

ONLINE TRANSFORMATIVE COACHING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM FOR STUDENT TEACHERS

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Abstract: *This paper presents the concept of an operational model of virtual training and personal development for students - future teachers-graduating from the University of Pitesti, who, under the current circumstances of academic education and pandemic crisis, need more than ever individual and group support to cope with change in order to generate their own solutions to personal problems, to know themselves better, to learn how to get well, to better understand how their own thoughts affect feelings, emotions and behaviour, to develop their assertive communication and active listening skills, to learn behavioural self-regulation strategies, increase self-esteem, identify priorities, cope with academic exams, etc. The aim of the research is to analyse the partial results of a pilot-project that began by surveying the perceptions of student teachers in preschool and primary education at the University of Pitesti on the needs, fears/ concerns they have during the coronavirus pandemic, but also on the need to implement a possible online coaching and personal development program to support them during this period. The research methodology brought together a questionnaire-based survey, interviews with experts, content analysis and statistical processing of the partial results. The research findings highlight methodological and praxiological aspects of implementing a possible virtual program of transformative coaching and personal development that can cause generative changes in students' cognitive and behavioural plan and can bring balance, satisfaction, even joy on a personal level, but also practical training as future teachers.*

Key words: *online transformative coaching; personal development; change; personal evolution.*

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic still has a dramatic impact on the world. Due to the global pandemic situation, schools and universities have had to conduct distance learning activities and teachers around the world have to rethink their teaching methodologies by adapting to this crisis situation and often learning to use electronic platforms and applications on their own in order to facilitate online teaching

The European Commission's Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 emphasizes that teachers "have remained on the frontlines of the response to ensure that learning continued, innovating distance learning for their students in confinement. Without teachers and trainers, no innovation, no inclusion and no transformational education experiences for learners can take place."(p.12)

The digital boom imposed by the new online teaching conditions was also visible in the case of academic education, and the health crisis deepened even more the challenges related to digitalization, innovative pedagogies, inclusion and well-being, students, researchers and support staff, mobility and funding. Verde A., Valero, J., M. (2021) believe that if the pandemic had not had this impact on education, the use of technological developments in educational settings could not have evolved so rapidly in recent months.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2020) captures the fact that "universities are currently facing the need to change pedagogy, which should value the more active and autonomous involvement of students in their own training, the use of technology and of open access resources, so as to develop a new relationship with society, beyond their traditional role in the generation, dissemination and transfer of knowledge, emphasizing the two-way link with society, in the logic of open science." (pp.1226-1227)

At the end of July 2020, the Romanian Academy issued a point of view entitled "Romania in and after the pandemic" by which it proposed a series of measures to mitigate or even eliminate the effects of the pandemic crisis on the short, medium and long term. In addition to equipping all schools with the technical means to ensure the necessary conditions for online education, it is also necessary to train all teachers to use efficiently the infrastructure in the digital education process. Today, these constitute priority action axes of the Strategy for the digitization of education in Romania 2021-2027 (SMART-Edu), launched in public consultation in

December 2020, and of the Educated Romania presidential project (V.9 Digitalization).

An important study on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people conducted by Copăceanu M. (2020) in April-May, on a sample of 1201 young people in Romania with an average age of 21.93 years, of which 40% were students, highlights the fact that young people have suffered during the pandemic, both in terms of their emotional state and in terms of excessive consumption of food, internet, tobacco, alcohol. The students participating in the study mentioned that they feel stressed by the online university courses invoking adaptation problems, the large volume of projects and homework to be completed in a short time, fear of exams, lack of free time and lack of motivation, etc. (pp.116-117). At the same time, the author draws the researchers' attention towards intensifying in-depth studies focused on young people during the pandemic, while developing useful applications for young people to get in touch with psychologists and/or applications to reduce their risk behaviors. An example of a useful application for people during the coronavirus pandemic is the *Covid Coach* application, developed by the mobile mental health team National Center for PTSD, Dissemination & Training Division (US). The application is free and includes personalized tools for self-care and for improving emotional state, a tracker for checking mood and graphics for viewing progress over time. It is a tool for self-education and personal development that helps to create one's own personal assistance network.

Other studies (Alghamdi, 2021) highlight the much greater impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the social aspects of students' lives than on their educational aspects.

