The Web-based Lectures as Leverage for Developing the Sense of Belonging in the All-Russian Creative School-Contests

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Abstract - In modern Russia, the most gifted and motivated students of high schools usually enter the leading universities in biggest cities of the country, receive excellent education and usually never return to their native towns. A part of them finds jobs in abroad. As a consequence, the population of middle and small towns has been diminishing.

In 2017, the authors launched an All-Russian Web-based creative school-contest for school children "Portrait of your town". It is a delicate opportunity for the child or an adolescent to tell about the beauty and originality of her/his town, to find her/his sophisticated look at the outstanding or usually not noticed facets of her/his town. In 2019, the track "Say thank you" was included into this school-contest. Its participants are to realize what persons from their native towns have made a difference in their life. The analysis of the sketches submitted to this track shows that it supports and improves emotional intelligence of the participant, analytical and critical thinking, creativity, figurative thinking, the ability to think and act in terms of public good. It may be conjectured that a new way of contributing to diminishing the acuteness of the mentioned social problem has been found.

Keywords - creative school-contest; web-based lectures; emotional intelligence; student-self oriented learning model; soft skills

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern Russia, the most gifted and highly motivated students of high schools usually enter the leading universities in biggest cities of the country (mainly, in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg), receive an excellent education, and never return to their native towns and villages. A part of them finds jobs in abroad. As a consequence, the population of middle and small towns has been diminishing. This is one of the significant social problems in modern Russia,

In the beginning of 2017, the authors launched an All-Russian Web-based creative school-contest for school children "Portrait of your town"; it took place for the fourth time in January - June 2020. It is a delicate opportunity for the child at the age from 14 to 18 years to tell about the beauty and peculiarity of her/his town being for the child the place of living, to feel the own roots, to perceive herself/himself as a link in the chain of generations, to have a sophisticated look at her/his world and find her/his personal look at the outstanding or usually not noticed facets of her/his town - such facets without which, according to her/his opinion, the complete portrait of the country can't be formed. The technical support (Web-platform) was provided to our school-contest by the Association of Living Cities, supported by the Public Chamber of the Russian Parliament.

The most bright, beautiful thoughts from the essays of the winners of the school-contests 2017 - 2020 were presented at the first and second exhibitions "Country as an Orchestra" (March 2018 and May 2019) and at the exhibition "Portrait of the Country in the Hearts of Children" (July 2020) in the Federation Council of Russian Federation (RF) - the upper chamber of the RF Parliament ("it is called "State Douma"). The authors of the essays presented (partially) at these exhibitions were awarded by a Letter of Gratitude signed by a senator of RF (a member of the RF Federation Council).

In the beginning of 2019, a new track "Say thank you" was included into the school-contest "Portrait of your town". The diapason of ages was considerably expanded: it is from 6 years to 18 years. The participants are to realize what persons from their native towns have made a difference in their life, who has influenced them a lot in their choice of future occupation, who has given the model of behavior children would like to emulate. The first track "Say thank you" (February - June 2019) attracted the participants from 18 subjects of Russian Federation, including the subjects in Siberia, North and South of the country.

The participants submit the essays explicating their feeling of gratitude to the persons of the kind. Our first working hypothesis was that this track will be able to considerably contribute to developing in young people the sense of belonging to the native town. Then, after receiving an academic degree in a university, a part of young specialists will return to their native region or will regularly do something useful for their region.

The school-contest "Portrait of your town" has a methodical provision in the form of four written lectures posted on the Web. These lectures are prepared by the
first author of this paper and are oriented at the adult specialists (from a school or a library) helping children to prepare the essays for the school-contest. This interaction with an adult helps children and adolescents a lot to better explicate their feelings.

During last decade it has been broadly realized that education in knowledge society (or smart society) is to pay a particular attention to supporting and developing in the learners the significant, domain independent skills called soft skills [1], [2] or transversal skills [3], [4], first of all, analytical and critical thinking, creativity, out of box thinking, thinking and acting in terms of public good. The significance of creativity perceived by the world leading experts has been quickly increasing. In [5], the experts of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland published the list of top 10 skills for the year 2015 and a forecast of the similar list for the year 2020. It is sufficient to say that the position of creativity shifted from the position No. 10 in 2015 to the position No. 3 in 2020. The forecast of the WEF list – 2020 includes also new skills in comparison with the WEF list 2015: emotional intelligence (the position No. 6) and cognitive flexibility (the position No. 10).

