

Issue topic: International perspectives on social education

PAPER

Paper

What if Comenius had stayed home?

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The phenomenon of internationalization is almost inseparably connected with the existence of universities. But this connection is still complicated. These were universities that had counted on mobility and firm internationalization since the Middle Ages, and which strongly supported male religious orders (especially Franciscans, Dominicans and, in the modern period, Jesuits). The quality of education was directly related to the ability of the university to function in a more cultural environment of intense exchange. It was the universities that built the phenomenon of humanism in the modern sense.

At the same time, from the very beginning of their existence, we can also see the present danger of inevitable closure and segregation. In the example of the Czech university (now Charles University), this struggle with diversity and openness can be seen primarily in two historical moments. The first is the edition of the Decree of Kutná Hora in 1409. Thanks to it, the university became truly “Czech”, which meant putting the university in a provincial state and leaving a large number of students and teachers of “foreign” origin to relocate to Leipzig and other foreign universities (Nodl, 2009). The importance of the university was not restored until around 1654, which meant that it took nearly 250 years to heal the wound.

This is a time in which internationalization is predominant. It is not so important to earn a degree but rather to gain international experience, linking ideas and experiences from different parts of Europe – gain experience. For example, Nicolaus Copernicus worked at the Jagiellonian University in Poland, Bologna, Padua and Ferris. Nowhere did he finish his studies. This was not about his inability to complete his education – this approach to studying, emphasizing the experience of diversity, ends at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Charles University’s second isolation disaster occurred in 1882, when the university was divided into Czech and German parts. The result was a lower quality of both newly established universities (although the Czech university was much worse off) and, above all, lower overall access to modern science and current trends. It is no coincidence that the German (international) part at this time included personalities such as Albert Einstein, Ernst Mach, Christian Doppler and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. The Czech part was financially and personally weak (because this part of the university was lacking in prestige) (Dvořák, 2016; Úlehla, 1988).

It seems that somewhere in the DNA of the university, there is a need for internationality and interconnection. This is a prerequisite for the quality of education. Still, it is regularly associated with the idea that inboarding is not an appropriate form of cultivation of quality personalities, and that quality is not guaranteed by nationality and language homogeneity, but by heterogeneity.

So what is so tempting about the closure of universities that they are subject to this activity? We believe that this is a combination of fear of open competition and loss of security; the inability to work bravely, and perhaps particular thoughts, limit what we do. On the whole, it does not matter whether these feelings are manifested by stubbornness in the international curriculum or by insisting on absolute “field purity”. I believe that this is a specific manifestation of nationalism (Šíp, 2019), seeking simple answers in a complex world without having to work and leave the comfort zone.

In this study, I will work with the term “internationalization of the curriculum” as defined by Betty Lask (de Wit & Leask 2015; Leask, 2015): learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a study program. Josef Mestenhauser emphasizes that “the most common

approach to internationalization is to add information to the existing curriculum” (Paige & Mestenhuser, 1999, p. 502). But merely adding “something” to the curriculum is not enough. The process of internationalization is connected with a more significant change in the whole knowledge environment.

I use the term “international curriculum” for the final stage of the curriculum, as a certain ideal that has not yet been achieved in education, but to which we are heading. We see the same difference, for example, in the commonly used term “learning society”. However, this term is also commonly used to refer to specific courses or educational products for internationalization.

Small-scale research about internationalization

In the autumn semester of 2019, I taught, along with several of my colleagues, a course designed for all students of the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University (as compulsory elective course), which students from other faculties could enroll in. Of the total number of 106 persons, four were from the Faculty of Informatics, one from the Faculty of Medicine, Education, Economics and Administration, and 98 from the Faculty of Arts. The course was called *Life in Cyberspace: A Guide to Survival*. During the semester, students discussed many sub-themes, including the changes that education has undergone in connection with the advent of technology in the last thirty years. The students were first-year students, so at the time of writing the test, they had had one semester of college. Students in the final (written) test answered several questions intended for independent reflection. There were always 20 questions in the test. One of the items they answered was:

“How does internationalization work in your field of study?”

When I asked a student for the test, I expected to offer many answers, to leaders from mobility, through field changes, topics, international research, knowledge pooling or perhaps a broader field of experience that is reflected in science and teaching.

