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Educational challenges of developing multiple communication competences in the era of convergence. Case study of the Transilvania Creative Camp

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Abstract

Educational challenges of developing multiple communication competences in the era of convergence. Case study of the Transilvania Creative Camp

The purpose of our article is to show, on the basis of theoretical analysis and empirical research, that participating in intercultural educational activities based on the project method can have a beneficial impact on the development of multiple communication competences. This paper combines participant observation with elements of content analysis and presents a case study of a summer school, the Transilvania Creative Camp. The participants' focus was to create a promotional strategy for the heritage of Lăpuș Land in Northern Transylvania (Romania). It can be noted that whilst implementing the main objectives of the project, specifically the development of marketing communication skills, the participants developed, among others, competences in the field of intercultural, visual and media literacy. This initiative fits perfectly into the needs of contemporary education—it is a response to globalisation processes, shapes awareness of intangible cultural heritage, and promotes sustainable tourism and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: media literacy, media literacy competences, intercultural competences, project-based learning, intangible heritage

The Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC) is a project carried out cyclically as an initiative of the Transilvania University of Brasov (Romania) and Meisei University Tokyo (Japan) in cooperation with other academic centres. It was developed in the summer of 2014 (Nechita et al., 2018) and has been ongoing since, except the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The next edition of the project is planned for the summer of 2025. This summer school is organised as a project-based learning with very in-depth workshops and fieldwork, conducted by national and international experts and scholars. The participants are to be given a task to prepare a promotion of the heritage of Lăpuș Land in Northern Transylvania (Romania) in order to develop their marketing communication skills (Nechita et al., 2018).

The subject of this analysis is the third edition of the project (2023), in which I had the opportunity to participate. It took place from September 1st to September 7th and effectively was an immersive summer school focusing on the theme “Creative Destinations and Heritage Interpretation.” The

blended programme combined in-person sessions from September 1st to 7th in Târgu Lăpuş and surrounding villages with online work preceding and evaluating on-site activities. It was organised by Transilvania University of Brasov, University Meisei Tokyo (Japan), University of Applied Sciences in Hannover (Germany), Heilbronn University of Applied Sciences (Germany), University of Dunaujvaros (Hungary), Polytechnic University of the Marche (Italy), School of Social Sciences Nova Gorica (Slovenia), The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow (Poland) and West University Timișoara (Romania). The project group consisted of German, Hungarian, Slovenian, Japanese, Romanian, and Italian students working under the supervision of faculty members, communication professionals, and representatives of the Tourism Information Centre in Târgu Lăpuş.

Târgu Lăpuş is a region in the northwestern part of Transylvania characterised by beautiful landscape, nature, cultivation of traditional customs and costumes, and architecture (especially wooden churches and typical gates carved in wood). As the authors of the article emphasise:

The majority of the inhabitants preserved the identity of their ancestors through traditional houses, traditional agriculture and old recipes for food and drinks [...]. The local people are still wearing their traditional clothes during the religious rituals or at traditional weddings (Nechita et al., 2018, pp. 66–67).

The region is religiously and ethnically diverse. Alongside the Romanian population, Hungarians and Roma people live here. The majority of the inhabitants belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church. The rest have ties to the Reformed Church or are affiliated with the Pentecostal, Greek Catholic, and Roman Catholic churches. The unique tourist attraction of the region is of course Wooden Churches of Maramureş listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Nevertheless, in Târgu Lăpuş among the historic buildings are also the Roman Catholic Church, the Calvinist Church, and the Orthodox Church. This illustrates the mosaic nature of the region.

Importantly, the effects of mass tourism development, especially the commercialisation of traditions and the degradation of forest areas, have not yet been felt in these areas. For students representing Generation Z, mostly coming from industrialised areas, this is a unique opportunity to get to know a unique area of traditional culture. It is also an opportunity to promote sustainable tourism and the protection of intangible heritage (Nechita et al., 2018).

