

ENTER STUDY DAYS 2014 – HOW TO USE THE ENVIRONMENT TO ACHIEVE INNOVATIVE COMPETENCES – A NEW VISION FOR EDUCATION

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Abstract. The article is a summary of the ENTER Study Days 2014, organized by the international network of educational institutions working in the field of teacher training in the field of agriculture, forestry, horticulture and related subjects. The Study Days took place in Stoas Vilenum University of Applied Sciences, located in Wageningen, The Netherlands.

The participants shared good practices and experience with their colleagues from foreign countries. They visited three educational institutions in the Netherlands and acquainted with different innovative teaching methods.

Keywords: innovative learning environment, ENTER, vocational education in agriculture, international experience

What is an innovative learning environment? Is that the place where students or future teachers can learn innovative competences? Which are the innovative competences people need in the XXI century? Do we need a new concept for education that would lead to substantial changes in schools all over the world?

These were the main questions that challenged the participants in the international event ENTER Study days 2014, which took place from April 23 to April 25 in the Stoas Vilenum University of Applied Sciences, located in Wageningen, The Netherlands. The main focus was the theme “How to use the environment to achieve innovative competences”. There were 40 participants from EU countries, Turkey and Ethiopia. They represented universities, vocational high schools and private companies. Most of the institutions are members of ENTER, but the forum was also open to participants that are not members of the network.

The study days were organized by the international organization “European Network for Learning and Teaching in Agriculture and Rural Development” (ENTER). This is European association of educational institutions working in the field of teacher training for secondary and higher vocational schools of agriculture, forestry, horticulture and related subjects. Its main goal is to help participants from

different European countries to exchange professional experience, knowledge, skills and pedagogical methods in green, rural, agricultural and forestry education and research. The study days are a regular event for ENTER – they are organized once every two years and are hosted by a different member state. Previous ENTER study days took place in Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Dijon (France) and Cordoba (Spain).

The 2014 program of the study days was very intense and included parallel sessions with presentations, interactive workshops, excursions to innovative learning environments, various discussions and a General Assembly meeting. The activities were a thrilling international experience for all participants. “After the end of the study days several people shared that they were inspired by the topics and the interaction with the other participants. I was thrilled to see so many happy faces and smiling people, which clearly means we achieved a great success.”, commented Ing. Jan-Willem Noom from Stoas University, the main facilitator of the study days.

After the opening speeches on the first day of the conference the participants went on a guided tour through the new building of Stoas University. Built in 2013, it has unique architecture, and it is also energy efficient. Round-shaped and with a big spiral staircase in the middle, the building looks quite different in comparison with traditional universities. There are many classrooms and laboratories with high level equipment, but also places where students can work on projects or homework, or even exercise. That makes Stoas a great example for the main theme of the study days – the influence of the environment on the learning process.

After the tour the participants took part in parallel sessions with presentations on the topic ‘How to study in innovative environments’. The groups focused on the environment in classrooms, institutions and businesses. The presentations showed learning methods and good educational practices from different countries. The program continued with parallel interactive workshop sessions on the topics “From educational vision to school building”, “Learning preferences”, “Knowledge creation” and “Ecological intelligence in a game simulation”. The first workshop was particularly interesting. The participants met Edith Winkler, the architect who designed the building of Stoas University. They shared with her their thoughts on the building itself and the different places in the university – rowing machines where students and teachers can exercise, a modern iron desk with tablets at which a group of four students can work, moving desks, a corner with pillows where students can work together and a massive conference table with different chairs. The architect shared the idea behind every piece of furniture and every choice of colour, and how they influence people. For example, a massive oak table would help students concentrate on a specific topic. The different chairs around it represent the different roles every participant plays – the leader would sit in the most solid chair, and a person who hesitates a lot would sit in stool. After the workshops, the attendants had plenty of time to discuss the workshops and their impressions from the Study days.

