



Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation Project

„Transfer of experiential and innovative teaching methods for business education“

No. 2010-1-PL1-LEO05-11462

Case study

Laura at Panevėžys Juozas Balčikonis Gymnasium

The project has been funded with support from the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Case study was written by R. Alonderienė and M. Pilkienė from ISM University of Management and Economics, Lithuania.

The case study and information provided therein is for teaching and learning purposes only. Copying and distributions without authors' permission is prohibited.

Laura at Panevėžys Juozas Balčikonis Gymnasium (JBG)

Opening

As Laura Vilutytė¹ walked down the long corridor towards the Principal's office, the closer to his door the more nervous she became. She did not know why she had been summoned to his office. She suspected it was to review her progress at the school. Returning to Juozas Balčikonis Gymnasium² (JBG) as a teacher, the same school in which she had spent many happy years as a pupil, had been the culmination of her dreams, but in reality the first few weeks teaching had been the toughest challenge of her life.

Laura reflected upon the times she had walked down the same corridor when she was a student member of the school's Parliament. In those days it provoked feelings of nervous excitement, as the Principal, Raimondas Dambrauskas, was invariably supportive and keen to listen to her ideas. This time Laura was nervous, but nervous excitement were not the first words she would have used to describe her feelings as she knocked on the door.

After the usual pleasantries, Raimondas invited Laura to sit down.

"I have here a petition signed by every pupil in Year 10 that disturbs me. We need to discuss the substance of these claims. I am willing to help you, but I fear that I may have to take very serious action, if the claims are substantiated".

Laura could not believe what she was hearing. She knew that a teacher could not be fired just because some students had complained about teaching styles, but nevertheless it was a shock to her system that some of her pupils had submitted such a petition to the Principal.

Panevėžys Juozas Balčikonis Gymnasium³

¹ The name has been changed

² Gymnasium - TYPE of secondary school, providing accredited secondary education and seeking for moral development of pupils.

³ More information could be found at <http://jbg.puslapiai.lt/>



Panevėžys Jozas Balčikonis gymnasium has one of the richest histories of schools in Lithuania. It was established in 1727 by the Piarum institution. For almost one hundred years it functioned as a school, delivering education in Polish, Russian and Latin languages. Among its graduates were some of the most outstanding academics of the 18th Century.

By the end of the 19th Century it was fulfilling a more vocational role. In 1915 it became the first Lithuanian secondary school (gymnasium). A deep respect of Lithuanian culture, tradition and language, as well as its reputation for the quality of its teaching, have been amongst its most defining and distinguishing features ever since. It proudly supports patriotic youth organizations, such as scouts and riflemen.

Balčikonis secondary school is currently ranked as number 5⁴ in Lithuania for the academic achievement of its pupils, whilst being faithful to its tradition and broader contribution to Lithuanian education and society.

Laura Vilutyė

“Who would you like to be when you grow up?” - is the question that is so often asked of young children.

From a very early age Laura Vilutyė knew perfectly well that she would like to be a teacher, just like many other young girls. Uncommonly, however, she did not change her mind later on.

Laura completed 8 grades at “Rising Star”⁵ gymnasium in Panevėžys before entering Jozas Balčikonis gymnasium, graduating in 2003. Laura continued her English language studies at Vilnius University and upon passing her degree she decided to look for a job back in Panevėžys.

The first job Laura had was as a translator/ interpreter in a private firm. That was far away from her childhood dream to become a teacher. Unfortunately English teacher

⁴ In year 2011 (source: “Veidas”)

⁵ The name of gymnasium has been changed

vacancies at schools, especially in a smaller city were few and far between. Laura was delighted when she saw a temporary vacancy for an English language teacher at her first school, “Rising Star” gymnasium. Although the job was only to cover for someone on maternity leave, the chance to gain experience in such a role would allow her to take important steps towards fulfilment of her childhood dreams.

Orientation and Mentoring at JBG

Laura’s first day at “Rising Star” gymnasium was a nightmare. What a dreadful introduction to teaching it was. It did not help that she started in the middle of the school year and with very little support. Laura asked for help from a more experienced teacher, but to her surprise and dismay this was refused. Laura had hoped to be given some time to settle in to her new job and to be able to observe some class teaching, but all she was given was the timetable and told the topic that she should be teaching that morning. Laura felt very uncomfortable and exposed. She wondered whether the move into teaching was the right move for her. Or maybe this troublesome start was more an indication of the pressures on teachers and the particular culture and climate at “Rising Star”?

