

**THE EUROVISION AS A KEY
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE:
TEACHING EUROPEAN POLITICS
AND IDENTITIES WITH IMPACT**

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Abstract

Over the past twenty-five years, Eurovision studies have evolved into a multidisciplinary research area. It inspired books and papers written by musicologists, physicists, statisticians, economists, political scientists, sociologists, gender experts and cultural analysts. This paper advances the field by focusing on teaching the ESC. Using the theory of key educational experiences, it exemplifies how academic courses on the Eurovision can combine fun with academic rigor while advancing knowledge about European politics and culture.

Teaching Eurovision? Seriously?

Recognized as “the Godfather of Eurovision Studies,”¹ the organizers of the 2014 scientific meeting of the Eurovision Song Contest held in Denmark invited me to deliver a keynote address. I took the opportunity to summarize twenty years of research on the event and charted a map of the intellectual terrain.² Many media interviews ensued, so my department administrators asked me to follow up on this enticing topic by teaching an academic course on the topic. “Teach the Eurovision? Are you serious?” I asked. “But why not?” they replied, “You say it’s all about politics, don’t you? So teach about Europe through the lens of the Eurovision! Let’s give it a shot!”

This was not an academically frivolous request. For the past two decades, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has attracted growing interest of scholars from a variety of disciplines. Their studies supplemented initial analyses of European political and cultural divisions with diverse inquiries into gender, national branding, national trauma, fandom, tourism, voting procedures and media coverage. The interest in the ESC even gave rise to an annual scientific conference devoted to the ESC. This annual shiny and pompous event – inaugurated in 1956 – produced data that lighted

¹ Duncan J. Watts. (2007, May 22). The Politics of Eurovision. The New York Times, Op-Ed Section.

² Gad Yair, “Douze Point: Eurovisions and Euro-Divisions in the Eurovision Song Contest – Review of Two Decades of Research,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22:5-6 (2018), 1013–1029.

interest amongst musicologists, physicists, statisticians, economists, political scientists, sociologists, gender experts and cultural analysts. The body of scholarship they have created – inclusive of books³ and dozens of publications in respected journals – exposed the ESC is akin to a cultural and political seismograph.⁴ They have shown, for example, that voting patterns, song words, stage layouts and performances expose hidden schisms between nations and political blocs; that economic relations predict cultural relations; that authoritarian regimes opt for political voting, whereas democratic countries judge songs by musical tastes; that countries use the contest to project national identities; and that some performers use it to raise consciousness about social problems (e.g., child abuse).

But much as it proved fertile for scholarly research, the Eurovision is yet to enjoy a similar interest as a teaching platform. The present paper fills this lacuna. It describes an elective, multi-media and interdisciplinary course I developed using the Eurovision Song Contest. The course provides students with an opportunity to appreciate how a seemingly frivolous event opens a unique window into European politics and tensions. Though some participants expressed doubts before attending this class, some admitted that they were always passionate about the ESC, being hooked by its frivolity and by memories of fun familial ceremonies during nights of the broadcast.

³ See for example: Raykoff, I., & Tobin, R. D. (Eds.). *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*. London: Routledge, 2017.

⁴ Yair, Douze Point.

Few expected, however, to learn something of significance about Europe and the tensions between continent and nation. Notwithstanding their initial suspicions, their feedback about the course testified that they experienced a fresh approach for understanding European societies and their identities, for thinking about gender and performativity – and even for thinking about themselves. As the following descriptions suggest, the course kept the fun part of the Eurovision, but added important academic contents.

Indeed, students' feedback is telling: "It was an amazing course," wrote one student; another stated that it was "A refreshing course that combined theory with practice, had wonderful guest speakers from the industry, and provided room for dialogue and discussion." A student from the sciences explained that since she had never studied the social sciences, the course presented her with a different way of thinking. Her friend suggested that "Classes were held in a special and fun atmosphere that combined musical performances with theoretical content." Another student summed this up: "An unforgettable Course! Real experience! Important Learning!"

Teaching Eurovision

Several elements joined in creating those enthusiastic reactions. Equivalent to a 2-credit course, the class met for four intensive full days at a Spring break, a month before the ESC. During those days, I reviewed streams in the scholarly literature (based on the 2018 review of the literature). I peppered theoretical presentations with relevant songs from prior years (e.g. Ukraine's performances criticizing

Russia). On each day I focused on one or two of the following themes: Political blocs and voting preferences; gender and LGBT identities; national trauma and national branding; European integration and inclusivity across national walls and ideological regimes; tensions between nationality and Europeanness and between Christianity and Islam; and fandom. On each of those days a guest speaker from the industry arrived to speak with the students.

