ACTION LEARNING METHODS AND TOOLS USED IN THE ERASMUS GOODFOOD PROJECT- A STUDY CASE ON THE ROMANIAN RICH PICTURE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The present paper focuses on the usage of the Rich Picture as an instrument that stimulates participation, communication, negotiation and reflection among a group of students, in particular of the Romanian students attending the Intensive Study Programme designed within the Erasmus project: GOODFOOD- Good teaching practices in experiential learning for effective education in embedded food systems.
The main objective of the study is on the one hand to answer to some specific questions related to the production of a Rich Picture (RP) (what is a Rich Picture? why/when and who can use it? what are the conditions for producing a Rich Picture? what are the advantages and limitations of this tool?) and on the other hand to present the Romanian study case of producing the Rich Picture on an embedded food product, that is "Magiun de Topoloveni".
The answers to all these questions are based on the unique experience of the Romanian students of drawing the Rich Picture and they are approached from a methodological perspective.
The results of this study show that the Romanian students succeeded in producing a Rich Picture that included many details related to the stakeholders involved in the respective embedded food system (more exactly in the case of "magiun") and the whole process consisted in different forms of participation (storytelling, negotiation, reflection agreement) specific to the action learning approach.

Keywords: rich picture, action learning, teaching practices, storytelling, reflection, participation
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INTRODUCTION

Starting from the idea that any painting or graphical representation is the result of the human expression, we may say that Rich Picture falls in the same category, given the symbols, icons, pictures and short text that it uses.

If we look back in the history of humanity, we see that the first form of human expression were the paintings on the walls of the caves discovered in Europe representing the way people were living at the respective moment. These paintings date back around 38000 BC (Horn, 1998) and depict physical elements of their surrounding environment such as: men, animals and simple hunting tools.

The development of the written language happened at a later stage in 3200 BCE due to the Sumerians (2000 signs), Egyptians (hieroglyphs) and Syrians that produced the first alphabet comprising 22 letters which represented the starting point for the Greek and all the other western European alphabets.

This process of drawing before writing is a natural stage in the evolutionary process of the human beings. As children we all start by drawing the world around us according to the way we perceive it at the respective moment. However, immediately after we become familiar with the writing process, we give up on drawing and even feel reluctant at a later stage.

And yet, visualization techniques under the form of diagrams, charts, mind maps (Bulzan, 1992), road maps and rich pictures represent useful tools in education being initially addressed to those students whose learning style has a visual component.

Today, they are currently introduced in the action learning approach and are meant to develop and enhance key competences in the future specialists in the agrifood sector.

A Rich Picture is considered a graphical technique drawn by an individual or preferably by a group of persons and depicts a real-world situation at a specific moment.

It was initially developed as an integral part of the Soft Systems Method by Peter Checkland and his collaborators in 1980s in order to capture the "richness", complexity and multiple perspectives of the systems he was interested in. Soft Systems refers to the sort of

complex and 'messy' existences that we as humans live our lives through.

*"The end point of this stage in the analysis should be a picture of the problem situation, one as rich as can be assembled in the time available" (*Checkland et.al., 1980, *p. 281).*

The application of the Rich Picture was in action learning approaches, organizational development and counseling.

In 1994, other details are added to the definition of the Rich Picture, being considered ad-hoc drawings that cannot be considered "right" or "wrong", regardless the fact they are unstructured and have no formal syntax (Darzentes, Darzentes&Spyrou, 1994). They are artistic forms of expression that reveal a certain situation in a way accessible to everybody.

Later on, other aspects of the RPs were approached in several later works by Checkland (Checkland & Holwell 1998; Checkland & Scholes 1990; Checkland 1988; Checkland 1981; Checkland & Poulter 2006).

The aspects related to stakeholders and communities and the use of visual and diagramming innovative techniques have been in discussion in the Rich Picture literature (Deutz et al. 2010; Powell 1997; Pandey 2009).

Bell and Morse studied aspects of RP's application (Bell & Morse 2013; Bell & Morse 2007) and explored the connotations of its meaning in other contexts such as sustainable indicators (Bell & Morse 2012). In other studies, the same authors considered the Rich Picture as a powerful tool in participatory situations because it succeeded in the creating the proper context within which the participants felt comfortable to draw things that in other contexts they wouldn't mention or write (Bell & Morse, 2013). Thus, the Rich Picture is used to encourage groups to identify elements, connections and issues within a complex situation even if the final outcome doesn't represent an actual recording of all the discussions within the group.

