

Learning@Europe



European Value: Identities in Europe

July 4th, 2007



HOC - Hypermedia Open Center (Lab)
Politecnico di Milano
Electronic and Information Department

phone: +39 031 332 7389
fax: +39 031 332 7365
www.learningateurope.net

European Value: Identities in Europe

“In questioning the self-evidence of such concepts as nation building, national belonging and national identity we contributed to pave the way to a broader European point of view. In comparing the different paths toward and across modernity of the various European countries, we showed that that nation building, far from being a national achievement, is a broader European process linked to larger processes of socio-economic and political change. In bringing students to know more about each other country’s history, we stimulated them to reflect on the similarities of the processes of nation building and to consider Europe as a common frame of reference. In so doing the way is opened not only to a common European public space, but also to the sharing of values beyond the nation state.”

(Statement by the L@E scientific committee)

Learning@Europe contributes to the shaping of a European Citizenship in a number of ways:

- students acquire a deeper understanding of the historical processes that led to the development of their identity (national, regional, local)
- students increase their knowledge of the identities of peers from different countries, developing attitudes of curiosity, acceptance and tolerance
- students are helped to understand the complex process of acquiring new identities, and to accept the new European identity, which can coexist with pre-existing ones within a notion of multiple identities.

The concepts of ‘*nation*’ and ‘*national identity*’ have assumed in Europe a peculiarly strong meaning, deeply affecting political dynamics. The terms “Country” and “Nation” have become two almost equivalent concepts, at least for the non-specialists.

Most European countries developed through a historical process that led to the formation of a **Nation-State**, i.e. a political organization (State) corresponding to “*a community of people sharing language, traditions, ethnic roots and often religion*” (Nation, as defined by A. Martinelli, coordinator of L@E Scientific Committee).

These historical processes, that also generated national identities, have **common aspects** in every European country, together with certain characteristics that are **country-specific**.

Over time, the definitions of “nation” and of “national identity” evolved in every country, influenced by several other identities (regional, local, religious, linguistic, etc.).



Participating in Learning@Europe, students gain a **deeper understanding** of the historical processes underlying their **own national identity**. After the conclusion of the Experience, a Polish student declared: “*our nation has a very interesting history*”, and a Latvian student commented: “*I am a bigger patriot than I thought*”.



In addition, they get a chance to learn **basic information** about the development of **other identities across Europe**. This is an absolute novelty to most of them, since history curricula in European schools (with few exceptions) lack international and comparative dimensions: while digging deeply (often with stereotypes) into the issues of one’s own national identity, they often neglect to provide even the basic facts about other European identities. When asked whether he had learnt anything about other countries, an Italian student commented: “*yes, because it isn’t an argument of usual lessons*.” An Estonian student found it “*quite interesting to learn other cultures*”.

Furthermore, L@E provides conceptual tools to understand some essential characteristics of **historical processes**, such as their arbitrariness, their complexity, and the impossibility to present “*either the past or the present in an excessively simple way*”, as explained by B. Yun Casalilla, one of the experts interviewed. The format of the contents – interviews to historians of different European countries – is particularly effective, in that students realize that there is no “fixed picture of history”, and no “absolute truth”, as history textbooks suggest. As a Spanish teacher reported, “*they have realized that some historical events can be considered from different perspectives.*” The contents focus in particular on the processes that have led to the modern configuration of Europe.


In Learning@Europe, the process of understanding and learning takes place in a **collaborative fashion across national borders**.

Collaboration with foreign peers provides motivations for proudly explaining one’s own national identity to other students (as shown in the excerpts on the side), and enriches understanding: Latvian students reported to have “*heard opinions of other nationalities about our own [country]*”.

At the same time, collaboration raises curiosity (and acceptance) for other identities and other ‘histories’.

At the end of a L@E experience an Italian student wrote: “*i have found that some nations that i didn't know are very interesting*”, and two Latvian students commented: “*i feel friendly to other nations*”, “*yes, because people are very friendly*”.

From the students' homework



The **Greek** flag symbolizes liberty as well as our religion because of the cross it has on it. Its colours represent the sky (white) and the sea (blue). Also the unity of the nation as well as freedom and our ancestors who brought us that. The Greek flag has five blue lines for the “ε – λευ -θεε – ρι - α” and four white lines for the “ή – θα – να – τος”, which means “freedom or death”

Our [**Polish**] flag is two colored (the white stripe is above and the red stripe is below). The white color is an allegory of purity and the red one –courage and bravery.



The flag is a symbol of our national identity. These colours are deep-rooted in our folklore, there are plenty of red-white ornaments in traditional costumes. Today red-white flags are always present at sport meetings. It expresses our pride of these national colors.

Indeed, the very fact of working together (for completing the homework and winning the playful competition) with students of a different country leads to a **better understanding of different cultures**, different backgrounds, different life-styles, and at the same time to the “discovery” that students are not so different across Europe.

An Estonian student commented after L@E: “*I think people, in all Europe are the same*”; a Latvian student agreed: “*yes, we all are different but similar too*”, and an Italian student specified: “*we are all equal, but with histories and origins sometimes very different*”.

The combination of all the different factors, illustrated above, leads to the shaping of a better **European citizenship**: L@E does not take any explicit stance about the process of integration in Europe, but implicitly and de facto puts the students into a trans-national context, where borders and barriers become blurred. The underlying motif is that each one of us has several identities, and an additional one could be added: the European identity.

“Now I think that Europe is not only an idea but something concrete.”
(an Italian student)

“Before starting Learning@Europe, my students felt just French. Now they feel French AND European.”
(a French teacher)