As mentioned earlier, the activities in the Târgu Lăpuș region were preceded by online meetings, which allowed participants not only to introduce the aims, topics and history of the project but also to get to know each other. In this phase, students also underwent training in the effectiveness of video marketing and familiarised themselves with the topic of sustainable rural destinations. The core activities took place on site in the form of workshops, lectures, presentations, study visits, observations, and interviews with local residents and included, among others: a visit to Rogoz Wooden Church and the local museum, workshop on wooden sculpture (Rogoz), visiting traditional sheepfold (Ungureni), watching the buffalo herd (Rogoz), attending a traditional orthodox religious service and visiting nearby wooden churches (Cupșeni, Costeni), hay making workshop (Groșii Țibleșului village), and Hungarian evening (Dămăcușeni village). It was an immersive experience that allowed students to become familiar with the natural, religious and ethnographic diversity of the region. The participatory nature of the activities was also significant: taking part in the harvest, milking sheep, dancing together, having a bonfire, and tasting local cuisine. There has certainly been an increase in awareness of the multiculturalism of this region and the presence of the Romanian, Hungarian and Roma communities. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that all students were accommodated in the boarding house of the local secondary school. As a result, they had an opportunity to get to know each other better and develop friendly relationships during shared meals and informal meetings. Such solutions support group integration and the development of various competences, especially communication and intercultural ones. The last phase, conducted online, allowed for evaluating the promotional video. In the beginning, students were divided into five multicultural groups. Their task was to prepare a promotional campaign for the region. During the camp, they collected various types of documentation, such as photos, short films and notes. The task required attentiveness and an analytical approach to the topic. It concerned such elements of local tradition as folklore and traditional costumes, wooden churches, cuisine, crafts and agriculture, and natural heritage.

The novelty and advantages of this educational practice have already been described and diagnosed several times, especially by its main initiator and organiser, Florin Nechita. However, all works so far have referred to the 2016 edition of the project. The educational dimension of the initiative was particularly emphasised, especially in the context of the participation of students

from Japan (Nechita et al., 2018; Nechita & Tanaka, 2021). The scientific reflection focused on topics such as: the concept of community-based tourism as a basis for the valorisation of intangible cultural heritage (Nechita et al. 2018), framing the project into three dimensions of the Hofstede's Model such as: individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence (Nechita & Tanaka, 2021). The publication "Creative Destinations & Heritage Interpretations. The story of the Transilvania Creative Camp 2016" issued after the aforementioned edition is also worth referencing. It includes a discussion of the genesis and concept of the summer school, participants' memories, essays and theoretical reflections, for example on: "a creative cultural tourism combined with heritage interpretation" (Candrea) or visual anthropology (Burlacu).

However, it is worth looking at this project from a different perspective and specifying its multidimensional impact on the professional and personal development of the participants. As some scholars claim, emphasising the complexity of the project-based learning concept, "sometimes, the projects enlarge the instructional curriculum without any predetermined expectations in advance, resulting in some surprisingly effective and novel pedagogical outcomes" (Ling, Liu, & Nechita, 2024, p. 757). What defines this method is a learner-centred approach, both in terms of knowledge and skills. It allows students to affect independent and self-directed learning, develop motivation, practice teamwork and problem solving. The special educational environment in which the students found themselves allowed them to develop competences that went beyond the previous assumptions of the project. By all means, they managed to achieve the main goal, i.e., prepare promotional materials. At the same time, however, it is worth pointing out other dimensions of this educational experience in the sphere of competences. Without a doubt, participation in the project contributed to the development of several competences such as intercultural, visual and media skills.

