CULTURAL MEDIATION AS A FIELD OF STUDY AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF A MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY

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Abstract

Cultural mediation constitutes a field of interaction at the intersection of culture, communication and society, aiming to foster closer relationships between cultural institutions, artistic expressions and heritage, on the one hand, and audiences and communities, on the other. Beyond being understood as a complementary activity carried out by cultural institutions, cultural mediation deserves to be recognized as an autonomous field of academic study and professional education. This article explores the need to develop university-level programmes in cultural mediation in North Macedonia, with the aim of preparing specialized professionals equipped to work within cultural institutions and the cultural industries. This need is particularly relevant in the country's multi-ethnic and multilingual context, where expanding cultural participation, fostering intercultural communication, and promoting mutual understanding constitute both significant challenges and opportunities. The Francophone experience is examined as a reference model for the integration of cultural mediation into higher education and professional practices within the cultural sector. Drawing on a theoretical and analytical approach, the article argues that establishing a specialized professional profile and developing an appropriate university-level educational framework can contribute to broadening cultural inclusion and participation, while also strengthening social cohesion.

Keywords: Cultural Mediation, Higher Education, Professional Education, Intercultural Communication, Social Cohesion.

1. Introduction

Culture is not merely a collection of cultural heritage, works of art, traditions, or institutions. It is also a space for communication and participation. The value of a cultural activity is determined not only by the quality of the artistic work and the significance of the heritage being presented, but also by the extent to which different individuals and groups are able to access, understand, and experience it, and ultimately to enrich their social lives. In this sense, one of the main challenges facing contemporary cultural institutions and organizations is the establishment of lasting relationships with audiences. Museums, performances, theatres, galleries, libraries, festivals, and other organizations operating in the cultural industries cannot limit themselves to producing and presenting cultural offerings. They must develop new forms of communication, understand the needs of diverse audiences, and thereby create the conditions for their active participation. It is precisely within this space between cultural institutions, artistic creativity, and the public that cultural mediation acquires its significance. It facilitates the mediation of cultural content, supports its interpretation, and creates various forms of interaction between culture and society. For this reason, cultural mediation should not be regarded merely as an occasional task performed by employees of cultural institutions, but as an activity requiring specific knowledge, competencies, and professional preparation.

In North Macedonia, this issue is of particular importance. The country’s multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural character makes it essential to develop forms of communication and interaction that respect diversity and create more equitable opportunities for participation in cultural life. This reality places intercultural communication and cultural inclusion among the important dimensions of social development.

The aim of this article is to argue for the need to develop cultural mediation as a field of university study and professional education in North Macedonia. The analysis focuses on the

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establishment of a professional profile for the cultural mediator, who would be able to work in cultural institutions and the cultural industries, contributing to the expansion of cultural participation, the promotion of intercultural communication, and the strengthening of social cohesion.
The main research question guiding this paper is: Why is it necessary to develop university studies in cultural mediation in North Macedonia, and how can the education of specialised professionals contribute to cultural inclusion and social cohesion?

2. Cultural Mediation: Concept and Dimensions

Cultural mediation is a concept encompassing a range of practices and processes through which relationships are established between the author, the public, and cultural content, facilitated by the intervention of a cultural mediator. It is not simply the transmission of information or the explanation of a work of art or cultural activity; rather, it is a communicative process that seeks to create the conditions for interpretation, understanding, experience, and participation (Davallon, 2000). Intercultural mediation is a subject of study within Information and Communication Sciences (Mathieu, 2012, p. 287).
Cultural mediation is particularly relevant to live artistic performances, as opposed to recorded art forms such as cinema and audiovisual productions, which do not require the physical presence of performers before an audience. Live performances involve direct interaction between artists and audiences and include theatre, dance, music, opera, concerts, choirs, circus, street arts, storytelling, and puppetry, among other forms of artistic expression. From this perspective, the cultural mediator is not merely someone who conveys information from an institution to the public or interprets and explains an object or event. The mediator exchanges ideas, develops effective communication strategies, and acts as an intermediary in cultural relationships: identifying audience needs, adapting forms of communication, creating participatory activities, and facilitating dialogue between different cultural experiences.
Jean Caune (1999, 2017), one of the founding scholars of French cultural mediation studies, approaches cultural mediation not merely as an instrument of aesthetic, public, and political communication concerned with conveying and experiencing artistic works or democratising access to the consumption of cultural products, but also as a pedagogical activity undertaken by cultural institutions and, indeed, as a process that mediates the relationship between art, culture, the individual, and society. The author maintains that “culture and communication are fundamental components of all collective life”, although, in his view, this relationship is often regarded as “a strange couple” (Caune, 2006, p. 18).
From this standpoint, mediation is not simply a tool for increasing the number of visitors or participants in cultural activities. It is also concerned with the ways in which individuals internalise cultural experiences, construct meanings and shared frames of reference, and establish relationships with others. Sonke et al. (2025) argue that participation in the arts and cultural activities can contribute to strengthening social cohesion and improving community well-being, including dimensions of physical and mental health.
For this reason, cultural mediation seeks to involve all age groups and social groups in cultural life and in the consumption of art and culture. It contributes not only to education about the values of cultural heritage and the importance of transmitting them to future generations, but also to raising social awareness of a range of current and broader social issues. It also aims to facilitate access to art and culture for potential audiences, particularly individuals facing economic, social, or geographical barriers. Beyond conveying basic knowledge, cultural mediation seeks to broaden each individual’s cultural horizons, paying particular attention to audiences who are excluded or marginalised.

