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CURRICULUM BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE A FURTHER APPROACH OF CURRICULUM

Rodica Mariana NICULESCU PhD.
University Transilvania of Braşov, ROMANIA
rodica_niculescu@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: *The paper intends to go further with the approach of discussing about the core concepts of curriculum. A brief theoretical presentation (structured on two chapters) intends to substantiate the practical approach which is briefly described, analyzed and argued further. It is an extract from a long term research developed with the students trained to be specialists in the area of education (bachelor and master degrees levels). This research is intrinsically connected to the didactic activity. It is the normality of a scholar's activity, in my opinion. An academic professor is firstly an educator and the indispensable research must be connected to the practical educational process seen both as field of research and aim of this research.*

Keywords: *curriculum models, curriculum as process and as result, metaphor and drama, committed learning style, qualitative learning*

1. Going further[1] with the presentation of curriculum – theoretical background; curriculum theory as fundamental for the practical approach of the educational process

1.1. Conceptual approach

If „the term curriculum is many things to many people"(Aoki, 1980/2005, p. 94) and the theorists of curriculum should call attention to the tools used for the shaping in order that the world being shaped by educators can be more beautiful and just (adapted after Huebner, 1975) this approach is focused explicitly on trying to propose a possible answer for this issue.

Discussions about curriculum are never ended. First, this is necessary because curriculum represents a complexity difficult to be completely covered, and it reflects a dynamic field developed along a continuing process.

Secondly, to understand the essence of what curriculum represents seems to be

[1] This article is a continuation from a special perspective of a previous one published in Journal Plus Education, Vol. XII (2015), No.1,pp.23-34

a core issue of realizing the continuum from the strategic to the tactical level of designing-implementing, evaluating and developing curriculum. A genuine curriculum reform should have as fundamentals a more in-depth understanding but focusing on the essence of what curriculum means both as structure and process.A broad definition as the basis of the forthcoming submission is chosen:*"Curriculum is represented, in the broadest possible sense, of all the learning situations/ learning opportunities, which appear during the human being's lifetime, that have as a result, cumulative and progressively restructured, sets of learning experiences, expressed through competencies or their components"* (Niculescu, 2010:33)

Three intrinsically connected concepts are considered as core ones within the previously proposed definition: learning situation, learning opportunity and, respectively, learning experience as a result of learning process. This learning process is understood as an adaptive process to the task. The answer follows after the decoding of the information related to the request involved and their transformation into learner's own knowledge. The new knowledge is adapted to the previous knowledge, but they reconfigure the old structure. Performance of the learning process is measured by the relevance, adequacy, and the speed of response to the task. It is important to highlight that the literature does not involve a distinction between the three terms: *learning situation, learning opportunity* (Murray Print, 1993: 9), and *learning experience*. Sometime they are used as synonyms, or in other contexts they are distinguished but not in a clear way.

It appears that the term of learning opportunity is met with a limitative meaning only for the formal education context.

Thus, Print Murray (1993) defines learning opportunity as a planned and supervised relationship between students, teachers, equipment and environment, where an educational process is presumed. This seems to be implicitly determined by the defined meaning of the two terms: (1)opportune ("occurring at an appropriate time", according to Merriam Webster, or "suited or right for a particular purpose" according to The Free Dictionary), and (2) opportunity ("a good chance for advancement or progress"). They both suggest the intentionality of developing a situation that offer the chance to do something. This intentionality is specific, as essence, for the formal education and it appears in the non-formal education as well. But the intentionality belongs to the educator as initiator and designer of the learning situation. A learner is purposely involved in a learning situations in school or non-formal institutions, but depends on the learner's motivation the degree of his or her own intentionality to use it for developing the own learning abilities. The truth is, on the other side, that the educator mastery of teaching may support the learner motivation. The informal education puts the humans into a lot of

learning situations. These have positive or negative effects but not all are consciously used for learning.

Consequently, the learners may participate in an active way to a learning situation (in formal – nonformal, and informal contexts), and use it as *an opportunity* or chance for advancement and progress of their own development.

As long as the term ”opportunity” involves a positive connotation and a purpose, between learning situation and learning opportunity one may detect a nuanced difference. Both of them have not as designer the learner but the educators, except the context of self-education. However, the learning opportunity asks a voluntary implication of the learners themselves. The learning situation exists (as the educator has designed it, and he/she is implementing it). The learner uses it voluntarily as an opportunity to learn, with different degrees of success.

1.2. Interest for curriculum as process and as result

Generally speaking, references about curriculum are mostly done for the formal context of education. Teachers focus their attention on learning situations to be designed and run. They are interested in the process of curriculum, a process considered in relation to the expected results (students' competencies). Pupils’ parents primarily are concerned about the curricular results, learning experiences expressed in new or restructured knowledge, new or developed capacities/ abilities, attitudes and values (adapted after Print Murray, 1993, apud Niculescu R. 2010:33). Therefore, to consider the learning experience as a different side of the issue seems to be obviously necessarily.

