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Public history through the eyes of future media professionals

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Abstract

The article reveals the possibilities of public history approach in exploring communicative space of the modern city. The object of research is the city of Zaporizhzhia (Ukraine) that has rich diverse history. Experience of creative research projects made by the students of journalism faculty, Zaporizhzhia National University, which are presented on the educational website Virtual Learning Lab "Media Culture in the Modern City (MCMC)" in the site section "Discourse of the City" (<http://mcmc.tilda.ws/misto>) is summarized.

Keywords

Public history, collective memory, journalism, project based learning.

Introduction

Higher educational training of future media professionals requires up-to-date theoretical, methodological, and communicative approaches. A special place among them belongs to public history approach and project based learning methodology.

Heuristic potential of public history approach

Public history is a field of modern historical science. Its emergence and development is the result of the democratization of public life. Nowadays the community's interest in its history, the past of its city, village, and region is growing. Academic science, responding to such a public request, should become more democratic, should tell people about past events fascinatingly, using the newest, especially digital, formats.

The public history movement emerged in the United States in the 1970s. It is finding new and diverse areas and directions of activity, while the main thing is "making history relevant and useful in the public sphere". (1) Public history "should communicate with the public and adapt itself to ever new forms of expression. It must learn how to use the prevailing media of the public sphere, stay flexible, and seek out interdisciplinary partners without forgetting its roots in historical scholarship". (2)

The counter direction also exists. Ordinary citizens, without any special historical education, without being specialists in the field of academic historical science, become true researchers of their local history. The development of such a "civic" historical science is promoted by modern media, which disseminate popular information about historical events and their significance for the present. Pierre Nora tells about the "democratization" of history: for the peoples, ethnic or social groups "recapturing one's past is a necessary component of the assertion of own identity". (3) In such "folk" history different, often opposing interpretations of past events can be presented. For the researchers, both professionals and amateurs, it is important to understand the grounds of those interpretations and to seek ways of establishing public dialogue.

Advantages of public history approach in journalism training

Public history approach in conjunction with project based learning technology enables preparing skilled contributors in media industry that have a high motivation to explore and disseminate information about the history of the city, involving a wide audience into the problem of the historical heritage preservation. At the Faculty of Journalism, Zaporizhzhia

National University, during studying the course "Theory and History of Social Communications" students learn to perceive components of urban landscape (architecture, monuments, streets, squares, etc.) as constituents of holistic communication environment, carriers of collective memory.

Zaporizhzhia is a large industrial city in southeastern Ukraine; it is situated on both banks of the Dnipro River. Zaporizhzhia has a remarkable centuries-old history. Scythian burial mounds, Cossack host and its glorious history, the famous island Khortytsya, relics of a county town of Russian Empire, Lenin's plan of electrification and DniproHES, constructivism and "Stalin's architecture", industrial giants of soviet times and processes of de-communization, which are reflected in the communicative space of the modern city.

Main part

Formulation of the problem

The main problem is complexity and ambiguity of the city's history. Particularly controversial is the Soviet period in the history of the city. In educational process and practical training of students we test the hypothesis that awakening interest and love of residents to the city's history will serve to solve the complex social and political problems of our time, to integrate the community for common future. Our purpose is to develop students' love for their hometown, to form readiness to prepare professional media products devoted to the public history of their hometown.

In pursuit of this goal, during studying the discipline "Theory and History of Social Communications" our students fulfill creative research projects on the topic "Native City in Terms of Social Communications". Media products are the results of their work; the most interesting of them are posted on the educational website. (4) It is Virtual Learning Lab "Media Culture in the Modern City (MCMC)", in particular the site section "Discourse of the City" <http://mcmc.tilda.ws/misto> (Figure 1).
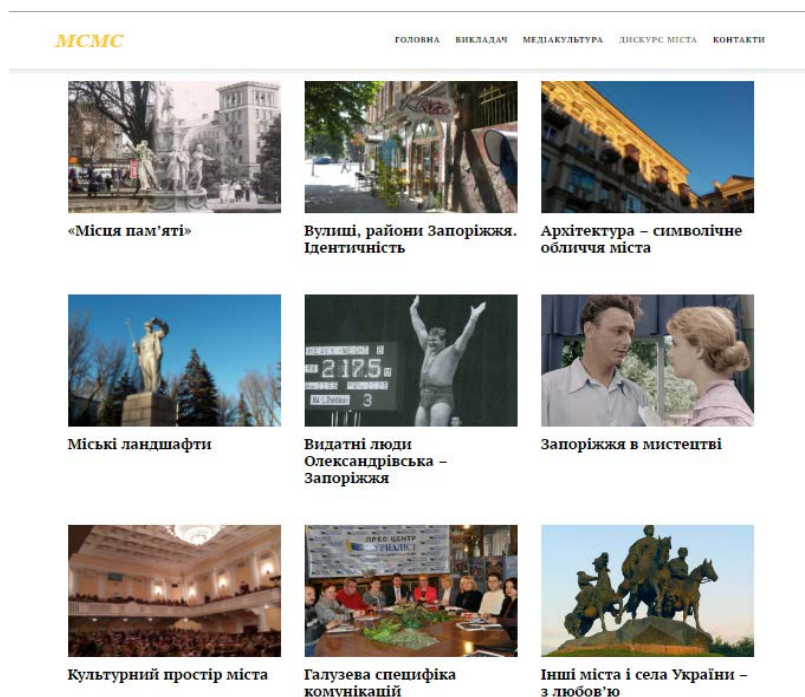

