Some Considerations on the Online Training Programs for the Teachers from the Romanian Pre-university Educational System

Bogdan N. NICOLESCU*a, Tiberiu MACARIEb, Tudor PETRESCUc

*a,b,cUniversity of Pitesti, Targul din Vale, no. 1, Pitesti, 110040, Romania.

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to present our analysis of the results of the Pre-University Educational Management (M.E.P.P.) online course, which runs over several years in the Department „Muntenia” of Continuing Education of the University of Pitesti. We have analyzing some of the aspects of this kind of the training in the online system: the organization issues concerning the Skype network, the e-learning aspects for the supports courses, the didactical communications with the participated teachers, etc. Last but not least, our study has considered also some aspects of education programs continue training for the teachers which occupies the school manager position, one of the key positions of the education system. The most important thing is the feedback which we get from our „students”. This feedback allows us to improvement our activities of the training programs for the pre-university teachers and to nuance the contents and applications of the lectures for specific educational management of our educational system.

Keywords: Strategy, leadership, institutional organization, decision, flexibility

1. Introduction

The national education law requires, even imposes, the participation of teachers in the pre-university education to continuing education programs, like of professional training, of retraining, of postgraduate training etc. The continuous training of teaching staff, which facilitates its permanent training, is a prerequisite for effective linking of
the teaching activities which must be connecting with the evolution of society. By participating in continuing training programs teachers receive the newest information concerning their field of activity and/or in their specialty, if those programs are well designed and are carried out responsibly, both on the part of trainers and students. The programs of continuing education approved by the institutions provided for by the law, aimed at staff of pre-university education are numerous and, in order to be recognized, its have to be accredited by the Ministry of National Education or by the establishments designated and recognized for it.

Starting from the fact that the first, and most important, lesson is that no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers (Nicolescu & Macarie, 2013), it is obvious that the teachers’ continuous training, their permanent professional preparation, is a mandatory condition for efficient educational activity, in line with the evolution of the society. By participating in the continuous training programs the educational staff receive the newest information concerning their field and/or area of expertise, when those programs are well conceived and responsibly, by both the trainers and the trainees.

The National Educational Law states the obligation for the teachers from the pre-university education to participate in continuous training programs for professional development, professional reconversion, and post university specialization. That law does not state the same obligation for the educational staff from the university education due to unknown reasons; therefore we appreciate that the same should apply for the university teachers as well. We believe the obligation to participate in the continuous training programs would be useful even it would be just to compare professionally each and every university teacher with the others and for them to find out about the achievements in their fields, from other national or foreign universities.

After all, the school should be considered as a learning organization and promoting a culture of learning and teaching, which is dedicated to constant renewal and improvement. We will must also tackle the issue of context, and will look at the ways in which the physical environment of the school impacts on the quality of learning, which leads us into an exploration of the challenges of effectively planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating a curriculum that needs constantly to change and reinvent itself in line with the changing needs of a changing society. More, we must focus on what is required to improve teaching and learning in order to produce enhanced learner outcomes. This paves the way for the identification and development of the skills and processes needed to lead and manage effective teaching and learning.

2. How do we quantify the continuous training programs for the educational staff?

The continuous training programs accredited by the recognized institutions, intended to the pre-university staff are multiple and, in order to be recognized, they must be certified by the National Education Ministry or the chosen and accredited institutions.

The duration of these programs, stated by the National Education Law, varies from short term programs (20-30 hours) to long term programs (200-300 hours). The training programs duration is quantified by a number of transferable credit points that validates its content and quality.

Is it correct like that? In principle it is, but the number of transferable credits given for many training programs is debatable. How do we establish or calculate the number of credits? Which is the measurement unity for a transferable credit? The opinions are very divers and the result is visible by accrediting training programs with a large number of credits, corresponding to a small number of hours or vice versus. As a consequence for that, it appears the teachers’ „rush” for the short term programs, „covered” by as many as possible credit points. Obviously in such cases, the quality of the training program comes second. What can be done, what can be improved?

