

The Challenge Ahead

Since their foundation in 1955 by Peter Papaeliou, the Papaeliou Schools of Foreign Languages have been offering education of very high quality. The continuous operation of an organization for more than half a century means that it has managed to successfully cope with the challenges that have appeared. We can roughly identify three (3) main challenges that this organization has faced and is facing.

The greatest challenge that Peter Papaeliou faced was to establish an institute of foreign languages from scratch at a time when learning a foreign language was considered to be a luxury for the vast majority of greek families. Thanks to the gradual modernization of the greek state, the establishment of political stability, and the increase of the average income of greek households, a new challenge arose. Learning a foreign language started becoming more like a necessity for those who aspired to climb the ladder of social hierarchies rather than a luxury. During the 1980s the daughters of Peter Papaeliou had to withstand fierce competition in a field where institutes of foreign languages, proclaiming astonishingly low fees, were virtually mushrooming in every neighborhood. The financial capacity of these institutes was, generally speaking, limited and those which did not offer services of high quality ceased to operate after some time. Having successfully tackled these two challenges, the organization is now facing a third one which may not necessarily be greater in intensity but most likely will be in duration. I am referring to the problem of "commodification" of education.

According to some social scientists one phenomenon of our postmodern society is that of the colonization of various spheres by the logic of capitalism. To put it briefly and somewhat simplistically, some sociologists argue that social fields such as art and education have lost their own distinct logic which has yielded to that of the economic field. For example, while the logic of art says that an artist creates a piece of art which expresses his inner realm, the logic of capitalism sidesteps this notion and stresses that what matters is merely whether the "product" will sell. Therefore, when art is fused, may I say adulterated, with capitalism we have a result which is visible in our everyday life.

This sign of our society's moral impoverishment is apparent in education as well. Education is no longer "knowledge" which helps the individual's personal growth, but a "product". A piece of paper that will merely assist the person in entering the University or getting a pay rise. There are numerous examples in our everyday life that illustrate this argument. Organizations issue certificates that, without any credible reason, "expire" after a couple of years. Some Universities demand that the students sit exams for a certificate which is well below their already proven competence in the language. Some other Universities require that students submit certificates of the English language when English is not used in the offered courses in the least. Some institutes of foreign languages, more than willing to embrace this phenomenon, launch clever marketing campaigns based on that principle, not of offering knowledge, but of selling a product. Indeed, if one compares the leaflets of such institutes with those of a super-market or a fast-food restaurant she will see that the layout and the rationale behind them are identical, the only change is that of names (instead of groceries or pizzas, we have diplomas and certificates). The astoundingly low prices are there, so are the offers (pay for 3 years / pizzas and get 1 for free) and so is the instant gratification of obtaining a diploma without cost, effort or time! This strong tendency has also affected many students and parents who get carried away by the luring advertisements and undermine the true nature / function of education and solely take into account the time and the money they have to spend in order to "get the paper".

The institutes of foreign languages that used to exist in every corner of a neighborhood have now been replaced, to a great extent, by organizations that follow the marketing principle of franchising. The headquarters of this company sell the brand name and guarantee very sophisticated advertising campaigns. There is virtually no monitoring of the quality of teaching done within one of these "stores". The obvious explanation is that this does not interest them. So long as new "stores" open and "customers" are attracted the goal is accomplished. Within these institutes the mentality of marketing is again omnipresent. The employees, who are usually inexperienced or simply indifferent to their vocation, are offered quite low wages, in order to decrease the operational costs, and must also be somewhat good looking in order to "catch the eye".

There is no doubt that there is absolutely nothing that a single organization can do in order to change this tendency, but there is much it can do in order to resist it. There is also no doubt that very professional planning regarding the financial situation and the marketing direction of each organization are necessary for its survival. The phenomenon of "colonization" is a reality when this planning is done at the expense of the level of education offered. When this happens a great moral and practical problem arises. The moral aspect is that this organization is no longer fulfilling its primary function, which is to educate, and the practical aspect is that the student is basically doomed to failing exams of B2, C1, C2 levels. Setting aside the moral dimension of the issue, which many people will find outmoded, parents and students will find that from a practical perspective these cheap and attractive education "packages" are actually very costly.

It is with great disappointment that each year we meet parents and students who have spent a small fortune in these institutes, have amassed a good number of useless certificates, and when the time comes to succeed in B2, C1, C2 levels they are faced with repeated failures. These failures are very costly not only in financial but also in psychological terms. Both parents and students feel that they have failed in their roles; the former to provide their children with what is good for them and the latter to succeed in a field of their life. Entry tests that we administer to new students show that, in most cases, their level is nowhere near that proclaimed by other organizations.

To reiterate our point, the current challenge that an institute of foreign languages has to face is that of resisting "colonization". This theoretical concept, which has been a topic of discussion by renowned sociologists, has many practical implications that will help an organization survive in our postmodern society. Colonization takes place when an organization loses its original orientation (in our case, providing education) and embraces the logic of profit making. This logic is short-sighted and this is why in the previous decade such institutes left the field because of their feeble financial capacities. However, nowadays thanks to franchising methods and the centralization of capital some organizations remain competitive regardless the fact that providing a high level of education is not their priority. Parents and students may find it difficult to resist "offers" for a free year of studying or "guarantees" for a certificate, but as years go by the low quality of education the student has received cannot be hidden any longer. It is at this point they start looking for a proper institute of foreign languages. Until when such organizations will continue to exist is unknown! This challenge can be successfully tackled so long as an organization sets as its very first priority the high level of teaching and at the same time makes the work done inside the organization known to the external environment through clever marketing. Conveying knowledge is not a sophisticated way of making money. It is a moral obligation that older generations have towards the younger ones. This has been the orientation of this school for more than half a century now and it will continue to be for good years to come.

The Directors