Students' answers were almost unified into a short solution, *“Importantly, we can go on Erasmus”* (in many variations), only occasionally accompanied by the mention of English as a new Latin, the availability of online resources, or foreign lecturers. In other words, they reduced the whole phenomenon of internationalization and its impact on specific scientific disciplines to the equation: internationalization = mobility. On the one hand, this simplification or reduction shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what the whole process of the internationalization of curriculum or science itself is; on the other hand, at least 90 % of the students were able to name at least one aspect of internationalization in the test. It was also a time of demonstration that students know about Erasmus (or mobility in general).

This is the end of the answers. The only exception were students of the Faculty of Informatics, who emphasized that their entire study was international and that there was no such thing as national informatics. All program comments, variable names, programming language commands and all relevant literature, were all in English. They were the only ones who could associate internationalization with the very essence of science and the curriculum of the field they study. Indeed, it is no coincidence that this faculty has also been including compulsory courses in English for a long time, and all competitions for teaching positions at the Faculty of Informatics are offered in English. In my opinion, this is partly a discipline, but primarily a cultural grasp of what university education can (or should?) look like.

In this example, a small-scale research (the research analyzes more than a hundred responses to the open question. It is no longer entirely insignificant data). I would like to show three aspects of internationalization that relate to my university. But at the same time, I think they have a wider outreach... The first is a certain optimism that only students who did not write (almost) did not know anything about internationalization in general. This is a topic that is so strong among first-year students

that they are willing to pay attention to it, at least perceiving its practically available form in the form of Erasmus+. I think that this is good news, and it is possible to build on it.

The internationalization of the curriculum is something that implies cultural transformation, something that cannot be arranged through sets of visits and arrivals to (and from) a foreign university. It is a cultural transformation that the university itself must go through; this is shown by the admirable work of Jiří Zlatuška, Dean of the FI. Without people from culturally different backgrounds becoming an integral part of research teams, lecturers and students at the same time, all efforts to internationalize are minimal.

This is what I believe the internationalized curriculum is about – the ability to honestly and openly form a community with others working and thinking in a different language and cultural context. Yes, we must consider that this cultural change will not be quick or painless. We meet with many personalities who still believe that their scientific field is cultivated only at the home university (or in the Czech Republic), and that something like foreign interaction is seen as something extra, something that hinders human development and is unnecessary.

The idea that there is no valuable international cooperation in a particular area of research suggests a certain professional deficit rather than reality. However, I would like to point out that this is not purely their fault – as Fasora and Hanuš show (2010, 2019), the main problem of higher education in 1989 was not just the professional profile of lecturers (1990 saw a generation of academics working for many years in boiler rooms and gatehouses), but absolute locality. The closure of Communist Czechoslovakia resulted in a closed mindset. Its impacts can be traced even now – from the methods of working, research topics, curriculum structure and teaching methods. Even regular competition and intrigue, which are unfortunately common in our faculties and departments, are related to the fact that the only goal we are able to target is excellence within the institution, i.e. the essential locality of thinking, which lacks the ability to cooperate.

In this respect, “new” departments and disciplines have a specific advantage, although of course they also carry part of this heritage. The critical challenge of internationalization is – in my opinion – precisely this abandonment of the locality (to be the most significant Czech expert in the eschatology of Comenius does not mean anything if we are not able to compare it with broader international research).

All internationalization efforts will, therefore, have to be lined with this cultural thought change, which will lead to a really gradual opening up to the world, not only on a formal but also a practical level (Mittelmeier, Slof, & Rienties, 2019). Working with someone who is a competent expert and who is also linguistically or culturally different is a benefit that we cannot miss.

The third important area that emerged from my research is the fact that students perceive the possibility of going on Erasmus more intensively than the presence of students coming to the university. International students (at least students from the Faculty of Arts) do not see. To a large extent, they are concentrated in separate courses or are managed by the central International Office. We deprive our students of the experience of homogeneity, cultural context and linguistic change. The impact of such a strategy is evident – we need to teach Erasmus students separately and run a few, and it is challenging, tedious, ungrateful and expensive. Students who come to the university also have a limited benefit.

