The Importance of Social Abilities in Teaching Practice

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of an evaluation conducted in the Educational Sciences Department of Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu on the interpersonal interaction style and assertiveness of students attending psycho-pedagogical studies, starting in the school-year 2011-2012, and evaluation is still in progress. The research focused on students having accomplished the theoretical stage of their training, before starting the teaching practice stage, compared to those who have already had finished this stage, intending to identify any visible improvement. On the other hand, the research attempts to identify characteristics of interpersonal interaction style and assertiveness shown by teachers with a certain experience in educational activities, and compare the interaction patterns in order to properly evaluate the directions for further training requested.

Keywords: social interaction abilities; communication abilities inventory; assertiveness; interpersonal skills; teaching practice improvements in social intelligence;

1. Introduction

The need for productive human interactions is gaining in importance in all areas of human activities. A good teacher should constantly attempt to develop interpersonal intelligence aptitudes such as capacity to analise and properly response to disposition, motivations, temperament and desires of other people, capability to develop interpersonal relationship, communication skills, creating and maintaining group synergy, ability to understand reality under different perspectives, being able to identify distinctivness of people, being able to efficiently communicate – either verbally or non-verbally. Transposing these capabilities in the teachers′ current activity means developing the abilities of easily establishing adequate relationship with the students, of easily influencing the group as well as individuals, sincerity in the relationship, offering support in the students′ effort to prepare for real life and the ease of adapting different teaching styles. These teaching styles, mainly founded on human relationship seem to be the most benefic but it is very true that they require special communication and interacting skills.

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1.1. Defining Terms

It becomes obvious that no matter the teaching style adopted, an empatic approach of the teacher is mostly desired. This will increase interest for the study, will improve motivation for learning itself. Thus, an authoritarian teaching style, manifesting dominating tendencies, or maybe even arogance, aggresive touches, lack of critical spirit acceptance might hide the lack of professional and/or pedagogical competence and such teaching styles will surely generate tensions within the group and even desconsideration or discontempt in the group of students.

Social interaction issues have been brought to attention by the Multiple Intelligence Theory of Howard Gardner [1] which states that best human interactions are the result of special endowment of individuals. However, the Multiple Intelligence Theory research also proves that individuals are able to develop social interaction abilities by means of education, starting with early development stages of childhood. [2]

Daniel Goleman [3] takes the next steps by defining emotional intelligence and then developing the concept of social intelligence and proposing intervention ways to improve capabilities related to social intelligence. As far as teaching is concerned, it is obvious that knowledge, itself, no matter how brilliant it might be, will never be enough for professional success, if not founded on efficient human interaction. As David Goleman shows, social intelligence becomes manifest even on our first evolutions in society, during childhood bringing subtle but strong influence on our social and professional evolution. Edward Thorndike, psichology scientist at Columbia University [4] was the first to use this concept, showing that inter-personal efficiency is vital for success in a wide area of professional competence.

In teaching practice non-cognitive aptitudes should be mostly considered (talent, for instance) that will allow professionals to perform at higher standards without overwhelming effort. Such special endowment refers to social intelligence abilities that might be grouped within two major categories: social consciousness (how we perceive others) and social offhandedness (what we actually do with our social consciousness). Social consciousness covers a wide area of abilities starting with prompt identification of the inner state of the collocutor and reaching to the understanding of the feelings and thoughts of others and understanding of complex social situations. Such consciousness involves [4]:

- Primary empathy – sharing feelings, perceiving non-verbal emotional signs
- Emotional resonance – maximum responsiveness when listening to others
- Emphatic precision – understanding thoughts, feelings and intentions of others
- Social cognition – knowing how the social world is functioning

As far as social offhandedness is concerned, it becomes important because only perceiving someone's feelings or knowing what someone thinks or intends will never guarantee efficient interactions. Social consciousness will only be the foundation for building social offhandedness required for efficient interactions. This will refer to abilities such as:

- Synchrony - smooth non-verbal interaction
- Self-image – efficiently self - presenting
- Influence – modeling the result of social interactions
- Concern – considering the others' needs in own actions

Both social consciousness and social offhandedness refer to various abilities. Although subtly different and apparently difficult to identify and interpret, such abilities have been tested and evaluated by specialists worldwide, which brings us consistent argument of the major importance of these abilities for the society. Teaching is a professional area where good social intelligence is crucial, thus the effort to identify and develop such abilities is mostly required in order to reach professional success.

