Chapter 1
Multicultural Approach to Learning History and Geography at School in Europe

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ABSTRACT

MIH project (Multicultural Interdisciplinary Handbook: Tools for Learning History and Geography in a Multicultural Perspective) is a Comenius Multilateral Project funded with support from the European Commission that was developed from 2009 to 2011. Conceived from the idea of educating lower and upper secondary school pupils in a process of construction of a European identity by involving them in the culture of other countries, the MIH project meets this need by providing new methodological and ICT tools that could help teachers and pupils plunge deeper into both the cultures and languages of other nations via their history and geography. This chapter describes the multicultural approach that has oriented the project development and MIH’s most significant results, and opens the way to introduce a European perspective in history and geography school curricula and classroom activities.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957, the growth of the European Economic Community created the conditions to foster a discussion on the need to build a European identity, which includes all Europeans beyond a common economic framework. However, throughout the years, at the signing of both Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and Lisbon Treaty in 2007, the European Union has seen how differences in cultures, languages, and history have made this task difficult. Sometimes we wonder whether, at the individual level, there is something like a real “European consciousness” and, if so, what such feeling may mean: is there a need to identify ourselves with a cultural entity or just to share a unified political status? Following Welsch’s (1999) concept of multiculturality, it could be said that the European Union is a multicultural scenario where we can experience “the problems which different cultures have living together within one society.” The challenge—he writes—relies on changing the traditional conception of cultures as autonomous spheres or islands to achieve a better coexistence and cooperation, overcoming classical cultural boundaries in a “transcultural” form and sketching a different picture of the relation between cultures. From a theoretical point of view, we can agree with Welsch’s approach on the concept of culture and his definition of transculturality, and we may be willing to take a step ahead of interculturality and multiculturality; from the practical point of view, we must be aware that, in everyday reality, the issue of coexistence between cultures evolves step by step by achieving partial goals, with the support and feedback provided by new educational and cultural actions.

Several projects at the European Union, within the framework of the lifelong learning programme, for instance, were born under these premises and have successfully dealt with the multiculturality/interculturality approaches; they have also been focused usually on one specific dimension or aspect regarding multiculturality/interculturality and have proposed problems and challenges to be solved by social frame approaches, teaching approaches, CLIL approaches, etc.

MIH project belongs to this kind of projects and its mission was to explore the diversity of both national history and national cultures building processes, so as the different ways in which we are representing ourselves and other European countries, by learning history and geography at school. If we accept, according to contemporary hermeneutic paradigms (for example White, 1987; Ricoeur, 2004) the premise that a cultural identity is based on these three entities: facts (reality), memory (sources, beliefs, and ideas), and communication (cultural artefacts and historical narrative), MIH project intends to explore and to work on the common past, i.e. the community of communication, by analysing “curricula” and textbooks of history and geography in use in European secondary schools and by providing useful tools for teaching activities aimed to foster a multicultural dialogue in classroom. This will help teachers inform students about the differences in terms of historical narrative (and hence, cultural perspectives) of the same historical facts when they are studied under the light of such differences present in history and geography textbooks of the EU countries. As a consequence, students will increase their critical thinking approach by acquiring consciousness of the European Union as a multicultural entity.

The present chapter will present in detail the MIH project describing its main outcomes, the digital modules design and production processes (Section 2), the teacher training courses development (Section 3), and the handbook for teachers’ structure and objectives (Section 4), that are developed according to the perspective of the multicultural and interdisciplinary approach that has guided the project from its beginning (Section 1). Finally, some conclusions will be drawn describing how the progress made along the project life could open new challenges to continue the educational purposes of MIH (Section 5).