

Students' Attitudes to Sites of (Non)Memory at NCU

Goals, Course and Results of Action Research

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Abstract: This paper presents the afterthoughts and conclusions related to the second edition of the Project - Students' attitudes to sites of (non)memory at NCU – which combines historical content and modern educational methods of knowledge transfer and is inspired by the research conducted and analysed by Hana Červinková. The author makes reference to the educational potential of the sites of memory (at the Nicolaus Copernicus University) which enables delving into multi-layered historical resources, immortalized records, identity-making processes, on the one hand, and learning characterized by critical thinking and careful consideration, on the other hand. This study provides also the reasons for the methodological framework used in the Project: action research; it is conducive to bringing the understanding of the processes which shape the reality, in its broad meaning, surrounding an individual. The Project participants, progress and results are described in order to demonstrate how to construct collective memory and how to cultivate the history which serves human 'freedom', rather than 'subjugation' as it is to save the past from falling into oblivion for the sake of the present and the future.

Key words- action research, Nicolaus Copernicus University, sites of (non)memory, Guidebook

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nicolaus Copernicus University (NCU) has a lot of sites of memory. These eternalize the people and events that left their mark in the annals of Torun *Almae Matris*. They also serve as an inspiration to extend one's knowledge and to construct one's academic identity. However, having perfunctorily observed the academic life in its different aspects, one may conclude that the undergraduates of the NCU are hardly familiar with the history of their university and are not aware of the sites of memory. Following Marc Augé, it can be said that the majority of the undergraduates consider the university a 'non-place', in other words: a place with transient significance, as in the case of an airport, railway station or healthcare clinic, therefore a place with a particular designation [1]. Thus, they seem to feel justified in their indifference to the history of the university and in an approach which would be more applicable to 'a manufacturing and service company' [26] running its business activity in the market of education. In the wake of undergraduates' increasingly commercialized attitudes to the university in Torun, an interdisciplinary educational and scientific project has evolved. It functioned under the title of: *Students' attitudes to sites of (non)memory at NCU*. The project culminated with Street Games held on 8 June 2012 [18]. Following that, *Students' Guidebook to the NCU Sites of*

Memory was published on the Internet portal dedicated to the sites of memory at the NCU (www.miejscapamieci.umk.pl).

This paper presents the afterthoughts and conclusions related to the second edition of the Project - Students' attitudes to sites of (non)memory at NCU – which combines historical content and modern educational methods of knowledge transfer and is inspired by the research conducted and analysed by Hana Červinková [6, 7]. The author makes reference to the educational potential of the sites of memory (at the NCU) which enables delving into multi-layered historical resources, immortalized records, identity-making processes, on the one hand, and learning characterized by critical thinking and careful consideration, on the other hand. This study provides also the reasons for the methodological framework used in the Project: action research; it is conducive to bringing the understanding of the processes which shape the reality, in its broad meaning, surrounding an individual. The Project participants, progress and results are described in order to demonstrate how to construct collective memory and how to cultivate the history which serves human 'freedom', rather than 'subjugation' as '[...] it is to save the past from falling into oblivion for the sake of the present and the future' [15].

II. SITES OF MEMORY AS A SUBJECT AND OBJECT OF RESEARCH

The sites of memory (at the NCU) have the educational potential which can be considered from the perspective of timelessness [2, 17]. According to Pierre Nora, 'the term of "*lieu de mémoire*" implies a sense of belonging, experience of community membership, inclusion in the history, and the period of production, fermentation. It suggests the framework, tradition, formation of common imagination and of a set of collective images' [21]. Thus, it can be concluded that the (NCU) sites of memory, which determine the nature of a particular society and which make it possible to refer to the indigenous/local heritage, are the elements of collective memory which form the basis of the group identity and, therefore, facilitate self-definition of any group [13].

From the educational point of view, it is significant that the (NCU) sites of memory, being rooted in the past, initiate cause-and-effect thinking, are inextricably bound to factual material and rationalistic information, as well as influence the affective domain. Due to these characteristics, it is impossible to predict unequivocally what kinds of feelings and impressions they will stir in the individuals who function

within the sites of memory [14]. Yet, simultaneously, they raise one's hope that the learning-oriented educational process characterized by emotionality and fragmentariness, as well as based on the sites of memory contributes to the adaptation of the values which will spark the sense of dedication to one's past.