2. E-Coaching/Coaching in education

In the current context of our social life, we wonder how we can support students to cope with the current situation both in terms of their resilience to the health crisis and in their initial remote training, in atypical conditions of academic education. One solution may be the virtual coaching programs in education and personal development. Today, the digitalization of coaching proves to be successful in several fields, including in the field of education. Ribbers and Waringa (2015) emphasize the value of online coaching as “a non-hierarchical development partnership between two parties separated by a geographical distance, in which the learning and reflection process takes place through both analogue and virtual means” (p. 7). In the digital age, e-coaching is gaining more and more popularity being considered “a set of computerized components that constitute an artificial entity that can observe, motivate, learn and predict the behaviours of a user, in context and

over time, and which is proactively engaging in an ongoing collaborative conversation with the user, in order to help plan and promote the effective goal by striving to use persuasive techniques. ” (Kamphorst, B.A. , 2017, p.5).

Since the 1980s, the area of coaching has grown significantly, not only in sports, but in almost any field, with several situations in which it has been defined: as sports training, as an occupation, as a branch of consulting, as a training method, as development strategy. There is a rich literature on coaching and many definitions of this concept have been launched over time. It is often taken for mentoring, counselling, consultancy or even psychotherapy, but there are many specialists (Zeus &Skiffington, 2008, Hattie, 2014, Rosinski 2019, van Nieuwerburgh, 2020 et all et alii) which draw attention to the differences not only at the conceptual level, but especially at the practical-action level. According to Zeus, P., Skiffington, S. (2008) coaching involves “a voluntary partnership, which bears its full potential only if it takes place in an environment of trust and responsibility” (p.371). The same authors share the conviction that through coaching, “essential qualities for survival” are formed and perfected both at individual level and at the level of groups and organizations, such as self-knowledge, the ability to reflect and learn, confidence in one’s own competence. According to Hattie (2014), “coaching involves people’s ability to facilitate self-learning, personal growth and performance improvement”. (p.137)

Some specialists (O’Conner, Lages, 2019 et al.) understand by coaching “a partnership in which the coach helps the client reach his maximum potential and produce the results he wants in life and at the workplace”(p.44). The authors point out that “the goal of coaching can be similar to that of other techniques that involve helping people in trouble: to support personal change according to the client’s wishes and to help him reach his highest limits.” (44)

In the field of education, coaching was intensively theorized after 2010. We emphasize here the extraordinary contribution of Christian van Nieuwerburgh (2012) and of his collaborators to clarify the concept of coaching in education, understood as a professional dialogue specially designed to help develop skills specific to pupils / students, teachers and school canteens in order to achieve the intended educational objectives. According to van Nieuwerburgh (2012) and his collaborators, *coaching in education* is “a one-on-one conversation focused on improving learning and development by increasing self-knowledge, self-analysis and personal responsibility” (p.17). In this context, the coach facilitates students’ self-directed learning, using techniques such as active listening, dialogue, support and ongoing encouragement. Applied to students, coaching can lead

to improved confidence and self-motivation, performance and wellness (Devine, Meyers, Houssemand, 2013).

Stan C. (2020) believes that coaching education leads to a conscious evolution of the student, which “combines self-knowledge with self-understanding, but also with recognition and overcoming limits, in order to achieve performance in a particular field or context.” (p.102).

Polish researchers Babicka-Wirkus A, Wirkus L, Stasiak K. and Kozłowski P. (2021) recommend that universities introduce interpersonal training and stress adaptation workshops for individual groups of students, as well as other forms of participatory intervention, support and self-support of students during the pandemic. Furthermore, online workshops/virtual coaching and personal development sessions were organized during the coronavirus pandemic for students in the Romanian university space (Bucharest, Cluj, Iasi, Timisoara), starting from the premise that during this period, more than ever, students need to feel that they belong to a resilient academic community, and that their academic life, even if they have moved into virtual space, does not imply isolation and loneliness, but interactivity, interesting teaching activities focused on their learning needs, flexible and professional network. The descriptive-exploratory study initiated at the level of the Faculty of Education Sciences, Social Sciences and Psychology within the University of Pitești goes in the same direction.

3. Purpose of the study

The aim of the study was both to probe the perceptions of future teachers in preschool and primary education about the needs, fears/concerns they have during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as about the need to implement a possible online coaching and development program to support them during this period. At the same time, the opinions of experts in education sciences and psychology were consulted with respect to the concrete way to implement such a distance learning program for students.

