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An Effective Learning Environment for Training Future Professionals Including the Field of Politics and Public Administration

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Abstract

An unresolved debate about possibilities for the pre-service training of politicians but an emphasized necessity of an effective professional training for public administration are bases for our research focused on finding solutions for an efficient development of a so called committed learning style over onto-genesis process. Our work analyzed 200 students over several academic years revealing eight core traits of this studying style within an effective learning environment with a significant impact on developing competencies useful for a further activity within political or public administration areas.

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1. Introduction

Politics is often considered as “an unavoidable fact of human existence”. So is economics. And so it would seem, is administration. Whenever the two or three are gathered together-- politics, economics, and administration—a range of relationships will be revealed. These will in turn demonstrate a range of dynamic conditions. Rise and fall, a revolving door in some instances, ups and downs, a pendulum that swings back and forth, and are characteristics associated with such dynamics”. (Khodr, 2005, p. 270). Characters that are able to follow effectively this “rocky road” appear to demonstrate the existence of several important competences implicitly or explicitly revealed by different authors. Research has been done on this topic and the domain of psychology has something to contribute (Silvester & Sutton, 2010). Interesting aspects are scrutinized: how politicians learn, the role of mentoring, what kind of skills and traits of personality they need for effective performance, and crucially the necessity or absence of necessity of politicians' pre-service preparation etc (Silvester & Sutton, 2010).

A political competence index made up of two factors: education and political career has been used by one south American research project. The published results show that a factor labeled ‘education’ accounts for 35% of the total weight of the index while a ‘political career’ factor accounts for the remaining 65%. (Alcántara, 2008). Education here is considered in terms of the level of grade schools attended. However, we maintain that it is the qualitative

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experience of that education that is more influential than the grade of education. This impacts qualitatively more strongly on the personalities of educated people, than the length of educational experience. This idea implies interesting connotations inside the controversial phrase *lifelong learning* within the context of a *learning society*. Kenneth Wain (2000, p 36) defines the learning society as a concept involved in an “ongoing debate about the future of education in the postmodern world, together with its twin notion, ‘lifelong learning’”. This twin notion is in depth analyzed and debated aiming to establish its meanings and mechanisms. It also throws up questions about how the learner of the future should be in a position to generate multiple and interesting answers (Schuller & Bostyn, 1996).

We focused in depth on all these issues. Our strong belief is that graduates should develop a well structured competence profile during the long and complex process of ontogenesis. This profile might enable the graduate to extend learning in the most effective possible way based on an effective internal engine (skills developed on functional knowledge) and strong fuel represented by intrinsic motivation for learning, positively energizing emotional structures and traits of personality built on strong moral values.

2. Developing an effective learning style: committed learning

The traditional instructional models had as main aim the development of a higher level of knowledge in each student’s mind. The term knowledge here is taken to mean more memorized information, than decoded and assimilated information. A committed to learning attitude could have been detected in this type of learning, but the students' learning results were assessed according to the mentioned goals of educational process.

We prefer to use the term *committed learning* since that reveals a learning style in terms of Keefe’s definition of the concept. The learning style is seen as a “composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and psychological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with and responds to the learning environment.” (Keefe, 1998, Logan , & Thomas, 2002, p. iii). Accordingly, the *committed learning as a learning style* is the results of an active, reflective, socio-cognitive and intrinsic motivated, individual and social involvement of a *learner by studying* within the learning process implied by a complex studying situation. In this context, learning process is defined by loyalty to the belief of necessity to learn; and its core trait is willingness and interest to work hard for learning. We highlight the difference between commitment seen as an attribute of the learning process and the act of being committed to learning; the latter shows the learner’s attitude intrinsically involved in the committed learning style. Thus, the phrase *committed learning* as learning by study style contains the attribute *committed within the learning process*. In this context, any prior incidental and explicit learning has the effect of providing a background of knowledge and skills necessary for understanding the explicit tasks of a studying process. The distinction between *committed to learning* and *committed learning* comes from the differentiation between an attitude towards learning and a specific manner of approaching the learning process as a studying one. Accordingly, committed learning means more than an attitude, involving skills, activated knowledge and traits of personality synergistically put into the studying process; it is an active- manipulative, collaborative, intentional, and complex learning, a learning style that involves effective communication skills and actions, constructive attitude and behaviour, and a reflective attitude and action.

After more than ten years of academic activity we have defined this concept of *committed learning* together with our students. This was a result of using blended active and interactive teaching-assessing methods centred on students’ effective learning within an environment of studying together that eventually emerged.

Several core distinctive traits were established and described as a result of a research based on questionnaire and focus groups conducted over more than 10 years. 200 subjects have been selected from the whole sample for the purpose of this analysis. This restricted sample comprised undergraduate students enrolled in direct and distance education in student years 1, 2, and 3 as well as students on direct education master study programmes. The mixed gender sample included people from age 18 to more than 35 studying in the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education.

Our study had multiple sets of objectives. We have extracted for the purposes of our analysis data connected to the specific traits of the committed learning concept. The results that emerged can be considered as significant for defining the core traits of an effective learning approach that might be an overall goal of educational process for new millennium. Our society needs citizens ready and able to integrate themselves within a learning society with a lifelong learning dimension. An effective integration, based on an effective manner of approaching the problems of the life and society represents a stimulating premise for a further selection of representatives for policy, public administration or other professional fields. Such representatives should be ready to deal with the increasingly dynamic and complex issues of human society. The development in time of the so called *committed learning* style could be a genuine help.

