

Bridging Moral Philosophy and the Classroom:

How a 2017 Encounter Sparked Project PROVE

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When I first dedicated myself to championing innovative teaching methodologies in Georgia during the late 20th century, I quickly realized that educational reform is an exercise in continuous adaptation. Over the decades, my career has spanned the entire ecosystem—from navigating the macro-level strategies of international organizations and driving grassroots initiatives within NGOs, to lecturing in university halls. Yet, regardless of the setting, my most grounding and vital perspective remains that of a former school teacher. It is within the micro-dynamics of the classroom that grand educational theories face their ultimate trial.

For years, I harbored a specific pedagogical frustration regarding [Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development](#). Academically, Kohlberg's framework is brilliant; it beautifully maps how individuals progress through moral reasoning. However, as an educator trying to translate this into daily practice, I always found its implementation frustratingly elusive. The theory offered a magnificent conceptual destination but left the actual map blank. How do we deliberately foster moral reasoning without hijacking the academic curriculum? For a long time, the application felt vague, theoretical, and detached from the urgent realities of a standard lesson plan.

The missing link emerged unexpectedly in 2016. While collaborating on the international [CURE project](#), I met **Jean-Luc Patry**, a distinguished Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Salzburg, Austria, and the pioneering mind behind the integration of values and knowledge in European pedagogy. During our sessions, he introduced a framework that immediately bridged the gap: the [VaKE \(Values and Knowledge Education\)](#) model.

For me, seeing VaKE was a true "aha!" moment. Patry's model elegantly addresses a classic pedagogical dichotomy: the false choice between teaching hard knowledge and cultivating ethical values. VaKE rejects this divide, constructing a structured, viable methodology where students acquire content knowledge *through* the discussion of moral dilemmas. It was the exact actionable bridge I had been searching for empowering students to navigate complex academic data while simultaneously stress-testing their ethical reasoning.

From a Spark to a Transnational Network

The true power of international initiatives like the Erasmus+ program lies in their longevity. They are not merely finite timelines with fixed end dates; rather, they serve as incubators for lifelong academic relationships and systemic transformation. Erasmus+ does more than just strengthen institutional ties or catalyze immediate adjustments—it births raw ideas that eventually take on a life of their own, inevitably paving the way for entirely new projects.

This is precisely what happened in our case. When the formal lifecycle of Project CURE came to a close, the collaboration between myself, Professor Ekaterine Shaverdashvili and Magda Gogrichiani from Ilia State University, and Professor Jean-Luc Patry did not cease. On the contrary, it intensified.

Driven by a shared conviction in the power of the VaKE model, we spent years working tirelessly to sustain and expand this vision across the South Caucasus. Professor Patry's commitment to our shared goal went far beyond standard academic cooperation. Demonstrating incredible generosity and dedication to educational reform, he visited Georgia entirely on a voluntary basis. During his time here, he stepped out of the purely academic sphere to meet directly with school teachers—the very individuals on the front lines of classroom innovation.

However, transforming a shared vision into a structured, large-scale reality does not happen overnight. Before [Project PROVE](#) could fully materialize, there was a long, intensive period of preparation and rigorous conceptual groundwork. This phase was defined by countless online meetings, late-night strategy sessions, and the invaluable process of expanding our network to include exceptional European partners who had already dedicated years of research to this exact domain.

Through this collaborative journey, we connected with institutions that brought immense pedagogical expertise to the table: the **University of Western Macedonia** in Greece and the **Private University College of Teacher Education of the Diocese of Linz** in Austria.

Working alongside colleagues from these universities was a profound experience. These were scientists and educators who had lived, tested, and refined the integration of values into education within their own academic systems for years. Bridging our regional insights from Georgia with their extensive institutional experience created a powerful synergy. Each digital meeting became a workshop where we cross-

referenced international standards with local realities, ensuring that when PROVE finally launched, it would be backed by solid European expertise while remaining deeply relevant to the specific needs of our schools.

Project PROVE in Action: What We Do

Today, those years of collective effort, late-night digital sessions, and cross-border networking have culminated into a proud reality. Project **PROVE** is officially funded by the European Union's **Erasmus+** program. It is no longer just a shared ambition; it is an active, high-impact initiative being implemented by a powerful consortium across the South Caucasus.

In Georgia, the project is driven by three leading higher education institutions: **Caucasus University**, **Ilia State University**, and **Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University**. Recognizing that pedagogical challenges do not stop at national borders, the project has established a vital regional bridge, partnering with two esteemed institutions from Armenia: **Yerevan State University (YSU)** and the **Khachatur Abovyan Armenian State Pedagogical University (ASPU)**.

Our core mission is currently coming to life through three major strategic pillars:

- **Designing Three Specialized Courses:** We are building a robust academic framework by creating three distinct courses. One is a foundational, universal course on the VaKE model itself, while the other two are country-specific courses—uniquely tailored to address the distinct educational realities and cultural contexts of Georgia and Armenia.
- **Rigorous Curricular Integration and Piloting:** These courses are not just sitting on paper; they are undergoing active piloting. To ensure sustainable systemic change, parts of these new modules are being seamlessly integrated directly into existing university curricula, allowing us to refine our approach based on real-time classroom feedback.
- **Empowering Youth and Building Regional Bridges:** Our work is deeply centered on our students. We are actively engaging young people, empowering them to take this newly acquired methodology and apply it directly to local community issues. Through this, young people from Georgia and Armenia are working side by side, laying the vital groundwork for lifelong friendship, mutual understanding, and future regional collaboration.