On the third day students had to formulate a research question for their final project. They had a month to seek information, analyze data, and interview informants. The students met in small groups and created team projects (up to three students in each). During the interim, the students met me for refining their projects and presentations, and a week before the ESC they submitted preliminary written reports (50% of the grade). The class then met again during the ESC week, on each of the three nights of the broadcast. During the two semi-finals the meetings took place in a public venue with an open invitation to the public (friends, parents and siblings). I also invited three doctoral students to serve as referees for the final presentations (awarding the students the remaining 50% of the grade). Participants then presented their research findings in front of all present, with rounds of commentary, discussion and applause. The two semi-finals ended with joyous screenings of the ESC along with commentary and voting quizzes (with beer and treats, another surprising element that supported the experience).

The peak of the course was special. We watched the ESC final broadcast in a large pub downtown Jerusalem. Sponsored by a public organization, we again invited the public for a short introduction and quizzes that the students arranged. About a hundred attendees joined the students. The crowd watched the ESC live. We finished the evening by analyzing bloc voting *in situ*, with live statistical analysis. In the second year, the late-night victory of the Israeli performer Netta (with “Toy,” the #MeToo song of the year) ended the scholarly treatment of the event in an emotional crescendo. Though I could not plan for that victory, throughout that month I used my theory of key educational experiences (a “serious” part in my research portfolio) to further structure students’ learning experiences.⁵

Transforming the Eurovision into a Key Educational Experience

Like many scholars studying Eurovision, I launched the first ever studies as a fan.⁶ As said, the opportunity to teach a course on the

⁵ Gad Yair. Decisive Moments and Key Experiences: Expanding Paradigmatic Boundaries in the Study of School Effects. In Carlos Alberto Torres and Ari Antikainen (eds.), *The International Handbook on the Sociology of Education: An International Assessment of New Research and Theory*. Lanham, Md; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 124–142; Gad Yair, “Can We Administer The Scholarship of Teaching? Lessons From Outstanding Professors in Higher Education,” *Higher Education*, 55:4 (2008), pp. 447–459; Gad Yair, “Key Educational Experiences and Self-discovery in Higher Education,” *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24:1 (2008), pp. 92–103.

⁶ Gad Yair, “Unite Unite Europe: The Political and Cultural Structure of Europe as Reflected in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Social Networks*, 17 (1995), pp. 147–161; Gad Yair & Daniel Maman, “The Persistent Structure of Hegemony: Politics and Culture in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Acta Sociologica*, 39:3 (1996), pp. 309–325.

ESC was a happenstance. But when I was invited to do so, I exploited my research of key educational experiences for creating a unique course. My aim: provide an opportunity for students to learn about Europe, politics, and culture and leave them with lifelong memories. The following elements allowed me to transform an ordinary academic course into an impactful key educational experience.

Promoting Choice and Multiple Talents. The theory of key experiences resulted from large studies on the most outstanding educational experiences that adults had. In principle, it aligns with John Dewey's ideas of 'progressive education' and Kahane's model of 'informal education,' both urging educators to allow students to engage in voluntary activities for promoting their engagement in learning.⁷ Moreover, studies have shown that providing room for exhibiting unique talents intensifies students' motivation.⁸ Therefore, the Eurovision course promoted choice first by being an elective, second by allowing students to choose a topic of interest to research, and third by giving them freedom to choose how to present their findings. Some students, for example, created quizzes and engaged the entire class through Kahoot, some dug deep into statistical models, while yet others opted for presentation of social problems or

⁷ John Dewey. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1926; Reuven Kahane. *The Origins of Postmodern Youth : Informal Youth Movements in a Comparative Perspective*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997.

⁸ Howard Gardner. *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

national visions using literary means. Students testified that they were “connected” to “their” topics. The freedom to choose their mode of presentation allowed them to present their best skills and their best selves. The only mandatory element in the course was attendance – especially during the two semi-finals (making sure that students attend all presentations).

Creating Relevant Multi-Disciplinary Contents. The Eurovision course was open for students across campus. That meant that students arrived with a variety of backgrounds and interests. The richness of academic interests in ESC studies enabled to bring together a multidisciplinary crowd – which also promoted variety of intellectual orientations during class discussions. Most students could find relevant topics for testing questions and hypotheses. For example, students from economics asked about the economic aspects of the Eurovision (e.g. the economic benefits of winning). Transgressions on stage and their political and ideological meanings engaged students from gender studies (e.g. studying discussions around the victories of Dana International and Conchita Wurst, for example). Voting patterns and explicit political biases engaged students of politics and international relations (e.g. Jamala from the Ukraine with her 2016 winning song “1944” referring to Soviet deportations of the Tatars; the bond between Greece and Cyprus). Media coverage of the event and its popularity across borders enthused students from communications and journalism. The wide spectrum of topics and the

freedom to choose media of expression engaged all students throughout the meetings.

