

Participate When Mapping Realities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tools for recording individual perspectives of realities have long constituted the guiding theme for geographers. In this article, the “bird’s eye” view resides within the spectator of complex socio-economic realities. The cases presented in this paper show the practical contributions of IT, especially of e-learning platforms and of Geographic Information Science and Systems, in facilitating the exchange of fact-based concepts for the construction of social spaces and spaces of understanding. Societal learning can enlarge and approximate spaces of understanding. Social spaces are a type of “social capital”. Learning changes interdisciplinary realities (“n”) seen through the lenses of interculturally diverse understanding (“m”), hence it constitutes a m:n type of “mapping perceptions” that successfully facilitates consensus finding. IT tools have promoted the dialogue in these cases of cooperative learning both in developing countries and in administrations and within academia of industrialised countries: the project Schools on Ice, the UniGIS online curriculum, the UniNet network in Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Tajikistan, Global Studies, the ESD forum, the Environmental Systems Analysis Curriculum USW, and the European Union Twinning tool applied in Slovakia, Slovenia, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Keywords: Approximation, Consensus, Constructivist, Intercultural, Interdisciplinary, Training, Twinning.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The organisations involved in the following cases include secondary schools, universities, university clusters, transnational university partnerships, international environmental NGOs, and the European Union’s external policy. These organisations range from public to private and from idealistic to pragmatic. All of them plan to “change the world” and for that target they undertake to exchange views and perspectives among the stakeholders concerned. This paper approaches to find answers to the specific set of questions through cases of international collaborative educational projects.

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What is the inner meaning of learning?
2. Which role plays learning in global civilisatoric evolution?
3. How to overcome individualistic and sectoral views that hinder intercultural understanding?
4. Is it helpful to use recent concepts such as network society, social capital or structural capital?
5. Was “dialogic learning” and “exchanging views on reality” applied in more than a dozen cases of individual and societal learning and to what extent was this successful?

SETTING THE STAGE

Learning is Dialogue

As a starting point, we look at the core element of any social progress, namely at “dialogue”. Dialogue leads to reflection and reflection, in turn, leads to awareness.

The final target of evolution (encompassing amongst others the evolution of mankind) is to *build consciousness* (Ahamer & Strobl, 2009). Consciousness governs procedures in the material world.

Dialogue is a suitable means to approximate divergent views – which is one of the main issues of learning – and to ultimately facilitate changes in consciousness.

Regarding learning, we may distinguish between *individual* learning and *societal* learning. Regarding the multiplicity of learning objects and learners, we distinguish the following types of learning:

- Individual learning
 - Traditional learning (1:1)
 - Interdisciplinary learning (1:n)
 - Intercultural learning (n:m)
- Societal learning, e.g.
 - Responding to climate change
 - Political integration (globally, Europe-wide).

We are traditionally used to approach learning objects from one perspective (1:1) and consider it a progress to view objects from several, interdisciplinary perspectives (1:n). A still more advanced learning procedure would take into account the *multitude of learning subjects* (m) in addition to the *multiplicity of learning objects* (n), we will refer to it as *intercultural learning* (m:n) in this text because subjects are considered to be rooted and coached in their respective cultures inducing the subject to see and view reality as they decide to.

Useful training situations are spatial planning exercises and other space-related procedures that are open to GIS applications (Jekel, 2007, 2008ab; Strobl, 2007, 2008), or political, technological, civil engineering, cultural or peace negotiations in the classroom (Ahamer, 2004).

Learning Means Converging Divergent World Views

For very complex, interdisciplinary and intercultural learning issues a purely cognitive approach (an individual learner cognises a well-defined object of learning) appears too simple and the approach of “converging individual perspectives” (Ahamer et al., 2009) seems more appropriate.

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