A first step should be done for establishing unanimous accepted criteria in setting up the value of a credit point. There are different opinions, but we can say that the majority of the people who decide in this matter appreciate the transferable credit point by the duration criterion, that means the number of hours necessary to peruse and understand certain amount of information through individual study. How large is that quantity of information, corresponding to a credit point, is a different debate, still to be discuss. In the European Union, after numerous and intense discussions, it seems that they have found an accepted and tolerated unit, of 10-15 hours decided for a credit point. Is it a lot? Is it small? It is debatable, because the training programs are not identical and cannot be, their contents and accessibility are different, the amount of information is different, the trainers and trainees are different, etc. But, we believe that a measurable criterion is necessary and because of that we appreciate as necessary to
embrace the European criteria, in the absence of a more efficient one. Of course, such criteria can be improved, but its absence is worse.

3. How is done the continuous training for teachers nowadays?

The National Education Law specifies that the continuous training for the pre-university teachers is mandatory for that the education institutions must allocate the necessary founds. The law does not stipulate anything for the university teachers.

In the pre-university education system, the continuous training is organized by the different accredited institutions. The lead role is taken by the Education Staff Houses from every district. The offer of these institutions covers most of the demand for continuous training market.

State or private universities come with their own offer for continuous training, addressed to pre-university staff. The teachers choose which program they want to follow by different criteria, an important one being the financial one. The teachers choose to follow free training programs or the cheapest ones, paid by themselves because in the majority of the education institutions the money that should be allocated in the annual budgets are missing or are not enough compared to the demand or the training need.

Free continuous training programs can be conceived and accredited through national programs POSDRU or international ones financed by the European Commission. The bureaucracy imposed for writing, approval and proceeding of the POSDRU programs is important and sometimes discouraging. Most people who experienced the management of a POSDRU project did not have the courage to do it again. Although writing eligible programs is not an easy task, the courageous and perseverant people succeed eventually.

However, financed continuous training programs have been numerous and will continue. This is a direction that must be used because is tempting financially speaking.

The non-free continuous training programs for pre-university teachers function especially at university supplier’s level, but not only. Such programs have variable prices, sometimes important for a teacher’s budget and take place usually at the university. That means the teachers must travel to the supplier’s place, involving supplementary expenses and extra time necessary for the journey to and from the training sessions.

4. Aspects concerning the online educational activities

The online training programs can be an efficient educational modality for continuous training, eliminating the trainees’ travels to other cities or places. This type of programs can take place with minimum necessary equipment such as a personal computer, fix or portable, a microphone and a web camera. By using one of the ways to communicate on internet, either Yahoo Messenger or Skype, the trainers and trainees can participate in quality continuous training activities with minimum costs. Of course there is also the possibility of on-line communication through specialized programs and with specialized equipments, but these are expensive and not accessible financially speaking.

If the trainee has and knows how to use the necessary equipment for audio-video communication, he can participate to direct educational activities, seeing and hearing a person located somewhere else, without having to be face to face.

For the manager of a on-line continuous training program is easy to follow, from distance, the participation of the trainees, the duration of the educational activities and one can intervene directly, with the trainer agreement, during the activities, for possible corrections, suggestions or idea exchange.

The disadvantage of the on-line communication, on Skype or Yahoo Messenger, is the technical restriction of the number of participants in audio system to a maximum of 25 people, and the video communication can be done only personally, trainer- trainee. In fact that disadvantage can be transformed in advantage, but that depends on the trainer’s ability to keep in touch permanently with all the trainees from a study group, located in different places.

It is advisable for the efficiency of the educational activities the trainee should have the possibility to prepare through individual study and for that the trainer must send to the trainees the course support and the exercises for
that. That is recommended to be done in order for the trainee to be able to exchange ideas or to exchange real questions – answers with the trainer, for any on-line educational activity.