A foreshadowing of the difference between learning opportunity, learning situation and learning experience appears in the definition of curriculum given by Caswell and Campbell (apud Negreț-Dobridor I., 2008: 25). They say that curriculum is understood as the “path followed by students and involving all their experiences of children guided by teachers”. If we understand the meaning of the term path as a set of learning situations designed by teachers, used as opportunities by students along the learning process, and lived by them as learning experiences, these learning experiences are unique, very personal. (Niculescu R. 2010:33) Thus, this manner of analysis is very close to my previous way of defining curriculum.

Consequently, learning situations, with their specific hypothesis as learning opportunities, on one side, and the learning experiences, on the other side, are two faces of the act of learning, understood in its essential meaning as acquisition, in a given context, of certain behaviors in response to specific situations that life puts the human beings in, with educational intentions or not.

The learning situation/learning opportunity involves the whole context created by educator, which requires the learner’s involvement. They appear in formal and non formal education. Sometime, when one talk about self-

education the learners themselves may create or use learning situations created by the life as learning opportunities. The learning experience is the personal result of the act of learning, a result strongly influenced by the particularities of the situation, the actual time of "crossing" through the learning situation, with the individual's psychological implications. As a consequence, the same learning situation may generate different learning experiences, sensitively nuanced acquisitions for each learner involved in the same learning situation; on the other side, the same learner, involved in different moments of his/her life in a similar learning situation, may have different learning experiences strongly influenced by the personal history of the set of learning experiences and by the context.

Learning situation and learning experience are to be considered as a ying – yang sides in curriculum theory and practice, even if the literature often considers them as synonym or does not make a difference between them. They are twin core concepts of the theory of curriculum in formal, non-formal and informal curriculum hypostases. Essentially a learning situation is designed by educators in formal and non-formal contexts, and it simply exists in the real life. If one understand that a learning situation is lived like a genuinely personal learning experience by each involved learner, the figure no.1 shows how the five core structural elements of a learning situation turns into five components of unique learning experiences.

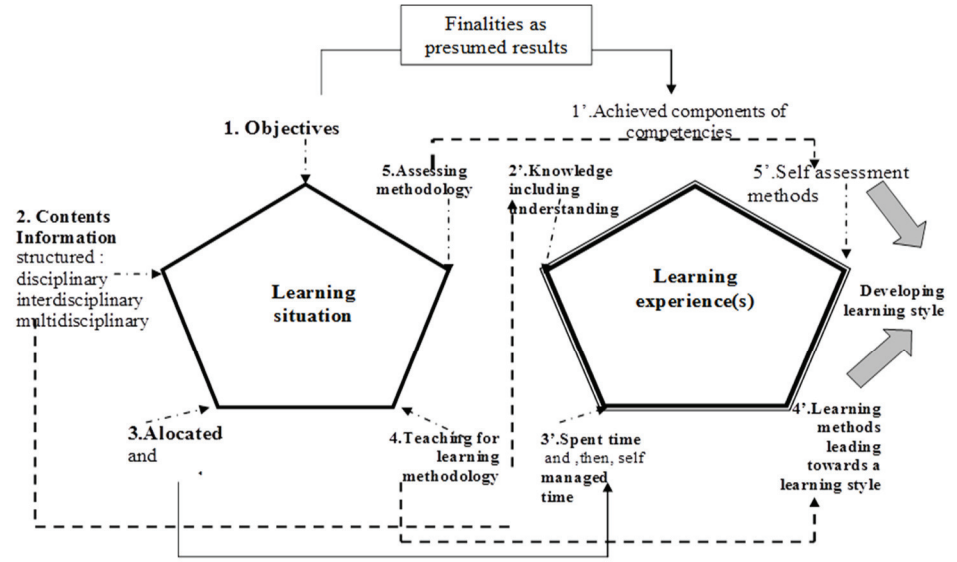

Figure 1. Learning situation turning into learning experiences

The components of learning experiences (involving knowledge, abilities/ capacities, and personality traits, as components of competencies) are determined by a number of individual, personal factors. These factors put their mark on some important issues: (1) the relevance of the learning context for each subject; (2) the quantity and quality of the previous major acquisitions, with a major role in the correct decoding of tasks; (3) the nerve strength, the capacity of attention concentration and distribution; (4) the emotional resonance with the learning situation; (5) the motivation for involvement; (6). the capacity of volunteer effort; (7) the degree of fatigue, etc. All these are reflected in the way in which each learner perceives the learning situation, the degree of his/ her motivational involvement in solving tasks, the emotions accompanying the learning process, the time and intensity of involvement, the nature and intensity of the volunteer effort put to overcome any obstacles, the degree and manner to storage the new acquisitions that result out of the total or partial settlement of tasks, etc. (Niculescu 2010: 33). And finally, they are reflected by the quality of learning, the degree of developing the resulted competencies.

