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Centred learning strategies in initial training of psychologists

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Abstract

Bologna process wanted to determine a global higher education system reform in many European countries. This reform involves a structural change and an in depth curriculum reform as well. A curricular vision means to focus on competencies the entire process of curriculum design. A new strategy of psychologists' initial training was considered. Three learning practices were presented. A special questionnaire was applied to 72 students, aiming to evaluate their opinion regarding the formative effect of these methods. The results of this analysis demonstrate that these methods succeeded to develop the students' autonomy and responsibility in learning.

1. Introduction

Contemporary society increasingly puts pressure on higher education to restructure, according to labor market dynamics, the explosion of information and increasing diversification of access to information sources. Necessity to create an active and proactive professional personality, flexible and capable of adaptation to very fast changes is very strong

Due to information dynamics, the knowledge become perishable in a time estimated to be in increasingly short. In this context, the traditional approach of learning as a change in knowledge stored in memory proves to be inefficient. Also, the classic cycle "teaching - learning - assessment" can not be circular, teaching and learning are not distinct phases, but are complementary processes, and assessment must become "formative evaluation" and to be part of a continuing learning process. Consequently, the university's mission is to develop for students some important transferable competences which are built initially within a specific knowledge context (a special domain one) but they can serve further to other

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field. We are talking about : capacity to find and to interpret new information, process rapidly the new information in order to use it in new and diversified contexts, evaluate new information, pass information through a critic filter, transform information in new own knowledge, and use properly new knowledge in solving problem contexts

Since 2000, the Bologna reform transformed higher education by creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Bologna process was beginning as a structural reform of higher education, but it also implied "major changes under way in curricula, the missions of universities, their relationship with national and regional authorities, and their governance. Together, these amount to a revolution in European higher education". "Curriculum change, the definition of learning outcomes, agreement on standards of quality assurance, and credit transfer all flow from the core aims of the process as it was first defined in Bologna in 1999 …. After some initial hostility, academics throughout most of Europe began to embrace the idea of totally rethinking their programs rather than merely paying lip-service to the new structures. Of course this implied determining what students should know, in terms of both content and methods of enquiry and learning" (Floud. R., 2006)

The core of curricula reform in higher education is the concept of "competence", defined as the target of educational process. But the defining of competence concept was the subject of a strong debate. It seems that it was the vocational domain which introduced this concept, and for this reason the competence was considered as focused on the behavioral aspects. But, far to be a simple tool for a practical action, the competence is an individual's capacity to exploit their repertoire of knowledge in order to perform tasks and resolve a family of problems.

Competence, in the generic sense of the concept, expresses an attribute of personality. The plural "competencies" refers to various manifestations of personality that has this attribute of competence in different social contexts. (Niculescu, 2010). Competences are knowledge into action. Only action can prove the efficiency of knowledge. Curricular orientation, focused on competencies, as an alternative to the traditional orientation, focused on contents, and memorization requires a reconsideration of the relationship between teachers, students and the learning process, shifting the learning responsibility from teacher to student, which in the literature is called "student-centered learning".

Student-centered learning approach is quite commonly used in contemporary pedagogy. Its first use is not recent and that he attributed to Hayward in 1905, and then appear in the works of John Dewey, 1956 (O'Sullivan 2003). (O'Neill G., McMahon T., 2005). But its meaning has been extended over time due to the contribution of Carl Rogers, who applied the principles of experiential psychology in education, Piaget's work, which brilliantly demonstrates that intelligence and knowledge are built from complementary action of assimilation and accommodation and Vâgotski's work on the proximate development. Gibbs (1992) states that student-centered approach "gives students more autonomy and control in choosing the subjects to be treated, the methods of learning and the time of study" (Sparrow L., Sparrow H., Swan P., 2000).

The result of this approach can be evaluated in terms of learning effectiveness. The student centered approach supports the development of higher order thinking, both cognitive and meta cognitive, as well as performance skills which are based on a constructivist perspective building upon learners' strengths and needs (De la Sablonnière R., Taylor M.D., Sadykova N., 2009)

2. Strategies of learning in initial training of psychologists

What a psychologist mean? Should be a psychologist a graduate person with a lot of knowledge stored in memory, able to quote from theory and to write about hypothetical psychological issues? Or an effective psychologist should be a professional able to solve concrete life issues based on a profound psychological understanding of them?

