TOWARDS CRITICAL-REFLEXIVE AGENCY: INTRODUCING THE 2030 AGENDA THROUGH ENGAGED PEDAGOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

J. Haba-Osca¹, F. González-Sala², R. Martínez-Carrasco³

¹Dept. de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya, Universitat de València (SPAIN)
²Dept. de Psicologia Evolutiva I de l'Educació, Universitat de València (SPAIN)
³Dept. de Traducció i Comunicació, Universitat Jaume I (SPAIN)

Abstract

Both metacognition and self-awareness are key elements in the education of students. Yet, traditional education tends to be rather static when it comes to its methodology and understanding of education, which results in students passively accepting change without questioning its nature or purpose. This kind of superficial learning contrasts with the complex network of situated, multi-faceted, asymmetric power relations that students will be exposed to once they join their respective communities of practice, and calls for specific action that not only contextualises their learning environment but also fosters an approach in higher education that involves listening, dialogue, action and reflection. In order to develop a deeper understanding of their education, students need to assess the norm critically though engaged collaboration with their peers, linking their safe learning environment with the world that surrounds it. With that objective in mind, the project “Writing towards Sustainable Development” was born. Adopting the framework put forward by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the project seeks to achieve a double goal in the education of our students: on the one hand, promoting critical-reflexive agency through the Sustainable Development Goals in the classroom; on the other hand, promoting action through expressive writing. These two tasks —reading and writing— embody the very essence of creative competence development and have proved to be efficient tools in order to foster critical-reflexive thinking, a vital characteristic in any transformation process, education included. Under the motto “Transforming our World”, the 2030 Agenda introduces five main plans of action: People, Planet, Prosperity, Universal peace and Larger freedom. These plans of action and goals have meant a new challenge for the international community towards eradicating poverty, widening the access to Human Rights, and achieving a greener global economic development. “Writing towards Sustainable Development” takes up the main objectives of the 2030 Agenda and introduces them in higher education scenarios, empowering the students involved to become critical agents of change. This presentation will introduce the project, how it is linked to our learning environments and how it engages our students’ needs and motivation under emancipatory premises.

Keywords: ODS, 2030 agenda, emancipation, critical thinking, transformative pedagogy.

1 INTRODUCTION

There are various approaches to the idea of university lecturers, who tend to be defined by a triple facet at least in the European scenario: teaching, researching, and management. Many of these approaches, though, agree in defining them as a specialist at the highest level in their area of expertise and, at the same time, a reflective, critical individual [1]. In this context, lecturers “are often cast as cultural agents, largely unaware of their participation in the perpetuation of established mindsets and practices” [2], therefore failing to provide an accurate depiction of the partial discourses that shape the reality around us.

While contemporary classroom discourses seem to neglect the force of this hidden curriculum [3] in favor of rather neoliberal narratives of accountability and marketisation of higher education ([4], [5]), there is a pressing need to implement, at all levels, curricula and course syllabi that convey a “complex understanding of how social structures mediate power relations to create different forms of alienation”, depicting “the reproduction of social struggles, inequities, and power differences” [6].

For university students to become professionals in their field, “they must be encouraged to question, challenge and ultimately change those workplace practices that seem to them unfair, i.e. unethical, and to become aware of the links between the social and the political” [7], an understanding of higher
education that goes beyond the passive reception of decontextualised content that many lecturers still apply in their modules [8].

One of the great challenges that higher education in Europe faces these days is precisely reducing dropout and increasing completion rates. The Europe 2020 strategy, indeed, addresses this issue and acknowledges the lack of comprehensive comparative research on study success policies and their effectiveness in the different Member States. At the same time, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) highlights the need to promote and support “institutional, national, and European initiatives for pedagogical training, continuous professional development of higher education teachers and explore ways for better recognition of high quality and innovative teaching in their career” [9].

1.1 The 2030 Agenda in Higher Education

“Transforming our World” is the motto of the 2030 Agenda, the document that sets out the objectives of the international community in the period 2016-2030 to eradicate poverty and promote sustainable and egalitarian development. To achieve this, 17 sustainable development goals (SDG) were presented during an unprecedented international consultation process coordinated by the United Nations. The 2030 Agenda is based on five central pillars: Planet, People, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. These goals and targets represent a new challenge for the international community to eradicate poverty, extend access to human rights, and achieve a sustainable global economic development that respects the planet and the resources it offers.