The same authors provide detailed information on the usage of Rich Pictures (Bell and Morse, 2013b) and on how to approach their content analysis (Bell and Morse, 2013a), considering it a valuable learning method.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study explores and presents the usage of the Rich Picture, as a tool that emphasizes participation, communication and negotiation among the members of the Romanian student team (attending a Food Engineering – related study programme within the Faculty of Environmental Protection, University of Oradea) that have been selected to take part in the Intensive Study Programme proposed through the Erasmus project: GOODFOOD- Good teaching practices in experiential learning for effective education in embedded food systems.

Initially, the Rich Picture was part of the toolbox of a previous research project **Horizon 2020: Nextfood- Educating the next generation of professionals in the agrifood system (Grant agreement: No. 771738)** which had in view the improvement of five key competences: participation, dialogue, visioning, reflection and observation but it remained unexplored by the Romanian team at that moment. Because the GOODFOOD project includes two of the partner universities from the NEXTFOOD project, it was decided that Rich Picture could be one of the most efficient tools to be used in order to enhance the students participation in parallel with the on-line theoretical module that involved an individual approach. Therefore, the students were asked to produce a graphic representation of all the stakeholders involved in the selected embedded food system accompanied by the whole web of visible and invisible interconnections existent among these stakeholders.

In the case of the Romanian team, the Rich Picture was related to "Magiun de Topoloveni" embedded food system, a traditional sweet product made of plums with no added sugar having a thick consistency and being produced in any household in the past.

For the production of the Rich Picture, a short recorded course of fifteen minutes was uploaded on the platform of the GOODFOOD project where all the students, selected to take part in the Intensive Study Programme, could watch it for as many times as they needed. The course included valuable information on the characteristics, elements and reasons to produce a Rich Picture.

Figure 1. Contents of the on-line course

The course also included information on what is a Rich Picture and how to produce it step by step. A set of guidelines and many examples of the RPs produced in the NEXTFOOD project were provided for exemplification.

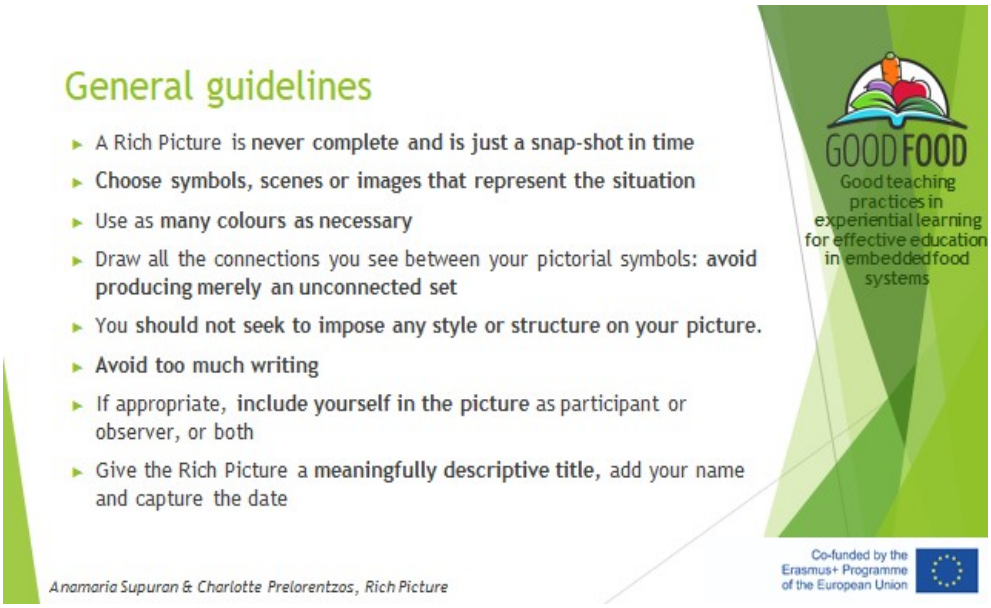

Figure 2. Guidelines for the RP production

At the end of the course, the task related to the Rich Picture was mentioned: "**Identify the actors of your case study (product), and their roles & links/connections/actions between them**".