Methodology

This study combines participant observation, elements of content analysis (an analysis of visual materials prepared by students) and case study elements. As Shin & Miller point out, participant observation refers to a data collection method "in which researchers take part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life through the

observation of events in their natural contexts” (Shin & Miller, 2022, p. 120, quoted after: McKechnie, 2008, p. 599). The case study is defined as “an intensive study of a single unit” (Shin & Miller, 2022, p. 119, quoted after: Gerring, 2004, p. 341) or a “research strategy which focused on understanding the dynamics within single settings” (Shin & Miller, 2022, p. 120, quoted after: Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534). Furthermore, as Pawłowska claims, quoting Stake, “The defining criterion of a case study, as a certain way of conducting research, is not the methods used, but the interest in the individual characteristics of the case” (Pawłowska, 2011, p. 269, quoted after: Stake, 2008, p. 119).

In 2023, I had the opportunity to take part in TCC in the double role of a supporting teacher and an observer. Consequently, I was able to observe the students’ activities during the implementation of the 2023 edition of the project—from the organisational phase to the evaluation phase. It gave me a unique opportunity to examine the situation from the inside during my participation in the project activities, as well as the informal ones. The collected data are the result of the virtual presence in online meetings, on-site workshops and training, as well as the accompanying presence during field-work. The collected materials include field notes such as observations of the actors (the students) and their interactions (between group members and their attitude towards members of the local communities), informal interviews, casual conversations, together with an analysis of the materials produced by the participants (films, photos, promotional videos, presentations). A combination of these methods allows us to recognise the impact of the participation in the Transilvania Creative Camp 2023 on the development of the youth’s intercultural, visual and media literacies. The presented findings do not exhaust the topic. They are only a contribution to further research.

Developing intercultural, visual and media literacy in the context of the Transilvania Creative Camp 2023

Intercultural competences

As Liisa Salo-Lee pointed out 18 years ago:

Increasing multiculturalism in all societies is one of the consequences of globalization. People encounter, globally and locally, other people with different world views, values,

communication ways and habits on a more frequent base than ever before. These encounters are further facilitated by the development of technology. Multiculturalism and intercultural interactions are, at best, a possibility for dialogue and creativity. (Salo-Lee, 2007, p. 76)

These comments remain relevant today and take on even greater importance. There is no doubt that in recent years there has been a growing awareness of the importance of intercultural competences among policymakers and civil society. The issue of intercultural competence is raised by UNESCO, the Council of Europe, ministries of education, universities and non-governmental organisations. The intercultural competences prove to be essential for safe and conscious living in modern societies, effective communication, and cooperation with individuals with various cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, as authors of “Intercultural Competences. Conceptual and Operational Framework” published by UNESCO state:

the scope of intercultural competences is much wider than formal education. They have to reach out to a new generation of cybercitizens, notably young men and women who have unimagined opportunities for global conversations (UNESCO, 2013, p. 5).

The complexity of the environment in which young people function requires them to develop a range of literacy and competencies. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to the concept of intercultural literacy as “all the knowledge and skills necessary to the practice of intercultural competences” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 17) and I am inclined here to the definition of intercultural competence recently proposed by Barrett and Borghetti. They see it as

a combination of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding which enable one to:

- understand and respect people whose cultural affiliations appear different from one’s own
- respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people, and to establish positive and constructive relationships with them
- understand oneself and one’s own multiple cultural affiliations by reflecting critically on one’s encounters with cultural ‘difference’ (Barrett & Borghetti, 2025, p. 96)

This project is an unquestionable application of the theoretical concepts to real life. Intercultural competences were actively taught, promoted and implemented here. The situation the students found themselves in was undoubtedly a challenge. They developed communication skills in contact with international members of their groups, as well as in contact with the local community. The language of the project was naturally English, but when talking to local residents, the students used the support of their Romanian colleagues. In addition to the training provided by guides and specialists, the importance of informal conversations, reflective observation, and non-verbal communication cannot be underrated. Therefore, intercultural competence can be discussed in two ways: in the student-student relationship and in the student-representative of the local community relationship.