A new philosophy of the initial training based on a new manner of building a psychologist's mind and soul is necessary. Knowledge as a self construction with an intrinsically motivation, a deep understanding of the human psychological system with all its internal connections and determinations, a high level of counseling and action skills, and more than this a positive attitude towards human being's richness should be the core targets of a psychologist training as professional. Our activity wanted to find answers to these challenges. Three effective learning practices were considered, and the students' learning results were analyzed using the criteria of socio-constructivist theories of learning. These methods belong to a student centered approach. A special questionnaire was applied to students aiming to evaluate their opinion regarding the formative effect of these methods. The main focus of our inquiry was centered on two levels. The first one was represented by cognitive abilities, creativity, social abilities and expression of students' personality. The second level was represented by six dimensions of the effective learning: depth of understanding, operational nature of knowledge, persistency of information, possibilities of expressing the students' personality within the learning products, emotional support of learning, and the spent time for learning

The first learning practice we intend to present is to ***use the metaphor as a teaching, learning and assessment method***. Metaphor can be used at any time of learning. It requires the student's effort to capture the essential relations between concepts, theories and reality. The metaphor acts in the sense to ignore the details and capturing the relations, forcing the processing of information, abstraction, evaluation and selection. Cognitive mechanisms involved in metaphor are: create an intra psychic conflict that generates understanding; confronting with another's ideas, this leads to clarify ideas; put emphasis on interrelations and functionality at the expense of structure; encouraging a holistic and dynamic thinking; combines the three facets of learning (Brunner): iconic learning, by imagines, semantic learning, by reasoning, symbolic learning, by transposition into another system of signs. In the training of psychologists, we have used metaphors in a variety of situations. Eg. to analyze human physical system (locomotive), the relationship between heredity - environment and education (potter's wheel), personality (effect of pyramid) etc.

Specific competencies: to argue a symbolic construction, to capture the relationships between phenomena, to combine logical strategy of thinking with intuitive and imaginative strategy. Transversal competences: to communicate effectively in groups, to negotiate, develop together, express themselves creatively.

We asked to the 23 students of second year of license to evaluate the role of metaphor in learning, regarding cognitive abilities, creativity, social abilities and expression of students' personality on a Lickert scale (from 1 – very high level to 5 the lowest level). The most important, in students' opinion, is the role of metaphor for expressing their personality (1, 27), and then in stimulating their creativity (M= 1, 40). The role of metaphors to learning efficiency (1, 92) and development of cognitive abilities (2, 14) are less valued at this level of study.

Table 1. The role of metaphor

	1	2	3	4	5
Depth of understanding		X			
Operational nature of knowledge			X		
Persistency of information			X		
Possibilities of expressing the students' personality within the learning products	X				
Emotional support of learning	X				
The spent time for learning				X	

To create **a learning product** is the second analyzed learning practice. The aim is to promote our scientific knowledge to our clients. For the first level of master degree we proposed to create a journal addressed to a target audience, on a specific topic (cognitive development, personality development, moral development, attachment development etc.). This was a team work.
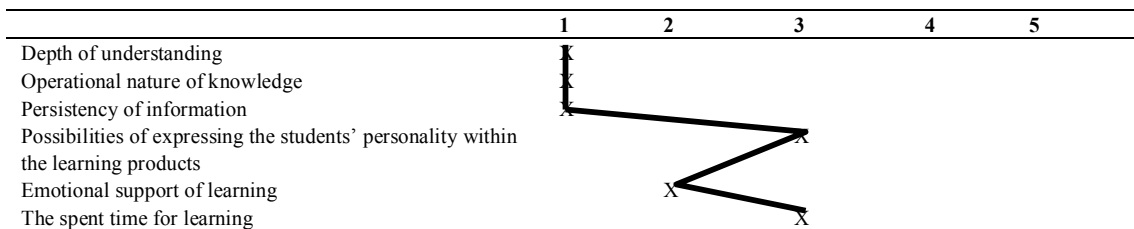
Specific competencies: to illustrate how each developmental theory has been used to explain the real situation, to identify ways in which developmental theories are used to support the practice of counseling and to strengthen educational practices. Transversal competences: to adapt scientific information to the understanding of clients, communicate effectively, and collaborate to develop a complex product, to work creatively. For the 26 students the first year of master studies, the most important role of this learning practice was to develop cognitive abilities (M= 1,34), and then to increase the quality of learning (1,51) Less valorized (but not low) is the role to stimulate their creativity (1,74) and to express their personality (1,89). Below we present the analysis results for the six dimensions of learning.