Cultural mediation can take different forms depending on the context and the institution in which it takes place. In museums, it may include guided tours, educational workshops, and participatory programmes. In theatre, it may involve meetings with artists, discussions with audiences, and audience-development activities. In galleries and contemporary art institutions, it can create new forms of interpretation and interaction with artworks. At festivals and within cultural projects, it can facilitate communication with local communities and encourage their involvement in the creative process. In libraries, it may include meetings between readers and well-known authors, a practice that young people today are familiar with under the term “book club”. Cultural mediation should therefore be understood as an interdisciplinary field combining elements of communication studies, sociology, cultural studies, education, art history, cultural heritage, and cultural project management.

3. Cultural Mediation as a Field of Study and Professional Education

The development of cultural mediation as a professional field requires more than practical experience or general communication skills. The work of a cultural mediator involves knowledge of theories of culture and communication, audience analysis, an understanding of social contexts, and the ability to design and implement activities tailored to different groups.
A cultural mediator should be able to analyse the relationship between a cultural institution and its audiences. They must understand which audience groups are represented, which remain beyond the reach of the cultural offering, and which factors may prevent their participation. On this basis, the mediator can propose new forms of communication and mediation that are as inclusive as possible and, where feasible, minimise all forms of exclusion.
The competencies associated with this professional profile can be organised into several main areas:

1. Theoretical competencies: knowledge of theories of culture, mediation, communication, audience sociology, and cultural policy.
2. Communication competencies: the ability to communicate with diverse audiences, adapt language, and facilitate dialogue.
3. Pedagogical competencies: the ability to design workshops, educational programmes, and learning activities through culture and the arts.
4. Intercultural competencies: the ability to understand and respect cultural and linguistic differences and to create spaces for communication between communities.
5. Organisational and project-management competencies: the ability to design, implement, and evaluate cultural mediation projects.
6. Digital competencies: the use of digital tools and platforms to expand cultural communication and participation.

These competencies demonstrate that a cultural mediator is not simply an administrative employee or an event organiser. The mediator is a professional who connects cultural knowledge with the practices of communication and social participation. In this respect, university studies would provide a sound theoretical and practical foundation for the profession. They would also help define more clearly the profile of the cultural mediator, the fields in which they may work, and the competencies required to practise this profession.

4. The Francophone Experience as a Reference for University Education

The French experience offers a useful example of how cultural mediation can be integrated into higher education and connected to the concrete needs of the cultural sector. It is not presented here as a model to be copied directly, but rather as evidence that this field can be