4. Research Methodology

The research methodology brought together a questionnaire-based survey, interviews with experts, content analysis and the statistical processing of the partial results.

Participants and procedure

The study was conducted in 2 stages:

- designing and conducting the survey based on an electronically-administered questionnaire (Google Forms) to students from the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PIPP) program within the Faculty of

Education Sciences, Social Sciences and Psychology, University of Pitesti (November 2020);

- application of the Delphi technique by organizing and conducting interviews with psycho-pedagogical experts within the faculty in November 2020-January 2021.

The survey participants were students (n = 192) aged 18-36, 54.7% from urban areas, 45.3% from rural areas; female students had the highest weight (190), together with 2 (male) students, the sample being made up of first- (57,8%), second-(25%) and third-year (17,2%) students from the specialization Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, the field of Education sciences.

Delphi interviews were conducted with 6 psycho-pedagogical experts, who were selected from the faculty for their proven expertise in scientific research, as well as for their direct involvement in academic teaching, with over 10 years of teaching the subjects of self-knowledge and personal development, personality psychology and educational psychology. There were 3 rounds of panel discussion with experts using the Google Meet app. The objectives of the panel discussion with the experts were:

- the need to implement a virtual coaching and personal development program for students, based on the needs analysis and identification of the design stages of such a program;
- the advancement of a possible design for the virtual coaching and personal development program for students who are preparing for a teaching career;
- the analysis of effective coaching models and strategies, which can be capitalised in discovering the internal resources of students, in activating the factors that can motivate them in the direction of change, orientation towards performance and continuous development.

Materials and instruments

To achieve the purpose of the research, the following research data collection tools were designed: a questionnaire with 28 questions for students (5 factual questions, 20 questions on the Likert scale and 3 open-ended questions) and 3 interview guides for applying the Delphi technique. All instruments were administered electronically. According to the rules of research ethics, the agreement of the research participants was obtained in advance.

4. Results and discussions

Students were asked to what extent an online coaching and personal development program could meet their needs for optimizing individual

performance, acquiring new skills, and even correcting some inappropriate behaviours.

The responses they offered are summarized below (Table 1).

Table 1. To what extent do you consider that an online coaching and personal development program is useful for you....

Questions from the questionnaire	Percentage <i>*to a very large extent</i>	Questions from the questionnaire	Percentage <i>*to a very large extent</i>
to adjust to student life	31,8	to apply certain behavioural self-regulation strategies	43,8
to get to know yourself better	51,6	to strengthen / increase your self-esteem	48,4
to discover some inclinations, talents, skills	40,6	to identify your personal priorities	45,3
to find out what you really value in life	48,4	to identify your academic priorities	39,6
to better understand your own reactions	47,9	to change certain habits in your life	33,3
to better understand how your own thoughts affect your emotions and behaviour	52,6	to learn to deal with crisis situations	36,5
to develop your assertive communication skills	40,1	to prepare yourself psychologically for academic evaluations	38,5
to practise active listening	40,1	to learn how to get well	41,1
to train certain personal skills	45,3	to cope with changes on a personal level	41,1
to find solutions to personal problems	37,5	to learn to cooperate more effectively with colleagues	40,1

We notice that the students participating in the study consider this program useful, to a large extent, for self-knowledge and a better understanding of their own thoughts that affect emotions and behaviour, but also to correctly identify their own set of values. In addition, they mentioned they need this program to get used to student life (especially first-year students), but also to develop their communication and active listening skills.

To a large extent, respondents believe that such a program is useful for them to strengthen their self-confidence and increase self-esteem, to identify personal priorities and to learn certain behavioural self-regulation strategies. It is useful for them to learn to cooperate effectively with colleagues, but also to deal with crisis situations and to prepare them psychologically for academic evaluations.

In case of the open question from the questionnaire which aimed at naming 2 personal needs and 2 concerns/fears that students have during the pandemic crisis and which claim their need for coaching and personal development, they listed:

- the need to feel safe in terms of health;
- the need to increase self-confidence;
- the need for freedom;
- the need for peace;
- the need to communicate more and in any way with the people around;
- the need to better manage emotions in public, be it virtual;
- the need to acquire professional language;
- the need for professional stability;
- the need for support in achieving the objectives proposed;
- the need to be taught how to learn quickly and efficiently;
- the need to empathize with other peers in need;
- the need to lose weight in a healthy way and have a personalized sports program.