This process is referred to as Internationalization at Home (Janebová, 2008, p. 67–68). Jos Beelen reflects this approach through Knight's interpretation as follows: “Internationalisation at Home (IaH) was introduced as a concept in 1999. In the particular setting in which it was introduced, IaH aimed to make students interculturally and internationally competent without leaving their own city for study-related purposes (Crowther, 2000). In the original setting in Malmö (Sweden), there was a marked emphasis on intercultural aspects of the teaching and learning process. This was facilitated through strong links with local cultural/ethnic groups. Knight (2008) elaborates the concept of IaH and describes a wider focus, in which liaisons with local cultural and ethnic groups are but one of the

elements. She distinguishes “a diversity of activities” and mentions a number of them in addition to cultural liaisons: curriculum and programmes, teaching/learning processes, extra-curricular activities, and research and scholarly activity. In Knight’s view, internationalisation of the curriculum is one of the aspects constituting IaH.” (Beelen, 2011, p. 251). The aim is to exploit local diversity for education. It is not always necessary to just look outwards; It can often be useful to work with a different mindset based on multiculturalism or internationality, gained through the experience of difference.

Internationalization at Home, this relatively new concept of internationalization, still follows the same thought pattern. The key is to connect the knowledge, people and minds. This joint interconnection and sharing is then a fundamental building block of humanism and a constitutive element of the university's meaning. The question is not whether universities should support universal internationalization – only how they should do it. Without internationalization, no model of the university exists, and ultimately neither general humanity nor the development of humanity. Isolation is, as I said before, the shortest way to nationalism; according to Teilhard de Chardin, it is even the way to death (Teilhard de Chardin, 2007).

I believe that a substantial part of the fear that such joint learning is not possible is odd. All students at the university are able to communicate at least at the B1 level in English (or another language that is compatible with the field – for example, Romanesters in Spanish, German students in German...). This is a requirement of both language examinations and a reflection that the state maturity guarantees this level. Subjects in English will surely be more challenging, but will undoubtedly help students. As far as teachers are concerned, a substantial number of them are published in English, and habilitation procedures are also carried out in English, which means that there should be no room for ignorance of the language. There is undoubtedly the presence of fear, but it is something we should learn to overcome through education and internationalization of the curriculum.

Indeed, the Netherlands is an example of the fact that in a relatively short time, universities can be fully internationalized and thus capable of international quality and cooperation. This is not to say that the Dutch path is the only possible one, and hassle-free, but I believe that where there is a clear decision for change, there will also be a rapid institutional transformation. Universities are not nearly as rigid as one might think.

From connectivism to the international curriculum

These reflections on the international curriculum outlined above need to be broadly reflected. Of course, there are multiple ways to do this. It must be said beforehand that the considerations we have made lead to a considerable blurring of the borders between international and multicultural. The two concepts are different, but in the context of university education they lead to a very similar phenomenon, in which it is complicated to differentiate.

In 2007, George Siemens formulated the principles of connectivist educational theory, which could, in many ways, be a new frame of thought for our thinking. We can analyze some of our research findings through the theory of connectivism by concept Siemens (Siemens & Conole, 2011).

First, connections and not the nodes themselves are crucial to knowledge and learning. This view mostly underlines what we have mentioned in the context of the necessary cultural change. Only when we can build a high-speed connection with people who are culturally distant from us can we really get to know, that is, to cultivate, science and education at the highest level. In this respect, internationalization is becoming something at the very centre of the educational process, not an additive activity among many others.

At the same time, this view can help to model and build all activities that are associated with the activities of ordinary international offices, from short-term internships to trips for the whole semester or year. The aim should be to expand, deepen and differentiate the social network of specific participants in education.

At the same time, Siemens emphasizes the temporality of knowledge – cognition (and not even education) is permanent, but gradually changes over time. In order to be truly useful, the internationalization of education must be carried out continuously. A single trip makes sense, but is only very limited. The aim must be an absolute continuity in networking, constant verification, testing, and questioning of one's truth and beliefs.

The first connectivists (in addition to Siemens, Downes, Kop and Cormier) built an online course based on the idea of a relatively small curriculum that is offered to many people who connect, work together, and evaluate each other's work (Goldie, 2016; Saadatmand & Kumpulainen, 2014; Wang & Chen, 2018). This model has been set up for online learning but can easily be implemented in hybrid learning. That is a model in which a heavily internationalized curriculum makes it possible for different people, who know each other from the online (or offline) world, to connect and interact.

