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Identity, culture, and pedagogical thinking in first semester courses at the Slagelse Institute of Social Education

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The direct teaching of democracy and citizenship in Europe is only a part of a programme. In this paper we describe how themes in our course programmes contribute to teaching our students about being a both a member and a citizen of the European community.

The Social Educator programme in Denmark has no mandatory curriculum, only subject themes. The rules regulating the courses broadly describe the requirements of each subject theme, and require the Social Education Institutes to involve their students in the process of teaching, but within these broad regulations set by the State, the Institutes are free to develop their study programs individually. Even within a relatively small school such as Slagelse, it is possible to teach courses which vary in form and content. The following is our approach.

Identity and culture

The examples are gathered from the students' first semester, primarily from the first eight weeks. During this period the teaching program is thematically organised. Examples are also taken from the Pedagogy course, which is compulsory in the second semester. The students follow this course after they return from twelve weeks of practical training.

The students' first assignment is a project on finding their roots and on describing their background and upbringing. The assignment is first and foremost about identity - "Who am I, and what values do I bring to this programme?" Many students perceive this as a curious task because they expect to be fed material which will teach them to be social educators. Our purpose is to emphasise that the importance of seeing each person as a unique individual, and that this perspective is an example of a European project which developed during the North Italian Renaissance and which contains both elitist and humanitarian, collective enlightenment that impacts on present-day European social education.

We do not introduce all this material to the students at first: we focus on their ability to decipher the term 'culture'. It is not only a term describing elitist cultural expressions, but also a term indicating ways of life and cultural social settings. After the students have described themselves, they listen to each other's descriptions. The exercise is aimed at making them transcend their private culture, and training them in generalising and differentiating culture. We believe that such an exercise trains them to break down barriers when they encounter a foreign culture and thus increases their level of tolerance. Later, during their practical training, we ask them to submit a journalistic article about the institution they worked in. They are asked to write about the culture and the values that they believe govern the institution, and which they recognise.

After the end of the course and the submission of the completed projects, members of the various institutions are invited to our Institute to a small conference hosted by the students.

Pedagogy

The modern age in Europe (and the USA)

When the students return to the Institute after their 12-week practical training they are involved in more subject-orientated courses. A dominant theme is that of 'the modern.' We seek to explain and describe the term as it has developed historically in the last 200 years in both Europe and the United States.

We emphasise how the industrial revolution has its starting point in England and then spread throughout Europe, driven by the steam engine and capitalism, and how the Sciences gradually replaced the religious community, establishing democratic thinking throughout Europe. The change in the perception of 'work' is emphasised - the ways in which work becomes synonymous with identity, and the individual is valued based only on her/his work status.

We problematise the term 'the post-modern society' towards the end of the course, engaging in a discussion about paradigm changes in relation to work, processes of learning and scientific truth. We ask what are the implications for social education if what is being valued changes from material things to intangibles such as knowledge, services, information and dreams? What qualifications will be in demand, and what types of processes of formation are needed?

We believe our teaching is 'European'. We believe that the discussions we engage in with our students should take place in all institutions of higher education in Europe. Our own modest contribution may be a special emphasis on anti-authoritarian perceptions and a faith that not only the elite, but also the people of Europe, can contribute to the new Europe. This faith is what we debate with our future citizens of Europe, our students.