

VI International Forum on Teacher Education

Project Activity as a Means of Multicultural Values Development in the Internet-Mediated Learning Environment

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Abstract

The article deals with the ways of increasing the efficiency of using the project activity for formation of multicultural values of students in terms of the modern digital educational environment and also includes analysis of the experience gained in the course of implementation of the Sharing Cultures project. Urgency of this issue is undoubted, since use of the digital educational environment in learning activity has a significant impact on formation of axiological orientations of students.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the ways of increasing the efficiency of using the project activity for formation of multicultural values of students in terms of the modern digital educational environment, as well as to analyze the experience gained in the course of implementation of the Sharing Cultures project.

The methodological basis of the study is the principles of the systemic and structural-functional approaches, which allowed considering the advantages of the project activity for formation of multicultural values of students in terms of digitization.

The authors consistently prove that use of the project method in the course of intercultural communication not only contributes to axiological orientation of students, but also provides them with the opportunity to learn a foreign language in the natural language environment, achieve self-determination, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, socialization, form responsibility, and the ability to work independently.

Keywords: digital technology, multicultural values, project activity, digital educational environment, cross-border formation of values.

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Published by Kazan federal university and peer-reviewed under responsibility of IFTE-2020 (VI International Forum on Teacher Education)

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Introduction

In the late 20th and the early 21st centuries understanding of the potential of using digital technology to form multicultural values of students is of great importance in the field of education. There is a growing demand for studies dedicated to the understanding of the axiological basis of the worldview that is formed in the course of active participation of young people in the project activity in terms of the digital educational environment. Works dedicated to this issue are often complex in nature and are at the intersection of many sciences (pedagogy, sociology, philosophy, culturology, linguistics, etc.). Study of the issue from various perspectives appears most advanced, since exactly in the course of the project activity students not only gain knowledge, but also form the ideas about the role of the young generation in the life of society, the value of intercultural communication, etc. Urgency of the issue under consideration is undoubted, since use of the digital educational environment in learning activity has a significant impact on formation of axiological orientations of students.

The scientific novelty of the conducted study is in substantiation and factual confirmation of the effectiveness of using the project method for formation of multicultural values in terms of digitization.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the article is to evaluate the efficiency of using the project activity for formation of multicultural values of students in terms of the modern digital educational environment, to describe the methodology of implementation of the group project aimed at formation of the axiological basis of the students' worldview, as well as to analyze the experience gained in the course of implementation of the Sharing Cultures project.

Literature review

The issues of using project activities and digital educational environment for formation of multicultural values of students were developed and discussed by many researchers. Abramova, Gladkova, Gladkov, Kutepov and Trutanova, considering the peculiarities of using projects in e-learning, point out that “the project activity occupies a particular place among the methods that are used in the university educational process and ensure systemic integration of scientific knowledge and practical actions” (Abramova et al., 2017, p. 8).

Malley believes that “teaching online is not simply a matter of transferring face-to-face classroom materials to a digital, networked class. For better or for worse, things have to change because interaction

changes. In online learning environments, the social interactions necessary for collaborative learning are built discursively” (Malley, 2013, p. 6).

Daukilas and Kasperuniene think that “the learner’s value-orientation can and must be promoted by practical demonstration of knowledge and skills, therefore, the content of e-learning should be personalized, and, during the educational interaction, value-orientation of the educator and the learner should be actualized and practically demonstrated, because it is values that the constructive critical thinking of the interaction participants is based on” (Daukilas, Kasperuniene, 2013, p. 8).

The works by Varlamova (2017), Tareva et al. (2018), Beycan (2017), Saenko & Panova (2019), Filimonova et al. (2019), Chernicyna et al. (2017) are of particular interest.

Varlamova, studying the project activity, notes that “education on an active basis, through the students’ purposeful activity corresponding with their personal interests, is an essential peculiarity of the project method” (Varlamova, 2017, p. 199).

Tareva et al. (2018) in their research emphasize that the new e-learning technology applied in the formation of the innovative modeling of intercultural communication cases contributes to elimination of barriers between teachers and students due to the modern telecommunications and increases the productivity of teachers.