The list of the NCU sites of memory is extensive and is undergoing permanent evolution. It is a personalized alphabet of sites of memory including both physical (faculty buildings, University Museum, Rector's Office, commemorative plaques, etc.) and metaphorical/ideological (matriculation, Yearly student carnival], particular professors, etc.) sites of memory. They are reminders of the institutional and personal heritage of co-operation with Vilnius and Lvov, as well as with Cracow and Poznan, which came to being pursuant to Decree by the State National Council of 24 August 1945 (signed on 11 September 1945) and which finally terminated the struggles for the establishment of an institution of higher education in Pomerania that had been unresolved since the Middle Ages [10]. The beneficiaries could also wake up to the idea that an institution of higher education does not operate in a social vacuum and that its functioning is affected by a vast array of socio-political, cultural and economic factors. A good case in point is, for example, a technology hall at the Faculty of Chemistry; it was opened in 1974 as an educational venue for the staff of ELANA corporation – a thriving artificial fibre factory - in Torun. Upon the closure of the factory the university authorities had to decide what to do with the disused space; it was transformed into a four-hundred-seat lecture room and has been used as such until now [22]. However, the original architectural elements and solutions still present there which are the tangible mementoes of the prime purpose of that place.

The sites of memory related to the university in Torun constitute meeting points of individual interpretations and collectively construed meanings. They also serve as depositaries of timeless values, such as: love of truth, openness to difference, readiness for compromise, and respect for others' values and beliefs. Owing to that, it is possible to implement one of the fundamental aims of the contemporary education – which is: '[...] development of a sense of respect for cultural heritage and construction of basic indigenous values both at the individual and at the collective levels in such a way that the sense of one's local and regional belonging should help comprehend and accept other cultures' [14] – and to cooperate with others for the sake of common good.

III. PROJECT METODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In terms of the cognitive subject and its aims, the Project was conducted according to the principles governing the action research and was supported with the technique of observation (and self-observation) and the analysis of the participants' essays.

The action research, being a specific form of case study [23], [...] is research into the social background of the researcher which aims at the improvement of that reality – in other words: the perfection of researcher's activities throughout the research. The research is nothing else but a

systematic collection of information on the phenomena which trigger changes, where the researcher is an initiator and an active participant of those events. The action research is conducted when there are some signs that a particular situation may undergo a positive change; then a scenario for improvement is developed, put into action and the results are observed [3].

What appears to be an important advantage of the action research, apart from its orientation to innovations in educational practices, is that the educationalists (researchers) implement the idea of considerate intervention into '[...] the educational policy of a particular institution, curricula, quality assessments of a school (university) and conditions for development created there for teachers and their charges'[27].

It can be thus inferred that the character of the procedure governing the action research consists in the participants remaining in continuous interaction with each other and with the phenomena/processes which they generate. The procedure also enables an immediate review of the theory which is under construction in the practical educational activities. Consequently, it facilitates the exploitation of the educational potential of the NCU sites of memory by activating memories of particular historical events and people. Remarkably, working at the level of the Aristotelian *praxis*, it is conducive to the 'cognition' and the 'change', it enables both the unity of thoughts and actions, on the one part, and the improvement of professionalism, on the other part [4, 8]. The procedure leads to the reconstruction of social structures and processes, as well as individual transformations. Furthermore, it creates favourable conditions for active learning through practice, which is a pre-requisite for the acquisition and perfection of different competences, including the civic, social and ethnographic competences.

Another argument for the application of the action research was that its ethnographic perspective on the issues studied would contribute to a more effective context exploration and, as such, enable a better cognition of the 'educational sites' [21]. The procedure acknowledges that the individual identity is continually being created through the interactions at the cultural, socio-historical and material-economic levels [12]. Such an assumption protects the practitioner/researcher against vainglory and unjustified confidence vested in too objectified practice, which may change only if the researcher undertakes some relevant actions [9].

Apart from the above-mentioned features of the action research, it has one more significant benefit: it makes the researcher step into contemplative practitioner's shoes and, thus, provides the researcher with a wide array of research methods and techniques. It enables the formulation of conclusions at each research stage (plan, action, result) on the basis of the data obtained from the participants in educational interactions, documents and artefacts produced during a project (including audio-visuals). The action research encourages network thinking, which consists in the compilation of information coming from different sources, its unification and utilization in short-time planning.

