

Museum School: An Introduction to Critical Thinking on Multiculturalism, 2021

Project Review

“Museum School: An Introduction to Critical Thinking on Multiculturalism” is the first project of the Museum School Association. It was based on the graduation thesis “Museum as a Place of Formal Education for Primary and Secondary School: An Example of High School Sociology Teaching at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb” by the co-author of this presentation. As a part of the graduation thesis, we examined which teaching methods and techniques were best suited for this type of teaching at the museum and then we used the obtained results in the organisation of classes within the project “Museum School”. The project is being implemented through the support provided by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights – Croatia. On this occasion we would like to thank Youth Initiative for Human Rights - Croatia (YICR) and especially Andrea Kovač for leadership, assistance and support that is invaluable to us.

The objective of this project is to contribute to solving two current problems. Firstly, there is the issue of a lack of museum education activities directly related to prescribed teaching content and the expected learning outcomes, especially when it comes to secondary education. Secondly there is the issue of the perception and prejudice of the public concerning the refugees, immigrants, asylees and asylum seekers. There is a growing phenomenon of spreading moral panic where immigrants tend to be presented as a security issue. When conceptualising this problem, the authors often talk about the combined perception of the economic-cultural threat, i.e. a possible conflict over different resources between immigrants and the domestic population and the idea that, due to greater demographic changes, traditional social values could be threatened (Halperin, Canetti-Nisim and Pedahzur 2007 according to Sabalić 2017).

In the context of the economic crisis caused by covid-19 pandemic, this problem of perception becomes even more alarming primarily due to the fact that the factors that greatly influence the degree of the perceived threat are precisely economic conditions, since the members of the dominant group believe that they are exclusively entitled to some specific resources, which leads to intolerant reactions if they believe that they have been deprived of this right (Čačić-Kumpes, Gregurović and Kumpes 2012).

In order to contribute to solving these problems, we have designed a sociology class addressing the issue of culture at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb (hereinafter EMZ) that would serve as an example of good practice and an incentive for others to prepare similar projects. We would also like to thank Željka Jelavić and Silvia Vrsalović for their assistance and support in the realisation of the project.

In view of the covid-19 pandemic, the realisation was envisaged in two options: a standard visit by students to the museum and an online version of teaching at the

museum. In both options, classes are designed to last 120 minutes and they consist of two parts. The first part includes guidance through the permanent exhibition of the Collection of Non-European Cultures with the purpose of revising the previously learned concepts in classroom teaching and upgrading the previously acquired knowledge, while the second part consists of a lecture by Prince Wale Soniyiki, a Nigerian asylum seeker who has lived in the Republic of Croatia for ten years. Through this activity, students have the opportunity to hear “first hand” information about the problems faced by immigrants, refugees, asylees and asylum seekers, as well as about the conditions they come from and their goals because it has been shown that this so-called intergroup contact (Čačić-Kumpes, Gregurović and Kumpes 2012) has a great influence on reducing prejudices. That happens because in this way “the others” become less unknown, abstract and frightening and it makes it possible for their voices to be heard and they are given the opportunity to tell their story, which promotes general intercultural understanding.

We managed to implement virtual sociology classes at EMZ at the end of March 2021 with students of the Bernardin Frankopan Gymnasium and Vocational School in Ogulin. Classes were conducted on Zoom and by using the “Share Screen” option we guided the students during a virtual stroll through the exhibition that EMZ has provided on its website (http://vrgt.novena.hr/etnografski_muzej_zagreb/). EMZ also provided photographs of the exhibits that were not clearly visible during the virtual stroll and we used them in a PowerPoint presentation to additionally highlight them. Guidance through the exhibition included the conversational method because it stimulates greater cognitive activity of students who, when faced with the exhibit, think, conclude and share their thoughts (Jurić 1979). We asked the students questions such as “Can you find an object in this section of the exhibition that indicates cultural diffusion?”¹, and in this way we revised sociological concepts in connection with culture and we also used these concepts in a new context, which is the first step in developing critical thinking (Chafee 1997). In addition, since a section of the permanent exhibition of the Collection of Non-European Cultures was collected in the time of colonialism, we emphasised the crimes committed by the Europeans and thus strived to raise the students’ awareness of the fact that prejudices and ethnocentric attitudes often have very serious consequences. In the second part of the class, we dealt with modern ethnocentrism through students’ listening to the lecture delivered by Prince Wale Soniyiki’s from Nigeria, striving to achieve educational outcomes such as the development of empathy, elimination of prejudices and ethnocentric attitudes, the development of awareness of civilisational and social problems and the development of democratic values such as equality, tolerance and criticism of the society in accordance with the Grammar School Curriculum (1994), which are often ignored due to the extensiveness of the prescribed teaching content for the sociology course.