Our second working hypothesis was that the school-contest "Portrait of your town" and, in particular, the track "Say thank you" will contribute not only to developing the sense of belonging but also to supporting and developing a number of significant soft skills.

II. THE PECULIARITIES OF WEB-BASED LECTURES UNDERPINNED THE SCHOOL-CONTEST "PORTRAIT OF YOUR TOWN"

Four lectures written by the first author of this paper and posted on the Web-platform of the Living Cities Association (see http://xn--80addedeo5catlj.xn--p1ai/shkola-konkurs-portret-tvoego-kraya/) are oriented mainly at the adults helping children to prepare home essays for the creative school-contest: teachers of primary, middle, and high school, the librarians, teachers of secondary education, and parents.

A. Choice of a Theme and Its Aspects

The first and principal discovery to be done by the participants of school-contest is to find a theme. A theme is something obvious or not obvious what individually defines a participant’s direction of idea, the deepness of a feeling, the peculiarities of the character, of the look at the world, inner freedom and dignity.

A theme may be the feeling of space, a river, sky, a bridge, an old building, restoration, a thing in a town’s museum, even the walk of the dogs across an embankment. To sum up, a theme may be everything what has left a bright semantic trace in their conceptual world’s picture and forced them to have a new way of viewing themselves due to an impression from their unrepeatable and wonderful town.

A participant makes a try to answer the question about what enhanced her/his emotional impression from what she/he has seen and, in this way, makes brighter the semantic trace from this emotional impression (i.e., it is comprehension). There are possible numerous ways of viewing and aspects of viewing, in particular:

- the contours (because a contour gives a more general look at a thing, enables us to philosophically think over something);
- the details (garnish or not garnish);
- the light (sunny, during a rain, during a snowfall, under electrical lightening, inner luminescence of a thing, reflected light);
- the encirclement of a thing (a background that may provide absolutely different meanings and feelings);
- color;
- the sounds (of dribbling rain, children’s voices, the singing of birds, the noise of waterfall, the violin of a street musician, etc.);
- what maximally attracted your attention and became a strong emotional experience starting the thought and images.

B. Developing Thought Producing Self of the School-contest’s Participant

An impulse to the birth of a bright idea can be given by a word, image, sound, impression in case there is the inner readiness to this moment. The fireworks may give an analogy of this effect. Suddenly emerging stars, seemingly from nothing, grasp the imagination and generate new, unexpected stars which are fading, each following the own logic of combustion.

It is necessary to prepare children and adolescents to the birth of an idea, to understanding of the fact that the brain is able to produce the ideas being different from the ideas of other people. A comprehensive attitude to the work of the own brain, understanding that, by means of speculation, i.e. of analysis, generation, finding analogies, it is possible to solve a problem, to create something new, to find a figurative expression of the own feelings and to build own life in accordance with own objectives – all this is a final and necessary condition of comprehending by the child’s the own thought producing self (this notion was introduced by the authors, in particular, in [6], [7]).

Successful children are thinking children being able to presume the existence of different world’s conceptual pictures possessed by different people, the ability to effectively process symbolic information, to metaphorically think, to clearly express the ideas, being able to wonder and to see, as Denis Diderot said, the usual in unusual and the unusual in usual.

One old English story tells about three workers which were building the north wall of a cathedral. They fulfilled the same work: put the bricks one on another. A passer-by stopped and asked each of them what he was doing.

- I am putting the bricks, - answered the first one.
C. The Significance of Using the Metaphors in the Text for Developing Children’s Creativity

The skill to find an image which helps to clearly express an idea is a great art. The scientists drew attention to the fact that modern language is very figurative. Figurative (or metaphoric) reasoning means establishing an analogy between two different domains. It is the ability of the brain to join non similar (at the first look) entities, to discover a certain connection between them, to present the things by means of transporting a meaning from one domain to another one.