Table 2 – The role of journal in effectiveness of learning

	1	2	3	4	5
depth of understanding		X			
operational nature of knowledge	X				
persistency of information	X				
possibilities of expressing the students' personality within the learning products		X			
emotional support of learning		X			
the spent time for learning				X	
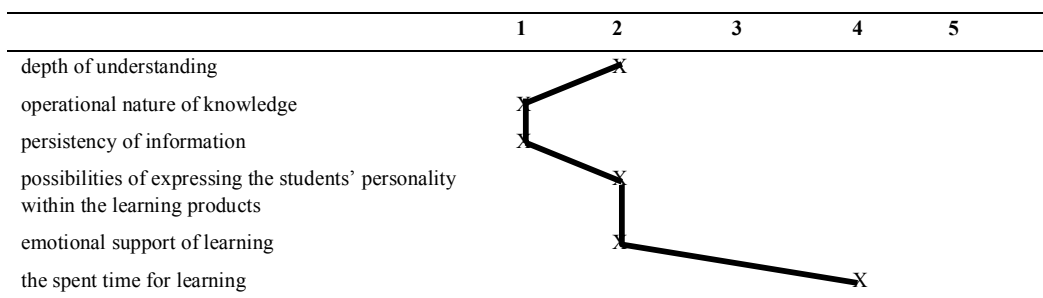
The third practice we present has the aims to assess research projects of students in second year of master. We called this activity "Café Research". Students had the task to design and conduct a research in a specific domain. The assessment was conducted as a scientific session, but in a different manner. In a relaxed atmosphere, each team has promoted their research project, through keywords and a brief written presentation. Students watched the presentations and have identified related topics. Then they formed a larger group, on criteria of similarity of research interests. In this group, each team presented their research project. Finally each group was tasked to make a summary of the two or three projects. The assessment took into consideration: the quality of the research project (assessed by the teacher), participation in preparing the draft (by Self evaluation and Peer evaluation), and the evaluation of the group. Final synthesis has made from this activity a genuine learning experience.

Table 3 – The role of Research Café in effectiveness of learning

	1	2	3	4	5
Depth of understanding	X				
Operational nature of knowledge	X				
Persistency of information	X				
Possibilities of expressing the students' personality within the learning products			X		
Emotional support of learning		X			
The spent time for learning			X		

Specific competencies: to develop a research project. Transversal competences: to communicate effectively in groups, to share together, to identify the similarities and the relations between projects,

rather than differences, to develop together a synthetic product. The 24 second year students from the master considered the most important role of this activity was to enhance the quality of learning (1.30), followed by stimulating creativity (1.38), and cognitive skill development (1, 68) and expression of their personality (1.84).

3. Conclusions

The results of this analysis demonstrate that these methods succeeded to develop the students' autonomy and responsibility in learning; they offered a real opportunity for students' improved cognitive abilities development, students' higher capacity of arguing ideas, and their ability to solve problems; a deeper understanding of information and a higher level of power of decision making were also noticed. The highest level of satisfaction was registered at the students of the last master degree level and the explanation is simple: they had a two years experience of using these methods. After the first impact with them, when the methods novelty determined a short time attitude of distrust, the students' involvement in this new learning context were seriously changed and the results were very good.

Our methodological research had results which demonstrated that the use of constructivist learning strategies determines students' motivation for learning, reflected further by a higher level of cognitive competences development, a solid understanding of information and an interesting self-building process of knowledge. Another extremely important result was that the learning context was effective for developing students' transversal competences (soft skills), like communication abilities, capacity to work in team, intellectual curiosity, serious involvement in learning process. All these are features considered as important for what we called " committed learning" which is not an attitude as *committed to learning* could be considered, but a new and effective learning style (Niculescu, Usaci 2008)

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