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Two perspectives, same reality? How authentic is learning for students and for their teachers

Lucian Ciolan^{a*}, Laura Elena Ciolan^a

^aUniversity of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, 90 Panduri, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The recent PISA results show that our 16 years old students are the most demotivated for learning from all participant countries. We assume that one of the reasons is related to the learning experiences students are living at that age level (upper secondary). In the research inspiring this article (based on an extensive survey on high school students and teachers) we tried to investigate the perception of students and their teachers on what is and how should be organized an authentic learning experience and an authentic learning environment. As shown by the results, the learning experiences are perceived quite differently in many extents by the two key actors involved (learners and teachers). The paradox of living the same educational reality and working in the same environment, but having different, even contradictory opinions, perceptions and meanings of them seem to be one of the causes for deficits in academic achievement and in motivational level of the high schools students in Romania. Some preliminary results of the research are presented and analysed in the frame of a broader conceptual framework for understanding authentic learning.

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* Lucian Ciolan. Tel.: +40314253445; fax: +40314253445
E-mail address: lucian.ciolan@fpse.unibuc.ro

1. When things are going down. Fall of a myth?

A well intentioned statement used in public policy field is that you cannot solve a problem unless you accept it exists. And for many years already it seems that large proportion of key stakeholders refuse to admit we have a problem with education. Not in education, but with education, as we have reasons to suspect it became endemic. For already quite a long time, we (well, some / many of us) argued we have an excellent education system. And the stereotypical way to support that statement was strongly related to arguments like: “we have olympics, we earned medals (again)”, “our kids learn in the 6th grade what they learn in country X in the 8th....”, etc. For a while we thought that “only” performance goes wrong, as it goes down. We didn’t like it, but improving performance is not impossible. Is completely possible if you find the reasons for performance deficits and you act in appropriate manner to prevent them. Performance falls could be prevented, solved if understood correctly and approached with direct interventions and appropriate tools. But now we know is not just performance that goes wrong. It is also the motivation of students for learning. The last PISA results published fall 2013 are not surprising necessarily by showing we perform well below OECD average, but what is really to be taken into account is the motivational factor, where Romania is completely alone, out of any normal statistical distribution (see fig. 1).

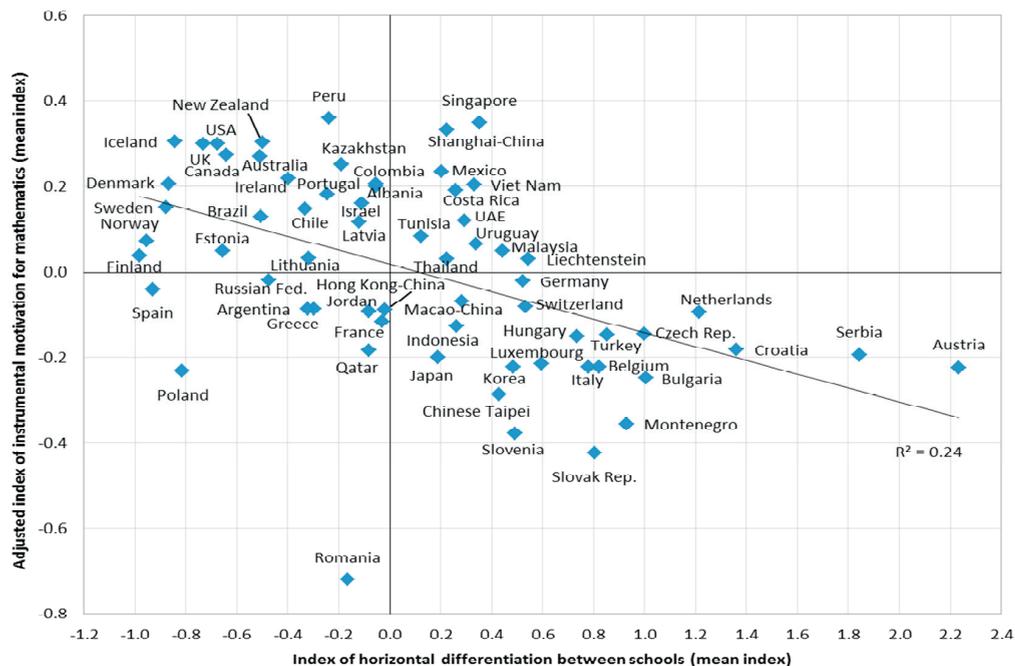


Fig. 1. Motivation and grouping of students. The situation in Romania.