The complexity of this experience should also be underlined. It is worth showing them in relation to the components of intercultural competence identified and described by Barrett (2016) and Byram et al. (2022). In the case of this project, you can undoubtedly consider the presence of the consecutive components:

- on the level of values: “valuing cultural diversity”,
- on the level of attitudes: “openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices” and “respect”,
- on the level of skills: “analytical and critical thinking skills,” “skills of listening and observing,” and “empathy” (Barrett, 2016; Byram et al., 2022, quoted after Barrett & Borghetti, 2025, p. 106).

Some examples confirming the hypothesis about the effect of participation on the improvement of intercultural competences are worth mentioning. Because of the participant observation, it can be concluded that the students:

- Faced an ethnically and religiously diverse community, and their reactions showed respect and interest (e.g., during the service),
- had an opportunity to observe a different model of life: traditional farming, flock tending, which they observed with openness and commitment, often engaging spontaneously in these activities (e.g. involvement in harvest work, helping to milk sheep etc.),
- treated local people with respect (e.g., during workshops in the open-air museum, a ceremonial dinner after the Sunday service, or trying on regional costumes),
- responded in the vast majority with openness to local cuisine that differs from contemporary dietary trends.

Of course, the observations made are fragmentary and it is impossible to draw any decisive conclusions based on them. It would certainly be worthwhile to ask questions about young people's previous experiences in this matter and their influence on these specific reactions. However, the observations mentioned earlier emphasise the value of this individual experience. Attitudes of engagement and openness were observed among 90% of the participants. Attitudes towards distance, as one might assume, were not the result of prejudice, but rather of a lack of appropriate preparation and attachment to the lifestyle of large metropolises. It is significant that this observation does not apply to students from Tokyo, who, despite a different cultural background and sometimes a language barrier, participated in the project activities with remarkable enthusiasm and attentiveness.

Media and visual competences

The burgeoning influence of the media in all spheres of our life is one of the global tendencies. It calls for the active implementation of various media education programmes. The second aim of this article is to present "Transilvania Creative Camp 2023" as an opportunity for developing various media literacy competences.

Over the years, many definitions and ideas of media literacy have been created to reflect different points of view, different approaches and goals, and to consider different audiences (Potter, 2022). The European Commission describes media literacy as "the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts" (Recommendation 2009/625/EC). It should also be underlined that media literacy is intrinsically interdisciplinary by virtue of using the tools and methods of such fields of studies as sociology, psychology, race studies, cultural studies, art, or aesthetics. Developing students' 21st-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, or problem solving has been a leading effort in our globalised society. The objective of media literacy education is to provide citizens with the tools and skills needed to be confident and capable media consumers. The above-mentioned competences should be developed not only during the years of formal education but also in an informal context and without any age limitations. Because of its importance, media education is now required in many curricula across the world. A great number of educational institutions,

from kindergartens to universities, tend to incorporate it into their courses to improve students' media literacy skills. In accordance with the concept of lifelong learning, it is also integrated into professional courses and the third-age universities' curricula.

In this work, I draw on the often quoted research of Renee Hobbs, who sees the term “digital and media literacy” as

full range of cognitive, emotional and social competencies that includes the use of texts, tools and technologies; the skills of critical thinking and analysis; the practice of message composition and creativity; the ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking; as well as active participation through teamwork and collaboration (Hobbs, 2010).

A media-literate citizen is supposed to follow a five-phase process that consists of: accessing (media and technologies), analysing (media messages) and evaluating (in a critical way), creating (media messages in a reflexive way), participating (through the publication and dissemination of their own media messages in order to reach the desired audience) (Thoman & Jolls, 2008).

In the case of students at the “Transilvania Creative Camp 2023,” whilst working on the project, they all had an opportunity to develop essential competencies and skills of digital media literacy as they:

- Used media and technology tools smoothly to gain information about the region and shared suitable and relevant information with others (access).
- Perceived and analysed a variety of messages by using critical thinking, studied their quality, accuracy, authenticity and credibility whilst examining the potential effects or consequences of messages (analyse & evaluate).
- Primarily composed a content using their creativity with awareness of purpose, audience, and composition techniques (create).
- Seemingly followed ethical principles and felt responsible for the impact of their work (reflect)
- Worked individually and collaboratively, both online and in person, to attain the project goals (ACT) (Hobbs, 2010).