IV. CLASSIFICATION OF PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

All people engaged in the Project were divided into three main groups. The first group included the participants who were involved in the venture from the beginning and co-operated with me in developing and publishing the Guidebook. These were the NCU undergraduates who first learnt about the Project through the university mass media and Project's Facebook profile, then volunteered to work on Project implementation and enrolled via the university intranet, known as USOS, for the classes under the name of *Students' attitudes to sites of (non)memory at NCU*. All in all, there were fourteen undergraduates: four students of Educational Sciences (two women and two men), three female students of Cognitive Sciences, two female students of Romance Languages, a female student of Geography, a female student of Painting, a female student of European Sciences, a female student of Biotechnology and a male student of History. Their participation in the Project was awarded with ECTS points, i.e. European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System for grading, the number of which depended on the field of studies: the students of Educational Sciences were credited with four points, while the other undergraduates obtained two points.

The above-mentioned team could be described as heterogeneous: it comprised both female and male students; both the first (BA) and the second (MA) cycle students; both the so-called Arts and Science students. However, the group shared also some common features. First and foremost, its members were selected in a purposive and random sampling. The former was related to the university (NCU) and a type of academic society (full-time students); the latter meant a random selection of individuals. All of the team members proved conscientious/responsible, as none of them withdrew from the venture after their tentative agreement on participation. Unfortunately, what they also had in common was surprisingly superficial knowledge on the history of the NCU and its sites of memory. At the initial stages of the Project it emerged that they were not even aware of their existence.

The other group of participants was created as postulated by Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak, who claims that the action research should involve all individuals who were contacted throughout the execution of educational activities [9]. In the case of the Project at issue, that group included all the people with whom the core participants of the Project established contact with a view to obtaining information on particular sites of memory at the NCU or on the procedures applicable to the publishing of the Guidebook. There were also those who attended the question and answer session with the authors after the Project work came to an end.

V. PROJECT COURSE

The Project under analysis was planned in such a way as to let the undergraduates develop the ability of critical thinking, to stimulate them to co-operation and substantial discussion, as well as to make them improve their social, civic and ethnographic competences pivoting on active perception,

rather than passive perception only [6]. It came into being in order to make it possible for the undergraduates to give new meanings to the floorspace and social areas of the NCU. They were also encouraged to review the meanings of the sites of memory at the NCU which hold a key both to the creation of the academic identity and the body of historical knowledge which originates not only in the officially binding discourses but is stored/recorded in the memory of representatives of various micro-societies. The Project, which may be divided into two basic stages: Guidebook Preparation and Guidebook Publication, was to instigate the formation of personal alphabets out of the sites of memory at the NCU which may contribute to the outlook on both universal and contemporary values [15]. Another goal was to awaken students' sensitivity to event selection and verification processes, and then to let them consolidate and convey the knowledge gained. As was the case with the above-mentioned research by H. Červinková, here as well the idea of dialogue became the main driving factor [6] present in all implementation stages of the Project and governing each of its communicative activities.

The Guidebook Preparation stage, lasting from 12 February 2012 until 31 October 2013, engaged the Project participants in: extending their knowledge on the (NCU) sites of memory; discussing the choice of these NCU sites of memory which should be presented in the Guidebook; collating information on the selected NCU sites of memory through, for instance, the analysis of a relevant body of literature and interviews with university's undergraduates, graduates, teachers and lecturers, and administrative staff, which included those working at the time being and those retired; preparing textual material and its publicising on the Internet portal devoted to the NCU sites of memory; and preparing a promotional campaign in the form of question and answer session with the authors of the Guidebook.

The first phase of the Project commenced with the inauguration meeting with the students, which was organized in the said technology hall; the very place, taking into consideration its history, is a monumental symbol of transformations happening at the university under the influence of socio-political, economic and cultural factors, on the one hand, and a vivid example of a site of (living) memory set in subjectified and contextualized history basing at the memory [18]. The idea of presenting the Project to the students from another point of view – one which related to the space known to them only from lectures given there – was supposed to act as symbolic awakening, an opportunity for them to notice what the surroundings have in store and to become aware that there is more to these places than meets the eye. Subsequent classes saw students sharing their observations and opinions related to the rediscovery of the seemingly familiar environment, exchanging afterthoughts on the work performed until then and discussing further steps.