The most exciting part of the program was the excursions to different educational institutions in the region near Wageningen. The participants could choose among

three destinations: Groenhorst Barneveld, Greenport Venlo and CAH Vilenuim University of Applied Sciences in Dronten.

Groenhorst Barneveld is a vocational college which offers courses on animal care. One of school's departments is for training of veterinary nurses. The main concept the teachers adhere to is "learning by doing". The school has an extraordinary campus on which 2 000 animals live. After the visit many participants shared that the school campus looked like a zoological garden. By learning in this environment students become really close to animals and learn efficiently how to take care of them.

The first task for every freshman at the school is to pick an animal and take care of it for the whole course of study. That way students learn that caring for an animal is a full-time job, because they have to take care of their pet even on weekends and holidays. The staff members of the school supervise how the animals are taken care of and help with advice when necessary. The animals are also used in practical lessons once the students have mastered the procedures on animal mannequins.

The training area of the school is approximately 750 m² with a pharmacy, reception area, consulting rooms, operating theatres, an x-ray room, a recovery and a dental room. Practical lessons are conducted in groups – the maximum number of students in a group is 16. All of them have to follow strict rules for personal safety, discipline and work efficiency.

During the course of study students have to complete practical assignments without direct intervention from a supervising teacher. They usually work in groups and learn to work independently.

The second excursion destination for ENTER study days participants was Greenport Venlo. The school is an example for innovative educational vision and has a unique model for education. The students have regular classes only two days per week. During the rest of the week they work on projects in groups or individually. An important part of the innovative learning process in the school is the new role of the teachers. They are perceived as coaches who support the students, not as lecturers who give them all the information and expect them to learn it by heart. The teacher-coach is a person who assists with the learning process, but the student learns from different sources on its own. Because of that, student motivation is very important for this new educational approach – if the students are not motivated, they would not work efficiently by themselves and they would not perform well on their assignments.

The school works closely with companies from the region which work in gardening, agriculture or horticulture. The business partners give various assignments to the school and as a result students work on real projects. For every assignment students form a group and divide the work – they choose one of the students for a team-leader, another one for a financial manager, etc. They have a deadline by which they have to organize their work process and complete the assignment. They do most of the work by themselves, but they can address questions to a teacher from

the school or to a representative of the company that assigned the project. If the work is done well, the school receives remuneration from the business partner.

The school has been using this curriculum structure for two years and so far they have had very good results. The maximum benefits of this new learning model are expected to be reaped after several classes graduate successfully and start working.

The third group of ENTER study days participants visited the CAH Vilentum University of Applied Sciences in Dronten, an institution for higher professional education in the field of agriculture that offers bachelor and social degrees, as well as master courses. There are a total of 17 000 students, and 150 of them are from foreign countries. The university offers 9 programs for international students. There is also “a double degree” in International Food Business– a joint program with a university in Canada. Students spend half of the course in the Netherlands and the other half in Canada. All programs are practically and professionally oriented. The groups are small and professors pay individual attention to every student.



The environment in the university is unique – the main building is the biggest greenhouse in Western Europe with a height of 23 meters. Two smaller buildings with wood-covered concrete floors and stone walls are located inside the greenhouse. There are various classrooms, a library and large study areas, where students can work on their

projects. There are lots of plants that make the space very comforting. The main idea of the architect was to create sustainable, economical and eco-friendly building. It is meant to be a place where students can feel at home. The campus has a big greenhouse and a yard with various flowers and vegetables, as well as a dairy farm.

The education at Dronten University is based on the philosophy that students have to be active in the learning process. They have to produce the knowledge themselves and acquire the competences they need in order to easily find a job after graduation. According to the university statistical data, 95% of the graduating class find a job or continue their studies at another institution. The university has good connections with companies in the agricultural sector. Every year the students have an internship at a private company. Also, business representatives come to the university as guest lecturers.

After the excursions the participants had a workshop during which they analyzed the environments and the learning methods they had seen. They discussed the positive and the negative sides of the innovational approaches and shared what methods they could use at their home institutions after the end of the study days.

