

The Eurovision University Study Unit and Its Pedagogic Value: A Critical Evaluation of Public and Media Reaction Towards Innovation in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In 2016 the University of Malta launched a study unit called 'Interpreting Music Culture: Multimodality and the Eurovision'. The course intended to serve as a first step through which higher education students would move away from looking at the Eurovision Song Contest annually attracting 161 million viewers around the globe as purely entertaining. Instead, the study unit aimed to help students critically analyse these music-related texts at deeper pedagogic levels. After a couple of minutes from the launch of the study unit, a widespread public reaction developed. The media and the general public commented, asked about, ridiculed and criticised the fact that a well-famed formal higher education institution could come up with such an idea. Many asked the pertinent question: What should a well acclaimed serious higher education institution (i.e. University) accept to teach and what not? Adopting a thematic approach this paper intends to answer this main research question through the evaluation of qualitative data based on the comments and reactions towards the launch of the Eurovision study unit, collected from social media and local and international press. As an outcome, the main conclusion of this paper suggests that people in Malta still frequently adopt limited definitions of higher education which do not include the perspective of higher education institutions as sources where mundane popular and authentic texts such as the Eurovision can be used as valuable pedagogic texts. The paper proactively presents four suggestions through which hopefully, gradual change towards a more comprehensive definition of higher education institutions could be initiated.

Keywords: higher education, creative teaching methods, eurovision song contest, multimodality, teaching resources

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1. Introduction: Redefining the Definition of Higher Education

According to Antony and Shaps (Antony & Shaps in Perna, 2021, p. 385), "Over the past two decades our society has continued to steadily and progressively move in the direction of challenging academia to ask new questions, challenge old theories, adopt new approaches to teaching and research, and even evolve to create space for new disciplines and fields, and new subdisciplines and subfields". Zlatkin et al (2016, p.2) elaborate that: "Apart from expert knowledge in a domain, which is presupposed, cross-domain "21st century skills" (e.g., Lai & Viering 2012, p. 2), such as critical thinking and problem solving, are expected from higher education graduates in nearly all OECD countries (OECD 2012). Many studies emphasize the importance of such generic competencies, showing that they are related and necessary to the acquisition of domain-specific competencies over the course of studies in higher education (e.g., Badcock, Pattison & Harris 2010; Lai & Viering 2012; Mehralizadeh, Salehi & Marashi 2008)".

Therefore, higher education institutions, are continuously invited to gradually keep on challenging the traditional definitions of education. Craft's (2017) reminder pointing out that in Latin there are two different roots of the word "education." can serve as a good starting point through which higher education institutions can start challenging long year repeated and uncontested definitions. Craft in fact distinguishes between 'educare', having a meaning of training and moulding, and 'educere', which implies a sense of leading out. Bass and Good (2004) suggest that educators through higher education institution course content should be encouraged to reach a balance between both aspects.

This suggestion encourages a situation where through the content covered in the tertiary (i.e. university) class, students should not only be trained and moulded but also should be encouraged to take initiatives to critically think about the content presented in class, discuss and debate about it and gradually start taking action linked to it. Learning is therefore viewed as a process of putting what one learns into practice. As Laur (2013) suggests, learning happens best when through student-centred task-based learning, students feel engaged with what they have learnt, rather than just following traditional teacher-centered lectures which frequently leave the students passive and not directly involved.

This direction in thought requests for a change even in the pedagogic tools and texts one refers to in the higher education lecture room. While not disregarding the importance of the knowledge which can be obtained through lessons based on the use of textbooks, a further additional step encourages the value of critical reflection of personal experiences and events which students encounter even out of the class, after lecture time. Authentic resources (Pacheco, 2022) therefore serve two roles, that of very effective tools through which student-centered motivating learning contexts can be created, as well as valuable texts initiating and facilitating creative thinking of students. Students feel more at ease critically reflecting on contexts that for them make sense, rather than about contexts that they view as distant or foreign (Fan, 2022).

2. Launching the Eurovision Study Unit

In this light, with the intention of challenging academia to ask new questions, as well as with the intention to help students develop their critical skills, back in 2016, the University of Malta approved and launched a 30 hours (5ECTS) study unit called: 'Interpreting Music Culture: Multimodality and the Eurovision'¹.

The choice of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) was almost inevitable. Research shows that it is not only an authentic text (Cremona, 2018) but also the biggest and most followed musical institutions in the world with over 161 million viewers watching it annually (Eurovision.tv, online). Furthermore, over 93% of the Maltese population constantly follows it with a very keen interest. The most recent statistics indicate that record TV audiences were reached when over half a million viewers living in Malta followed the three day selection of the Maltese 2022 Eurovision entry (PBS, 2022). Notwithstanding the popularity of the Eurovision both locally and around the globe, this musical phenomena still seem to be viewed by many as purely entertaining (Dubin et al, 2022).

