

TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES AND INTERACTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

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Abstract: In a research organized at “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad within the “SocioPlus” project, it has been found that students have not properly developed transversal competences needed in order to adapt to the labour market: communicational, inter-relational skills, or skills of managing their own professional path etc. In this study we aim to present the importance of interactive pedagogy during teaching, and also some examples of methods/ exercises applied to courses that facilitate the development of those transversal competences.

Keywords: transversal competences, teaching strategies, university curriculum, students, employers.

Theoretical frame

There are numerous definitions of the term competence but in procedural terms they all share functional notions such as: „a set of resources” – cognitive, motrical, affective etc. related to knowledge, knowledge of the self, attitudes and skills, action schemes, habits that „mobilize” dynamically as well as the ability to „face” problem situations in learning, problem solving, projects (Le Boterf, Paquay, Rey, Wittorsky etc.).

The competence in a certain field consists of knowledge („to know”), abilities and skills („know how”), as well as attitudes and values

(„to be”); the attitude-value component turns an individual into an expert. Competence involves „cognitive, operational, affective-attitude related and conative potential, which successfully emerges when the situations call for it” (M. Ştefan, 2006, p.57). „Competences are complex structures with operational and instrumental value that are placed between knowledge, attitudes and abilities and have the following characteristics: ensure the achievement of assumed roles and responsibilities; are linked to performance in activity; can be measured based on performance standards; can be developed through learning” (V. Chiş, 2005, p. 136 after S.B. Parry, 1998).

Any field of activity or profession contains a system of general and specific competences, their achievement and development being considered a continuous process; an individual’s knowledge and skills are permanently enriched and strengthened as the professional experience increases. The system of professional competences represents the acceptable standard for practicing a certain profession. Thus, systems of initial and continuous training in all professions are responsible for the development of a system of professional competences (V. Chiş, 2005). Transversal competences need to be developed in addition to these categories of competences. They are acquisitions in terms of values and attitudes that exceed a certain area/field of study and are expressed through autonomy and responsibility, social interaction, personal and professional development.

Consequently, initial training in academic programmes aims two complementary aspects: the acquisition of field related/ specific competences and the acquisition of transversal competences.

Research

One of the major objectives of the Project *SocioPlus – Training, documentation and access services for students in Undergraduate and Master Studies in Sociology and Social Work* is represented by the improvement of undergraduate and Master study programmes in the fields of Sociology and Social Work by increasing the relevance of contents for the demands of labour market.

Therefore, the training needs of specialists in the field of Sociology and Social Work (undergraduate studies), Human Resources Management, Social Services Management and Social Work Management (Master studies) have been investigated. We have focused on the demanded and scarce competences and abilities which are needed for the fulfilment of real professional tasks.

Knowing the competences and abilities needed by the graduates` from the perspective of the coordinators of their professional activity is a fundamental condition for efficient revision of study programmes and their adjustment to the demands of the labour market. The study involved the identification of 100 organizations, public and private institution from Oradea and Arad, which have employed graduates of at least one of 5 study programmes targeted by the project.

The study on the training needs involved the usage of two research methods: survey questionnaire and focus group. After analysing and interpreting the data it has been noticed that employers focus on specific competences developed through academic programmes; yet they also revalue the graduates` transversal competences. We will further discuss data referring to the students enrolled in the study programme Social Work at ,Aurel Vlaicu,, University of Arad.

Results and discussions

Collected data reveal that employers of Social Work graduates appreciate the employees' specific competences related to the knowledge and usage of intervention methods in their work with the beneficiaries and the development of prevention services. Thus, handling social cases is one of the abilities each Social Work graduate should possess. These competences are regarded as developed to a large extent.

Referring to the category of transversal competences, their list has been made by experts involved in the project starting from the specifications of the National Higher Education Registry (RNCIS), namely the qualification summary for the fields targeted by the project. According to RNCIS, the transversal competences that would be developed in the future social worker are:

- Objective and argumentative approach both theoretical and practical of certain problem situations seeking for an efficient solution, respecting values and principles specific to social work
- Applying techniques of efficient work in trans-disciplinary teams developed around hierarchical positions at intra- and inter-organizational level.
- Objective self-assessment of professional training needs and the identification of resources and ways of personal and professional development aiming the insertion and adjustment to the demands of labour market

A scale of 16 items has been used to assess the importance given by employers to *transversal competences* within the study programmes. The results are illustrated by the figure below.

