



Prof-no-profit: a teaching experience of an European professor in Rwanda

Roberto Valentino

Department of Chemistry, Life Sciences and Environmental Sustainability, University of Parma, Parma, Italy
(roberto.valentino@unipr.it)

The didactic experience of teaching a course of “Soil Mechanics” in a Faculty of Civil Engineering in Rwanda rose fundamentally from the research of a new sense for my academic profession at the University of Parma (Italy), where I teach the courses of Geotechnics, Rock Mechanics and Slope Stability.

During a holiday journey in Rwanda, at the end of August 2017 I visited the Institute of Applied Sciences INES at Ruhengeri. The Rector of that University asked me the availability to spend a short period at INES, in order to teach a module inside the undergraduate program in Civil Engineering. On the basis of a bilateral cooperation agreement between the University of Parma and INES-Ruhengeri, a first three weeks teaching activity at the beginning of 2018 and a second six weeks teaching activity at the end of the same year was carried out.

Beyond giving a report of the activities done, this note aims at explaining the lesson learnt from this experience, under both human and professional viewpoint. Firstly, preparing lessons for students coming from a very different background, with respect to what I was wont, represented a real personal challenge. The educational background of Rwandan university students is very different from that of European ones. It was astonishing to observe how they were inured to study using only few and poor material means such as handbooks and books. As regards the level of basic knowledge, it was generally satisfactory. On the other hand, especially referring to typical Engineering disciplines, it was evident a study practice based on the solution of elementary problems more than on deep reasoning.

One of the general objective of this teaching experience was to show a different approach to the study of such a kind of disciplines. In particular, it was useful to pass from a mere pragmatic approach, to a wider vision of the theory, through an in deep analysis of problems, based on physical evidence and on experimental measurements.

As regards the specific contents of the course, dealing with the basic concepts of Soil Mechanics, they were of paramount importance, due to two main reasons: 1) the great amount of problems connected to soil mechanics affecting Rwanda, from the construction of new infrastructures to the frequency of different kinds of landslides, and 2) the lack of local experts in this field of knowledge.

If it is difficult quantifying the lesson learnt by the Rwandan students, it is much more difficult measuring what the teacher gained from this experience. The most impressive gift I received was the human relationship. This had the power to give a new sense to my profession, anywhere it is practiced. Moreover, it was astonishing to observe how the didactic approach that is “normal” for an European teacher was considered of a much higher level by the local students. I think that European professors can assume an important role with respect to a real improvement of high level education in the African context.