In the field of pedagogy, the subject of using the educational potential of the project activity for formation of values related to the life of society in the context of digitization has not been sufficiently explored. Some scholars studied the issues of use of the project activity to prepare young people for self-determination in life and profession (Allen et al., 2008), practice of organization of the project activity in high school (Wagner et al., 2005), use of projects in e-learning (Abramova et al., 2017; Alhomod & Shafi, 2013), the role of professors in organization of the project activity of students (Rule, 2004; Stein, 2014), peculiarities of performance of the project activity in work with gifted children (Beycan, 2017). However, so far there have been no attempts to present a comprehensive study of advantages and peculiarities of using the project activity in terms of digitization for formation of multicultural values. This article will fill this gap to some extent and make a contribution to the understanding of the issue of effective use of the project activity for formation of the axiological basis of the worldview of young people in terms of the modern digital educational environment.

Methodology

The methodological basis of the study is the principles of the systemic and structural-functional approaches. This system of work allowed considering the advantages of the project activity for formation of multicultural values of students in terms of digitization. The works by Abramova et al. (2017), Allen et al., (2008), Malley (2013), Daukilas & Kasperuniene (2013), Saenko & Panova (2019), Filimonova et al. (2019), Chernicyna et al. (2017), Stein (2014) served as an important methodological reference point in the conducted study.

To evaluate the efficiency of using the project activity for formation of multicultural values of students in terms of the modern digital educational environment, we conducted an analysis of students' work in the course of implementation of the Sharing Cultures project. Suzanne Blum Malley from Columbia College Chicago (USA), John Ruiters from Stellenbosch University (South Africa), Evgenia Gulyaeva from Volgograd Institute of Management of RANEPА (Russia) were the project coordinators.

Students of Volgograd Institute of Management of RANEPА (Russia), Columbia College Chicago (USA) and Stellenbosch University (RSA) participated in the Sharing Cultures project. It was organized as a social network, since this form of communication is the most popular among young people today. The name of the project ("sharing cultures") is determined by the main global purpose of the project, which can be supplemented also with the following feature – sharing cultures, blurring boundaries and reducing distances.

The purpose of the project is to create conditions for culture congruent enhancement of the students' personality. In the course of work young people learnt to acquaint themselves with other cultures and treat them with respect. Such activity facilitates formation and development of ideas about culture of other countries, culture of human relationships. Interpersonal communication makes it possible to compare value orientations of young people of different ages, nationalities and countries. This helps to increase motivation for learning foreign languages and to develop a respectful attitude to people of different cultures.

The educational objective of the project is to develop students' academic writing skills (to teach them to write review, discussion, argumentative and research essays) and a culture of using intellectual property (inadmissibility of plagiarism, importance of academic honesty, the ability to observe the generally accepted framework for using intellectual property). In the course of implementation of the educational objective of the project, professors tried to explain the cross-border nature of universal values, which are independent of age, nationality, cultural background and country of residence. Particular attention was paid to the commonality of academic values aimed at development of the intellect and the world view of the project participants.

Results

In this paper, we present the results of the investigation of the project activity as a means of multicultural values development in the internet-mediated learning environment. Despite the great potential of the project-based method within digitalization it still did not become a widespread phenomenon in the system of higher learning in the Russian Federation. Exploring the present situation, practitioners conclude that teachers in higher educational institutions do not use all the benefits of project activities for multicultural values development. The findings of the analysis of the most significant ways to make the use of project activities more efficient in the context of modern digital educational environment are presented below.

The project first started in 2002 as a result of an initial Fulbright Alumni Initiative Award which brought Columbia College Chicago, USA (CCC) and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa (NMMU). Later in 2008 Volgograd Academy of Public Administration (currently called Volgograd Institute of Management – branch of Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration) joined.

Class time was used to access the discussion board, both as a means of keeping it a central component of the course and to ensure access to the technological tools needed for the exchanges. Students were encouraged to participate in the Sharing Cultures space outside of class as well. Because institutions and countries have different time zones and at that time the Internet access was far from brilliant the Sharing Cultures discussions were always text-based, without the addition of images, sound and video available in many other digital platforms.