Being Project Coordinator, my role in that stage of Project implementation was to help students find and establish contact with people who would be able to provide them with interesting information on particular NCU sites of memory, for example: people who personally know those to whom

these sites are dedicated or people who participated in the events occurring at these sites. I advised them on the choice of reading material and methods of finding it. All the same I can sincerely admit that my function was advisory only, because all decisions were reached jointly (according to the principles of the action research) by all Project participants. Upon an agreement reached by all of us, we selected the NCU sites of memory for the Guidebook, chose the suitable form of the Guidebook and a place for its publishing. Together, we discussed ways of tackling problems/overcoming difficulties which had been occurring to particular participants throughout their performance of specific tasks. It was in an open discussion that we shared our afterthoughts with each other, talked about our successes and failures and described the accompanying emotions. Although each of the Project participants was dedicated to an individual NCU site of memory, they willingly exchanged materials and shared their knowledge.

Owing to such a method of work in the Guidebook Preparation stage, the Project participants had an opportunity not only to extend their knowledge on the NCU history and organisation but also to develop their social and civic competences, including the skills of co-operation, knowledge acquisition, knowledge application, self-evaluation, decision making as well as suitable aim and goal definition [26]. What should be highlighted at that point is that due to the enriched experience, they were able to redefine their attitudes to the NCU and to forge some relation with the NCU environment.

The next stage involved presenting the Guidebook to the public, which happened on 31 October 2013 in a session of approximately two hours. That stage activated people who had not been related to the implementation of the Project yet; it was open to the academic society, in its broad meaning, and to the local media. The meeting was an opportunity for the core participants of the venture – the authors of *Students' Guidebook to the NCU Sites of Memory* – to present its content, talk about the work on the Guidebook and the Internet portal where it had been published. Apart from that, they also answered the attendants' questions.

The completion of that Project stage contributed to the promotion of knowledge on the NCU sites of memory among a wide range of the general public. As far as the core participants of the Project are concerned, the public presentation of the outcomes, as corroborated in H. Červinková's study, which was based on a full emotional engagement, facilitated further learning processes [6]. Furthermore, they could benefit from the opportunity to develop socially and intellectually, upgrade their co-operation skills and improve their ability to support each other when working as part of a team. Owing to the performance-based final stage of the Project, they were able to check their teaching skills in practice and to directly assess the effectiveness of their activities.

VI. RESULTS

Upon the completion of the Project, each of its core participants wrote an essay in which they described one's

tasks, afterthoughts and feelings. The form of the text was an individual matter, but it turned out that each of the essays provided an explanation of the reasons why its author took a special interest in a particular site of memory at the NCU (their descriptions were so remarkable that they merited the inclusion in the Guidebook). These compositions enable an insight into the perception of didactic processes by the individuals involved in them and all of these pieces of writing constituted an invaluable source of knowledge on the emotional and cognitive changes experienced by their authors.

On the basis of the essays it can be concluded that the Project participants liked the way the Project had been developing and how it had been implemented. Moreover, it transpires that the participation in the venture meant for them not only a pleasant form of leisure activity and an opportunity to meet interesting people but, first and foremost, a valuable history lesson on their own university which taught them, among other things, new competences. In order to prove the aforementioned statement, it suffices to quote the following:

- 'From the very beginning I was really excited by the fact that I would have to be someone like a detective who is bound to find as many important facts on Professor Aleksander Jabłoński as possible... What is extremely important is that the Project taught me responsibility: I had given my word that I would write a paper on one site of memory and I delivered. That difficult task became feasible for me thanks to the weekly meetings with Kinga Majchrzak and other students participating in the Project – their comments and ideas meant a lot to me and were of great help. Today I can say that the Project helped me – a first-year student at the time – feel at home at the NCU, become familiar with the history of the NCU and learn the significance of the places I go past every day. Now I realize it better that I had been right in my choice of university' (a female student of Biotechnology).
- 'Another thing that brings back positive memories are meetings with the Project participants. When we were talking with each other, I could feel that each of us was genuinely involved and was having a buzz from finding a new clue, valuable information on an individually chosen site of memory – I mean a person or event eternalized at the site' (a female student of Educational Sciences).
- 'First of all, I need to emphasise that it was the first time that I had taken part in an initiative like *Students' attitudes to sites of (non)memory at NCU*. Thanks to that Project I learnt about people related to the university in Torun and commemorative places dedicated to them. Besides that, I met a group of really friendly students who were also engaged in the Project. What appealed to me most was the way the Project was progressing. Namely, the work on the Project was divided into individual and group tasks, which was incredibly important for both self-development and integration of the participants, who

were always free to voice their own opinions. [...] As a co-author of that venture, I spent my time in a nice way and became familiar with the sites of memory which I had failed to notice before. Now, when I'm passing by the sites of memory at the NCU, I smile and go back to the moments spent so well with the Project participants and, what's most important, I keep them in mind!' (a female student of Geography).