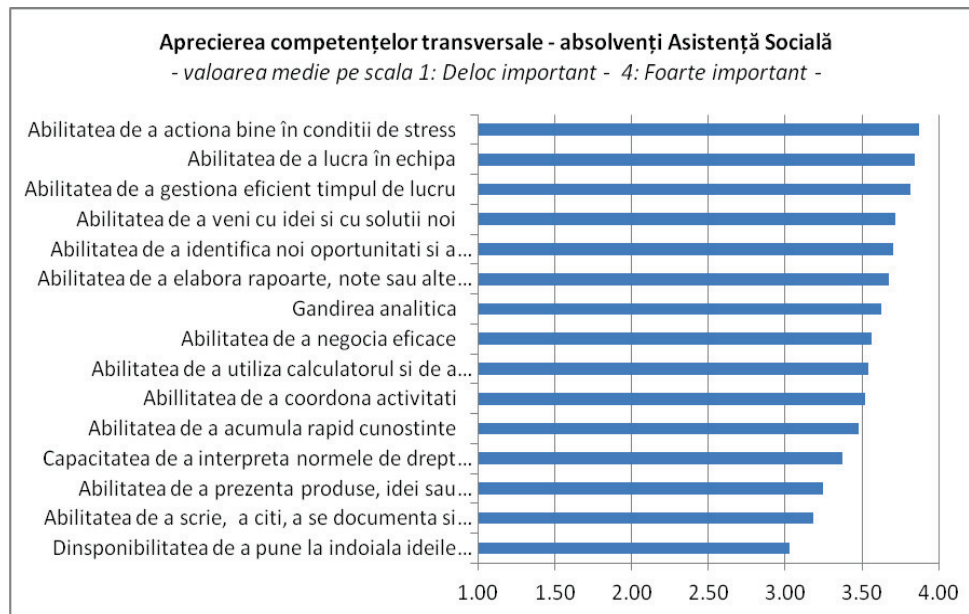


Figure 1 – Appreciation of transversal competences – Social Work Graduates

After analysing these results and having a look at the average values obtained for the study programme Social Work, we notice that employers give more importance to transversal competences transmitted to the graduates of this study programme (undergraduate and master studies). Within the project these competences are identified as:

- ability to acquire knowledge rapidly
- ability to act well in stressful conditions
- ability to manage working time efficiently
- ability to work in team.

For social workers, qualities such as the ability to coordinate, communicate and synthesize are considered necessary.

After performing the focus group with employers, we conclude that the most commonly encountered proposition of curricular improvement refers to internship, conducted in social institutions but also

in foundations, associations, etc. Other improvement propositions of these study programmes refer to the development of transversal competences with emphasis on: the development of communication abilities with people belonging to vulnerable social groups: (the elderly, children, and people with disabilities); the development of communication and teamwork abilities.

Thus, we further want to present some methods that would help in the development of transversal competences; the methods are applied as part of interactive learning strategies.

Models for the development of competences can be built. They are the consequence of learning activities and learning situations in which students are placed. A learning situation which favours the development of competences relies on sequential, gradual involvement of ten types of activities:

1. Facing problem situations (new and challenging);
2. Exploration of resources (available through learning);
3. Acting internally and externally
4. Interaction (for research, confrontation, analysis, understanding, etc.)
5. Reflexive activities, attitudes
6. Co-evaluative activities
7. Structuring new acquisitions
8. Integration in systems, inter- and transdisciplinary context (to practice new long-term acquisitions)
9. Activities of constructing meaning and
10. Preparation of transfer possibilities.

Obvious progress has been registered in the development of formative aspects of learning but this area remains restrained to „learning to know” and „learning to do..”. Aspects such as „learning to be” and „learning to live among others” remain at the teacher`s decision.

The interactive student is the student who „actively interferes in the didactic activity and changes its variables, makes efforts of personal reflection and thinking, does mental and practical activities of search, research, rediscovers truths and reissues knowledge” (M. Bocoş, 2002, p.59). He assumes the role of an actor in the educational act by becoming a co-participant of his own training and co-responsible for the achievement of learning.

An active student seeks solutions to the problems he faces, being intrinsically motivated by the desire of knowing and training for the future; he „elaborates personalized projects of learning, assumes responsibility for them, is aware of them, applies, assesses and improves them, manages his learning by gradually acquiring autonomy in learning.” (M. Bocoş, 2002, p.58).