1.2.   Purpose of Study, Theoretical and Experimental Details

The initial presumption of this research refers to the real possibility that practical training conducted by the Teachers′ Training Department for its students in the application schools is positively shaping their interpersonal interaction skills and, on the other hand, by encouraging students to organize and accomplish quality teaching activities on their own allows them to gain confidence and self-respect leading to natural tendency for self-improvement and even passion for a highly elaborated activity leading to satisfactory results.

Intending to evaluate some aspects of the interpersonal interaction abilities of the students, as well as the impact of teaching practice on these abilities, three different sets of data were intended to be analysed, resulting from three distinct groups of students: a first group of students before entering the teaching practice stage – proposing to evaluate these abilities before their contact with the school and their teaching activities – a second group of students having concluded their teaching practice programme – in order to point out eventual improvements or any notable modifications – and, finally, a group of teachers and other professionals involved in human resource training, having a certain experience in inter-relational activities, participants in training programs conducted by the Education Sciences Department of Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu.(Fig.1). It is of clear evidence that a more accurate research should have considered the same group of students during the three stages of their training route and professional accomplishment. The present research only intended a first step in a more profound research, aiming to point out the real benefits of conscious, educative human interaction which will cover also other important aspects of the human interaction and interpersonal intelligence development. Such research should necessarily cover a wider time horizon and focus on more subtle aspects. The present evaluation was only conducted in order to prove the necessity of such study, so it does not consider the need of accuracy requested by the intended deeper approach based on the primary results offered by the present evaluation.

The purpose of this research was to estimate a certain level of development of interpersonal skills in each group of students, to compare the statistic repartition of these skills within these three groups, to analyse and compare results and to relate these group evaluations to the professional environment where students have practiced these skills. The final purpose of the research to be continued is to identify the most appropriate professional environment for the students during their teaching practice as well as the most adequate activities intended to develop these interpersonal interaction skills and the most efficient intervention of the University in their practical activities in the schools. The aspects evaluated referred to interpersonal interactions, communication abilities and assertive comportment, and the evaluation considered the approach proposed by Dr. John Liptack [5], as well as the evaluation instruments used by the author. Evaluation instruments were questionnaires proposed by the quoted author in his research.

The theoretical premises classify interpersonal abilities considering the scale of evaluation as follows:

- Interpersonal interactions inventory – aiming to evaluate the style mainly used in communicating and interacting with others, as a measure of the eventual success in educational careers. People are very different in interacting with others: some of them prefer facts, others might choose conceptual and abstract facts and others might′ appreciate a more sentimental register. The evaluation intended to establish the profiles defining the preferred interpersonal interaction of the groups studied, thus describing the four major groups of communication style considered: concrete communicators, spontaneous communicators, intellectual communicators and sensitive communicators.
- Communication abilities inventory – intending to evaluate whether the subjects of the research are able to share personal experience, to trust others and determine others to trust them and have the ability to share emotions and understand others and accept them. Efficient communication could be measured by the quality of the attitude of the speaker, the efficiency of the speaking abilities, the language and the capacities to listen and understand others. Communication abilities are the most valuable social abilities and as far as teaching career is concerned, such abilities are crucial – communications means much more than speaking to others.
- Assertive demeanour inventory – assertiveness is defined, for the purpose of this evaluation, as the ability of defending someone's own rights while carefully not bringing infringement to others rights. While non-assertive behaviour leads to self-sacrifice of passive, weak people, aggressive behaviour is, by contrast, hostile, demanding, unfeeling for the others – the golden mean, the assertive behaviour, allows the individual to clearly express personal needs and purposes, to follow own interest and preferences, to easily offer and receive rewarding, to comfortably and politely contradict others, to be able to say "no" when necessary and to protect himself in incorrect contexts.

