds” (40.7%) and the analysis in the field of the problems that existed in the design of this place (37%), probably because the time allotted to these activities was insufficient. The fact that the interaction with specialists from different domains, where there are concerns for spatial planning and urban regeneration, obtained a lower score (33.3%), as well as asking questions to the people involved in the urban regeneration of a Cluj-Napoca area (11.1 %) was explained by focusing the field activity more on presentation and less on conversation and interaction.

6.5. Activity weaknesses

Taking into account the fact that the activity was centred on the presentation and explanation coming from the person involved in the urban regeneration process, 51.9% of the participants considered as weakness of the activity the low interactivity degree among participants, 22.2% of them the fact that during the activity a higher percentage was held by the time they were in the position / role of the recipients / audiences compared to the moment when they asked questions, expressed opinions or made suggestions. The fact that little time resources were allotted for this activity was considered a weak point by 37% of the participants, and not knowing the people from the group by 18.5% of them.

6.6. Proposals for officially solving the problem

Starting from the premise that the participants were aware of the issues related to this place, we asked them to express their opinion on the actions the City Hall should take to solve the problem of space fragmentation “At the Playgrounds”. Some participants believe that the situation should be regulated from a legislative and legal point of view; others consider that the City Hall (four opinions), at the market price (an opinion), could solve the problems by associating the owners or by purchasing the land. The participants believe it is necessary for the City Hall to discuss with the nearby residents (two opinions) and reach an agreement with all the owners. The City Hall is perceived as a power factor that should invest in this project, access more funds, or which can identify individuals or companies willing to bear these costs (an opinion). Some participants consider as a solution dealing with it as a development project, and others suggest the landscaping as a park (four views), as a green space of urban type park (one), as a picnic area, or summer theatre (one). One participant believes that it is necessary to consider much more the suggestions of people qualified to solve these problems.

6.7. Proposals for involving the local residents

During the fieldwork, we realised that a typical problem for the urban environment with blocks of flats is the mentality and poor involvement of the inhabitants in the arrangement of the space near the buildings because it has the status of common property. A number of proposals relate to discussions with citizens (including “monthly sessions” to inform them “about the changes to be made, the urban regeneration process and its advantages over the inhabitants”, to ask them for proposals for the use of space. A participant considers that “the interest of the inhabitants in capitalising as a functional green space” could be increased by “participating in such actions”. Another participant proposes “community involvement in urban sector regeneration works / projects”. Other participants propose organising “constant events”, various leisure activities. Other participants consider it appropriate to impose rules or to offer “small symbolic rewards to make them feel closer to that space”. Another participant proposes “the inhabitants of each block should have a surface to arrange (planting trees or fruit trees, maintenance of the lawn)”.

6.8. Proposals from the owner’s perspective

Another challenge for the participants was to approach the problem and to plan the space from the owner’s perspective of “At the Playgrounds” space. The proposals are aimed at placing furniture (benches, barbecues, solar panels for public lighting, alleys, a mobile stage for festivals), building a summer theatre, landscaping for various uses (sports ground, football field, picnic area, children’s playground, dog walk place).

Other participants claim they would turn the space “into a green oasis where you can relax” in a recreation area, park or green space where residents can have a quiet moment being a bit more isolated, a diversified park offer, perhaps similar to the one in the Central Park, but also unique. A participant believes that it would be beneficial to create a “sports base similar to the one in Gheorgheni”. Other participants would organise cultural events, and sports competitions. One participant states that he or she would take into account the topography and would set up several waterfalls on the Calvaria Valley, “creating a spectacular landscape capitalising the landforms and vegetation, but also a place not only to see something at, but also to do various activities” (i.e. cultural, sportive). A participant would “leave everything to an architect’s decision”.

6.9. Proposals for designing the space with gardens

Regarding the design of the area situated on the slope of the Calvaria Valley, now occupied by vegetable gardens, almost half of the respondents would keep the current land use (for “urban permaculture”), some would even build greenhouses and about half of them propose setting up a similar arrangement as the one “At the Playgrounds”: a green space / park with benches and trees destined for walks, sports, and recreation. A participant states that he or she would destroy the vegetable gardens and sell this space to the City Hall, which would probably have as effect occupying the space with buildings for residential area.

6.10. Using the acquired information

More than half of the participants (51.9%) believe they will use the information they have acquired to cooperate in joint projects with the other participants. The second place (40.7%) is held by the valorisation of the information through participating at conferences, workshops and through maintaining the connection with the urban regeneration initiatives. 11.1% of the respondents claim to capitalise on the knowledge gained along the cooperation in joint publications, and 3.7% of them would use them for personal purposes.

The participants’ views recorded in the study that followed the field application were very interesting and constructive at the same time. Most of them proposed valuable solutions for the terrain called “At the Playgrounds” in the Mănăştur Neighbourhood, or for the Calvaria Creek. The Cluj-Napoca City Hall has already begun the activities for the urban planning of the studied area, and its transformation into a complex sports and leisure base, following the model of the Sports Base in the Gheorgheni Neighbourhood. The cost of this urban investment will amount to about 1.5 million euros. The main beneficiaries of this project will be the residents of the neighbourhood, but also the entire city’s inhabitants.

7. Conclusion

Involving the people who were actually a part of the urban regeneration project was perceived as a big strength and this provided a boost for this research and educational project. This aspect could overcome the main weakness of the didactic activity, which was the low interactivity degree among participants. However, allotting more time for future similar activities could be a solution.

Considering participants’ feedback, such a field trip activity, followed by a questionnaire survey that triggers attention to educational or research aspects that could have been missed, is a first step not only in raising awareness about urban development processes, but in creating a community of practice.

In addition, taking into account that a Humboldtian university system is based on forming the competences and ensuring the autonomy of the participants to the educational process, our proposed activities were based on learning and formative assessment (participation and critical thinking). These included specialty knowledge (hard skills ensuring progress and innovation in Science) and opinions about the activities (soft skills that lead to social change).

Moreover, a focus shift in quality teaching supposes changing the participants' role: from audience to involved and committed participants. At the same time, raising their awareness and civic involvement is possible if they are provided with an environment where they are in direct contact with real situations and realistic tasks. This could be a challenge for future research to tackle. Nevertheless, we consider that a first step was realised for the academia and especially for the university students, as our activities enabled them to start forming habits of heart, not only of the mind.

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