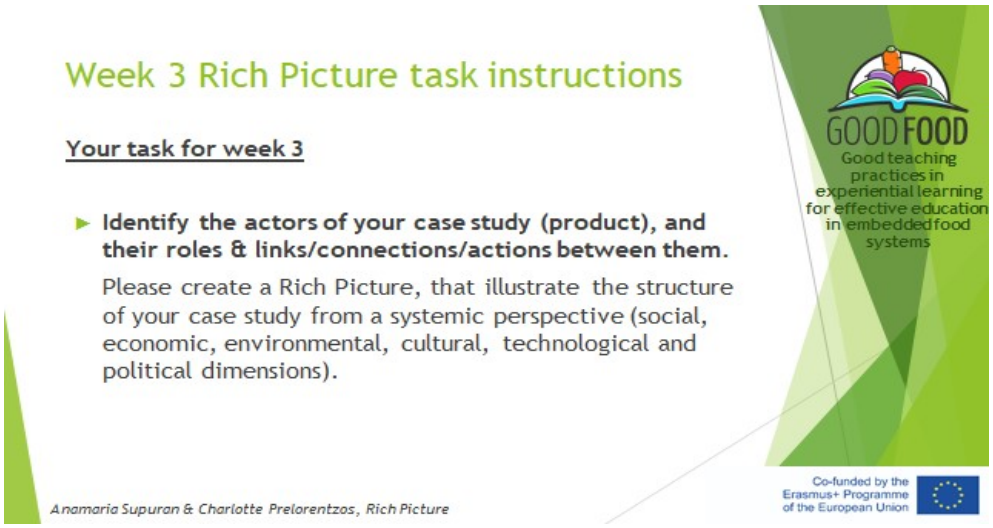

Figure 3. Instructions on the RP Production

The students also had the opportunity to post different questions related to the Rich Picture on the forum chat in case aspects in the course were not clear.

During the e-module, an on-line workshop was organized with all the students in order to make clear all the aspects related to the RPs and to answer to all the questions addressed by the students.

In parallel with the on-line module, the Romanian team of students organized three face-to-face meetings at the faculty where they had a brainstorming session on the "Magiun de Topoloveni" embedded food system touching subjects like: availability of the plums in different regions, factors that influence its availability (climate, soil, relief, varieties of plum trees), production process (domestic and industrial), stakeholders, etc.

The following two meetings were addressed solely to the drawing of the RP and there was a two weeks distance between the two meetings, time during which, the students collected more information on their embedded food product and thus, they could enrich the initial drawing with more details.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Romanian students started to work on the Rich Picture in week three (out of the six weeks of the whole e-module) when they could also attend the course in **Stakeholders – relational aspects within the food systems.**

This course was meant to support the students in identifying the right stakeholders related to their selected embedded food product and make them understand the existent relations among them.

The on-line workshop on Rich Picture was organized at a short distance after the task was given and all the students were invited to participate. The workshop was conducted by the two teachers who prepared the course in Rich Picture and they answered to all the questions received from the students.

Even if not all the students took part in the workshop, there was at least one representative from each team and they could present their work performed until that moment. Most of the questions made reference to minor aspects related to the richness or lack of details, colours, symbols or aspects meant to validate their ideas. The teachers reiterated the idea that there are no "good" or "wrong" Rich Pictures, fact that made them feel more confident with their work.

The two meetings that were organized with the Romanian team in order to start working on the Rich Picture, brought into discussion very interesting aspects related to their chosen product that is "Magiun de Topoloveni". Among the members of the team, there were students that already knew the traditional recipe of "magiun" and the production process from their grandparents living in the countryside. They even had photos with the whole process, and thus they could show the photos to the other members so that they were able to understand the process better. The opportunity created around the event of drawing invited the students to communicate openly and share personal information on their own experiences

connected with the tradition of producing "magiun" at home. During this phase, **storytelling** was one of the most important aspects of this process. Vivid memories related to their grandparents, the orchard from the countryside, the picking up of the plums, the traditional tools used to produce "magiun" and giving the kernels from the plums to the pigs were just a few examples of stories that made the students feel nostalgic and deeply connected to the chosen subject.