2.Methods

The groups considered to be evaluated consisted of 57 students having accomplished their theoretical psycho-pedagogical studies, before starting their teaching practice stage, 50 students graduating their psycho-pedagogical studies, after the two-semester teaching practice stage and a third group of 50 professionals activating in various human resources areas, including education, having accomplished their post-graduate psycho-pedagogical studies in the Teachers′ Training Department of the University. In order to simplify presentation of results, these groups will be labelled as "students", "graduates" and "post-graduates". The composition of the inquiry group will thus be rather uniform, as shown in Figure 1.
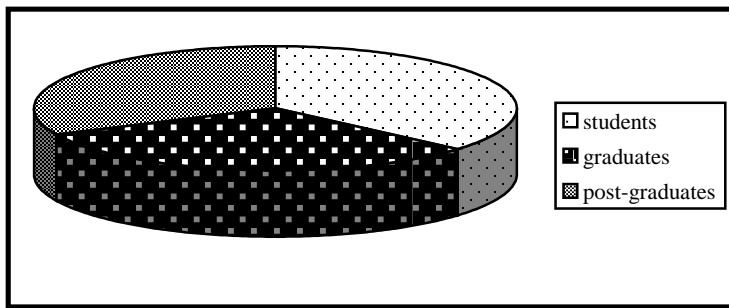

Fig.1. composition of the inquiry group

Each person was offered a set of three questionnaires and asked to sincerely answer the questions, under anonymous status. In order to insure accuracy of the result, a special attention was directed towards avoiding reciprocal influence (either deliberate, or accidental) by avoiding discussions during answering the questionnaires; this was possible by organizing the "answering session" on the occasion of the exam, so the exam atmosphere, as well as the willingness for offering complete explication and information whenever requested provided a certain independence of each student in answering the questions.

The content of these questionnaires is proposed by Dr. John Liptak in the evaluation methodology presented in the mentioned book [5]; the evaluation used by the author was applied in analysing these questionnaires. The presented study is thus a rather quantitative research so analysing of results has to comply with the rigour of sociological quantitative research. Application of significance test proves a statistic correlation strongly significant and the non-answering percentage is rather low, due to the anonymous character of the inquiry – the most important non-answering percentage is shown by the group of graduates answering questions related to interpersonal interaction inventory (8%), which might lead to the conclusion that either these students are not very much interested in this matter or their attitude is not intense enough to motivate them in answering these questions (the nature of the questions eliminates the option that these subjects might not be informed enough upon the matters discussed).

The questionnaires consisted in sets of questions (44 questions for interpersonal interactions inventory, 40 affirmations for the communication abilities inventory and 33 affirmations for the assertive demeanour inventory), asking the interviewed subjects to establish how much they might agree to the content of each question or affirmation (having three options: always true, sometimes true and never true – each of the three options being differently weighted).

Final scores for each inventory were obtained by totalizing scores obtained for each question according to the scheme provided by the quoted author. Interpretation of these scores intends to evaluate the style mostly used in communication and interactions, providing intervals of distribution of scores obtained by subjects by answering the proposed questions of each questionnaire.

3. Findings and Results

The results of the inquiry are presented in the tables as follows, for each interest area, showing the variable variation field (scores having been weighted for each variation interval) as well as the distribution of the answers within each variable interval, where notations are: group I – students, group II – graduates and group III – post-graduates.

Table 1. Results for Interpersonal Interactions Inventory

Group		Concrete communicator			Spontaneous communicator			Intellectual communicator			Sensitive communicator		
Scores range		11-18	19-25	26-33	11-18	19-25	26-33	11-18	19-25	26-33	11-18	19-25	26-33
Scores significance		Not used	Sometimes used	Mostly used	Not used	Sometimes used	Not used	Not used	Sometimes used	Not used	Not used	Sometimes used	Not used
I/ 57	weight	-	23,63	27,78	-	23,83	28,18	-	21,82	26,39	-	23,88	28,21
	frequency		28,07%	71,93%		38,6%	61,4%		49,12%	50,88%		49,12%	50,88%
II/50	weight	-	24,56	28,08	-	23,56	27,4	-	23,91	27,52	-	23,72	28,26
(46)	frequency		19,57%	80,44%		41,3%	58,7%		52,17%	47,83%		36,96%	63,04%
III/50	weight	-	23,67	27,8	-	23,09	27,64	-	23,92	27,71	-	23,74	27,83
	frequency		9,1%	90,9%		33,3%	66,7%		36,36%	63,64%		51,52%	48,48%

The non-response percentage for this data series is registered in the second group, where only 46 persons answered the questions. Significance of scores range in this area refers to the fact that generally people use mostly one of the four main categories of communicating and interacting styles, although these styles naturally may combine. These four main styles generate the scales used in order to group answers and more clearly define the major features of the individual's interaction style – which refers to the most used interaction style.