1 Cultural diffusion is a process of cultural change through which ideas, technologies and beliefs are transmitted from one culture to another (Fanuko 2009). Crosses are exhibited in the Congo section of the exhibition, which is a good example of diffusion because they represent the spread of Christianity in Africa.

Virtual classes at EMZ were evaluated through an anonymous survey that the students filled in at the end of the lecture. The students' impressions of the classes, self-assessment of knowledge and understanding of the addressed sociological concepts and attitudes on the purpose of holding virtual classes at the museum in response to the problems caused by the covid-19 pandemic were examined. The students were offered a choice in terms of a degree of agreement with the above claims from 1 to 5, with 1 – I fully disagree, 2 – I disagree, 3 – I do not know/cannot assess, 4 – I agree, 5 – I completely agree. Since this is a very small class and simultaneously a small sample (the class consists of only ten students), generalisations cannot be made based on the results, but these results provide a useful feedback that will be used for further work.

Concerning student satisfaction with online classes held at EMZ, a total of 70% of the students agreed with the statement "Online classes held at the museum were interesting", while 30% were unsure whether or not they agreed with the statement. Similarly, a total of 70% of the students agreed with the statement "I like it that the lecturer asked us questions during the guidance through the exhibition", 20% of the students were not able to give an assessment and only 10% of the students disagreed with the latter statement. We also wanted to know whether the students felt that this type of teaching helped them understand the teaching content, so we asked the students to assess whether they agreed with the statement "Conversation about the exhibits helped me better understand sociological concepts" and 70% of the students agreed, while 30% were unsure. Similarly, 80% of the students agreed with the statement "I think I would better understand sociological concepts if they were explained to me more often using various museum objects", while 10% of the students disagreed with the statement or were unsure. Against the backdrop of the covid-19 pandemic and the increasing need for online classes, we asked the students to assess whether they agreed with the statement "I think this form of online teaching at the museum is a good substitute for a real visit to the museum during the pandemic". 60% of the students agreed with this statement, 30% were unsure and 10% disagreed. While most students agree with the statement, it is evident that there is still plenty of room for improvement in the context of online teaching at the museum. The fact that we should not give up on the idea of holding online classes at the museum has been confirmed by student attitudes concerning the statement "I do not see the purpose of holding online classes at the museum" as 100% of the students disagreed with this statement. Consequently, we believe that our next task in the virtual sociology class at EMZ is to incorporate group work using online applications such as Mural to make the whole experience more interesting for students, to encourage them to be even more active in class, but also to develop problem solving skills and collaborative skills through this work. In this way, we would also reduce the difference between online sociology teaching at EMZ and sociology classes in the physical space of the museum, which we are planning to implement at the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, since this type of teaching also includes group work activities where students answer questions in connection with the sociological concept of culture through independent research of the museum exhibition.

The main activity of the Museum School Association is the design, implementation and evaluation of quality educational museum activities in connection with the prescribed teaching content and the expected learning outcomes in primary and secondary schools using alternative teaching methods that require student activity in class. Hence, we are planning to continue with the previously described activities even after the official project completion and use the obtained evaluation results in the further development both of this, as well as of other educational activities and programmes.

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