These objectives and goals are intended to be participatory and universal, and therefore constitute the perfect breeding ground to round the education process of higher education students and go beyond the abovementioned decontextualised information retrieval that has traditionally characterised higher education. Through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDG by means of creative writing assignments, as explained below, participants and lecturers are able to develop personally and academically in a more constructive, transforming, impactful way. Students are encouraged to participate in global citizenship probably for the first time in their lives, developing their practical ethics and other soft, transversal competences. At the same time, they are exposed to the course content and objectives.

2 METHODOLOGY

On the 2018-2019 academic year, the Continuous Professional Development and Lifelong Learning Office (SFPIE in Catalan/Spanish) at Universitat de València funded the project “Writing for Sustainable Development”, a joint initiative formed by members of different faculties aimed at fostering the critical skills of university students and lecturers through creative writing tasks.

Creative writing was thought to be a suitable means to address the SDG in the classroom since students are not used to being pushed out of their comfort zone as it happens when they are asked to discuss poverty and other global issues. The project had two separate drafting stages. After being presented with a prompt regarding a particular SDG (a piece of news, a song, a poem, etc.) students were asked to write an assignment about the topic in question without any stylistic, grammar or writing convention to observe. No previous experience with writing was required, and emphasis was placed on expressing inner emotions and situations in which students “find themselves” and reach greater awareness of the current state of the globalised world where we live. Later on, students were asked to create an on-going classroom portfolio including all tasks in the course. Students were meant to review and revisit their work, polishing their texts accordingly. Surprisingly, even if they were not expected to do so, students improved their initial texts more than significantly, adding content or introducing concepts beyond the instructions provided (creative illustrations, multiplatform portfolios, music playlists, etc.). As outlined in the conclusions below, research indicates, and so did the project we are presenting, that writing linked to the emotional spectrum improves working memory, together with emotion management, problem behaviour and social adaptation, while enhancing the promotion of critical thinking and the participation of students in class [10].

The project included the first five SDG: 1) No Poverty, 2) Zero Hunger, 3) Good Health and Well-Being, 4) Quality Education, and 5) Gender Equality. The rest of SDGs were not introduced due to time constraints but were equally mentioned and/or discussed in class.

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2.1 Phases
Considering the specific working structure designed by the psychologists involved in the project from the Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, the project was structured around the following phases:

2.1.1 Teacher Training
The project pursued a dual purpose that involved (i) promoting the reflection on SDG among university students and lecturers throughout readings and (ii) facilitating action through creative writing. Given the background of the twenty participating lecturers in the project, who taught 13 different modules in 8 different degrees, it was necessary to introduce a twenty-hour workshop where participants were provided comprehensive training on Education for Sustainable Development and Engaged Pedagogy.

2.1.2 Designing and Developing the project
Throughout this phase, the lecturers involved in the project designed and developed in a coordinated way the specific activities that would be implemented in their classrooms, trying to find the relevant synergies among them and exploring the possibilities of cross-curricular action. Since there were 13 totally different modules in which we had to find possible activities linked to their corresponding course syllabus and at least one of the five first SDGs, this was one of the most challenging tasks if not the most. Besides, mandatory courses at the Universitat de València have a high rate of students enrolled per group (see Table 1). It is important to notice that not all of the students attended regularly their classes and/or participated in this project. Although, in total, more than 460 students participated in the project on a regular basis, most of them enrolled in the Psychology and the English Studies departments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled</th>
<th>Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to English Literature</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Degree in English Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Literary Criticism</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Degree in Modern Languages and Literatures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Culture of English-speaking countries</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Degree in Translation and Intercultural Mediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Poetry (20th and 21st century)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German 2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Degree in Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German 4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Degree in International Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation EN/ES-CAT</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Degree in Psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contrastive Linguistics DE/ES</td>
<td>30</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills for Tourism 1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Business German</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology of the life cycle</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Degree in History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Modern History 2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Catalan for Primary School Teachers</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Approaches in Language and Literature Teaching</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Degree in Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1.3 Writing for Sustainable Development
This phase was devoted to the implementation in the classroom of the suggested activities. Once the participating lecturers had been given the relevant training and experienced the aims of the project themselves, they put the project into practice in their classes.
Reading and writing about the SDG became central in the development of a creative competence among the students and were felt to be effective tools to encourage critical thinking, an essential skill for any improvement and transformation process.