Table 2. Results for Communication Abilities Inventory

Group		Self-revealing			Trust raising			Communicating feelings			Diversity appreciation		
Scores range		10-19	20-30	31-40	10-19	20-30	31-40	10-19	20-30	31-40	10-19	20-30	31-40
Scores significance		Low	Medium	Very good	Low	Medium	Very good	Low	Medium	Very good	Low	Medium	Very good
I/ 57	weight	19	27,14	33,07	-	28,03	31,37	-	27	34,75	-	27,56	36,58
(56)	frequency	1,75%	47,37%	50,88%		41,07%	58,93%		42,86%	57,14%		32,14%	67,83%
II/50	weight	18	26,21	33,76	-	28,32	34,5	-	27,93	34,14	1 non-response	27,72	34,74
	frequency	2%	66%	32%		38%	62%		48%	52%		16%	82%
III/50	weight	18	26,72	33,93	-	28,88	35,37	-	27,18	34,93	-	27,43	35,92
(49)	frequency	3,1%	56,26%	40,65%		25%	75%		34,38%	65,62%		21,88%	78,12%

The non-response for this data series is registered in the first group – 56 persons out of 57 having answered – and in the third group, where 49 persons out of 50 have answered the questions, which means a non-response percentage of 1,75% for the first group and a 2% non-response percentage for the third group, respectively.

As far as assertive comportment is concerned, it is notable the fact that non-answering has not occurred, meaning that the topic was of greater interest for the subjects. The results of the test are presented in Table 3, and the distribution of answers is much more uniform than in the case of the former two inquiries. The distribution of the variables is rather homogenous in this situation, as Figure 4 shows, which proves that professional (teaching) experience is not the determinant factor in increasing the levels of assertive comportments. The results showing higher performing ranges for assertive comportment and lower performing ranges for aggressive comportments lead to the idea that the option for a career in teaching is generally considered by those who are able to perform within the reasonable limits of attitudinal equilibrium.

Table 3. Results for Assertive Comportment

Group		Totally non-assertive (11-44)			Totally aggressive (11-44)			Totally assertive (11-44)		
Scores significance		Min.	Max.	Average	Min.	Max.	Average	Min.	Max.	Average
I/ 57	weight	14	32	21,98	13	35	14,63	25	42	30,26
II/50	weight	12	32	20,97	12	24	17,85	27	42	34,83
III/50	weight	14	37	23,42	12	36	20,26	22	44	33,77

As the weighted scores presented in Table 3 shows, minimum values are rather similar in the evaluation of totally non-assertive comportment and that of the totally aggressive comportment, while maximum values tend to be rather different. It is also notable the fact that the attempt to evaluate totally assertive comportment shows a better minimum value, even if the average value tends to be rather close to this minimum value. The values presented in the table also reveal an average value much closer to the minimum in the distribution of the values corresponding to the aggressive comportment, which will lead to optimistic evaluations.

4. Interpreting Results

Transposing these data series into distribution diagrams will result in the distribution series as presented in Figure 2 and Fig.3, which can be further analysed in order to formulate conclusions concerning interacting and communicative abilities of the inquired groups.

Interpreting scores refers to the way people communicate – some prefer to deal with facts, others prefer energetic interactions, some are more comfortable when speaking about abstract concepts while others prefer discussing feelings. The presented research intended to provide an image on the preferred communication style of the three groups of subjects – the scores range defines the preferred styles of personal interaction of the subjects and weighting these scores intended to provide interpreting of the preferred interaction styles within each group. If weighted scores intended to show how good subjects might be at interacting according to a certain style, frequency of answers included in the same profile category intends to contour a distribution of the abilities within the group.
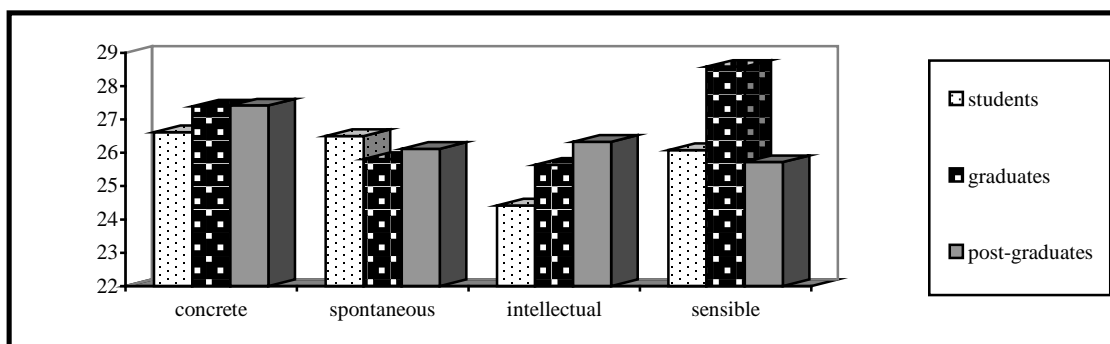
Fig.2. distribution for the Interpersonal Interaction Inventory