The worries / fears that the students expressed are related to the fear of disease, of the danger of coronavirus infection, the fear of not losing loved ones, the fear that they will not be able to express their opinions freely, the fear that they will not be able to manage effectively their learning time and the fear that they will have less and less free time due to the busy schedule, the theme of isolation, the fear of loneliness, fear of failure in exams and in the future profession, of financial instability.

To question Q23. *In your opinion, which type of work would you prefer in carrying out a future online coaching and personal development program?*, most students (46.9%) prefer that these activities be organized as group training, 29.7% mentioned that they want individual coaching, and 23.4%

as mentoring activities (individual/group) which demonstrates that students do not distinguish very well between coaching and mentoring.

The students' opinions on this question are in agreement with the opinions of the experts who mentioned, at one point, that group coaching workshops are flexible in terms of focusing on students' needs: developing personal skills, increasing motivation, overcoming procrastination, reducing stress, managing testing anxiety, effective time management, building a virtual community based on trust.

Following the interviews with the experts from round I, it was possible to identify the main stages of the implementation of a possible online coaching and personal development program for students:

- analysis of the training/personal development needs expressed by students;
- in-house training of trainers and setting up a coherent program delivery strategy;
- setting objectives and criteria for evaluating progress/performance;
- establishing the coaching strategies adopted, selecting the most appropriate coaching tools and techniques;
- the actual testing of the program (minimum 3 months) on the online platform of the university or on a specialized application;
- evaluating the success of the program and adjusting it for a new stage of implementation.

In round 2, the experts were asked about the coaching strategies that could be applied by the trainers in the distance learning program for students and the discussions led to the following tools and techniques: the reflective cycle G. Gibbs (1988), the GROW model (Whitmore, 1992, 2019) and the TGROW model (Downey, 2003), Wise Choice Process (Downing, 2013), NPL techniques for coaching (O.Connor, Lages., 2019). For coaches, experts recommended that the application of coaching strategies happen with a diversity of contexts and situations that involve students in the process of autonomous learning of resolute behaviours. The experts also discussed the benefits of coaching on students in terms of gain: positive changes on the mental, physical and emotional level, trust-based relations, development of new skills, optimal conflict management, increased involvement in activities, motivation and creativity, focusing on desirable goals and better results.

Following round 3, the experts expressed their consensus on the group/team coaching approach which involves a series of workshop-type sessions over periods of several weeks or months and on the coaching process as explained by many specialists (Whitmore, Zeus, Skiffington, et. all). Experts have proposed a possible design of the virtual coaching program and personal development for students (Table 2) that could be tested from this

academic year, taking into account the recommendations of other specialists (Stolovich, Keeps, Rosenberg, 2017) regarding the "careful and systematic design of online training, accompanied by cycles of testing and review by real beneficiaries, is an essential feature of the quality design of online education (p.304).

Table 2.A possible design of the online coaching program and personal development for students

Virtual coaching and personal development workshops	No. of hrs
Coaching lab for happy students: coaching methods and techniques applied in education	20
Self-coaching and peer-coaching	6
Journal of reflection and program evaluation	2 28 hrs

Discussions were also held on the concrete way of implementing the program and the following variants were launched: coaching strategies can be applied / infused both in formal seminar activities such as self-knowledge and personal development, personality psychology, and in non-formal environment as specific activities of the student scientific circles/personal development workshops type. The advantage of the latter forms of organization is that the program can respect the distribution of time allocated by experts or the needs of each student. The experts also proposed the option of organizing *joint distance learning courses* (via videoconferencing) through inter-university collaborations that can constitute new research projects.

6.Conclusions

The conclusions of the study highlight the need and possibility of organizing and implementing an online coaching and personal development program that meets the current needs of students, bringing them, in this period of health crisis, emotional balance, confidence, satisfaction, motivation, self-awareness and personal development. A coaching program for students, conducted even at a distance, has the power to trigger positive changes in the mind and behaviour of students in a very short period of time, developing their responsibility and self-confidence, their individual potential and own resources to achieve the performance desired. Furthermore, other

advantages are worth mentioning, as shown by the study, in terms of time flexibility, location, arrangement and rearrangement of workshops, integration of electronic and audio-video tools in the coaching process, reminder-type specifications, follow-ups and aftercare, possibility of reflection, etc.

The results of the study created the premises for experimenting with the program for students and open new directions for coaching research in the initial training of students for the teaching profession.

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