Is it difficult to fulfill all these conditions? From our experience at the „Muntenia“ Training Centre at the Pitesti University, we can say that those conditions are not difficult to fulfill and they show mutual respect and desire for professional improvement for both the trainer and trainees of on-line training program.

5. The Pre-university Performance Educational Management on-line program – MEPP

An on-line continuous training program, financed through Phare 2005 program, has been accredited at the „Muntenia“ Training Centre from University of Pitesti a new training program named Pre-university Performance Educational Management (MEPP), designed for the leaders of educational institutions or for the teachers who aspire to leading role in the pre-university education. The program had good antecedents, starting two years before, in the classical training system and was rated, at the end of the Phare project, with the top national qualification, in 2008. Afterwards the same on-line program has been re-accredited by the National Education Ministry until 2015 (see www.cfm.upit.ro).

The on-line continuous training program MEPP started initially as a challenge for the coordinator – the „Muntenia“ Training Center, being conceived as a long term continuous training program (272 effective training hours) and being accredited with 90 transferable credits. The challenge was for the trainers to use the equipments specific to the on-line education and the internet communication. The trainees' recruitment has been done and still is through a web page – www.cfm.upit.ro dedicated to the on-line MEPP program. Subsequently, we observed that such an education system is viable and it can be efficient because of the interest manifested by the trainees, there is no geographical restriction, the final trainees' evaluations.

The MEPP program is designed on three modules: Educational management, Communication and curriculum and Communication and information techniques. Each module has 30 transferable credits and contains mandatory and optional subjects.

The training schedule considers the time availability for both the trainer and trainee. There are 12 hours scheduled each week, in the afternoon, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Initially part of the training hours were held on Saturdays, but that stopped when the trainees requested it.

Each subject from the MEPP program is finalized with the evaluation activity, with one of the agreed qualifications: insufficient, sufficient, good, very good or excellent. The qualification given by the trainer considers the way the trainee participates in the education activities, the quality of its homework or its project, the trainee’s involvement in the on-line group debates.

The trainers participating in the MEPP program are teachers from Pitesti University and from the Arges County Education Inspectorate, having an appreciable experience in educational activities with adults. Each trainer has a course support adapted to the newest pre-university education management requirements, that the trainees can access as soon as they get the password for participating in the program.

The participation fee is 1500 lei, payable in 5 rates, all through the duration of the training. The trainees may pay from with their own money or from the funds of the educational unit where they work, if there are funds allocated for the continuous training at that unit. In Table 1 are presented, for the last four groups of students of the „Muntenia“ Training Centre, the period of the year in which the courses were held for them and the number of students for each of these.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The group number</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Trainees number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>October 2011-April 2012</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>January 2012-Julay 2012</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>March 2011 - November 2012</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>September 2012 - April 2013</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 2 is presented the questionnaire which contained five questions which were formulated by the Continued Training Department of the National Educational Minister for the final evaluation of PEPP program at the „Muntenia” Training Centre.

Table 2. The questionnaire which was given to the trainees at the close of MEPP program for a evaluation of it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current issue</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How do you rate the MEPP program from the organization point of view (hours, their repartition, the percentage of different subjects)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How do you appreciate the content of the activities from the professional relevancy point of view?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How do you appreciate the degree of adaptation of the program to the Romanian organizational reality?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How do you appreciate the content of the activities from the accessibility and complexity point of view?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How do you appreciate the balance between the passive and interactive modalities, between theory and the practical applications?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see from the Table 3 and Fig. 3, for the question 1, out of 100 trainees, 97% rated the MEPP program, from the organizational point of view with the “very good” or “excellent” mark. The „very good” mark has the higher percentage that tells the program managers that there are still some things that can be improved from the point of view of the organization of the educational activity, of the schedule, of the working days.

