"This course was a silent revolution":
Transformative Potential of the Community-engaged Learning in Higher Education

**Bojana Ćulum Ilić, Associate Professor
bojana.culum@uniri.hr**
University of Rijeka
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Education

**Brigita Miloš, Assistant Professor
brigita.milos@uniri.hr**
University of Rijeka
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Cultural Studies

RESEARCH CONTEXT & QUESTIONS

1) What are the positive outcomes of community-engaged learning for students who attended the course, in the context of its transformative potential from the perspective of contributing to changes in student biographies?

1) Are the narratives of students who participated in the course those of disappointment or empowerment, continuity or change, and have students developed a tendency to modify (their) habitus towards the radical one?

Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality

Community-engaged learning

service-learning

➔ **New elective course at HEI**
➔ **First of its kind in a national framework (subject + methods)**
➔ **Created collaboratively by HEI & NGOs**

Turner's concept of *liminality* (1969)

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1977, 1984) + Crossley's *radical habitus* (2003)

Analytical framework to discuss the biographical impact

Mezirow's theory of *transformative learning* (1981)

Qualitative research Participatory research

* students' voices
* searching for meanings attached to experiences

NEW COURSE AS AN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

COMMUNITY - ENGAGED PEDAGOGY - novelty in national HE

course as a **LIMINAL** situation with the potential for **TRANSFORMATIVE** learning and **HABITUS** change

Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality

HEI & 3 NGOs partnership

Community as a classroom - 6 mentoring programmes NGOs + HEI

course as a transgressive 'interspace' in an otherwise traditional HE teaching field

UNIRI | YUFE

COMMUNITY - ENGAGED LEARNING AS A NEW COURSE PEDAGOGY

➔ intentional integration of the curriculum and (student) commitment in the community with a strong reflective component

➔ carefully designed in cooperation between university teachers and representatives of organizations and institutions in the local community

➔ putting curricular concepts in the context of real life situations and community problems

➔ focus on students' critical thinking, their own civic role, and developing their sense of community

➔ empowering students by requiring them to analyze, evaluate and synthesize theoretical concepts in the process of designing solutions to various (social) problems identified in the (local) community

➔ (only) by integrating community-engaged model into HE, does student learning become social, emotional, cognitive, multicultural, and interhuman (Simons and Cleary, 2006)

➔ numerous studies point to the positive contribution

➔ positive impact on personal development and social responsibility, positive social attitudes, civic action, political awareness, acceptance of different attitudes, level of self-efficacy and a sense about integrating desired changes into the local community

UNIRI YUFE

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Turner's concept of "liminality" (1969)

➔ a phase that has few or no characteristics of the previous or next phase

➔ the state of 'in-between', the state of interspace in which one passes from one experience to another

➔ in liminal 'space and time' individuals are deprived of their usual identity while on the verge of personal (or social) transformation

Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (1977, 1984) + Crossley's "radical habitus" (2003)

➔ set of symbolically structured, historically inherited, enduring, and transferable dispositions adopted during socialization that guide individual action, perception, and interpretation of the world

➔ the unconscious and internalized 'map' of the path to action with coded beliefs, social class and action strategies, which becomes a modus operandi for action, which the individual continuously regulates and (re) defines

➔ "radical habitus" - propensity for further activism (Crossley, 2003)

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1981)

➔ critical thinking and self-reflection as to consider own experiences, beliefs derived from and their changes

➔ transforming problematic frameworks of reference to make them more inclusive, less discriminatory, more reflective, more open, and more emotionally capable of change

➔ institutional educational context - three situations lead to transformative learning - (I) experience, (II) critical thinking, and (III) reflection on experience accompanied by a substantiated discussion

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

UNIRI | YUFE

12 students attending the community-engaged course for the 1st time

Students heterogeneous in the context of disciplinary areas

METHODS
SAMPLE
ANALYSIS
(Feb & Mar 2020)

students share two realities: (I) first such experience in their educational path + (II) never been exposed before to the course content & methods

* Dedoose software
* coded data subjected to a thematic analysis

* qualitative approach
* participatory research
* constructivist theoretical perspective

* focus group
* semi-structured interviews
* creative qualitative research procedures

e.g. writing a 'farewell letter' to their mentors in collaborating organizations (Mason, 2006; Richards and Morse, 2013)

➔ course has significantly contributed to the acquisition of new knowledge and a range of different skills

"I really feel a lot smarter after this course (laughs)... but really, before enrolling I didn't know anything, maybe some basics, but I'd rather say that I was very ignorant... now I feel completely different."