The experience of successful combination of two different disciplines, mathematics and poetry, in one course delivered in late 1990s – early 2000s in the Technological University of Rochester (the state New York, USA) can be considered as an example of developing figurative (or metaphoric) reasoning for stimulating mathematical reasoning [8], [9].

The scientists showed that such kinds of disciplines’ combinations stimulate figurative reasoning in the process of solving mathematical tasks. As a result, the students demonstrate good results as concerns mastering mathematics and enjoy the learning of poetry.

The practice shows that the combination in one course of literature and painting and also of painting and psychology is successful too.

The use of metaphors in scientific papers, personal communication, presentations at international scientific conferences and other conferences helps to clarify the author’s point of view and angle of look underpinning the stated material.

A broad use of metaphors in the process of writing a portrait of the native town or expressing gratitude to a person who was able to make a difference in the author’s life will make the work for the contest more bright, interesting, and clear to the readers.

III. THE RESULTS OF THE FOURTH SCHOOL-CONTEST AND ITS TRACK “SAY THANK YOU”

A. General Information About the All-Russian Creative School-contest “Portrait of your town” and its Track “Say thank you”

The statistical results of the fourth creative school-contest “Portrait of your town” (January – June 2020) are as follows: the participants are from 24 subjects of Russian Federation, from West (Pskov) and North-West (Petrozavodsk) to North (Norilsk), Ural, Siberia, and Far East (including the island Sakhalin). 191 essays became the winners of the school-contest.

The exhibition “Portrait of the Country in the Hearts of Children” in the Federation Council of the RF Parliament (July 2020) consisted of 60 pictures containing the fragments with the brightest ideas from the works of the winners. 163 participants received a Letter of Gratitude from a senator of RF.

The analysis of the essays submitted to the track “Say thank you” has enabled us to construct an unexpectedly rich classification of the persons receiving “thank you” from the participants. This classification is as follows: 17% - friend; 15% - school teacher; 12% - mother; 10% - teacher of extra education; 10% - inspiring person; 7% - father; 7% - relatives; 7% - manager; 5% - grandmothers and grandfathers; 5% - unknown person; 3% - tutor; 2% - school employee. The constructed classification was used as a system of nominations.

B. Examples of Home Compositions

Example (analytical thinking). The 8 year old girl Kate writes: "One autumn day the parents led me to a ballet school. Yana K. became my teacher. She seemed to me being just, kind, and beautiful. She is teaching us good but rigorously. She wants everything to be OK in our life and that is why we are to undertake efforts. I've realized that it is necessary to make much efforts for achieving a result. I've realized that if one undertakes much efforts and works very much then the world and the people in this world will become better.

Thank you, my teacher, for evoking in me the belief that I will be able to cope with everything, and it means that I'll be able to do everything.

Example (empathy, mindfulness). A 11 years old girl Maria writes: “One spring day a young men opened a door of his car, intending to drive away. Suddenly he noticed a young girl who was crying, because her cat was unable to climb down to her from the top of a high tree. The young men reached the top of the tree, grasped the cat, and returned back with the cat. The young girl was happy”.

Example (empathy, thinking and acting in terms of public good). A 8 years old boy Andrey writes: "I would like to say THANK YOU VERY MUCH to my teacher Maria K. She is a very kind person and a person who is ready to help. One autumn day we with my class had an excursion in Kremlin. It was November, and it was cold. I lost my hat in school. At the moment when all the classmates were dressed and were waiting for me, I was looking for my hat, but all my efforts failed. Then my classmates started to help me to find my hat, but we failed to do it. Then our teacher gave me her hat and went on excursion without hat. Everything was good, we successfully went on excursion, and nobody from us became ill".
IV. THE SCHOOL-CONTEST "PORTRAIT OF YOUR TOWN" AS THE THIRD IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDENT-SELF ORIENTED LEARNING MODEL

It is possible to indicate an interesting interpretation of the school-contest “Portrait of your town” in the context of the achievements of modern education theory. During last decade, the peculiarities of knowledge society have created the need for a new paradigm of educational process. One of the most significant peculiarities of the kind is the necessity to change a profession several times during the working period of life.

