

The New Function of the Student Leisure in Russian Education

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Abstract

The aim of our research is to study the dynamics of the influence that students' leisure practices in Sverdlovsk region have on the formation of modern students' values. The object of the empirical analysis is music and theatre as forms of multi-faceted socio-cultural influence. With regard to the interdependence of the two forms and resorting to concrete empirical evidence, the authors demonstrate a change in the importance of students' leisure within the context of modern Russian education, as well as the emergence of a new function of leisure, which consists in the formation of general cultural competences and world views of future professionals. The paper emphasizes the role and the importance of student leisure practices for society and hence, a necessity of their thorough study with the aim to develop a consistent cultural policy. The authors cite the results of their monitoring sessions, which reveal leisure preferences, notions and beliefs of modern students in higher educational establishments of Sverdlovsk region; the findings also dismiss the myth about a low demand for world and national classical works. As concerns the conscious choice of artworks, students reveal an increased level of reflection in those of them that aim to rectify the ills of society. The student becomes the actor of society, which is also reflected in his/her leisure preferences. As concerns the formation of societal values, the student is changing the role of the driven for the role of the driver, and the prefigurative model of socialization comes into play.

Keywords: *modernization of education, students, values system, leisure, general cultural competences, youth policy*

1. Introduction

The multidimensional process of modernization in today's Russia attracts attention to the process of modernization in higher education, which is the major communicator of culture and a tool for intergenerational continuity. In Soviet times the social institution of education was built upon the responsibility of the main actors of the system itself, which was legally secured. According to Regulations of Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education in the USSR, which were in effect in 1968-1988 (before the fall of the Soviet Union), this central agency is immediately responsible for 'the state and further development of higher and specialized secondary education, as well as for the quality of education given to specialists'[7. Art. 1]. This institutional rule secured the world-famous quality of Soviet education, which was and still is understood as a synthesis of education and upbringing. Organizing leisure was an integral part of students' upbringing. The results of education in Soviet era were validated in two unequal documents: the basic diploma of higher education and a personal characteristic, which was institutionally important.

The social transformations of the 1990s-early 2000s, the inclusion of Russia into the Bologna Process led to global and contradictory changes in the concept of educational activity. This resulted in changing the rules of interaction between the state, social communities and groups, involved in higher education. The main institutional postulate on the national level was the process of performing social functions per se, as compared to the responsibility for the outcome of the process. This is legally secured in the Regulations about the Ministry of Education and Science, 'which carries out the function of developing and realizing the state policy and legal regulation in the sphere of education, scientific and technological activities, innovative activities... as well as in the sphere of education and upbringing, tuition and guardianship of underage citizens, in the sphere of social support of students and pupils of educational establishments and the youth policy...' [6. Art. 1] Such goal-setting generally complies with the notion of the educational system in Europe.

We believe that the consequences of changing institutional rules for higher educational establishments have an ambivalent character. For instance, the understanding of the role of education in reality has shifted from a social service to a commercial one; it has transformed to suit the needs of selling the service of education and training to the social partners interested in it – to students, and to a certain extent, to their parents. Practice shows that the process of education can be commercialized to a greater degree than the process of training, since the former possesses more properties for validation. That is, a certificate of higher education (now the only paper to certify your education after graduation) allows the employer to conclude what professional competences the bearer has. This certificate cannot reflect how well the graduate has learnt the norms and values of their social and professional group. As it turns out, the post-Soviet system of values does not require any

form of validating these competences, which is why the processes of upbringing have been in low demand in present-day higher education.

The closing stage of the transfer to the Bologna system of education proved to be contradictory. Two aspects are noteworthy. On the one hand, education for a young person today is an aim, a tool, a means and a must for successful socialization. The terminal significance of education and professionalism (the primary indicator of higher education) has decreased greatly. For instance, among the students of Sverdlovsk region in 2012 education took 9th place in the ranking of 17 different positions and was marked only by 16% of all respondents [8, p. 160], and in 2016 it took 8th place, as marked only by 16% of all respondents¹. On the other hand, ‘the strategic aim of the university is to form general cultural competences (those reflecting world views and the system of values) and general professional competences’ [5, p. 200]. On the one hand, the top priority in the education policy has been given to the competency building approach, which stands for the process of forming a complex of general cultural and professional competences in the future specialist, which will enable him/her to fully integrate into society, into the professional sphere and any professional teams. On the other hand, the educational activity as a system of forming world views of a highly-qualified specialist (i.e. forming general cultural competencies) was excluded from the list of indicators, which is used during accreditation. As a visible result, many Universities cleared the position of Provost for Educational Work, and consequently, reduced leisure programmes for students.