We believe that one of the highly underrated topics in the field of internationalization (and this is something we cannot adequately report at the university level) is working in the online environment. Of course, this is not the only component heading towards internationalization, but it is an extremely substantial component and, to some extent, little reflected. We need to learn more about communicating through social networks, building virtual science teams, working on regular correspondence with the international community, and many other aspects of life in cyberspace. The fact that the first connectivists were able to find a model of the easy interactive interconnection of different people through technology can be incredibly inspiring for us as well. We can only extend their purely online path to other areas of possible social interaction.

What if Comenius had stayed home?

Let us now consider what would happen if Comenius did not travel all over Europe but stayed home. The first is the comeniological grasp, which emphasizes that the purpose of travel is to strengthen the wisdom within yourself and others. Travelling (internationalization) is, therefore, one of Comenius's forms of education, namely symmetric education. If we have talked above about the frequent segregation of Erasmus students, then it is an apparent failure to fulfil what this means of education should bring to the university. It is also an irreplaceable activity (Kluge & Schnabl, 2019; Souto-Otero et al., 2019). While Comenius is about improving man, Comenius's curriculum is always integrating, never separating education from the general state of man. The aim of foreign stays is undoubtedly the cultivation of the human spirit. That is why Erasmus programs have a tremendous educational potential, which can sometimes accompany the reputation of less educational activities – but it is about transforming a person as a cultural, social and religious being.

This change of being, social and personal development is essential. If, we focus on the quality of programs and their economic efficiency, we must not succumb to the reductionist tendency — changes in the personality of a person whose life attitudes and experience can be significantly stronger and more profound. At the same time, we leave aside the question of the extent to which we can work with this component of internationalization in real university 'operations'.

The second paradigm is what I referred to as cultural transformation. Comenius's example can be a useful guide in this area. He gradually travelled through many states – from the Czech Republic, through (repeatedly) Poland, Hungary, Sweden, Britain, and to the Netherlands. Comenius undoubtedly retained his integrity and his scientific program. However, at the same time, he managed to find a place where he came to gain practical knowledge and impulses for his work, and was open to the critical discussion of cultural otherness (see the famous interview with Descartes). Everywhere he created, but also maintained an extensive correspondence (Patočka, 1998).

If Comenius had “stayed at home” because of his project of rectifying humanity through the project of transformation of the Czech school, no one outside the Czech lands could adequately understand his philosophical and pedagogical ideas and concepts (now we are ignoring the key historical fact that his emigrations were mostly forced by political circumstances). What made him a scientist of

extraordinary importance was the ability to interact with an ever-new cultural situation, the need to re-explain and cultivate some ideas, to rewrite, and to add more and more arguments.

The work of Comenius is excellent in that it adequately reflects what we have worked hard to take as an international curriculum after many centuries – with new ideas, themes and challenges, certainly. We should not refer in the least to the fact that everything has already gone through and clarified Comenius. This is certainly not true. The importance of internationalization arises in that it completely changes the nature of scientific research and education, forcing us to be better, more precise, more comprehensible and, above all, to abandon the idea that we can do something in science ourselves. Science is a collective work, as is education.

Comenius's work is specific in that it is based on active international contact and cultural exchange. His early studies at the University of Heidelberg influenced him through his discovery of Nicholas of Cusa (Burton, 2019): a renowned philosopher and theologian, from whom he absorbed, all his life, the ideals of the world as a labyrinth, emphasizing balance, working with numbers and symmetry as a fundamental element of the structure of the world. If Comenius had remained in the Czech lands, this discovery of resources could never have occurred.

Another comeniological example is his work on pedagogical works that draw on the tradition of encyclopedists (Tomlinson, 2017). When he returned to Bohemia in 1614, he realized that there was no general Czech encyclopedia in the local environment. This project would be modified many times later. But what I perceive as essential is that foreign experience, based on the fact that education and science without encyclopedic systematization cannot function and fulfill its "remedial role", was crucial.

All his life he entered into ever-new environments. It seems that because of his experience of the international context, he perceived the need to think of universal ideas describing the whole world and humanity as a whole. Maybe that's why he did so more intensively than his contemporaries. This is how his Latin textbooks were created – *Orbis sensualium pictus* or *Janua linguarum reserata*. They were inspired by the idea that education is a universal principle of world rectification (Subbiondo, 1992). Comenius sees these books as a specific illustration of how global order and values can permeate the whole society. They aimed to create not only a prevailing thought (philosophical) basis for all knowledge, but also its academic grasp, which would lead to the possibility of easy study wherever a person might be.