The General Assembly meeting took place on the last day of the program. At the meeting the members of ENTER made an important decision regarding the future of the organization – they elected the new board that will be in charge for the next two years. The newly elected president is the main facilitator of the study days in the Netherlands – Ing. Jan-Willem Noom from Stoas University. His first challenge as a president is to coordinate the ENTER members to draft and approve an official document that would state the policy, goals and activities of the network for the next two years.

Traditionally, the board of ENTER has 5 members. The new vice president is Jiri Votava from the Institute of Education and Communication of the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, Czech Republic. The first general secretary is Tonya Georgieva from the Agricultural University in Plovdiv, Bulgaria and the second general secretary is Francisco Ortiz Berrocal from IFAPA in Cordoba, Spain. Beate Kralicek from the University College for Agrarian and Environmental Pedagogy in Vienna, Austria will continue to be the treasurer of the organization. The first decision of the new board was that the next Study days will be held in Prague, Czech Republic, in 2016.

After the General Assembly meeting, the participants discussed ideas about future joint projects funded by the European programs Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 and COST. The discussion will continue during the next board meeting in Vienna.

Here are some comments from the participants at the end of the study days that demonstrate the importance of the practical application of the acquired competences, the benefits of working on international projects and the advantages of using innovative methods in education:

Ing. Jan-Willem Noom, Stoas Vilentum University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands:

In the future ENTER will continue to organize events like the study days and the ENTER study groups. These events are a very important tool for all partners to keep in touch and to learn from each other. In addition, we need to think about projects focused on communication skills and cross-cultural competences. We live in a global world and it is very important that people are open-minded and that they understand each other's background and culture. These are fundamental competences all teachers and teacher trainers should have.



Beate Kralichek, University College for Agrarian and Environmental Pedagogy, Austria:

ENTER helped me connect with colleagues from different countries who work in my field. At first I was surprised that there were so many people who worked on environmental education and tried to empower their students to learn about ecology or environment. Such international exchange has great benefits, because keeping in touch with colleagues from all over the world, I know that we could exchange good practices and work together on joint projects. Such collaborations are particularly useful for our students, because they give them opportunities for international mobility.



Assoc. Prof. Tonya Georgieva, Agricultural University, Bulgaria:

I'm pleased with the participation of the Bulgarian partners of the ENTER network. 4 lecturers from the Agricultural University – Plovdiv and 5 teachers from agricultural high schools had the chance to see the newest trends in agricultural education and share their experience with colleagues from foreign countries. Now we have inspiration and know what we need to do in order to work better, so we need to hurry and take action!



Pekka Kalli, Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Finland:

I believe that Europe needs improved educational systems based on a new philosophy. We need a new generation of teachers that would change the mind-set of our countries' young generations. Societies have changed rapidly and our educational systems should focus on skills such as teamwork, planning, communication. Students



would not be able to acquire these competences if teachers continued to use the out-dated pedagogical methods.

Marcel Robischon, Humbolt Universiaet, Germany:

In the 21st century we definitely need a new generation of teachers. I really like the innovative concept of a teacher-coach. In my opinion, a teacher should not just train the students, but train with them.

Still we have to consider that people are different and the teaching methods have different effects on each group of students. We cannot apply one universal teaching method to everyone, even if the method on its own is innovative.

Francisco Ortiz Berrocal, The Andalusian Institute of Agricultural and Fisheries Research and Training, Spain:

Agriculture in Europe is very important for all countries. For most of them it is the basis of the economy. Despite the fact that nowadays people often forget about farmers, we need to pay more attention to them. The academic staff at my institute works closely with farmers on many different topics. We train them in the newest trends in agriculture and we do research in fields that are important for business development. That is how science directly supports the industry. I believe that science could also directly support education, for example in the way that our institute supports teachers by giving them access to the latest educational techniques and agriculture-related knowledge.

We have to find out what competences the future teachers need and give them all the necessary tools for providing high-quality education.



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