➔ students empowered not only for the acquisition of new knowledge & skills, but also for its further transmission (e.g. lectures in high school, preparing a radio show, meetings with local authorities and other relevant stakeholders)

➔ significant role played by the mentoring programmes and all designed tasks of a reflexive nature (demanding tasks but contributing significantly to students' understanding and analysis of own attitudes, behaviour)

➔ students acquainted with various gender and gender-based social phenomena of inequality, discrimination and violence, gender stereotypes and socio-cultural patriarchal norms

"A lot of very concrete knowledge and especially terminology throughout the entire duration of the course and in such detail that it encouraged me to talk about these topics outside our group. It soon became clear to me that I really knew what I was talking about, there was some certainty in my new knowledge."

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

(New) competencies as an experienced change of participation in the course

"What the mentors have done with us in this course is truly amazing. The amount of knowledge they presented to us and helped us to acquire is immense. Not only that, we were continuously encouraged to further disseminate this knowledge, to believe in ourselves and to be active citizens who contribute to the betterment of society."

"Reflective diaries, and especially joint discussions and commenting on the diaries, helped us to upgrade our knowledge and encouraged us to express our own views, raising our confidence for critical reviews of the phenomena that were the topics of the course, our conversations and analyses."

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

(New) 'I' as an experienced change of course participation

➔ series of cognitive, emotional and value changes that students associate precisely with the experience of attending the course

➔ tasks of a reflexive nature enabled them to think critically about the current social problems related to the course, about themselves, their (dis)positions and the roles they have in the context of addressing these same challenges and social problems in the community

➔ experiences described as extremely significant, transformative, and in some cases emancipatory

➔ new, deeper and different personal frame of reference for considering the rights, challenges and difficulties of the LGBTIQ community and women's position in the society

➔ the course, and especially the mentors, empowered students for passing on the knowledge which they themselves had recently acquired - students speak in terms of empowerment, encouragement, and creating new personal missions

➔ transformative potential best reflected in the students' behavioural dimension and selected personal "battles" that they decided to wage with people - friends and family (*"hard core anti-gay roommates", "fathers who have backward attitudes", "grandmothers who just don't understand it at all"*)

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

(New) 'I' as an experienced change of course participation

"We learned a lot about gender-based violence, I was very intrigued by the topic and I want to continue to deal with it somehow... I'm very glad we had this experience because I feel like a much better and richer person."

"This course helped me a lot, my knowledge on these topics was equal to nothing; in addition to giving me such a corpus of new knowledge, it helped me to apply that same newly acquired knowledge further in my life and understand that I am an individual who now has that knowledge and that I should act accordingly... maybe to transfer that knowledge to someone else... and to change things for the better... "

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

'New' student habitus narratives - empowerment and change

➔ reflexivity continuously highlighted by students as very significant

➔ attending the course was intellectually, mentally and emotionally demanding and intense for students, as they were constantly questioning themselves, facing their own attitudes, beliefs, relationships with other people, known and unknown concepts, their old and new 'I'

➔ course as a transgressive 'interspace' in an otherwise traditional higher education teaching field (at least in the national setting)

➔ 'post-teaching' habitus of students - *"I feel completely different after this course"*

➔ the biographical impact of this (higher education) teaching experience on students reveals **narratives of empowerment and personal change**

*"I'd like to describe this course as a silent revolution
that awakened in us all a desire to become loud."*

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

'New' student habitus narratives - empowerment and change

"I had no idea that enrolling in this course would be one of my better life decisions. It was turbulent, it was a semester of effort, learning, tears, laughter, socializing, growth (...) so much new knowledge of so many levels regarding gender topics, but also about interpersonal relationships, communication, emotions, psychology, upbringing and much more. I think we all met "spheres" of ourselves that we didn't even know existed. I really feel like a better person after this course, richer, somehow greater. I feel like another I has grown."

"This course completely opened my eyes about some things and situations that take place in our society and as if it sent us a message to fight and be true to ourselves - we are the ones who construct reality for ourselves, and regardless of the number of rejections we may experience in life, we should be persistent and fight for the rights of all those at risk."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Turner's concept of "liminality" (1969)

Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (1977, 1984) + Crossley's "radical habitus" (2003)

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1981)

➔ attending the course proved to be a liminal, transformative and changing habitus experience + tendency for radical habitus

➔ students experienced the community-engaged learning model as a liminal space in an otherwise traditional and poorly participatory HE teaching field

➔ students took serious responsibility for their own learning process and engaged in a series of meaningful educational activities and reflexive assignments to gain deeper insights into the (new) curricular concepts, placing them in the context of contemporary society

➔ students' learning highly influenced by the *significant others* - mentors from CSOs

➔ course's legacy to society - a group of young people who were encouraged by this experience to seriously consider their own (dis)positions and forms of future professional and civic engagement in the fight for a more just society

➔ 'post-teaching' habitus expresses a strong desire for future engagement mission of their new 'I'

"What we started here needs to continue, but we need to continue in some other forms and I think it's our necessity now to see and figure out how we can continue this meaningful engagement in our lives."

GREAT BIOGRAPHICAL IMPACT

UNIRI | YUFE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!