Concrete communicators mostly like to speak about concrete, logical issues – they like to make clear statements and they never search for hidden sense and subtle nuances. Their information is practically gathered and presented, during short interactions, they are very good at organizing their thoughts and planning their speech. They sometimes might show a tendency of rigid thinking. Teachers (post-graduates) and graduates that have accomplished their practical stages of teaching seem to use this interaction style to a greater extent than students before their teaching practice stages.

Spontaneous communicators use a mostly uncomplicated and realistic language, they are energetic and get frustrated when caught in a long conversation. They enjoy spontaneous dialogues and they are very comfortable with wider areas for their conversation subjects, enjoying conversations. This interaction style seems to be mostly preferred by students, compared to graduates and post-graduates, although this is not the defining interaction style for none of the studied groups.

Intellectual communicators prefer to speak about concepts and abstract ideas. They would rather speak about possibilities, instead of realities or facts. They usually prefer a scholar, more complex language and they can be rather intuitive. They might sometimes seem moderate, as they prefer intellectual conversations, still, they are ready to accept the risk of their ideas and thoughts to be rejected by others. This interaction style is not relevant for students, although it is at a larger extent used bygraduates and post-graduates.

Sensitive communicators are rarely interested in factual information – they are very sensitive to nuances such as body language, intonation. They are rather emphatic and succeed to perceive hidden sense of others' discourse. They are able to easily use metaphors and analogies. The use of such interaction style leads to better human contacts. Graduates seem to perform better in this interaction area, while post-graduates are the least frequent users of such interpersonal interaction patterns.
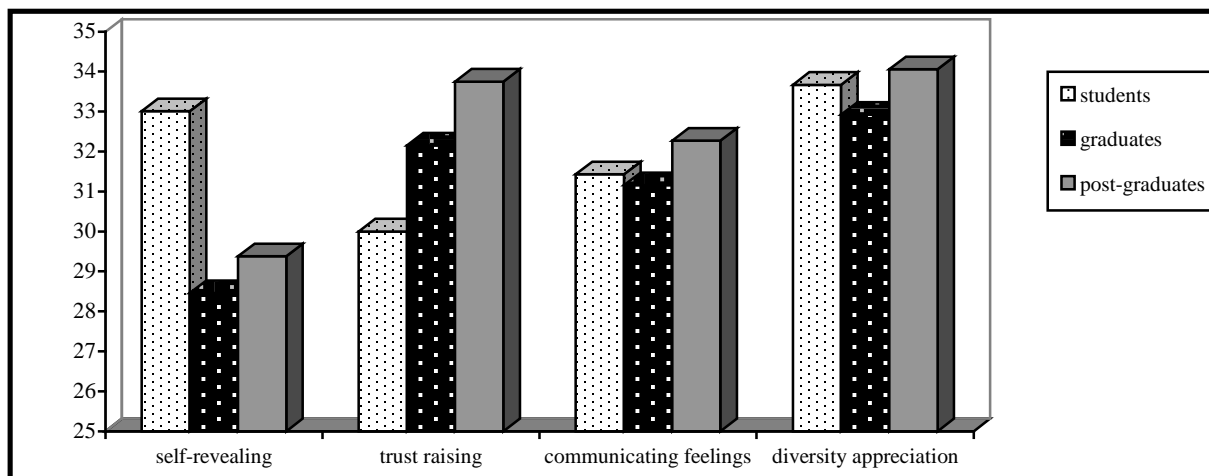