Quoting from the study unit course description published on the University of Malta website (UOM, online):

¹ The author of this paper is the coordinator of the Eurovision Study unit. The author originated this idea, drafted the study-unit course description and was (and still is) the main lecturer responsible for the running and the lecture delivery of this study unit.

As a response to this, this Unit intends to fill a lacuna and explore these music resources and events critically. The 30 hour unit will initially introduce students to multimodality and its concepts. Through this multimodal framework, students will gradually start analyzing these resources critically, interpreting these authentic texts related to these popular events from a critical, historical, psychological, sociological and pedagogical lens.

The intention of this Unit is to introduce students to the concepts of multimodality, and utilize these concepts to analyse the different ways through which texts and resources linked to the Eurovision Song Contest (for example music videos, blogs, ESC website etc.) can be critically analysed at various levels.

The study unit also has clear learning outcomes. The first set of learning outcomes address student knowledge and understanding:

By the end of the unit, as indicated by the course description (UOM, online), the student will be able to:

1. Familiarize themselves with and explain the definitions of multimodality;
2. Explain why these Music resources should not be simply viewed as entertaining resources but also as invaluable tools which one should interpret through a critical lens;
3. Identify different ways through which texts and resources linked to the Eurovision Song Contest (for example music videos, blogs, ESC website etc.) can be critically analysed at various levels.

Furthermore, by the end of this study unit, the study-unit course description (UOM, online) suggests that students are expected to also manifest the development of certain academic skills. These include:

1. Use multimodal theories in practice to critically analyse similar music-related texts;
2. Seek ways how to analyse the particular resources at deeper levels rather than stopping at superficial initial levels of analysis;
3. Assess and develop their critical skills;
4. Realize that different texts can be interpreted differently by different individuals according to their background and knowledge;
5. Discuss their views critically and in depth once they are presented with/encounter similar authentic music related texts.

3. Public Outburst and Reaction

On the 6th of September 2016 at 11.26am, the study unit was launched by the University of Malta and the news was publicised through an online news portal interview (seen in Figure 1). Just after a couple of minutes from the launch, a widespread public reaction developed. The general public started commenting, asking, making fun of and criticising the fact that a formal well-famed tertiary higher education institution (i.e. the University of Malta) could come up with – what in the view of the majority of those commenting – was an unimaginable idea. Many asked what one can learn from the Eurovision Song Contest and how serious the contents of the course could be.



Figure 1. The original news item which disseminated the news about the Eurovision study unit. (Screenshot from Newsbook.com.mt, online)

The outburst was so strong that in less than two hours all the prominent local online news portals had the news item featuring prominently. Figure 2 shows one example of the way the news featured on one of the local newsportals.



Figure 2. Screenshot from Loveinmalta.com

By the end of the day, as seen through the example in Figure 3 below, the most prominent music-related local influencers and producers also found time to share their view on their social media platforms (particularly on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter).

Whilst i understand the enthusiasm shown, if this article is true i find it quit absurd just like i would find it strange if there's a specific degree course or the world cup !!! For the record , using Ira 's quote and putting things into perspective " Eurovision is a good TV showcase with a broad viewership bt in no way is it , the beginning and end all of a music career." It's like saying let's have a course about the Super Bowl half time . I'm guessing they don't exist because it makes no sense unlike music production course , artist management , music marketing, event management etc So i'm also guessing this is a joke or it's not clear. Having a topic covered amongst other topics in a course makes sense but having a specific course tailor made on this is totally absurd imo !

Figure 3. The Facebook comment posted by one of the most prominent music producers in Malta. (Source: Facebook, online).

By the next day all the print newspapers had the news published and TV and Radio shows discussed the content of the course and the public outburst to it. Figure 4 captures the newspaper article featuring in the Times of Malta hours after the launch of the study-unit was announced.



Figure 4. Article in the Times of Malta newspaper (Times of Malta, 7th September 2016, page 2)

By the end of the second day, as seen in Figure 5 even the official Eurovision.tv website wrote an article about this news.