There are eight core defined traits of committed learning as a studying style. First the studying environment itself must offer to learners the opportunity to **act** within a carefully designed learning environment constructed around situations that simulate *contextualized* tasks with both roots and its inputs to the real world. Second, the students' engagement in the studying process implies a mindful processing of information, based on a solid and functional previous knowledge system. Third, the answers for the presumed contextualized tasks must incorporate in-depth thinking, a well argued study of different hypostasis of the same idea or fact, exploring for understanding the connections of the specific learning task with the complexity of real life (as cause or effect depending on issue, context and perspective). Fourth, effective communication with cognitive and action skills should be put together aiming for an effective learning result. Fifth, students learn by studying together, by receiving and giving feedback, even if the results are assessed eventually in an individual manner. Real social, political, and professional life implies team working skills and these might be developed during the entire ontogenesis process. Sixth, constructive attitude and behaviour appear to be as an important trait. This behaviour supported by energetic attitude means that skills and attitudes work synergistically: new information is decoded by using pre-existing knowledge systems energetically triggered by curiosity, the genuine wish to make sense or reconcile a discrepancy or puzzlement. Further cognitive skills ensure the assimilation of new knowledge and the subsequent accommodation of the prior knowledge, with new or in depth developed meanings. The seventh and the eighth traits of committed learning highlight that results of this kind can be achieved only if the learners' act is an intentional learning, meaning that students actively and wilfully try to achieve a cognitive goal, and their attitude is a reflective one focused on the learning processes and decision making.

These eight traits intimately interconnected emerged as core traits of the committed learning style show a significant interconnection with a synergistically effect reflected in the values of correlations obtained after a statistic analysis of the 200 students' answers. They were asked to value on a Likert scale the level of influence of the created learning environment upon each of these traits. Pearson Correlation's values cover the interval .894-.990

Emphasising a very strong correlation between the eight traits of the studying style that we have described, with a Sig.(2- tailed) of .000 – 0.05 for each of the eight traits. Students consider that each trait was highly stimulated by the studying environment (means from 4.12 to 4.175 for an interval 2-5)

Pearson Correlations have also medium strength values (+.423 to +.442) according to the year of study, higher than for sex parameter of analysis (-.338 to -.376). Students with a longer and higher experience in working within a studying environment as we defined it and constantly using the metaphor in different forms as a method of studying seem to rate more highly the contribution of this type of educational environment for each of the eight traits of the committed learning style.

The sample included students enrolled in direct (63%) and distance education (37%); however, master degree students were only involved in direct education. This parameter of analysis does not show high values of Pearson correlations (the highest is -.306 (.000), the lowest -.196(.005) in the case of complexity of learning and that of reflective attitude and action. A stronger and more significant correlation appears among students enrolled in direct education than for those studying within distance learning system. No significant values were associated with student age.

The sample reflects our students' population structure: females (88.5%) and male subjects (11.5%). The tendency toward a lower level of correlation for male than for female is shown by the negative values of Pearson Correlations that suggest moderate strength for all the eight parameters (-.338 to -.384)

3. Committed learning as an engine of a future rewarding professional activity

One possible conclusion from the elaborated research of Doe (2002-2004) which analyses competencies for effective professional activity would be that a ready- developed committed learning style can function as a highly *effective engine of a political or public administration activity of notable performance*-. We have connected these competencies to the traits of committed learning. A highly developed committed learning style can genuinely influence each of the 120 competencies (10 areas of activity with 12 competencies each). Most of the described competencies can be detected in specific manner of action for the political field of activity.

This statement is based on the idea that the learning environment focused on studying during the entire trajectory of academic studies succeeded in developing extremely important features that support effectiveness in policy, administration or other professional field: (1). We engaged the students within a learning environment made of studying situations implying *contextualized* tasks with solid roots and clear purposes in real life, with consequential effects upon students' capacity to understand real life and to use their learning outcomes for dealing with further concrete situations. (2). the students' engagement involved *mindful processing of information* developing at the same time their responsibility for the results of their work. Important skills and attitudes for the areas of problem solving and decision making were also involved. (3). Each topic of study implied tasks of analysis from different hypostasis, of listening to others and considering a diversity of solutions; important effects of the development of communication, self management, interpersonal relations and problem solving skills were acquired. (4). All the tasks called for a gradually developed level of communication skills and the effectiveness of students' individual or team action which was, constantly self-assessed and group-assessed because communication and assessment skills are extremely important for a politician or for any other type of professional effective work. (5). Students learn by studying together, by receiving and giving feedback and the political, social and professional life imply the capacity to learn and act in a collaborative way. (6). Learners' *constructive attitude and behaviour, involving the capacity to integrate* new ideas with prior knowledge in order to make sense or make meaning or reconcile a discrepancy, curiosity, or puzzlement is a valuable acquisition for a future effective social, political and professional life. (7). The capacity of acting actively and intentionally trying to achieve a cognitive, social, professional or other type of goal appears to be another valuable result of developing a committed learning style with positive effects in later professional life. (8). A reflective attitude and well managed action, explicitly practiced over the ontogenetic process generates conditions for success and well-being. These can be considered as benchmarks of an pre-service implicit training for politicians and other professionals.

These eight components of an internal engine might make travel on any rocky stretch of any area of activity more effective and easier.

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