The specifics of youth culture within the context of stable social systems reveal itself in a critical attitude towards traditional values of the older generation. In times of radical change the transformational processes of values systems in youth culture are followed by a conscious rejection of traditional values and an exchange of the traditional for their own - often opposing - values. These can normally be traced in students’ behavioral patterns, lexis used, and leisure practices.

The leisure patterns of the youth today cannot be described as unambiguous. Against the background of deepening societal stratification, growing social differentiation of the youth, commercialization of culture, the differences between rich, intense leisure patterns in one group of young people and poor, routine time-spending in another are becoming more and more evident. Some have diverse leisure patterns, some can be described as spiritually impoverished, and yet others do not reveal any recognizable patterns of leisure [8, p. 296]. These claims are supported by the sociological research of recent years. A study of cultural needs and peculiarities is of major significance for developing the concept of state youth policy in higher education.

¹ The first three positions in values system of the students of this decade are occupied by a. health; b. family and children; c. money, material gain, starting their own businesses.

Over the years of monitoring Sverdlovsk students (1995 – 2016), the problems of organization and content of leisure have lost their place and dropped closer to the bottom in the ranking of acute social problems that trouble students most of all (see: 8, p. 290–315).

Still, we should not underestimate the low status of students' leisure problems. It is doubtless that against the background of material need, anxiety over possible unemployment, personal and social insecurity and other burning issues of the same kind, leisure and its patterns retreat into the shade. At the same time, leisure is a way to master cultural values; it is one of the most important spheres of self-realization and self-assertion for a young person; it is a source of psychological stability. This holds true for all students – not only those from Russia. A similar conclusion was made by a group of researchers who studied theatre as a leisure pattern among American students [see: 1; 2]. It is noteworthy that the problems that bothered the American students in this case, were similar to those experienced by our students. Among these problems are the following: a lack of information sources about the possibilities for planning one's leisure and hence, low information awareness about concrete projects in the sphere of leisure, scantiness of electronic content (musical notation, multimedia, audio recordings). We believe that these issues are more intensely felt by American students because of the highly commercialized nature of the media sphere in the USA and stricter limitations on author's rights. However, this claim needs additional comparative analysis for further use.

A lack of any concept of governing students' leisure gives rise to different asocial behavioral patterns – not only to 'classical' alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, etc. Of a much greater risk is the usage of student groups as protest groups for political aims. In this sense students constitute a risk group to a certain degree.

2. Methodology and results of the study

The monitoring of leisure preferences among students of the Middle Urals is a part of a complex study, which was started in 1995 in conjunction with a sociological research of societal transformations in Russian society [See: 9.]. Since those times musical preferences of students have served as a reliable indicator: the variant 'listening to music' consistently comes first in the ranking of all students' leisure preferences.

The first stage of the study was conducted in 2005–2006 among students of the biggest higher educational establishments in the region (Ural State University and Ural State Technical University), which were united into Ural Federal University (UrFU) in 2010. The study aimed at finding a correlation between preferences for classical and mass music in its simpler forms. The experimental part of the study included broadcasting musical pieces of different genres and directions. On the managerial level the experiment was agreed upon as

a musical project in a higher educational establishment. Then a social survey was conducted using representative sampling. The results of the survey brought us to certain conclusions about a discrepancy between cognitive and conative aspects of perceiving music among students (see: [4]). Those of them who did not have any musical education verbally denied any possible need of listening to classical music, while the experimental part of the study disproved the fact - the overwhelming majority of all respondents (73%) were willing to listen to and purchase the music they heard.

The second stage of the study (2007) confirmed the hypothesis about the positive perception of the music suggested during the realization of the project.