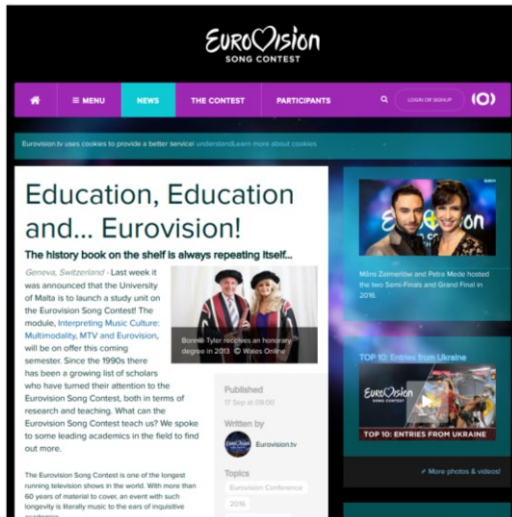


Figure 5. Screenshot from Eurovision.tv (online)

As a result, by the end of the week, the news had spread not only locally but also internationally with well acclaimed online news portals writing about it too. The author of this paper, as coordinator of this study unit, received a big number of requests to give interviews both on local and international news portals. Figure 6 shows one of these interviews featuring prominently in the Spanish online media.



Figure 6. The article featuring in the Spanish news portal Los Replicantes (2016, online)

In the next couple of days – and this reaction went on for weeks – as seen in Figure 7, prominent academics took a stand about this and on their own initiative, in their very well-read newspaper and online spaces, dedicated their weekly opinion piece to publicly share their views, defend or attack the academic value of this course, as well as to discuss which contents should be acceptable and not acceptable in the halls and lecture rooms of higher education institutions.

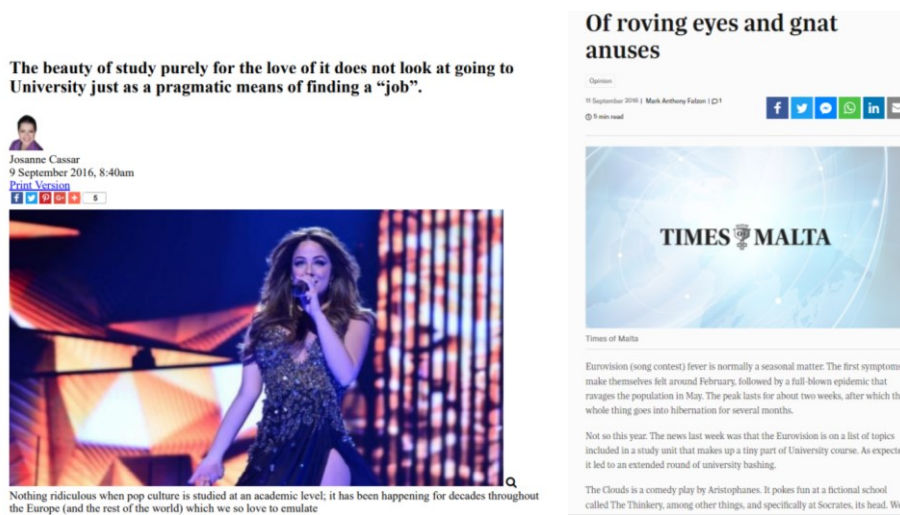


Figure 7. Opinion articles written by prominent Maltese academics scrutinizing the contents of the Eurovision study-unit.

A couple of weeks after this general outburst, at the beginning of October 2016, the Study unit commenced.

4. Methods

As seen from the examples included in the previous section, in brief, the question which each media article and the general public reaction directly or indirectly referred to was:

What should a well acclaimed serious higher education institution (i.e. University) accept to teach and what not?

In order to obtain answers for this question, as an aftermath of this, this paper intends to use primary qualitative data i.e. the comments and reactions collected from social media and local and international press as an outcome of this event which created such a reaction.

The analysed data set used to answer this pertinent question consisted of all the printed articles and online articles appearing on social media. With these, a record of the public comments posted beneath these online articles as an aftermath of this news was kept, saved and recorded. A record was also kept of those publicly sharing these posts and the public comments they motivated.

This primary data was evaluated adopting a thematic approach (Creswell, 2014). This involved initially developing codes of the most common occurrences in the reactions. Through these codes broader categories were formulated and these later led to the identification of themes through which the paper could obtain answers for the main posed research question.

5. Results

The data analysis exercise indicates four main results which will be presented in this section.