The morale amongst staff at the school was poor. This was in part due to the decreasing number of children. It was a testing time at the school up until the inevitable moment when Laura was made redundant, 18 months after taking up her appointment. Ironically, Laura was very disappointed to leave the school. She had enjoyed working with the children, who were all very sad to see her leave. The feedback she had received from the children reinforced in her mind that this was the career for her. It had been a great learning experience for Laura. She was proud of her achievements and took a great deal of self-satisfaction and confidence from being able to overcome the obstacles to good teaching that were evident throughout the school from day one. Laura felt that her experience at “Rising Star” would enable her to overcome any situation at any other school.

The experience at “Rising Star”, the fact that Laura was one of the alumni at Juozas Balčikonis gymnasium, young age (24 years at that time) and enthusiasm were key factors in her appointment to the position of English teacher at JBG. The fact that Laura’s close relative is also a teacher at the same gymnasium made her feel awkward at first, hoping she would have a chance to prove her proficiency. Anyway if one gets an offer to work at JBG in Panevėžys, one accepts it without long consideration.

The first day at her new, but old, school could not have been more different than at “Rising Star”. The Principal presented Laura and two other new teachers to the whole school and made every effort to make her feel welcome at the first staff meeting. Like nowhere else before Laura remembered all the colleagues’ names and felt a part of the community surprisingly fast.

There were a couple of times when the reactions of some of the school’s staff were not so welcoming. The school administrator had not recognized her as a teacher at the

school, confusing her for one of the older pupils because of her youthful appearance. He refused to hand her key to the classroom until being reminded of her status. On another occasion, when Laura had forgotten to clean the blackboard, an older teacher vented her fury at her:

“Don’t you ever forget to clean the board in a classroom again?! Don’t you ever learn?”

These were very embarrassing moments, but were minor incidents, relative to her time at “Rising Star”. For the most part Laura enjoyed her work, believing that teacher is defined not by high heels or amber necklace (liet. karoliai).

The most support Laura received was from the school’s English subject club. Motiekaitiene, was the most experienced teacher in the club and Laura’s mentor:

“Our club is really cool. Do not hesitate to ask any question or seek support when you need it. The club is a great place where we can share ideas, try out new exercises, and discuss new books and approaches to teaching and to generally help each other.”

The “English” club was also a social club, with 10 active members who would meet after school in local cafes to chat or to meet up at weekends for barbeques. Other teachers in the school regarded the “English” club as a sect, with rituals of behaviour, such as where to sit at meetings. Younger members chose to sit on the windowsill, whilst older members congregated in the centre, where the heat of the debate was the hottest!

All teachers were encouraged to pursue courses for personal development. Programmes of study on teaching pedagogy were made available, in addition to more practical sessions designed to improve teaching skills. Laura took every opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues, to attend workshops to improve her skills in the classroom and to develop her knowledge and insights into the teaching profession. Performance in class was subject to regular review and to survive at JGB it was necessary to receive good reports from pupils.

The school was fortunate in that it recruited the most able and academically gifted children. The children were generally well behaved and respected their teachers, but they were also very demanding and not slow to voice their opinions. Sometimes their comments were hurtful. Laura remembered occasions when she was asked to take some classes because of the pressure of work on other teachers, only to be met by strong resistance from the children who objected to being taught by teachers they did not like. Similarly, children who did not enjoy being taught English, favouring subjects such as biology, physics and mathematics, would be deliberately disruptive in class.

Laura knew that her performance in class was always subject to comparison with other teachers. This was something that all teachers had to endure, irrespective of how fair the comparisons were. Some classes were more challenging than others, especially those with weaker students or those with learning and behavioural difficulties. These children were likely to be more disruptive in class and often deliberately slow if they detected any weakness in their class teacher. Being a good teacher demanded not only subject knowledge, but also experience and ability to employ different behaviour management strategies to cater for the individual needs of children in class.

The young age was an obstacle communicating with pupils’ parents:

“How can I advise people who are twice as old as I am in raising and educating their children?”

