

## **Reflecting on the Experience of Summer School in Maribor**

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Summer schools, seminars and other educational and intellectual events very often represent rewarding experiences for the participants. In our case, mingling and interacting with colleagues and students of heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, reflecting on different learning and teaching methodologies applied in class, engaging in lively debates about the best and most effective teaching and learning practices of cultural and literature curricula, as well as learning to appreciate differences in learning and teaching, were among the most significant benefits of the SEEPALS summer school held in Maribor.

From a teacher's perspective, the interaction and collaboration I had with my colleagues as well as students in the SEEPALS summer school, was of an immense importance to my teaching career. As for the teaching, this summer school represented my very first genuine occurrence of teaching such a wide range of culturally diverse students, and the feedback that I received in class and afterwards was quite a positive surprise to me. This is the reason why. Prior to my teaching class, while communicating with my colleagues and students, a prevailing dose of cultural isolation among students was felt. The sitting in the lecture hall, the breaks and free times, the time they spent together, were very clearly and distinctly revealing a lack of cultural tolerance and cooperation among students. This issue represented a major drawback and challenge for my class, so measures had to be taken to eliminate it. Trying to tackle different cultural aspects, by means of Proverbs and Folk sayings, I needed culturally heterogeneous groups that would later on reflect on their own cultural traits. Grouping them by a rather lighthearted approach worked perfectly well, causing students' mood to change drastically, for the better of course. But this was just the start. The intensely interactive approach (games, role cards, matching exercises) used in class, triggered a lively discussion and debate on different cultural traits, which, by the end of the session, led the students to an overall appreciation of the cultural diversity across the region. By this time, the aim and objective of the lesson was fulfilled, and as I was proudly waving goodbye to them, they were leaving the hall in harmony, high spirits and camaraderie.

Another valuable aspect of this summer school was the observation of our colleagues' teaching techniques and approaches in class, and our reflection upon it. Even though we were limited to two observations only because of our 3-day stay, still the benefit was considerable. What I found really inspiring during these observations was the creative aspect of teachers tackling topics and ideas, and the means of indulging the students in it. I must admit that not all of them proved to be effective and useful, but nevertheless they fostered a very in-depth academic discussion among us teachers, regarding the most effective teaching and learning tools and practices. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that we all had something to learn from one another; every comment or suggestion made by our colleagues was scrutinized, and a good lesson learned from it.

Having intellectual discussions with colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds is another important matter that I appreciated a lot in this program. Each of us came to this summer school with a certain cultural baggage of beliefs about teaching literature and culture, but here we learned the lesson that different people and cultures react differently to the same input, and finding universal means of effective teaching and learning literature and culture represents quite a challenge for the teachers involved in the teaching of this field of study. But, with the help of this intellectual exchange school, we were given a very unique environment for testing our methods and approaches, and at the same time got feedback from students and colleagues of various cultural backgrounds, which was of vast importance to us.

I would end this reflection by stating that the overall benefits of this summer school are manifold. First of all, this event represented a solid ground for detecting the best teaching and learning practices while providing an opportunity for teachers to enrich our knowledge by selecting these practices and implementing them in our future teaching careers. Secondly, we learned to critically observe our teaching and intervene whenever possible, and moreover, we learned to respect and appreciate our colleagues' comments and suggestions for the purpose of improving and modernizing our existing literature and cultural curricula. Furthermore, we together with the students learned to appreciate each other's cultures and habits, and live in harmony by sharing our values and morals.

At the end, I would close this reflection by applauding the organizers, whose work, support and dedication made our stay a wonderful experience, and opened new horizons for teaching literature and culture in our future careers.