1. The analysed data indicates that the general Maltese public still tends to look only at higher education institutions as vehicles of content which prepares students to be successful (as in Rae, 2007) in obtaining sound moneymaking job-oriented opportunities (like McGuinness et al, 2016). The reaction was two-fold. There were those who thought that this course was a whole Bachelor or Undergraduate course. The latter clearly showed they would never accept having a whole fully fledged course with such content. However, when the media made it clearer that this was a study unit with

- 30 hours and with 5 ECTS, many still did not approve and the general feeling coming out from the analysis of the data indicates that not even this was acceptable in the eyes of the majority.
2. Results also tend to manifest that instead of viewing popular mundane texts as a valid source through which critical thinking could be initiated (as in Willingham, 2019), for the general public, a popular text such as the Eurovision Song Contest viewed annually by around 161 million viewers and 93% of the whole Maltese population is still unfortunately viewed as having little pedagogic value and instead should be kept out of higher educational contexts (same as Williams, 2007).
 3. The data analysed also hints a third result which indicates that many who commented or had their say, started referring to what Altbach and Salmi (2011) call World Class universities which set the levels of academic excellence. The comments analysed indicate that frequently people started backing their arguments by suggesting that well acclaimed foreign universities never include Eurovision in their course contents. For the majority, since Eurovision content is not presented in other Universities abroad, this course has little value. Frequently these examples were used as a more vociferous pseudo-proof that this idea of having the Eurovision study unit should be ridiculed and scrapped completely.
 4. One last result indicates that this keep-the-Eurovision-out feeling was a general feeling observed in the comments of people hailing from various different social contexts (Blommaert, 2005). Results seem to hint that people coming from different class, age, race, gender and social backgrounds, seemingly reacted similarly and shared the loud outcry that the University of Malta should reconsider the content of such a study-unit.

6. Discussion

Rather than just stopping at a descriptive (almost heart-demotivating) outcome, as a reaction to the four results identified above, this paper intends to initiate a prescriptive discussion through which change could be gradually brought about, now that the results are clear.

This section will therefore refer to each of the four abovementioned results and for each seeks to offer a practical reachable suggestion derived from the outcome of the data collection exercise. This will be presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Proactive suggestions for the results obtained from the data analysis of this research venture

Result	Summary of result	Proactive suggestion resulting from result emerging from this research venture.
1	Reactions indicate that the media and the general Maltese public still adopted the limited perspective looking at tertiary institutions as vehicles of content which only lead to job-oriented opportunities.	As educators working in higher education contexts, we should seek to help our students (and the public) move towards a wider more comprehensive definition of 'higher education' and 'higher education institutions'. This definition should incorporate the role of developing key competences above all systemic, anticipatory and critical thinking (see definitions in Rieckmann, 2012).
2	Reactions also tended to manifest that popular texts should be kept out of the higher education class and are frequently viewed as less valuable tools with less pedagogic value.	Higher education lecture halls should invest energies and time to discover the importance of authentic texts viewing them as invaluable tools through which serve to transform higher educational learning through links to real world experiences (Pitchford et al, 2020).
3	Reactions also showed that many started quoting other foreign	It is recommended that while learning from world-class foreign universities, one should refrain from

4	<p>universities. They reasoned: ‘Since other world class universities do not do this, this has little value’.</p> <p>Reactions (on the social media) reflected an inter- generation mentality. Furthermore, people from different social backgrounds and belonging to different social groups (i.e. age, race, gender etc) tended to share the same views.</p>	<p>idealising what is perceived to be happening in higher educational contexts. Instead, one should realistically realise that there are higher education institutions who include mundane popular texts (such as the Eurovision) as pedagogic tools (Langelotz et al, 2020).</p> <p>Higher education institutions frequently welcome different people from different social background and different walks of life i.e. age, race, gender, life styles (Goedhart et al, 2019). Therefore, because of its rich diversity, higher educational learning contexts should be viewed as a good starting point where change should be gradually encouraged and explored (Crimmins, 2022).</p>
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7. Conclusion

Therefore, the main conclusion of this paper suggests that from the way the media reported this news item and from the reactions of people in Malta towards the launch of the Eurovision study unit, it is evident that in general the predominant trend still found in Malta frequently adopts limited definitions of higher education which forget the pedagogic importance of mundane popular and authentic texts such as the Eurovision and the elements (i.e. videos, interviews, songs etc) it presents. This implies that a change is required. Hopefully the four suggestions presented by this paper serve as a good step forward which could lead to there in a more steady and abrupt pace.

However, these reflections should not end without highlighting a positive point. The fact that in the first place, the University of Malta approved the study-unit course description and keeps on offering it, and when it was launched steered such a public debate, is already a first commendable step which shows that as a higher education institution it is functioning and serving as a tool through which students as well as the general society are helped to think out of the box. Only this, could initiate steps towards change leading to the redefinition of the meaning of higher education and what it should accept and reject.

Lee et al (2014) talks of a ‘leap of faith’ which higher education institutions require to do in order to be effective and influential. And the University of Malta seems to already have taken the much required leap of faith. And this in itself is already very encouraging and augurs for a brighter future based on hope that these suggestions could be gradually implemented in practice.

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