Figure 1. Virtual Learning Lab *"MCMC"*, the site section *"Discourse of the City"*

Discussion

Review of students' creative research projects

At the Faculty of Journalism, future journalists, editors and publishers, PR and advertising specialists conduct research and prepare creative products in thematic areas:

- "Places of memory"
- Streets, districts of Zaporizhzhia. Identity
- Architecture as a symbolic face of the city
- City's landscapes
- Prominent countrymen
- Zaporizhzhia in the art
- Cultural space of the city
- Professional peculiarities of communications
- Other cities and villages of Ukraine – with love

Students carry out educational projects individually or in creative research groups, at their discretion choosing the topic and the form of project implementation, e.g. photos, videos, multimedia longreads, blogs, interviews, comics, presentations, posters of social advertising, etc. Necessary information is obtained from libraries, museums, archives, oral history, online resources, communities in social networks etc.

For example, the first chapter of the site section *"Discourse of the City"* contains students' works that help to understand "places of memory" phenomenon (Pierre Nora), that is, places in which collective memory "crystallizes and finds its refuge". (5) The student's photo project *"Zaporizhzhia in a Cut of Time"* seeks to show the layers of historical memory, which are preserved by our streets and squares, monuments and buildings. That student's creative work reveals the multilayered organization, fluidity, and continuity of the history; the work shows how streets of the hometown "remember" it. (<http://mcmc.tilda.ws/memory>)

Comics *"Legends of the Khortytsya Island"* offers special interpretation of legends in the genre of graphic tales. Culture of comics (including web comics) is close to contemporary youth perception. That comics poetically describes mystical history of the famous island. Such form of presentation reveals dialogue between ancient mythical ideas and modern visual culture. (Ibid.)

A chapter "Architecture as a symbolic face of the city" presents the students' works devoted to highlighting features of Zaporizhzhia architecture, which keeps the heritage of different ages, cultures, and traditions: Mennonites cultural heritage (XIX – early XX century), buildings in the style of constructivism (1920–1930's), totalitarian architecture discourse... All those create the unique symbolic face of the city, retain a collective memory of times, people, events. Students try to understand means of "Stalin's" architecture's influence on a person, namely metaphorical character, iconization of Soviet mythology in architectural decoration etc.

Future journalists, PR and advertising specialists prepare research projects devoted to the history of prominent buildings. Particular attention is paid to the history of construction and post-war reconstruction of the DniproHES. (<http://mcmc.tilda.ws/architecture>)

Students explore history of their native streets and city districts. In line with the process of de-communization there are student's videos on renaming streets of the city Zaporizhzhia. (<http://mcmc.tilda.ws/identity>)

A new special collective project "Zaporizhzhia in my family's history" is presented by student essays, posts in blogs, new sites created by students, publications in newspapers, photo and video projects. In concrete real human destinies, students reveal the idea of generations' continuity; describe participation of the Zaporozhians in construction and post-war reconstruction of industrial giants, complex historical processes of industrialization and population migration, and the formation of regional identity. (<http://mcmc.tilda.ws/family>)

Conclusion

Those creative research projects help future journalists to develop better understanding of society, national history and mentality, skills of critical/analytical thinking and interpretation, empathy, and aspiration to maintain their native city's history. At the same time, they disclose the role of social cohesion in the processes of regional identity construction and teach tolerance and respect for pluralism of opinions.

Doing such creative research projects, students comprehend the historical depth of contemporary urban environment; they discover tolerant coexistence of different epochs, cultures, and traditions. Students form conviction of the importance of democratic values in assessing the events of the past. Future journalists learn to love and to take care of rich, although sufficiently controversial, history of their native city, to be personally responsible for its coherent and peaceful life.

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