As mentioned before, the current article underlines the impact of the experience on the improvement of media literacy recognition. There is no doubt that thanks to the participation in the “Transilvania Creative Camp” students had an opportunity to develop several media literacy skills whilst

increasing their awareness of this concept. This project allowed the participants to learn through practice and study and create various products and, as a result, develop several media literacy skills. As you may conclude from the aforementioned paragraph, media literacy requires skills and knowledge. We define skills as “a cognitive ability that humans use to perform a particular task relevant to media use” (Potter, 2022). In a more detailed and complex presentation, the development of media literacy skills can be seen in several subcategories (Potter, 2022). While working on the campaign media products, students definitely advanced exposure skills (selection, searching and accessing) and information processing skills (analysis skills, meaning construction skills: creating alternative meanings, synthesising). Moreover, they certainly evolved a wide spectrum of production skills in conceptual as well as creative dimensions. First, they learned how to produce a media message, developed the ability to think about what to communicate, how to structure information within the message, how to make it precise, coherent, persuasive, how to produce innovative messages and be creative when producing messages. While presenting the project’s benefits, there is one more aspect that cannot be omitted, i.e., social skill advancement. The participants used media to develop relationships and collaborate with others to achieve the project goals (online collaboration, using social media as a tool of communication, group work). As a result of a variety of workshops, trips, meetings with local people, and partaking in local traditions, participants managed to become familiar with the unique character of the region and prepare an effective promotion strategy. Moreover, an additional result of the project was a significant advancement of digital and media literacy skills. Certainly, to conclude the task properly, students had to be aware of how to create persuasive messages.

Beyond media and digital literacy, there is another kind of literacy related to this experience that cannot be overlooked—visual literacy.

Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyse the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture (The Association of College & Research Libraries).

Visual media competences are crucial in the context of students' future careers. There is no doubt that nowadays, visual media has an especially ample impact on consumers. This means there is both a strong necessity of critical reading of the images and a major demand of understanding how to use images to make people interested in a problem, draw their attention, make them think, tell stories, etc. By taking compelling pictures and working on the promotional videos, the students learned how to use the power of images. To tell a story, to make somebody interested in a picture, they needed certain skills. They needed to realise how to create a meaning, how to choose particular images, design and create meaningful images and, as a consequence, visual media.

The analysis can be based on materials posted on the LopusXplorers profile on the social networking site Facebook: photographs published between September 3rd and September 24th, 2023, constituting a visual chronicle of the project, and a 2-minute promotional video. The latter material deserves special attention. It brings the emotional characteristics of the region present in three layers: visual, verbal and sonic. The visual layer is a collage of elements that were considered distinctive for the region: handicrafts, traditional costumes, joint celebrations, nature, tradition, farm animals, farm work, wooden churches, shepherds, and joint dance. The verbal layer refers to very characteristic concepts and key words from such semiotic fields as nature, history, community, diversity, and tradition. The background of the utterances is the sound layer containing elements of traditional music, bleating, and the bells of a flock of sheep. The final creation has an idyllic and romanticising character.

Because of the project, the students learned how to create specific products. They noticeably developed their professional background and became more conscious about the commercial impact of their works; however, the immersion experience made them more sensitive and aware of product authenticity. This final result can be seen as absolutely significant from an ethical point of view.