However Laura’s advices are inevitable dealing with students’ school matters as well as their health. Big studying load comes together with fatigue and exhaustion. Therefore Laura would remind the parents to ensure appropriate eating and sleeping regime of their children.

The Principal operated an open door policy and made it clear to Laura that she could consult him for advice on any occasion. He went out of his way during the first six months of her tenure to stop Laura in the corridor to ask her how she was getting on. As far as Laura was concerned Dambrauskas was the epitome of management competence. She held him in high regard, but tried not to trouble him with her concerns as she felt this might be seen as a sign of weakness.

In turn, Laura knew that Dambrauskas held the previous Principal, Vytautas Baliūnas, in the highest regard. He often took advantage of the invitation from Vytautas to consult him on matters of concern. Whilst Vytautas was 80 years old, he was still very active in mind and body, through writing books and being involved in many of the school’s activities. As well as being a mentor to Dambrauskas, he was Director of the school museum. Dambrauskas, who was appointed to Principal at only 29 years of age, had a great deal to learn and cherished the opportunity to call upon someone with so much wisdom. Dambrauskas considered it a sign of maturity, not weakness, to admit that sometimes you need help.

The meeting

Laura struggled to gain her composure. It took a while before she collected her thoughts.

She knew that her relationship with some of the students in the 10th form was not as good as with others, but at no point in time had she been aware of the apparent seriousness of their concerns about her ability to teach.

Her mind flashed back to the times when some of the children had been deliberately disruptive in class. It was as if they were on a mission to undermine her authority. If only she had not been so foolishly afraid of seeking help and guidance from Dambrauskas, she might not have been in the unhappy position she now faced.

Laura was always willing to receive constructive criticism, but could not imagine what it was about which the students had complained. She could not believe that any of the student’s claims could be substantiated. At least she hoped not!

What happened next?

After the meeting with the principal, Laura decided to take action. When she asked the students what exactly they were unhappy about, they were too afraid to say what was wrong. She then decided to ask them to write down their concerns anonymously. There were a few strange suggestions (for example, stop learning grammar because it

is boring), but some of the suggestions were reasonable and Laura took them into consideration when planning her classes. For example she allocated time for discussions and PowerPoint presentations in the class.

Principal Raimondas Dambrauskas was consistently supportive throughout this difficult period in Laura's professional career. He even suggested keeping it between him and Laura, and the class that had written the petition.

Laura continues to make progress. She is now better at establishing relationships with students and is also in contact with graduates of the school.

She has always admired teachers who behave appropriately with students, and who respect the work and time of the students. Nonetheless, she would like to remain true to her own ideals, principles and convictions, her readiness to improve, her healthy self-criticism, and improved planning skills, student evaluation and deeper subject knowledge.

Laura is presently preparing for her attestation in order to be awarded a higher category. She is certain that she will be able to reconcile her professional ambitions and family life in the future.

Addendum No. 1

Philosophy of the Gymnasium

Basic philosophical assumption of gymnasium - the ability to change both externally and internally. Fundamental knowledge, humanitarian worldview, critical thinking, a wide range of cultural horizons are described by the words of School Director Julijonas Lindė-Dobilas: "Let us be humans of essence".

Gymnasium vision

We develop free, creative personality, able to think critically and work independently for Lithuania.

Our aims are:

- To create an open, creative learning community, making the best possible education (learning) for school's students.
- To develop a man, a citizen, an intellectual.
- To develop humanistic values and enhance students' physical abilities.
- Cherish our uniqueness.

Addendum No. 2

Ministry of Education of Lithuania, 2011

Official teacher evaluation areas

1st area: Educational activities: purposiveness, efficiency and effectiveness:

- General knowledge of programs and educational standards and other curriculum documents regulating the essence of harmony and follow them.
- Ability to plan the curriculum and implement it.
- Ability to analyze the educational context

2nd area: communication, cooperation and active engagement in the community:

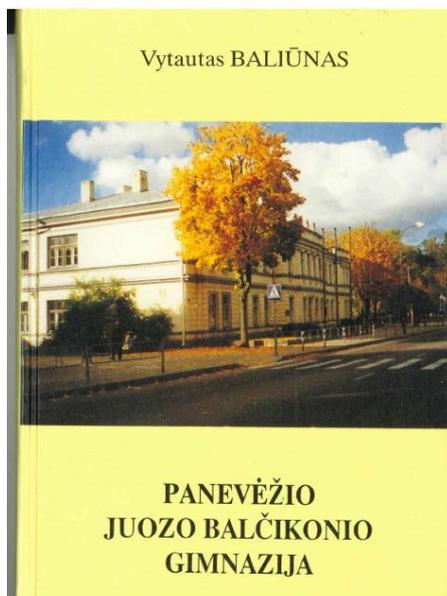
- Establishment and maintenance of effective relationships with students, colleagues, parents, local community members.
- Understanding of the co-operation with colleagues and other partners in achieving educational goals.
- Ability to combine knowledge and ideas with other knowledge and ideas. By participating in activities with others, seek to achieve an agreement with other people and groups

3rd area: personal professional development:

- Understanding the value of lifelong learning and being committed to personal, professional development.
- Ability to reconstruct and reflect on own activities in order to improve and identify own competencies.
- Ability to develop educational and methodological activities; a dossier/portfolio to be presented and evaluated.

Addendum No. 3. Artifacts of School's Culture

A, Hardcover of the first director Vytautas Baliūnas book on gymnasiums history.1727-1995). Published in 1995, 429 p. ISBN 9986-489-30-X



B. Humorous 50 LT currency bill, containing school director's portrait, presented to him at his 50th birthday

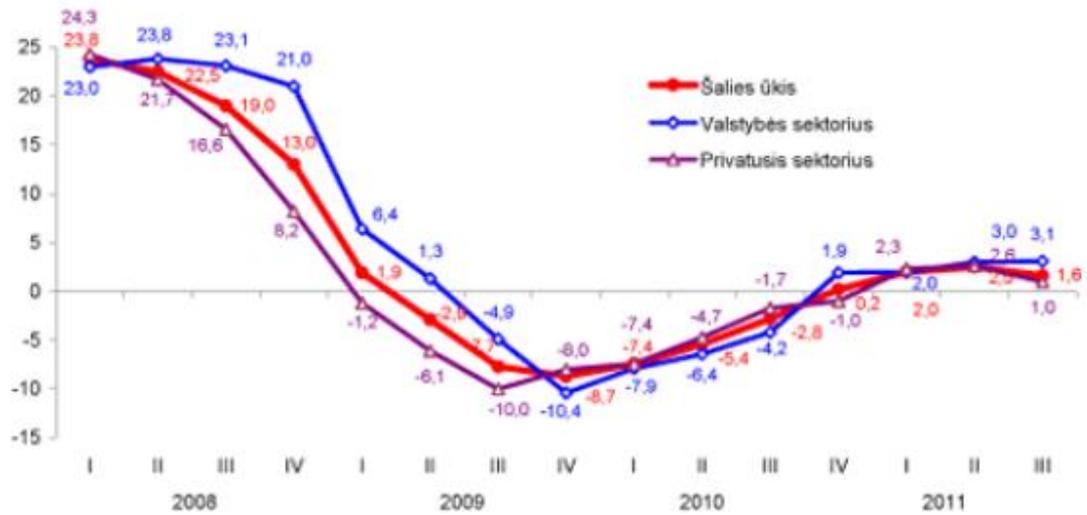


Addendum No. 4.

Source: Department of Statistics, Government of Lithuania. Dec. 15, 2011

Average monthly salary by sectors 2008-2011 (percent of change compared with the same quarter of previous year)

(red- country overall; blue – public sector; purple - private sector)



Addendum No. 5

Source: Department of Statistics, Government of Lithuania. Dec. 15, 2011

Average monthly salaries per sector (before taxes, in Litas) in Lithuania, 2011 3rd quarter

Sector	Monthly salary in LITAS
Accommodation and catering services	1257
Art, entertainment and leisure activities organizing	1603
Administrative and service activities	1689
Wholesale and retail	1896
Real estate operations	1970
Education	2009
National economy	2116
Healthcare and social work	2192
Professional, scientific and technical services	2751
Information and communication	3270
Financial and insurance services	3943

Average in country 2116 Lt; average in education sector – 2009 Lt (582.3 Eur) before taxes. 1 Euro = 3.45 LT

Addendum No. 6.

Level of unemployed woman, younger than 25 in Lithuania

Source: Eurostat