At question 2 the trainees appreciate the MEPP program has 97% professional relevance, as they rate it with the “very good” and “excellent” mark, as we see from Table 3 and Figure 3. The “very good” mark has the higher percentage, which suggests that there is room for management corrections.

At question 3 the trainees appreciate the MEPP program as being adequate for the Romanian organizational reality in proportion of 90% with the marks “very good” and “excellent”, Table 1. That percentage is not satisfactory and shows that during the application hours should be discussed more about different situations from the education units.

At question 4, the trainees appreciate the MEPP program as being accessible and complex in proportion of 97% with the marks “very good” and “excellent”, Figure 4.

At question 5, the trainees appreciate the MEPP program as being well designed and applied from the point of view of the usage of passive and interactive modalities in proportion of 95% with the marks “very good” and “excellent”, Figure 5.

In Figure 6 we give a global interpretation of the all data obtained along the four groups, for to have a look at the perception of students about our program of continuous training. From this, we can think that the things are very good, but it is room for the better.

Table 3. The trainees’ marks given at the close of MEPP program for the evaluation of it.†

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>FB</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Legend: E – excellent; FB – very good; B – good; A – acceptable; S – sufficient.
6. How can the continuous on-line training become attractive and efficient?

The continuous on-line training system has its advantages in time and space and disadvantages, like the lack of the face to face contact.

For the trainer there is the possibility of using multiple informational sources in order to write the course support and applications. The wide access internet bibliographical materials can be used, as well as own bibliographical materials conceived by the trainer: schemas, graphs, drawings, explanations. The trainer can also use specialized learning programs, if he/she knows them and has access to them. The trainer can modify the content of the training program as many times as he/she considers it necessary.

For that the educational organization must ensure the necessary logistics involving the access to the newest educational programs for the trainer, in order to increase the attractively and efficiency of the continuous training programs.

An example for that, but not the only one, is the program offered by the specialized on-line platform MOODLE, which was conceived and dedicated for the distance learning. Such a platform allows, to the trainer as well as to the trainee, an efficient teaching-learning activity and evaluation in the on-line system. The access and utilization of such specialized platforms and programs need the existence of important financial resources that not all of the educational organizations have.

The specialized programs destined for the on-line education allow accessing them only by using a password received from a network administrator, and only after a trainee meets the entire program subscribing requirements.
The trainee must have the training level requested by the educational program or by the on-line continuous training chosen platform.

The specialized programs destined for the on-line training may ensure the training of the trainees without conditioning the access time or time limiting the evaluation activities. For that the trainee must know very well the educational program or platform and use the internet communication.

The trainees’ evaluation can be done in multiple ways, different time periods, because any intervention of any course taker is registered electronically. The trainees have the possibility to re-do certain homework or tests given, so the trainer can notice each individual evolution, their interest for preparing and training.

Conclusions

Continuous training is a necessary activity for professional improvement for the education unit managers and for the other teachers in the Romanian education system, in trading with the best practices in this area (Bush, 2007). The different ways to do that continuous training, the quality and diversity of the training programs are an important problem for the national education system. The on-line or direct training programs, designed for the educational management, have the purpose to ensure that the trainees acquire the necessary competences for efficient usage of the human and material resources, improving communication processes, curriculum projection, all being necessary to be known and applied in the education units.

Such programs should be attended by all the education unit managers for the well being of the education units, for the efficiency increase of the education management act, for the increase of the efficiency in using the human and material resources, at the university and pre-university level (Barrera-Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos, & Santibáñez, 2009).

Moreover, teacher training is one of the main problems related to the development of any educational systems. A proof of this is the vast literature in this field and the international debates with these topics. For the Romanian education system, new approach to him autonomy by decentralizing of the education units involved the necessity that the teacher has to know how to managing a education unit, so to be a manger of such „organization” (McAuley, Duberley & Jhonson, 2007). Our training program MEPP has among its aims the completion of the teacher professional skills with those of educational unit manager, taking into account the specifics of the education system.

References