- 'I liked it that, thanks to the team work, each and every one of us had an influence on the end result. We enjoyed full freedom of expression and the group work as well as a common goal to attain boosted my communicative skills and raised my sense of responsibility' (a male student of Educational Sciences).

Thanks to the Project, its participants were able to redefine their everyday surroundings at the university by looking at them through the prism of their experiences, which were highly emotionally-charged. Having had an opportunity for a direct contact with tangible historical artefacts, they changed their point of view on the reality around them, because (in the process of internalization) they acknowledged the significance of the space around them and called it 'theirs'. The participants learnt that there is a bond between them and previous generations – common memory, which '[...] is an auxiliary factor or identity-building factor, especially when it comes to the identity of a particular group' [17]:

- 'Undoubtedly, my participation in the Project made me identify with the Nicolas Copernicus University even more, in particular with my favourite University Library, but not only. It was pleasure for me to gain that invaluable knowledge on my university, its history, and – what's most important – the people who worked very hard to lay its foundations and took care of its development. Today I'm even proud that when I'm in the lobby of the Library I see and notice more than an average reader. It is so because the Library is not longer just an anonymous building for me – it's rather an important place whose history was written by people working here (a female student of Romance Languages).
- 'I learnt a great deal about the history of our university, which makes me a more aware/mature student who realizes where she is and why she is here. All of the events and people who are represented by the sites of memory created the present NCU, gave it soul and substance. Thanks to them, I can see that our university is not a factory of the perspective workforce but rather something more important, the realization of which has become incredibly valuable for me' (a female student of European Sciences).

On the basis of participants' responses, it can be concluded that thanks to their participation in the Project they changed their general attitude to the sites of memory. During the venture they learnt from each other in the cityscape and gained enough experience and knowledge to start noticing those elements of their surroundings which had been marginalized before and to look for their explicit and implicit meanings:

- 'The whole Project appealed to me a lot; the idea of making the history of the place where you study and the people connected to it more familiar was really very good. Before I had not paid attention to the sites of memory at the NCU – in fact, I hadn't even noticed them. It was thanks to the participation in the Project that I extended my knowledge on them and, first and foremost, my attitude towards them changed as no longer do I walk on by them with indifference – I know their place in the history of our university. I can even say that as early as at the beginning of the Project – upon learning the history of the technology hall – I started to look more attentively at the environment around me and to think of its past and the processes which had shaped it and which are still shaping it (a female student of Cognitive Sciences).
- 'The participation in the Project has left its mark on me in form of some kind of tendency to contemplate things and stirred in me keen interest in the places I come across in my life. Now I take a closer look at what's around me and I notice more sites of historical meaning and value (a female student of Romance Languages).

It is also worth mentioning that the Project enjoyed popularity with the media. A report on the question and answer session with the authors was broadcast on Radio Gra and on TV Torun. It lets us hope that the sites of memory at the NCU will attract the attention of a wider group of people beyond the academic community.

Characterised by indifference, the attitude of the NCU undergraduates towards the history of their own university can/should be counteracted. That is facilitated by the educational potential of the sites of memory at the NCU, which can be used owing to the methodology based on *praxis*. That potential makes it possible to reconstruct the common memory of the university through the connection with its fundamental building blocks, i.e.: historical people and events that are still living in the memory or that are commemorated in artefacts. Taking into consideration that the common memory is a factor contributing to group identity creation, it can be concluded that the educational process bound to the university's sites of memory facilitates the formation of an academic identity. The students who participated in the venture had an opportunity to experience their individuality originating in their belonging to a particular academic community, which respects specific values and operates in a peculiar axiomatic and normative system. As a result, their

self-awareness was raised and, thus, their individual identity was enriched [20]. At that point it is noteworthy that the combination of the action research and the procedures developing observation skills and evaluative interpretation skills, which are pre-requisite to discover the history silenced through cultural factors, provided also an opportunity to improve social, ethnographical and civic competences with simultaneous enhancement of both teaching and learning skills. All of that provided a good ground for practicing one's contemplative skills, in other words: evaluative analysis of one's actions, taking into account particular context and possible outcomes [25], which facilitates effective functioning in today's permanently changing reality.

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