The efficiency of learning and the development of competences depend on the degree of students` involvement in the fulfilment of their learning tasks. There are two ways of approaching learning: “surface” approach and “deep” approach to learning. The surface approach to learning is based on the student`s intention of fulfilling a tasks without any authentic personal involvement. It relies on memorizing information and events, retention of concepts without personal reflection upon them, handling learning tasks as something imposed from the outside, the acquisition of knowledge with no connection to reality, etc. Surface learning is of „learning everything type ... of recognition and reproduction

from one's memory– reason, reflection and questioning remain in the background” (V. Chiş, 2005, p. 93).

The active/interactive student is the student who strives for autonomy in learning/training, who learns from his own initiative, individually, independently and in a personalized manner, who reflects upon his own person, researching and understanding himself; he has an active, positive and favourable attitude towards lifelong learning.

We want to underline the importance of using such methods in the training of students for their future professional activity and also in the development of their transversal competences, by taking into consideration the above mentioned arguments. Below, there are some methods used in the activities with students.

A first example is the method “*I as a professional (social worker)!*”(adapted from Filimon, L., Chioncel, N., training course “Trainers of professional competences”, AntrES Project). The method can be used focusing on the following objectives: to use correctly concepts specific to the field of social work; to report strong points and week points depending on theoretical frame of their professional competences; to prove the ability to perform a realistic self-assessment of their own personality; to find proper solutions to balance their week points.

Task: Design a worksheet for individual work entitled „I as a professional”. Start by assessing yourselves: reflect for a couple of minutes upon your strong points and week points as future social workers; think how well you use your strong points and how you deal with the week points.

Individual work will be followed by group discussion.

Strong point and weak point as future social worker

a) 3 strong points	How do I use them?
b) 3 weak points	How do I handle them?

Another method that can be used is the *Journal of Self-reflection*. The aim of this method is the discovery of difficulties encountered by students in their training, organization and presentation of their practical endeavour, the analysis of lacks and errors, dissatisfactions but also expectancies. The journal is also a self-assessment tool, which measures the students' progress in terms of goal achievement and professional training.

- What new knowledge have you acquired through the conducted activity?
- Which of the debated ideas have you found interesting?
- What difficulties have you encountered during your activity?
- What difficulties have you encountered in the interaction with the others?
- What are your dissatisfactions related to the activity?
- What could you improve?

The exercise "*Absurd explanations*" can start with the following objectives: overcoming an extreme, unexpected situation in a controlled environment; improving self-control when facing a distress factor; awareness of exterior, non-verbal signs which betray stress and uncertainty generated by an unexpected, apparently unsolvable situation;

improvement of socializing abilities and awareness of their role in overcoming unique situations; checking the students' creative skills.

The exercise has the following *stages*:

1) Five students are selected randomly and are asked to come in front of the classroom, placed so that the other students can constantly observe their reactions and behaviour. Each of these 5 students is asked to present a notion which is completely new to him and the rest of his peers. Notions belonging to a specific field can be selected for this purpose, supposedly words they haven't had contact with (e.g. medicine, aviation, geology, etc.). Each student is assured by the leader of the exercise that he would get support in form of a certain short written description of the notion. The student has then the opportunity to read it before the presentation. Attention should be drawn upon the fact that after the distribution of all cards, no participant can address any questions to the leader or talk to other participants under no circumstances.

The five sheets with the explanations will contain the following:

- correct explanation of the word;
- wrong but plausible explanation of the word (a notion with close meaning and form will be written on the sheet);
- wrong explanation of the word, even an absurd one (another notion than the one referred to will be written, preferably a notion familiar to all participants but with no connection to the initial word);
- correct explanation in a foreign language which may be familiar or unfamiliar to the student;
- no explanation (blank sheet).

Each student of the five will randomly choose one card and will be given 10 minutes time to prepare the presentation. The rest of the

group is asked to observe the 5 colleagues' reactions. 2) After 10 minutes, before the start of the presentation, the observers are asked to make a written hierarchy of the students with the best presentation. The written results will be kept by the students and they won't be disclosed at this point.

3) Beginning of presentation. Each student of the five „protagonists” will try to describe the notion in 15 minutes. The person who has the wrong but plausible answer on the sheet will start first (so as to create a state of doubt regarding the accuracy of answers given by those two students who have correct answers) and will end with the presentation of the student who hasn't received any explanation (to give him the possibility to try to put together and acquire information offered by the previous speakers– it would be interesting to observe which version will he try to imitate).

4) After finishing the presentations, students will be asked to make a hierarchy of each colleague's performance, according to the manner they managed to transmit the information.