Proceeding from broadly accepted role of emotional intelligence (EI) in professional and personal life, the authors suggested a new learning model (LM) called Student-Self Oriented LM (SSOL-model). It is defined as the model being beneficial for self-cognition and self-construction through the prism of the acquired knowledge and life experience [10], [11], [12].

The principal distinguished features of the SSOL-model are as follows: (a) it takes into account and bases on EI of the learners; (b) it aims at reaching cognitive engagement of the learners; for this, it proposes a conceptual learning environment instead of the environment based on mechanical remembering (it means addition of emotional color to the studied notions and, as a consequence, makes much easier the comprehension of these notions) [11], [23], [32].

The scientific literature describes two successful implementations of the SSOL-model. The first one is the System of Emotional-Imaginative Teaching (the EIT-system), based on the Theory of Dynamic Conceptual Mappings (the DCM-theory). Both this theory and the EIT-system are developed by the authors of this paper. The EIT-system is aimed at systematic development of EI, reasoning skills, sound creativity, figurative (metaphoric) thinking, language skills, and communication culture at the lessons of language - mother tongue and second language, literature and poetry in two languages (on the example of Russian and English), symbolic languages of painting, sculpture, garden-park art, classic dance. We have accumulated the 30-year-long successful experience of using the EIT-system in extra education in Moscow, Russia. Many aspects of the DCM-theory and the EIT-system are described, in particular, in the authors’ works [11], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [31], [32].

The DCM-theory and the EIT-system belong to the constructive core of cognitonics, or the science about the human being in the digital world [11], [19], [20], [22], [23], [32]. The authors organized as the co-chairs six international conferences on cognitonics in conjunction with the international scientific multiconferences “Information Society” (Slovenia, Ljubljana, Jozef Stefan Institute, October 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, see https://is.ijs.si/?page_id=903). Totally, the researchers form 25 counties participated with the papers in six international conferences on cognitonics.

The ideas and methods of cognitonics underpinned a number of educational projects in several countries, in particular, in Croatia and Macedonia [24], Croatia [25], United Kingdom [26], [27], and Mexico, United Kingdom and PR China [28].

In [29], the authors formulated the following expanded definition of cognitonics: it is the science about the trajectories of raising the human being to such level of intellectual and spiritual height where the scale of his/her personality becomes proportional to the scale of the digital world.

The second implementation of the SSOL-model is Art Cognitonics (AC) [11], [12], [23], [30], [32] - one of the principal branches of cognitonics. AC aims at tuning the EI of young children and adolescents with the help of well-known works of art. The goal is to create a bright semantic trace in the world’s conceptual picture of the learner corresponding to an idea explaining or illustrating a moral value, communicative situation, a situation of making a decision, cognitive process itself, the process of self-cognition and consideration, the seething cocktail of emotions, a way of viewing the world around, etc.

AC establishes the links between the objects, situations, processes, views of a person (a beholder) and the work of art that becomes a metaphor or a vivid illustration (vivid mental representation) of something the beholder is considering about. That is why the consciousness of the beholder receives a considerable impulse to developing the ability of establishing diverse analogies and consequently to finding a new look at a situation.

Example. For enriching the color of their canvases, the impressionists made use of what is known as division of color and optical blending. E.g., to represent a green meadow, they put little dabs of blue and yellow on the canvas which are supposed to be combined to form green in the eye of the beholder – a far more intense green than one taken straight from the artist’s palette. That is why it is impossible to understand the idea of a picture standing close to the canvas. We have to step aside and look at it from a certain distance to enjoy it and to have the desired effect.

We have the same situation in every-day life. “Multiple dabs, reflections” prevent us from grasping the sense of what is happening. As in case with impressionists’ canvases, we have to have a look at the situation from a distance, and distance in this case is equal to time distance. We need some time to better understand what has happened, and this will help us to cope with the situation.