From 2008, activity on the Sharing Cultures discussion boards has been structured in the following way. The first thing students were asked to do was to introduce themselves in the introduction sections of the board. Since the conversations started, students were guided to post in other areas of the board based on the local to global themes. The sections besides the introductions were titled “Community and Culture,” “Rights and Freedoms,” “Global Issues,” and “Hot Topics.” Hot Topics was a completely student-directed section; the students posted there about anything they liked. Hot Topics included extensive discussion of music, with a bit of politics, film, and sports thrown in, and the Introductions section took on a life of its own, often driving the interaction for the entire semester.

The students’ work on the project included a range of activities that facilitate comprehension of the importance of multicultural values (understanding and interpretation of semantic levels of “texts” by representatives of different cultures (films, books, online publications, video, materials in social networks,

etc.); study of cultural and historical contexts in which particular “texts” were created; discussion of events from the perspectives of various cultural and historical contexts; interviews with the project participants; discussion of essays of the project participants; creation of questionnaires and materials for sociological surveys; discussion and use of online resources of different countries to collect research material; development of joint projects with representatives of different countries and cultures; participation in the international online discussion to exchange various views, experience and beliefs, to understand how culture shapes the world view; participation in online discussions, online seminars and online conferences; participation in discussion of essays of the project participants).

In the course of implementation of the project the students discussed films, works of art, cultural and sporting events; examined stereotypes of perception of people of other cultures and nationalities; studied the peculiarities of interpersonal relationships among young people; considered their attitude to various famous people; familiarized themselves with interpretation of the term of “good education” in different countries and in different social groups.

Having done several years of the Sharing Cultures project, we have to admit that there have been plenty of failures as well. It was sometimes hard to encourage our students to participate or someone would not have received a much-anticipated answer. But at the same time when the discussion was hot and we, as instructors, saw real language or multicultural results, we realized this difficult but fun work was not in vain. One of the students wrote, “!...WE ARE THE SAME...! What i like about this website is that we all started out questioning one another like we were all so different from one another. Then through all of our questioning and conversations we began to realize how similar and interconnected we were even though we lived across the globe. I was reading the question that someone posted asking what people did for fun and it was so interesting to read how people commented. People wrote from North America and Africa, and both responses were so similar. People of like ages around the globe all experience similar ties and experiences. I love it when conversations bring people closer rather than farther apart”.

Discussions

The project method provided the students with the opportunity to experience the diversity of cultures, created conditions for self-fulfillment in a multicultural world, contributed to increasing motivation to learn a foreign language. The work resulted in creation of conditions for formation of personal identification of the project participants in a multicultural society and their integration into a multicultural world. The applied technique is considered one of the most efficient in practice-oriented learning. Particular attention was paid to the formation of axiological orientations of students in the course of implementation of the

project within the framework of e-learning. Project learning made it possible to use various techniques: cooperation, problem-based learning, modular learning.

The results of the presented study can be used to develop understanding of the efficient use of project activities for multicultural values development in the modern digital educational environment. Further studies may be conducted to find out students' opinions and attitudes towards digitalization of the educational process with the aim of strengthening their motivation to acquire the skills of multicultural communication.

Conclusion

Use of the project method in the course of intercultural communication not only contributes to axiological orientation of students, but also provides them with the opportunity to learn a foreign language in the natural language environment, achieve self-determination, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, socialization, form responsibility, and the ability to work independently. Research and questionnaires were applied to establish the level of students' motivation during implementation of educational projects in terms of digitization. The main conclusions made by the authors of the article are as follows: to increase the efficiency of using the project method for formation of multicultural values of students in terms of the modern digital educational environment, it is important

- to involve foreign educational institutions that are ready to participate in the project;
- to overcome the reluctance of professors of higher educational institutions to adapt their educational courses to the project method;
- to teach students to use computer programs necessary for correct implementation of the project;
- to strengthen the motivation of students to implement educational projects with the use of digital technology.

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