This milestone brings us back to the unique phenomenon of Erasmus+. It is difficult to overstate the importance of a program that does not merely offer short-term grants, but actively fosters this level of institutional continuity. For universities in the South Caucasus, Erasmus+ serves as a vital lifeline for sustainable, long-term development. It provides the infrastructure needed to transform a spark of inspiration from 2016 into a robust, transnational reality today.

The VaKE Framework at a Glance

- Values and Knowledge Education (VaKE) is a teaching methodology that introduces students to a specific content curriculum through the introduction of structured moral dilemmas.
- Instead of memorizing facts, students argue ethical viewpoints, discovering that they must acquire hard academic knowledge to defend their moral stances.

A Shield Against Indoctrination: The Global Necessity

The true brilliance of the VaKE model lies in its universal adaptability. It can be seamlessly integrated into virtually any subject. As learners engage with the material, they achieve a double victory: they master their core subject competencies while simultaneously elevating their capacity for moral reasoning.

In today's volatile world, where peace, democracy, and freedom of thought are actively under threat, isn't it high time we gave these issues the global urgency they deserve? It must become crystal clear that ideological indoctrination can utterly derail the future of education, and consequently, the future of the world itself. After all, indoctrination targets the most vulnerable and precious landscape we have: the minds of our youth.

When we shield education from rigid manipulation and instead open it up to values-based, critical inquiry, we are doing more than just training students to pass exams. We are building a defense mechanism for democratic society. Project PROVE is our localized contribution to this global necessity, a statement that in the South Caucasus, we choose to cultivate independent, ethically grounded, and free-thinking generations.

The Reality of the Classroom: Why This Shift is Hard

As a former school teacher, I know all too well that introducing moral and ethical dimensions into a classroom is easier said than done. When educators step up to transform the classroom from a space of passive listening into a living laboratory for ethical inquiry, they almost immediately run into systemic walls.

Through my decades of working within the Georgian educational space, I have observed four persistent challenges that trap teachers in the "safe zone" of traditional instruction:

- **The Tyranny of the Clock and the Test:** Standardized curricula are notoriously over-packed. Teachers operate under intense pressure to cover massive content chapters before national assessments. Spending a class period debating an ethical dilemma can feel like a luxury they

cannot afford, creating a false but stressful choice between academic performance and character development.

- **The Fear of Controversy:** True ethical dilemmas are, by definition, controversial. In an era of intense polarization, teachers often fear backlash from school administrations, anxious parents, or external ideological pressures. Without robust institutional backing, it is simply safer to teach *what* happened rather than interrogating the thorny, uncomfortable choices behind it.
- **The Lack of Actionable Frameworks:** Many teachers genuinely *want* to foster critical thinking, but their formal training prepared them to be content deliverers, not facilitators of philosophical discourse. Simply tossing a controversial topic into a room usually results in a chaotic shouting match or awkward silence. Teachers need a predictable, step-by-step roadmap.
- **The Assessment Dilemma:** Traditional education relies on binaries an answer is either right or wrong. But how do you grade a moral stance? You cannot give a student an "A" for one ethical viewpoint and a "C" for another. Without sophisticated rubrics to measure the *quality of reasoning* rather than the opinion itself, teachers find it incredibly difficult to justify these exercises to a rigid grading system.

This is precisely why frameworks like the **VaKE model** are so vital, and why Project **PROVE** focuses so heavily on systematic teacher training. We cannot expect teachers to bravely introduce these complex dimensions into the classroom without giving them the institutional support, the structured hours, and the proven tools to do so successfully. By embedding these methodologies directly into university and teacher-training curricula, we are finally building the infrastructure that transforms these hurdles into stepping stones.

Peace Education and Our Shared Intellectual Legacy

Ultimately, at its deepest core, Project PROVE is an exercise in peace education. When we use the VaKE model to dismantle rigid dogmas and teach young people to look at complex dilemmas from multiple ethical perspectives, we are doing the foundational work of peacebuilding. Peace is not merely the absence of conflict; it is the presence of dialogue, empathy, and the capacity to resolve differences through reasoned, moral judgment.

In chasing this vision, we walk a path cleared by some of humanity's greatest thinkers—including those from our own Georgian intellectual heritage who placed immense value on peace, free speech, and independent thought.

I think of [Vazha-Pshavela](#), whose profound ideas transcended national boundaries. He reminded us that true patriotism and a yearning for freedom must always coexist with universal human empathy and a commitment to global peace. As he beautifully captured in his writing "Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism":

"Raise every nation to such a level of development that it fully understands its economic and political condition, the merits and failings of its social existence; eliminate the economic wrongs of the present day, and surely the desire of one nation to subjugate another, the ravaging of one by another, and the wars that now dominate the earth will disappear."

By bringing these timeless values into the modern South Caucasian classroom through Project PROVE, we are honoring that legacy. We are proving that when we teach the youth of Georgia and Armenia to think freely, value truth, and respect the moral dignity of the "other," we are not just teaching a university course. We are planting the seeds of sustainable peace, ensuring that our shared future is built not on the fragile foundations of indoctrination, but on the unbreakable pillars of mutual respect, free thought, and ethical responsibility.

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