Undoubtedly, a great number of internet narratives that appear as an effect of mass tourism, such as blogs, vlogs, social media storytelling, and commercial videos, tend to simplify an image of a presented region. Moreover, due to the globalisation process, territories lose their uniqueness. As Chen accentuates "Many studies have found that vlog productions have intensified misconceptions of certain cultures and societies due to the vloggers' insufficient

understanding of local culture” (Chen, 2022). The worldwide dissemination of such media products and their uncritical consumption can increase cultural stereotypes. In our case, a perfectly balanced and arranged programme allowed participants to avoid such simplifications and experience the cultural diversity of the area of Târgu Lăpuș. The camp experience resulted in a kind of autobiographical narrative ranging from pictures and videos to promotional campaign products. To conclude, it is worth noting that the participants’ status cannot be recognised as ‘tourists’ as the mentioned output was inspired by a series of lectures, meetings, workshops, explorations, and conversations that develop cultural understanding.

Analysing the results of the project, we can observe how young people themselves visually articulated their perceptions of Targu Lapus. Exploring the environment should also be viewed as a key element of citizenship. Visual, digital and media literacy can be key facilitators of cultural awareness development and an arena for critical learning. For the main part of the group, exploring the Targu Lapus from the position of a global citizen was undoubtedly a formative practice. They had an opportunity to immerse themselves in a totally different environment to which they had been accustomed. It aided their socialisation, understanding of cultural differences and knowledge of local history or social issues. Moreover, it allowed them to become active observers and participants in the Transilvanian landscape and culture while also promoting the uniqueness of this region abroad.

The project can be defined as a pedagogic and research approach that helps students to reflect on the diversity of culture and historical complexity whilst documenting such issues through the use of digital media. As mentioned above, students were asked to produce a promotional campaign. However, we can assume that exploring the region resulted in the outreach of the commercial frames. In this case, we can talk about the reflective use of digital tools as students had a chance to reflect on heritage, intercultural diversity, and the like along with capturing these narratives or stories through the use of digital media.

The principal steps of this framework engaged the students in: visiting and exploring (confronting a totally different area in terms of culture, mentality, history, ethnography, landscape, language, cuisine, folk tradition, agriculture), collecting visual artefacts and/or producing some form of multimedia that capture the identity and the cultural landscape of the place and writing a reflective piece. The key concept of this task is that it links elements such as

youth attitude, the potentiality of media and the authenticity of the region. Moreover, the young participants appeared here in a double role—firstly as visitors—exploring and getting to know the region and, secondly, as ambassadors and creators of publicity. Not only were the students invited to use media as practical tools for capturing images or recording videos, which itself is a key to the development of media literacy skills. They were also inspired to reflect on more profound problems regarding the role of media in creating, communicating, for example through representation, framing, stereotypes, recreation, or advertising. There is no doubt that the project had a significant impact on its participants in developing digital, visual and media literacy skills and competences. Actually, one important factor needs to be mentioned here. The project idea was perfectly balanced. On the one hand, it drew from new technologies but, on the other hand, it was based on humanistic values such as cooperation, understanding, tolerance, and compassion.

Conclusions

The *sui generis* nature and the unique experience of the Transilvania Creative Camp make it an example of good practice. It can be seen as a novel pedagogical model that aims at bridging creativity with cultural understanding, professional career and new media literacy skills. Furthermore, it promotes the acquisition of the targeted skills in the 21st century, such as creativity, problem solving and collaboration. Moreover, through this experience, students learn to value the aesthetic qualities of media while using their creativity for making promotional materials. The camp helps them develop the ability to think critically and media responsibility. They gain the understanding that their media products impact others and shape the way they think about the region. In this context, it is also possible to recognise that the project can offer an inspiring approach that can allow a link between the formal and the informal learning strategies. It can also be seen as an opportunity to participate in our digital society in an ethical, responsible and critical way.

As you can see, the project fits perfectly into the needs of modern education. As indicated above, such initiatives allow for the multidimensional development of competences. Importantly, they emphasise interdisciplinarity and convergence. They put young people in situations similar to those they will face in their professional lives. On the other hand, it should be

emphasised that this article is only a contribution to the research and that these comments are fragmentary. Of course, because the camp is a cyclical initiative, it would be advisable to continue research in the field of competence development. It is certainly worth continuing this initiative and conducting an in-depth analysis using various types of tools.

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