Let’s consider the following principal factors providing the possibility to interpret the All-Russian creative school-contest “Portrait of your town” as the third implementation of the SSOL-model of educational process. As it was mentioned above, the main idea underpinned the creation of the SSOL-model was, while interacting with the learners, to take into account and to improve emotional intelligence of the learners.

We indicate a spectrum of the themes’ facets but not the theme. The children and adolescents participating in the main track of the school-contest are to ask the question about the existence in their towns of such
precious peculiarities that the portrait of the whole country would be incomplete without describing these peculiarities. Every participant of the track “Say thank you” is to ask herself/himself whether there are such people in her/his surroundings that the interaction with them turned out to be a defining experience for the participant. Children discover the delighting traits of character, the manner of speech, the ability to attentively listen to for a long time, etc.

After having delighted, a child or an adolescent is to critically have a look inside herself/himself and ask herself/himself whether she/he possesses the traits of the character delighted her/him and whether she/he wants to improve her/his character. The participants of the track receive the possibility to understand and to appreciate what they do know. We create a thought provoking situation which stimulates children and adolescents to analyze facts, to think over, to develop critical thinking (when a school girl or boy understands that she/he doesn’t possess an attractive trait of the character). The transfer of an experience from one situation to another situation contributes in many cases to developing cognitive flexibility.

V. THE GROWTH OF SELF-ESTIMATION IN PEOPLE OF USUAL, MASS PROFESSIONS. GOODNET

In every country, a great majority of people have the professions which don’t attract public attention so much. This applies, in particular, to school teachers, hospital workers, nurses, bus drivers, postmen, gardeners. Such people usually believe that nothing in the country depends on them.

The victory of a school girl or boy in the track ”Say thank you" becomes a thought provoking event in a small settlement or town. In many cases, the local newspaper tells about both the child and an adult being the hero of her/his sketch. As a result, many people in the country having usual, mass professions, have realized that they are able to make a difference for somebody at their working place. They become to be known in a small town or a village or in a district of a city. As a consequence, the self-assessment of these people increases. Children formulate new values; as a result, a new category of significant and distinguished people emerges.

Example (conciere). A 6 years old girl Vika writes: "It is monsieur Dima. He is a conciere in our house. Concierge is a man who defends us from bad people. Monsieur Dima is very kind. When I enter the home, I see him, and immediately my spirits are getting bright. Sometimes we are speaking, and sometimes he puts me on his shoulders and delivers me to the elevator. I am laughing. Monsieur Dima acts in this way, because he is kind hearted. Thank you, monsieur Dima, because you are kind and good".

The contest "Say thank you" has shown the significance for children and adolescents of the notion "a hero of our time". Simple people from their surroundings thinking and acting in terms of public good become such heroes.

The significance of the track can be better grasped in case we compare it with the WWW. The great peculiarity of the Web is that it reaches every family, every person (being not a very young child). The track "Say thank you" can be interpreted as a digital platform for explicating estimation and distributing good. Then the track can be called GoodNet - it reaches every family, connects the generations and receives a response in every heart. The track "Say thank you" is a platform where the demand, significance, and reality of respectable attitude to each other bridges the gap between generations, explicates and enhances intrinsic interest towards other people.

VI. CONCLUSION

The observations during several years are necessary in order to verify our first working hypothesis: the systematic participation in the school-contest “Portrait of your town” will improve in young people the sense of belonging to the native town, and it will contribute to increasing the proportion of young specialists returning to native town or native region after receiving higher education.

The analysis of the essays written by the winners of four All-Russian creative school-contests “Portrait of your town” convincingly confirms our second working hypothesis: this school-contest contributes to supporting and improving a number of significant soft skills: emotional intelligence of the participants, analytical and critical thinking, creativity, figurative thinking, out of box thinking, and the ability to think and act in terms of public good.

That is why there are the reasons to say about the creation of All-Russian digital platform helping both children and adolescents from various parts of the big country to develop a number of soft skills being precious both for professional success and personal life.

The planned next step consists in the attraction to the school-contest of the gifted children and adolescents from remote villages, in particular, from mountain and taiga villages. The purpose is to help gifted children and adolescents from the villages of the kind to increase self-assessment and to support and increase the faith in the own forces.

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