academically structured and developed into a distinct professional profile. Belgian universities have also included cultural mediation programmes in their academic offerings.
For example, the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) offers an inter-university programme in cultural mediation, with a focus on its socio-political dimension. In France, the University of Paris 3, for instance, offers a specialisation in "Cultural Mediations" within its undergraduate programme in Information and Communication Sciences, highlighting the importance of this professional profile: "Cultural mediation consists of a set of scholarly and professional approaches aimed at creating the conditions for encounters between artistic proposals, institutions, and audiences (...). This educational programme is based on a dual rationale: on the one hand, the sharing and transmission of knowledge, which the mediator conveys through activities such as guided tours, conferences, or the preparation of written or oral mediation tools; on the other hand, the creation of relationships and social ties." Another example is the University of Paris 8, which offers a Master's programme in Cultural Mediation, Heritage, and Digital Technologies. The programme prepares professionals "to initiate, develop, and lead projects in collaboration with museums, particularly in the field of new media: cultural mediation projects, audience engagement activities and projects, the development of cultural services, etc. This programme integrates several key areas of competence, including culture, museology, heritage, cultural mediation, and information and communication technologies."
These examples show that education in cultural mediation can be developed at the intersection of communication sciences, cultural studies, and cultural project management. They also demonstrate that university education should not be limited to theoretical knowledge, but should be connected to professional practice and to the needs of cultural institutions and organisations.
For North Macedonia, the significance of this experience lies precisely in the opportunity to consider an educational model adapted to the local context. The aim is not to reproduce a foreign programme or borrow ready-made, standardised practices, but to develop an original curriculum that takes into account the country's cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and institutional structure.

5. The Need to Develop Cultural Mediation in North Macedonia

North Macedonia has a cultural reality characterised by ethnic, linguistic, and historical diversity. This diversity represents an important cultural asset, but at the same time it calls for thoughtful policies and appropriate practices that foster recognition and stimulate communication and the participation of different communities in cultural life.
This reality should not be treated merely as an issue of the formal representation of communities, as it has in fact largely been addressed since 2001, primarily within the framework of the legal obligations arising from the Ohrid Framework Agreement (Ndrio Karameti, 2014). Rather, it should be approached as a question of the access of different communities and social groups to cultural life, and of the concrete opportunities available to them to participate in the production and consumption of culture. In this context, cultural mediation can play an important role in several areas.
First, it can expand cultural participation. Cultural institutions should be able to communicate with the public as a whole. Participation cannot be taken for granted simply because an activity is public and open to all. It requires information, communication, interaction, and the creation of conditions in which individuals feel welcome and included.
Second, it can facilitate intercultural communication. In a society characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity, institutions can serve as meeting spaces for different experiences. Cultural mediators can contribute to the creation of activities that present the heritage and

artistic expressions of different communities, encourage dialogue, and avoid treating cultures as realities isolated from one another.

Third, it can promote the inclusion of different social groups. Cultural participation does not depend solely on ethnic or linguistic affiliation. Age, educational level, economic circumstances, place of residence, disability, and access to technology may also influence individuals' relationship with culture. Cultural mediation can help develop programmes for children, young people, older people, persons with disabilities, residents of rural areas, and other groups who may have fewer opportunities to participate.

Fourth, it can strengthen relationships between institutions and communities. The cultural mediator can serve as a connecting point between cultural institutions and the social environment in which they operate. Through consultation, participatory activities, and joint projects, institutions can gain a better understanding of community needs and develop cultural offerings that are more closely aligned with their realities.

These functions demonstrate that cultural mediation should not be confined to the dimensions of its institutional mission; it can also have a much broader and more useful application in a country with considerable cultural diversity. Furthermore, North Macedonia is a country with candidate status for membership of the European Union. In this context, cultural mediation could facilitate social understanding at all levels.

6. Cultural Mediation and Social Cohesion

One of the main arguments for the need to develop cultural mediation as a field in North Macedonia concerns its potential contribution to strengthening social cohesion. As the scholar Bernard Lamizet explains, cultural mediation goes beyond the artistic work itself, the cultural event, or the figure of the author, and is grounded in political and institutional rationales (2000). This contribution should be understood as a gradual process, developed by creating opportunities for participation, mutual recognition, and interaction among individuals and communities.

Social cohesion does not mean eliminating cultural differences or creating a single shared identity. On the contrary, it concerns the possibility for individuals and groups with different identities, languages, and experiences to build relationships based on shared aspirations, respect, dialogue, and participation in common cultural life. In this sense, cultural institutions can become spaces in which differences are not presented as obstacles, but as resources for mutual understanding and the enrichment of shared experience. A participatory exhibition, a reading group (book club) or a theatre project involving young people from different communities, an activity presenting diverse local heritage, or a multilingual educational programme can create concrete opportunities for communication and interaction.