Creating Authentic Encounters. A crucial element in creating key educational experiences is having authentic real-life examples. To maximize authenticity, I invited prominent guests from the industry and from fan groups to speak in class. Given the centrality of LGBT facets in the Eurovision and its study,⁹ I invited central figures in the Israeli branch of the Eurovision Fan Club (the OGAE). The guest spoke about gender identities, fandom, and resulting transformations of homophobia and misogyny in the public sphere. The songwriter of the winning Israeli Song “Toy” was another prominent guest. Being a central figure in the Israeli pop scene, he introduced students to various aspects of the industry and exposed the behind the scenes of Eurovision production. Those presentations allowed students to appreciate the connection between theory and practice; they rendered the relevance of academic papers and theoretical discussions to the practical world of Eurovision. And authenticity indeed worked: Students were utterly taken by the guests!

Preparing for a Peak Experience in Front of an Audience. The course matched the structure of the ESC. After a long stretch of

⁹ Brian Singleton, Karen Fricker, and Elena Moreo, “Performing the queer network. Fans and families at the Eurovision Song Contest,” *SQS*, 2:2 (2007), pp. 12–24; Julie A. Cassiday, “Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia’s Trajectory to Eurovision Victory,” *Russian Review*, 73:1 (2014), pp. 1–23; Dana Heller, “t.A.T.u. You! Russia, the global politics of Eurovision, and lesbian pop,” *Popular Music*, 26:2 (2007), pp. 195–210.

preparations (national selections and two semi-finals), the Eurovision ends in a crescendo with 200 million watching the event across the world. The organizers create and maintain tension up to the last moments of the final. Similarly, the course progressed towards a peak that took place during the two semi-finals. It required the students to be active in making an original study while presenting their findings in front of outsiders. Knowing that they would present their findings in public – and be evaluated by external referees – increased their motivation and enthusiasm. Similar to the ESC, the month-long course ended with three peak evenings, making for a memorable learning experience. As the anecdotes at the beginning suggest, the students ended experiencing a lifetime key educational experience.

Serious Fun in Academia?

When I got my position as a sociologist at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem I just finished authoring the first two papers on the Eurovision Song Contest. By then I also published two papers on long distance runners, another hobby of mine. Dumbfounded, the dean invited me for elderly advice. “The Hebrew University is all about seriousness; beware of fun and leisure topics,” he warned me. Twenty-five years later, my research portfolio has consequently developed in several serious directions. Recently, however, I was able to recombine fun stuff with academic rigor. But twenty-five years later, it also seems that the university has somewhat relaxed its puritan fixture. Actually, several scholars have lately “came out” by asking to join me in teaching the Eurovision course. Coming from different

departments – communications, political science and international relations – they revealed that they too are interested in the Eurovision, and that they too seek to study its rich landscapes.

Indeed, the Eurovision Song Contest provides a unique window into European politics, society and culture. It allows teaching about questions of political integration and ideological divisions. It provides a unique arena for observing latent conflicts and for assessing social change of values and norms. It allows students to encounter research questions about continent and nation, about tradition, ethnicity and modernity, about masculinity and femininity. Without a doubt, the ESC provides an encapsulated arena for diverse scholars, inviting them to expose students to the rich political and cultural phenomena that surround the event. As is now clear, the academic study of the ESC evolved into a legitimate and sophisticated area. Eurovision studies matured to make up a multimodal discipline that is worthy of academic instruction.

Indeed, the Eurovision Song Contest proves to be an enticing focus for academically rigorous instruction. Given the multidisciplinary character of Eurovision studies, such academic courses are likely to attract the interest of students across programs. They are also likely to be popular thanks to the popish nature of the ESC, its extravagance and its centrality in TV broadcasts across Europe (and Australia). As I have shown here, by adopting the pedagogy of key experiences, courses on the Eurovision can prove highly successful in merging academics with fun. Future contributions might exploit this

instructional approach for teaching with impact by focusing on other cultural and sporting events. Such extensions can combine academically engaging contents with fun and enthusiasm – providing students with lifetime memories from their academic studies. As the quotes above suggested, students are likely to award such courses with a *Douze Point*.

Gad Yair is a sociologist at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His (serious) interests revolve around the impact of national cultures on science and education. He authored seven books and about eighty scholarly papers. He currently spends a sabbatical at MIT's Sloan School of Management.