Today nobody can explain evidence-based, in a scientific manner, why the situation looks like this, what makes our students so demotivated for learning, the most demotivated from participant countries. Our supposition at this point is that learning process as organized in schools and organization of schooling per se are lacking an important characteristic, which makes them not sufficiently attractive for new generations of students; students do not resonate in an authentic manner with their learning experiences and the impact of these experiences on them is rather poor. The myth of Romanian schools and students being highly competitive cannot be sustained any more on “side” realities, such as disciplinary Olympiads and high level of content / theory included in the school curriculum. Things are going down for quite a while, and now they became alarming. But, unfortunately, no consistent policy and research initiatives yet are in place to open the way for improvement.

2. Authentic learning – beyond the looseness of a concept

There is a growing concern in the pedagogical literature for the concept of authentic learning and some related concepts, such as disposition for learning, learning innovation etc. This is not now the place to investigate in-depth and make a review of the very rich research literature, but we are just making a synthetic proposal for a framework to understand authentic learning, that would serve us in introducing some provisional research results.

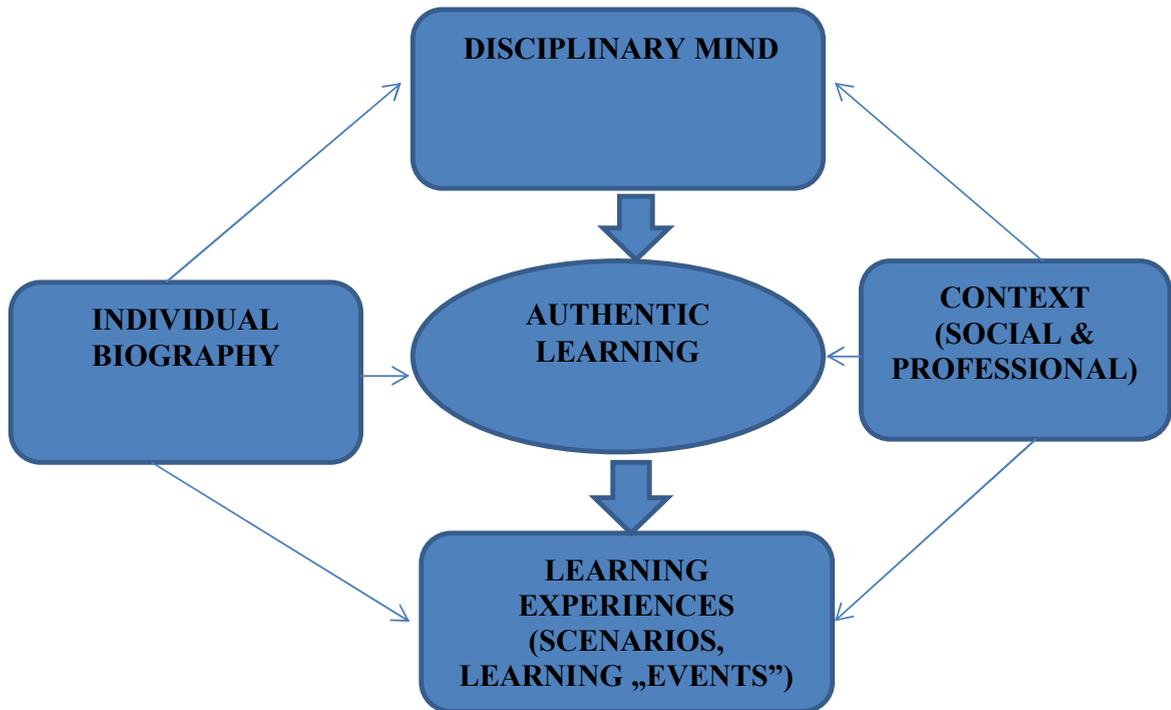


Fig. 2. Framework for understanding authentic learning

Learning authenticity is therefore framed at the crossroads of several instances, the most important being the four mentioned in the above figure: disciplinary mind, individual biography, social context and learning experiences.

Disciplinary mind refers to the logic and characteristics of the discipline, as domain of investigated reality and epistemological area. Moreover, understanding them mind of the discipline means to understand its pedagogy (i.e. signature pedagogies), the way you learn that discipline and the way knowledge of the respective domain is built, as social and imaginative process, since “We don’t have direct knowledge of the physical world. All we can “know” are our ideas about the world. Since our ideas are formed by brains that are shaped by our individual genetic codes and life experiences, we don’t all perceive the same objective reality.” (Jacobs, 2011, p.2). Authentic learning needs, in other terms, the subject matter knowledge from the perspective of didactic premises actualised in social and spatial settings (see Tochon, 2000). Teaching and learning are not exclusively and primarily related to disciplinary content / knowledge, but to habits of mind 3or even habits of behaviour, as excellently synthesized in the work of Gurung, Chick & Haynie (2009, 2012).