At the next stage of our study (2008–2009) we obtained analogous results on the basis of experimental research carried out in branches of higher educational establishments. The study debunked the myth about a low demand of higher forms of art, which by itself presents a great danger from a strategic point of view. It poses certain risks for the cultural level of society, for the social mandate, since all the prior experience and the level of involvement of the consumer into the product itself are very important variables, which affect the demand. A significant reduction in cultural samples leads to absence of any demand in the long run. The respondents voted for the significance of classical art by the majority of votes, classical art being an inseparable constituent of an individual, as well as for the importance of spiritual development in the formation of students' preferences.

On the 4th stage of the study of leisure patterns (2010 – 2011) we researched students' preferences in the sphere of theatrical art. Its influence on students can hardly be overestimated, since the world outlook is shaped on the emotional and rational-intellectual levels. We conducted a study called 'Students of UrFU and Modern Theatre' by quota sampling. The results testify to the fact that most of the students show uneven patterns of frequenting the theatre. Despite this, most respondents expressed a wish to visit the establishment more often. It is interesting to note that two-thirds of those interviewed considered it an absolute must to include theatre-going into the official curriculum in a higher educational establishment. When making their choice of a play, students were mainly guided by the title, the actors, the director, reviews and articles on the performance. The respondents preferred modern repertoire alongside with classical performances, but they only approved of the former if the play did not distort the original script. Almost 80% of those interviewed believed that any cultured person should be a theatre-goer. As concerns the question of who should be financing culture, the state and sponsors received the majority of votes. More than a half of the respondents agreed that the state does not pay sufficient attention to culture.

The fifth stage of the study based on comparable methods was conducted in 2016. There are three basic issues to be mentioned in this respect. Firstly, musical comedy was one of

the most sought-after forms of entertainment among students, which was proven by observing students who visited the same performances of different theatres. Students initiated such outings by themselves through their social environment. We believe that this can be connected with how students perceive the topicality of theatrical repertoire and the level of actors' performance and talent. In spite of its name, this type of theatre can boast a significant number of world and national classical plays of acute social kind in its repertoire.

Secondly, the survey, showed a high level of demand for the classical theatre: 62% of all respondents are positive towards modern interpretations of classical works if the original does not undergo significant change.

Thirdly, the top positions in the ranking of students' preferences were taken by complex performances covering a variety of multifaceted topics, which included general questions of philosophy as well as conventional national problems, which make the audience analyze the present-day Russian reality. This is 'Katherine the Great', a play about the Russian State (premiered 2008, 'Golden Mask'), 'Silicone Fool', a play about the information society (premiered 2007), 'A Night of Open Doors', a play based on Dickens' novels (premiered 2004).

Thus, we can state that students make a transfer from the driven to the driver in the formation of values in society, and the prefigurative model of socialization comes into play [see: 3].

The modern student, as compared to 'the Soviet student', has gained independence in everything that concerns organizing leisure environment. He/she is not suppressed by a 'poor organization of extracurricular activity in a higher educational establishment'. As a representational survey among students of higher educational establishments in Sverdlovsk region in 2016 shows, this was cited as a reason for dissatisfaction only by 5% of respondents. The major limiting factor today is insufficient personal funds, cited by 46% of the students, and a lack of spare time, cited by 40%: of them. The latter, however, is paradoxical, since the results of the same survey reveal a good reserve of free time: every third student has 2-3 hours a day, 30% of them have from 3 to 6 hours daily, and every 10th respondent can spare more than 6 hours on leisure every day.

Besides, our study of students' leisure patterns confirmed the need for traditional forms of leisure, which promote the formation of traditional values. Students reveal a latent need for worthwhile samples of culture, which is not satisfied within the modern context of higher education.

This choice testifies to the fact that students themselves choose those leisure patterns that were earlier in active use in the educational activity of the higher educational establishment.

Thereby leisure again acquires the function of forming general cultural competences of the student, albeit in a form reduced during the process of modernizing higher education. If Russian universities are limited in their capacity to solve the financial problems of all students, they can certainly resolve managerial issues with time. We believe that bringing back the management of students' leisure patterns as an element of the educational process can realize this very important role of higher education.

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