

In the footsteps of Comenius

Visualise a continent with a myriad of nationalities (defined by different languages and approaches/perspectives) aiming to achieve common goals through their educational systems. With such a mind-boggling scenario, the need for a transnational educational network, which harmonises the various kinks across frontiers, is obvious - the answer to this is Comenius.

Comenius focuses on the first phase of education, from pre-school and primary to secondary school, and it is addressed to all members of the education community in the broad sense. It adopts a holistic approach in aiming to enhance the quality of teaching, strengthen its European dimension and promote language learning and mobility.

Apart from the academic aspect, Comenius also emphasises certain important issues: learning in a multi-cultural framework, which is the cornerstone of European citizenship, support for disadvantaged groups, countering under-achievement at school and preventing exclusion.

Why the name Comenius?

The name Comenius could not be more aptly coined. A century before the Enlightenment, Comenius (1592-1670), born in what is today the Czech Republic, was a theologian, philosopher and pedagogue who believed that only through education could man achieve his full potential and lead a truly harmonious life. Comenius is considered by many to be one of the founding fathers of modern education who also strove incessantly for human rights, peace between the nations, social peace and the unity of mankind. In a nutshell, Comenius was an anachronistic figure with his ground-shaking visions, just as prodigies like Leonardo da Vinci were before him with their inventions - Comenius epitomises Europe's multihued cultural heritage.

The mission statement of the Comenius project sets out a highly ambitious karma: "Comenius seeks to help those learning and teaching in schools to develop a sense of belonging to a broader and outward-looking European community - a community characterised by diverse traditions, cultures and regional identities but rooted nevertheless in a common history of European development".

The overall objectives of Comenius can be summarised as follows:

- to contribute towards the improved professional development of school staff;
- to encourage transnational cooperation between schools and
- to promote the learning of languages and intercultural awareness.

These aims, in turn, straddle over a whole range of other collateral objectives, such as promoting the teaching of minor languages, promoting the use of information and communication technology in school education and in the training of staff working in this sector, encouraging innovation in pedagogical methods and materials, disseminating on a transnational level tenets of good practice and innovation in the management of schools, developing and disseminating methods for combating educational exclusion and school failure, promoting the integration of pupils with special educational needs, enhance awareness of Europe's cultural diversity and buttress the fight against racism and xenophobia, among a myriad of others.

The tools employed to achieve such objectives are mainly two:

- to promote cultural exchanges between different educational institutions of teachers and students alike and
- to promote communication between different schools of the different approaches and strategies adopted in implementing Comenius guidelines.

To whom does Comenius appeal to?

The array of interests that Comenius targets is vast and ranges from pupils of schools to university students and from future teachers to established university lecturers on an individual basis and from pre-primary schools to universities, teacher-training institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private and public entities, research institutions, etc in the kettle reserved for institutions and organisations.

The Comenius project is stratified into three different tiers:

In School Partnerships (Comenius 1) schools can apply for support for three types of projects: School Projects, Language Projects and School Development Projects.

Comenius 2 tackles staff training, encompassing the development of curricula, teacher training courses such as in-service ones through enhanced teacher mobility, pedagogical materials for schools, etc.

Comenius 3 aims to establish transnational networks between schools.

Overall responsibility for the implementation of Comenius lies with the European Commission. It is assisted in this task by the Socrates Committee and the Socrates School Education Sub-Committee, consisting of representatives of the member states.

The operational management of the programme is carried out by the Commission in close cooperation with national authorities, with the assistance of national agencies, designated by the national authorities in the participating countries in order to facilitate the coordinated management of the programme and a technical assistance office at Community level. The national agency in Malta is the Socrates Office within the University of Malta.

Last year, Malta, together with Iceland, participated in a project coordinated by Italy and titled: Salute e benessere: l'alimentazione.

This project aimed to provide a greater understanding to pupils of what it means to live and eat healthily while raising their awareness about different food and recipes which are available worldwide. To illustrate this theme, the students created a musical entitled We Are What We Eat which was presented to the school and to parents. During the project, students were encouraged to exchange information by e-mail between all participating schools. A book of recipes is being completed as a final product of this project.

The first Comenius week was held in Brussels (November 24-27, 2001). Acting on its large success, a second one was held in December 2003, with the crowning moment being the balloon-releasing ceremony - the epitome of unity between different European cultures and nationalities under the education cap.

As an example of a Maltese educational institution, SAC Sixth Form in Birkirkara, embraced the appeal to participate in Comenius 1 which is reserved for school partnerships. Schools joining the "fray" need to complete a Comenius Plan, which is meant to assist the educational institution in the long-term planning of its European/international cooperation activities, whilst also serving as a reference document for the national agency when assessing applications.

In the compilation of its Comenius Plan, SAC Sixth Form gave a brief outline of the school and an overview of the school's involvement in the previous Comenius project (2001-2003) and in other EU mobility programmes which involved various exchange activities, such as: Convegno di Storia (annual three-day seminar for history and culture and justice issues); a history project with an Italian school; a youth exchange programme with Northern Ireland and youth exchange programme with colleges in Milan and Empoli, Italy.

In a detailed project calendar spanning from 2004 to 2007, the school set out the following milestones to achieve, all outlined on a monthly basis:

September 2004: Preparation of a school-presenting video explaining its role in the national educational system and the establishing of communication with other partner schools via "Learnwise" virtual learning software, web pages, emails, etc.

November-December 2004: First project meeting in London to disseminate progress to date to other partners, followed by a write-up on the meeting.

January 2005: Work to start in earnest on the chosen burning issue.

February - April 2005: Head teacher meeting in Berlin, followed by teacher/student exchanges. Various "issues" will be compared and contrasted.

April 2005: Visits and project research completed and research write-ups, videos, dossiers, CDs, etc are disseminated to partners.

May 2005 - September 2005: Writing of reports on the first project year.

Year 2 salient points: The launching of a photo competition and creative writing competition on project topics; updating of web pages; teacher and student exchanges.

Year 3 salient points: Understanding of EU system and its role; preparation of resolution to EU parliamentary session; invitation of MEP to inform about procedures; training in public speaking and presentation of arguments - crowning moment will be the holding of a mock European parliamentary session in Strasbourg or Brussels by all participants.

The choice of the burning issue brought quite some brainstorming sessions in order to identify the areas most pertinent to the local Maltese reality. Two issues finally came out of the hat: waste management and over-development in the Maltese islands.

SAC Sixth Form staff believe that such themes are the greatest environmental morays in our islands. Momentum has already built one, with students attending the waste management seminar organised by WasteServ on March 3 where they were briefed on management