5) The leader of the exercise will present the correct version and the difficulties encountered by the presenters will be debated upon. Then peer evaluations will be analysed. It will be checked whether the correct version has been perceived as real by the participants; otherwise the reasons why another version has been accepted as convincing or real have to be identified. It will be also checked whether initial behaviour analysis corresponds to results presented in stage 4 (after students' performance) and causes that have generated the differences will also be analysed.

Another method which facilitates group communication based on photos is *Photo-language*. It contributes to highlighting the representations. Symbolic photos from magazines can be used for this

purpose. These photos will be displayed in a corner of the classroom and students arranged in a semicircle will observe the clichés. They will have to choose one or two photos that present, in their opinion, a situation connected to social work. Each student presents then the photo and explains the reasons for his choice. The other ones can react or assign the photo other meanings. The last stage consists of the identification of all subjects approached by the group and writing them down in clusters connected by arrows.

The *Exercise “Ways of communication”* can be used starting from the following objectives: diminishment of unjustified trust in one’s own abilities; increase of the degree of assimilating notions with abstract character; awareness of advantages offered by interaction based on communication and the development of relationships based on equality and partnership.

1) A person from the students` group is selected either randomly or voluntarily and is asked to present the group an abstract notion under the leader`s guidance. The concept must be familiar from previous training. The topic should be of medium to high difficulty. The student has 5 minutes to prepare the speech and 15 minute for the actual presentation. When the presentation is delivered, both colleagues and the teacher have the opportunity to ask questions to the topic.

2) The leader of the exercise will present the same topic using a different approach and another presentation method. Emphasis will be laid on communication and constant group interaction. Timing should be strictly respected, namely 15 minutes for initial presentation followed by a question session.

3) Analysis. A debate will be organized to identify the advantages and disadvantages of communication with the group as well as the group's reactions to the author's "performance".

Another example is the technique of *symbolic drawing* which consists of drawing something on a sheet of paper of large dimensions. It shows their representation of a discriminating situation and it is a method of knowledge and awareness of their own representations and affective experiences in the field of social work. All works on the discriminating situation can make the object of a mutual portfolio.

Another technique is the *self-biographical approach*. It determines the student to have a look into his personal experience and identify a concrete, positive or negative situation when he needed the help of a specialist. The activity can be initiated by evoking cases which describe such a situation. Each student writes a short summary of the experience and presents it to the others. The analysis of the event is made by asking questions such as: "What has made this situation so important that I remember it?" (the person who helped him, the nature of intervention, the circumstances it was issued, the consequences of the intervention): "What lesson can be extracted from this situation?"

Autoscopy comes to help students' self-assess/self-observe their own evolution, performance/competence with their colleagues' help or personally (Tăutu, C.M., Tăutu, M. G., 2000). If applied in an organized manner, the technique of autoscopy can aim the fulfilment of important objectives, some of them being:

- favouring confrontation between student and his own behaviour in concrete situations that are premises for critical analysis, reflection and self-reflection for the improvement of upcoming activities;

- supporting the awareness of obstacles that need to be overcome for an efficient management of activities and analysis and reflection techniques of one's own behaviour;
- favouring organized and guided dialogue, conducted by teachers and oriented towards students.

In a first stage, autoscoping can be used as follows: the teacher assigns specific observation tasks of specific situations, when students stated their own points of view, thus triggering an objective and meaningful discussion based on the observations made.

In further stages, a video camera can be used to record, review and analyse a student's performance (see table); the performance can be assessed/self-assessed constructively and obviously improved, too.

Behaviour self-analysis/ self-observation

Sequence	Behaviour	Strong points	Weak points	Improvement measures

Conclusions

Introducing such interactive strategies and methods of team work in the academic curricula gives students the opportunity to collaborate, intensify their interactions, take part in discussions and debates, research activities, role plays and micro-projects. Such interactive/group learning is beneficial under several aspects, contributing to the improvement of horizontal communication, stimulating the strengthening of student-student and even teacher-student relationships, making learning more efficient, generating feelings of acceptance and sympathy, stimulating the

increase of self-esteem and trust in one's power; in a word – developing communication and teamwork competences.

All these methods are used with the aim of activating the student, stimulating cooperation and intensifying vertical and horizontal communication relationships. The teacher is mainly concerned with the development of superior mental attitudes, reason in students, stimulation of discussions and group debates.

Therewith, teachers must take into account the students' need of knowledge and professional competence in their interactive academic endeavour. The main difference between pupils' learning and undergraduate students' learning is given by the fact that students should know what they are about to learn, how learning is organized and especially how they will revalue learning in the profession they have chosen.

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