Individual biography actualizes two dimensions. One is usually known and called in pedagogical works “previous experience”, referring both to the previously lived learning experience, but also to the previous life and social experience of the learners, shaping their identities, but also their learning habits. Individual biography is also composed by the expertise, by the already validated and cognitively accommodated knowledge each individual has

as result of being exposed to learning, either formally, non-formally or informally. Biography of learning and of individual's life leads to their experience and expertise, a second key dimension of authentic learning.

Social and professional context takes into account the way learner relates its learning experiences and the new learning to the broader social life and eventually link with managing meaningfully different tasks (professional dimension) as result of learning. The social contexts in which learning occurs and the way you can then use learning for transforming social and professional contexts, for getting validation on own performance in social work or life settings are also significant attributes of learning authenticity.

Learning experiences are referring mainly to those who are backed by intentional designs, made by professional educators with the explicit aim to generate or to facilitate learning. Here, as conceptualized by Stein et.al., authenticity means “intersection of the mind of the discipline with the here and now of the pedagogical moment” (2004, p.241). Designing authentic scenarios and learning events, capable to create and maintain disposition for learning and the desire to learn, is one of the key challenges of the effective education specialist, as “such habits of mind as risk taking, questioning, listening with understanding and empathy, creating and imagining, and finding humour cannot flourish under stressful conditions.” (Costa & Kallick, 1996, p.98).

As a conclusion to this multi-dimensional framework for understanding authentic learning, briefly introduced, we need to underline the key role of the expertise in pedagogy, which was clearly expressed by Hannon: “The skill set of professional educator will shift towards expertise in pedagogy: understanding with precision how people learn, and how learning opportunities need to be designed to facilitate this process.” (2009, p.8).

3. Two perspectives, same reality. Preliminary results of a research on authentic learning in Romanian high schools

Having this assumption in mind, that the dramatically low level of motivation for learning of high school students in Romanian high schools has among main determinants the “thin” authenticity of their learning experiences, we have initiated a research in which we investigated 322 high school teachers and 585 high school students from Romania. We have to mention that we were using a convenience sampling, based on availability of subjects for the field operators, which were Bachelor and Master students from University of Bucharest, during their research practice in October – December 2013.

We will refer there only to one of the items in the survey, formulated in similar manner for students and for their teachers. Students were asked: *The learning experiences proposed to you by your teachers are mainly...* (and we have the four scales for answering presented below). Teachers, on the same scales, were asked: *The learning experiences that you propose to your students are mainly...*

Table 1. Interactivity of learning experiences: teachers and students views

	Very dynamic, interactive			Without dynamics and interactivity
	1	2	3	4
Students	15,7%	45,6 %	28,9 %	9,6 %
Teachers	38,2 %	54,3 %	7,1 %	0,3 %

While around 38,5% of students consider that learning experiences are characterized by very low or no dynamic and interactivity, less than 7,5 % of the teachers are giving similar answers. Is amazing the very high percent of the teachers assessing their learning experiences as being highly dynamic and interactive (more than 92%!).

A significant difference in assessing the quality of learning experiences is also visible in another item, under the same question.

Table 2. Interesting / boring learning experiences: teachers and students views.

	Interesting, challenging			Non-interesting, boring
	1	2	3	4
Students	20 %	43,6 %	30,6%	5,8%
Teachers	40,4%	47,5%	9,3%	2,8%

As can be noticed in Table 2, we have more than 36% of students considering as non-interesting and rather boring the learning experiences they are exposed to, while only 12% of the teachers gave answers in this area. The two items presented here are giving us only some hints how the same reality is assessed significantly different by a large portion of those involved in the process, and that there are certainly quite different perceptions among teachers and students. The very high level of optimism and trust of high school teachers is somehow shadowed by the low performance of the students over the last years.

4. Concluding remarks

Solid research on student's motivation and de-motivation for learning, correlated with a systematic focus on capacity to create meaningful and authentic learning experiences is needed in our system, but also in other systems, facing severe crisis of learning and registering, at social level, worrying phenomena of depression and a sense of non-belonging very present in adolescents.

We have a whole generation being at risk of non-reaching their potential, as the risk is as much as their, as is ours, since in a very short while we will rely on this generations to support a high quality work and high quality social life. The mismatch of generations involved in learning and the obsolete understanding of learning as process (or even schooling itself) are legitimate subjects of analysis at research, policy and practice level in the same time, for producing the necessary evidences to nurture authentic learning and re-bring the joy of learning in young people.

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