The cultural mediator plays an important role in this process. They can design and facilitate these forms of encounter. Their professional education should equip them with the skills to identify communication barriers, understand cultural sensitivities, and create activities that encourage equal participation. The professional education of cultural mediators should be designed in a way that reflects the commitment of the state and society to coexistence and mutual understanding. One example concerns the mediator's language skills. In principle, a consensus should be reached whereby all cultural mediators who graduate or obtain a licence to practise are proficient in the main languages spoken in the country. Language proficiency positions the mediator as a key facilitator of a cultural event, at the centre of audiences with different characteristics. The profession of cultural mediator can gradually become recognised by different communities as a necessity for shared life within a common state. The more young people choose this profession, the more organically the need for mediation in the exchange and consumption of cultural and artistic products will become apparent.

Nevertheless, it is clear that cultural mediation cannot, on its own, solve the structural problems of a society, nor can it automatically guarantee social cohesion. It does not replace educational, social, or cultural policies, but it can serve as an important complementary instrument in their implementation. Its contribution lies in creating concrete spaces for communication, expanding participation, and building more sustainable relationships between institutions and citizens.

7. Towards a University Model of Cultural Mediation in North Macedonia

The development of cultural mediation as a field of study requires a structured academic and professional approach. A university programme in this area should combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience and prepare students to respond to the concrete needs of cultural institutions and the cultural industries. Nevertheless, the path towards developing such programmes could also begin with the introduction of courses in cultural mediation within existing programmes in communication and media studies.

One possible model could be developed, for example, as an interdisciplinary course offered within departments of communication studies, cultural studies (such as archaeology and ethnography), literary studies, sociology, and faculties of arts. The choice of academic structure should be determined by universities' capacities and by an analysis of the needs of the cultural sector. An essential element of this education at the national level should be cooperation between universities and cultural institutions and organisations. Professional placements would enable students to become familiar with the practical work of cultural mediators, analyse relationships with audiences, and implement mediation projects in real-world contexts.

Equally important is the clear identification of professional opportunities available upon graduation. Cultural mediators may work in museums, theatres, galleries, libraries, cultural centres, heritage institutions, festivals, non-governmental organisations, arts organisations, educational projects, and other structures within the cultural industries. Their work may involve audience development, community relations, the design of cultural programmes, communication, and cultural inclusion.

Before establishing such a programme, it would be necessary to conduct a comprehensive analysis of existing university programmes in North Macedonia. This analysis should examine whether, and to what extent, courses related to cultural mediation are included in programmes in communication, the arts, education, sociology, cultural management, and other fields. Such an inventory would help identify gaps, avoid overlaps, and determine the most appropriate form of academic institutionalisation for this field. For the purposes of this study, several programmes that could potentially include courses in cultural mediation were examined at three universities in the country whose activities are conducted primarily in Albanian: the *University of Tetova*, *Mother Teresa University*, and the *South East European University*. The analysis showed that cultural mediation is included neither as a separate programme of study nor as a course within any existing programme. Studies in communication and culture extend to subjects such as "intercultural communication". However, a more comprehensive nationwide study would serve not only to analyse needs and trends, but also to open up debate on new paths towards social cohesion in the country. In this way, the proposal for university studies in cultural mediation would be grounded not only in a theoretical argument, but also in a concrete assessment of the country's academic and professional needs, in the service of a society responsive to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

8. Conclusions

Cultural mediation represents a field of particular importance for the development of relationships between artists, cultural institutions, audiences, and communities. It makes it possible for culture to be more than an offering produced and presented by institutions, transforming it into a space for communication, experience, and participation that includes all social groups. In North Macedonia, the development of this field is particularly important because of the country's ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, as well as the need to create broader and more inclusive forms of cultural participation. In this context, cultural mediation can contribute to strengthening relationships between institutions and citizens, facilitating intercultural communication, and creating shared spaces for interaction.

This article argued that these functions require specifically educated professionals. Cultural mediators should possess theoretical knowledge and practical competencies that enable them to analyse audience needs, design cultural programmes, facilitate communication, and develop participatory projects. For this reason, cultural mediation should be treated as a fully fledged field of study and professional education within higher education. The French experience demonstrates that such education can be institutionalised within university programmes and directly linked to professional practice in the cultural sector. For North Macedonia, this experience can serve as a point of reference for developing a model adapted to local needs and specificities. The establishment of a university programme in cultural mediation would represent a step towards recognising this profession and developing new capacities within cultural institutions and the cultural industries. In the longer term, the education of cultural mediators could help expand cultural participation, promote mutual understanding between communities, and strengthen social cohesion. In this way, cultural mediation would become not merely an instrument for communicating culture, but also a means of making it more accessible, participatory, and present in shared social life.

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