Fig.3. Distribution for the Communication Abilities Inventory

Self-revealing creates trust, commitment, understanding and development potential. Students show the higher levels of self-revealing communicating abilities, while post-graduates are the best in trust rising, where student seem to fail in their communication – which confirms the initial hypothesis. Higher scores on this trust-rising scale reveal abilities of building and developing productive relationship. Such communication styles express acceptance, cooperation and support, also involving high consideration for different cultures. The results are confirmed by

scores registered for post-graduates in the diversity appreciation range. As far as non-verbal communication is concerned, differences are not significant between the three groups interviewed – post-graduates also seem to be better listeners, which is probably due to their professional experience.
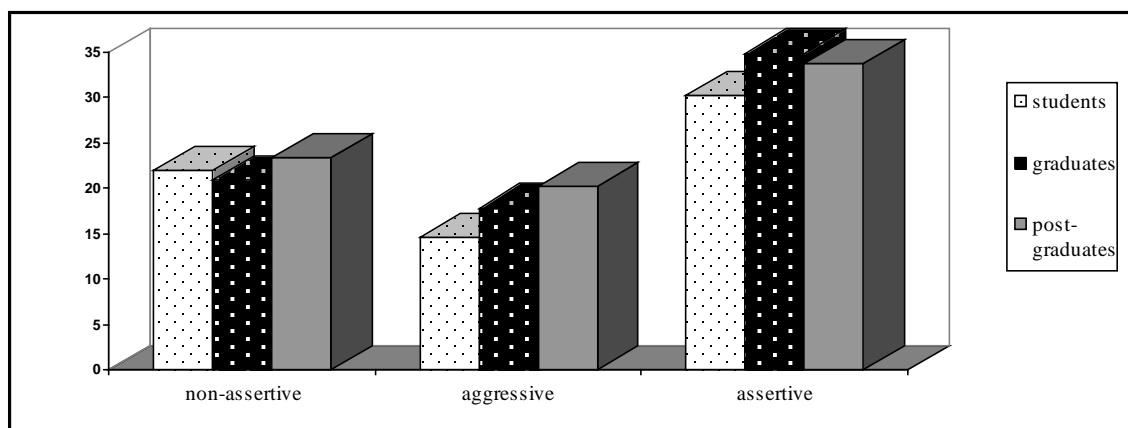

Fig.4. Distribution of Assertive Comportment Variable

A rapid change in social and professional life and stress involved by often unpredictable changes generates the need to adapt by correct defending social and professional rights. While non-assertive comportment is passive, weak and vulnerable, aggressive attitude involves hostility and lack of consideration towards the others. Both attitudes are non-productive interactions, the only efficient attitude being that of protecting own rights without infringement of others' rights and liberty.

Conclusions

Teaching is mostly a vocation than a profession. Emotional and social intelligence are vital for a good teacher; academic knowledge and pedagogy are obviously required for the best teachers but the interpersonal interaction of the teacher with his students, his teacher-fellows and the social environment is the subtle but extremely important ingredient of the successful career.

The present research aimed to identify whether teaching practice and experience might improve social abilities required in teaching and the results strongly confirmed most of the hypotheses. As previously stated, a more accurate research should have considered same group of students during the three stages of their training route and professional accomplishment. This is the next level of the research, starting during the academic year 2013-2014; the research will cover two years of observation of a group of 72 students, aiming to analyse sets of data referring to interpersonal skills obtained at each level – before entering the teaching practice stage and after concluding this practical stage – but also connecting these data series to the students pedagogical knowledge, acquired during their previous two-years study of psycho-pedagogical disciplines, intending to find out if any connection might be established.

The present study confirmed the initial presumption, proving that even if productive comportment patterns are not to be learned, these can be improved if stimulating environment will allow development of the individuals' interaction abilities. Teaching practice in controlled environment –the schools previously selected for this activity – can provide

visible development of communication abilities as well as a certain shift in interaction style of the students – the present study shows better sensitivity to nuances such as body language and intonation for the students after the teaching practice stage. As far as the interpersonal interaction inventory is concerned, differences were also visible for improving concrete communication and intellectual communication ranges of interaction and lower scores for the spontaneous register of communication – which means improvement in manner of speaking about logical issues and presenting practical information by means of efficient, organized interaction. Better use of the scholar, more complex language was achieved, while better understanding and using of body language is clearly shown by the results presented.

Teaching practice proves also improvement in the ways students are able to present themselves to others: if students show the development potential at the highest levels, grraduates show a visible improvement on the trust-rising scale, involving improved abilities of building and developing productive relationship. Improvements on this scale closely connect to diversity appreciation potential leading to acceptance, cooperation and support, high consideration for different cultures.

The approach for assertive comportment was not relevant enough. The results only show attitudinal tendencies of the three groups, without revealing possible evolutions. Instruments used for this comportment range need to be changed if evolution trends are to be highlighted. The assertive comportment variable is much more subtle, so different approaches have to be considered in the future stages of the research.

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