The texts developed became the starting point to encourage dialogue and self-awareness among the students in the classroom. During the sessions dedicated to these discussion forums, the lecturer’s role was to introduce the students in the social and cultural factors – both past and present – related to the five SDGs chosen for this first pilot experience.

2.1.4 Evaluation and adjustment

During the fourth phase, the overall project was evaluated by means of a survey aimed at both the undergraduate students involved in the project and the participating lecturers in order to review the contents, methodology, activities, timing, interest and feedback. The aim of this questionnaire was to adjust and refine the project for future action, taking into account the feedback and suggestions that students and the lecturers provided.

2.1.5 Project dissemination

Lastly, during Phase 5 three specific actions related to the dissemination of the project were implemented: a specific seminar designed for all lecturers in Universitat de València in which the participating lecturers in the project shared their impressions, suggestions and reflections about integrating the SDG in their classroom practices, a scientific conference about SDG applied to different contexts (Law, History, Foreign Language Acquisition, Psychology, etc.) and a student conference organised by the participating students.

3 RESULTS

Out of the five specific objectives designed initially for the project “Writing for Sustainable Development: Promoting the reflection on SDGs through literacy activities in the university environment”, four of them were achieved:

1. To promote the Sustainable Development Goals in the overall university community, both students and lecturers.
2. To develop the students’ and lecturers’ capacity for reflection and expression in order to promote their personal and mental growth. Indeed, expressive writing removes the barriers that make writing less accessible to both the students and lecturers - particularly for such complex topics such as the first five SDG.
3. To increase the students’ participation in the teaching routines, class organisation and activities, thus improving effectively their performance and results, promoting student-centred learning environments where students are eager to receive both group and individual feedback.
4. To carry out a workshop for lecturers in order to disseminate the contents and results of the project, as well as both a conference where the scientific results obtained will be presented and a student conference that will take place in October 2019.

Finally, due to time constraints we did not manage to achieve our goal number 5: to publish a book containing all critical-reflexive activities and students’ works as examples, in order to promote the 2030 Agenda goals through engaged pedagogy. Curiously, one of the most repeated suggestions via the undergraduate students’ surveys for improvement was to organise a creative writing contest in order to make the project and the SDG visible.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Along these pages we have intended to show our commitment to involving the students, lecturers, professors, and rest of stakeholders in our university in joint initiatives aimed at enhancing transversal competences such as critical thinking. Worried about the specific content of their module, lecturers tend to neglect transversal competences, while it is indeed those transversal competences that will allow our future graduates to work in teams, assess the norm critically and become professionals able to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and scenarios.

The project we have presented was a very ambitious attempt to approach the first five SDGs by means of creative writing. It involved two different campuses and a diverse range of degrees and
modules, not to speak of the different teaching styles and epistemological beliefs of the lecturers involved.

As we have mentioned in the introduction of this work, one of the greatest challenges in higher education these days is completion and dropout rates ([11], [12], [13]), something that could be addressed through initiatives like the one we present here. Studies on school abandonment at all stages of education confirm that segregation, current mechanisms of attention to diversity, and the lack of innovation in teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices are the three major factors explaining the processes of success, failure, and abandonment in schools.

By offering university students a non-coded writing space for self-expression without specific demands framed under the SDG umbrella, it was much easier for them to show themselves, to express their concerns and fears but, above all, their interests and their mental abilities. By opening this creative space, we gave attention to diversity while fostering the abovementioned transversal competences.

These creative writing exercises opened a space among the students (and their lecturer) that allowed them to break schemes and reinforce the positive Pygmalion effect ([14], [15]). Our methodology, therefore, offered a tool to build positive relations, detect and apply different skills and abilities and take action in order to change the paradigm and make a better world, dismantle old beliefs, and addressing the lack of involvement and responsibility for their own learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project “Writing for Sustainable Development: Promoting the reflection on SDGs through literacy activities in the university environment” (Escribir para el Desarrollo Sostenible: Promover la reflexión sobre los ODS a través de actividades de lectoescritura en el ámbito universitario) was funded by Universitat de València (Spain), grant number UV-SFPIE_GER18-954065.

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