The meeting with Descartes was also significant in terms of the structure of arguments and thoughtfulness of Comenius's entire work. It is Comenius, who, as a relatively older man, longs for knowledge of new things and wants his ideas to be linked to the modern thinking of his time. He does not want to leave them as a local point of interest but seeks to integrate them into the whole world. The important thing is that even though he and Descartes missed their thoughts, this meeting enriched him and influenced his work (Floss, 1972; Harries, 1998).

We can conclude that it was the well-thought-out, personally-lived internationalization of the personal curriculum, as a life program, which played a fundamental and crucial role in the formulation of perhaps the most extensive and systematic pedagogical work in modern times. It is the personal internationalized curriculum, as sort of a person's own timetable of being, that is something that can undoubtedly act as a powerful stimulus for everyone's own "scientific operation".

Josef Mestenhauser and the ideal of an international curriculum

However, for the international curriculum to work, one more thing is needed in addition to the general ideals. I would like to conclude by mentioning the attitude of Josef Mestenhauser (1998, 2002), a principal theoretician and practitioner of international education. The key to making such a project work is the widely understood ideal of humanity. Only if we can still see a person in the other, with his infinite value and potential, can we make a meaningful journey on the path to science and education. These are the means of cultivating being, the cornerstone of humanism.

“One of the roles of international education is to ensure access to the largest knowledge base possible and to focus on the utilization of that knowledge in practical situations. If the cognitive map of our faculty and students is ethnocentric, then people think that the knowledge they do not know, in fact, does not exist. There is sufficient evidence that our students, both undergraduate and post-graduate, are not being educated well enough to produce knowledge through research, and that they receive only the minimum exposure to international subjects.” (Mestenhauser, 2015, p. 4).

I consider this idea essential for two reasons. First, it points to the fact that the ideal of humanism contained in intercultural and international education is not merely an ornament or something unnecessary. This is not an extra job, but an investment that returns clearly and correctly. If we want to make progress, we cannot realize it in a homogeneous bubble. Internationalization is thus tangible and beneficial, has a place in the organization of the university, and provides clear benefits of a material and immaterial character (Mestenhauser, 1976). In the conception of Mestenhauser, humanity (Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004, p. ix) pays off economically.

The second reason is methodological — it shows why internationalization is necessary. The world in which we live is becoming increasingly complex. No simple problems that science can solve seem to exist. Unless scientists can structure their cognitive maps comprehensively, interculturally, they cannot be good scientists or teachers (Mestenhauser, 2002, p. 165–168) — the time when it was possible to identify one person who was responsible for the discovery of Newton's second law of motion (Isaac Newton) or the general theory of relativity (Albert Einstein) is gone. We do not know any particular “inventor” of the Samsung Galaxy A8 or the Tesla Model 3. No single one exists. Knowledge is structured in teams and has a shared form. The current problems are too complex for one person to handle (Černý, 2020).

If the idea of the university is to build knowledge, then it must accept the fact that education is of a community character, formed in teams in which diversity is an essential asset. In the Czech environment, there is a joke: “school is the only place in the world where you are punished for cooperation.” I think this joke is an example of the impact of a curriculum based on isolation and a too narrowly conceived phenomenon of competition. Only where there is cooperation and openness, and where diversity is valuable, can a real knowledge of complex problems arise. Only in such a place does humanism take shape instead of nationalism.

At the same time, I believe that this Mestenhauser, a graduate at the beginning of the modelled Charles University, clearly saw and knew that internationalization of the curriculum cannot be an external matter; it must permeate the whole cultural environment of the school in order to create a new ideal of humanity. Perhaps differently from what Comenius perceived in the 17th century, or something other than Mestenhauser could see in 2015, but one that would reveal the right depth and ideal of humanity.

Conclusion

I would not like to see the above considerations taken to mean that standard internationalization activities are of little, or undue, importance. I had the opportunity to attend a fascinating several-day workshop at the University of Minnesota (by Eva Janebová, Mestenhauser Fellow and Gayle Woodruff, University of Minnesota), which showed very nicely how the local international office worked, but also offered a lot of real experience. Similarly, Erasmus, short-term internships, etc. are also extremely valuable.

I believe that international education, openness to another culture, language or social context is a crucial element that ensures precious learning. Education, that develops humanity and democracy. It allows us to see the problems that we could not otherwise see and efficiently find solutions. This is an essential message of the pedagogical theories of Comenius, Mestenhauser and Siemens.

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