Figure 4. Group work for the RP production

The second phase of the process was to **negotiate and decide** on the elements that had to be included in the Rich Picture. The students reached the conclusion that there were aspects related to "magiun" relevant for them but not to those that could look at their Rich Picture, and thus they decided to exclude them (e.g. the image of the grandmother preparing "magiun" in the courtyard on an open fire).

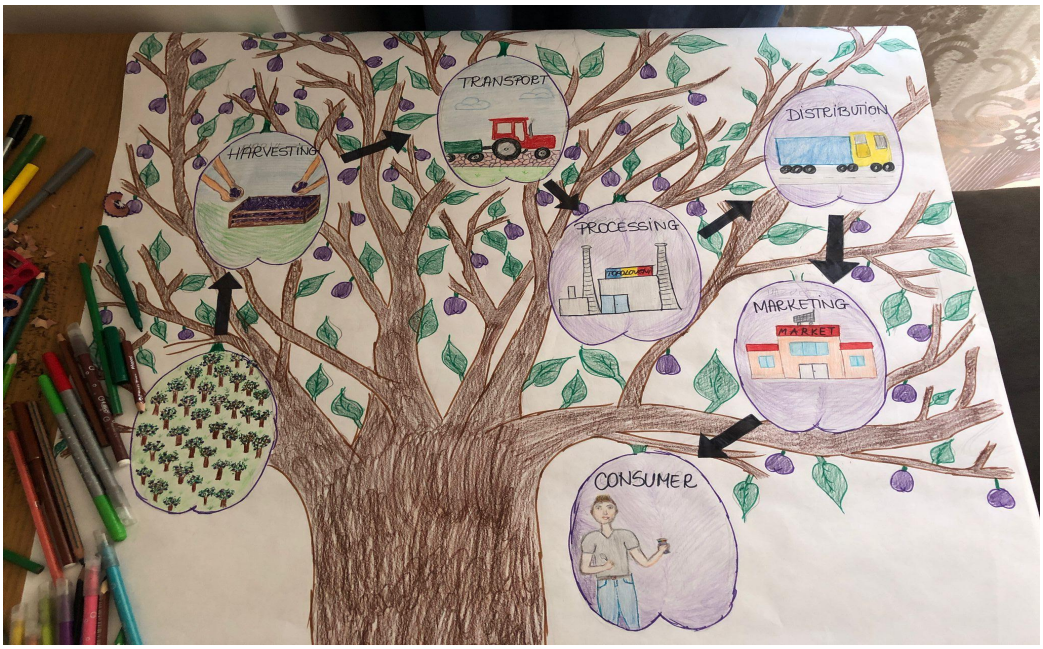

Figure 5. Intermediate version of the RP

Instead of presenting the domestic way of producing "magiun", the team decided to present the industrial process and the stakeholders involved in the food supply chain. Other common decisions referred to the style of the Rich Picture: "should it be artistic or not?" or "should it be coloured?" All the decisions made within the team, were accompanied by moments of **individual** and **group reflection**. Every reflection moment offered the team the opportunity to step forward in the process of completing the Rich Picture. Thus, the last meeting brought the final pencil strokes and the final outcome was agreed by all the members of the team.

Figure 6. Final version of the RP

CONCLUSIONS

The Rich Picture represented an integral part of the case study on "Magiun de Topoloveni" that stimulated the deeper understanding of the relationships among different interested parties within this embedded food system.

More than this, it was proved that a Rich Picture is a complex process that involves more stages of participation from the student's part: a personal stage of involvement represented by **storytelling**; **communication** and **negotiation** on certain aspects that are greatly influenced by social, cultural, economic and artistic factors; **reflection** and **agreement** on the final outcome.

Considering that participation, communication, negotiation and reflection are important elements of the action learning approach, we may conclude that the Rich Picture is a valuable instrument that shouldn't be absent from the toolbox of any teacher/facilitator that promotes experiential learning.

ACKNOWLEGMENTS

The present research was supported thank to the grant **Good teaching practices in experiential learning for effective education in embedded food systems – GOODFOOD - 2020-1-PL01-KA203-082209**, conducted by the University of Oradea.

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