2. Pentagonal model of curriculum seen as a tridimensional approach – a pyramid. Some more considerations

Various visions are connected to both issues: (1) the way of defining curriculum concept or selecting contents within curriculum context; (2) the curriculum structure. The literature presents and sometime considers as contradictory, a considerable list of described models

When it is about the structure of the learning situation one can find models anchored in three or five points: the triangular and pentagonal model. They are bi-dimensional models. Wragg has described in his 1997 version, a model with four basic roots a model labeled as cubic curriculum approach. This is the first try of passing towards a tri – dimensional vision, from a static and synchronic approach of the triangular or pentagonal models to a diachronic and more dynamic approach prepared by the tridimensional vision.

The components of learning situations are essentially five, but each of which may be related and other items. One of the five elements is represented by finalities (outputs of the educational process expressed by aims, goals and objectives, and described as competencies to be developed). They are placed in the top of the pyramid as the first moment of curriculum *design* and last moment of reference when the educational process has been already implemented. The finalities, or outcomes, or expectations (as they are named

in literature) determine the other four components of the learning situation. Accordingly, the five components placed into a three-dimensional shape are:

1. **Outcomes/expectations or finalities** expressed through *components of competencies*, or through generic competencies; these have to be required by the intended competence profile to be developed by a curriculum design. They are detailed by the aims/goals/ objectives of education, seen as outcomes with a decreasing degree of generality (from maximum to minimum /top – down direction inside the pyramidal model, where operational objectives represent the concrete level of the learning units)

2. Content structured in different ways under or not of a *transdisciplinary vision (meaning to focus the process on the expected results behind no matter what way of structuring contents):*

- *disciplinary*
- *interdisciplinary*
- *multidisciplinary/pluridisciplinary*
- *modular*

3. **Methods of teaching focused on learning**
4. **Methods of evaluation focused on learning**
5. **Time for learning** (including teaching time)

All these must follow a right **trajectory** that leads to the designed general finalities in order to achieve the curriculum reform targets.

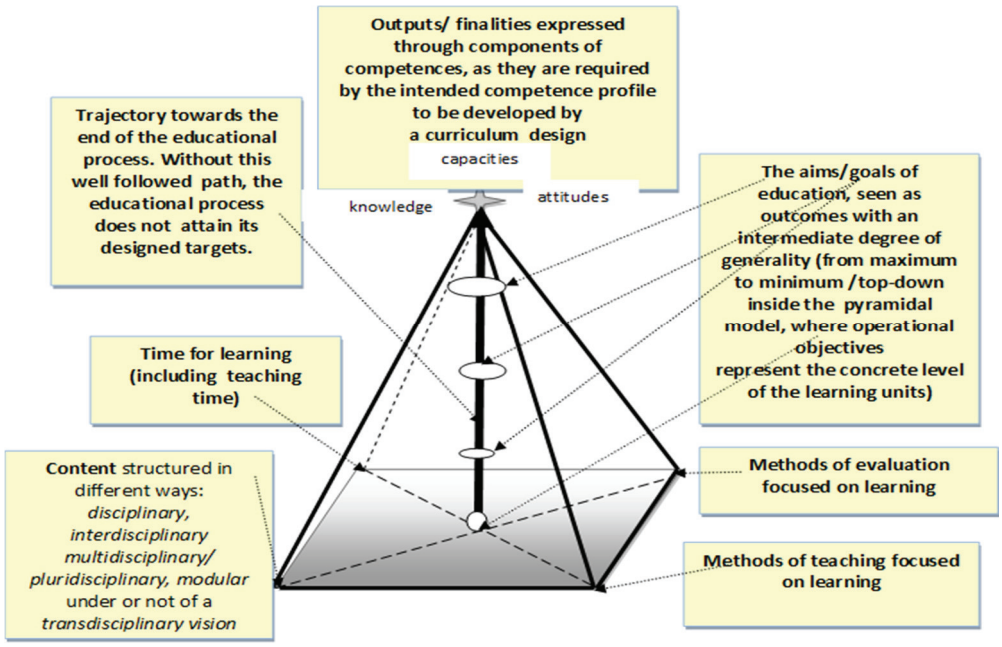

Figure 2 Curriculum as a pyramid

The strong interconnection between the five structural elements of a learning situation is more than obvious. I am reluctant to prioritize the importance of any of the items referred to, in order to not enter into debate with a variety of curriculum philosophies that are not essentially differentiated, but they stress the components' importance in a diversified manner.

The following image intends to show how the different philosophies are connected to the pyramidal approach. (Niculescu, 2010: 77)

The aim of the figure 2" *Relation between pyramidal approach and different interpretative models of curriculum* is not to achieve an overview of different explicative models of curriculum, simply because their presentation in the specialty literature is sufficiently well represented. The figure only suggests the relationship between parts of the existing curriculum models with the pyramidal presentation of a learning situation, as a central element of curriculum. The figure also highlights the priority emphasized by each model for on one or another of the constitutive elements of the learning situations.

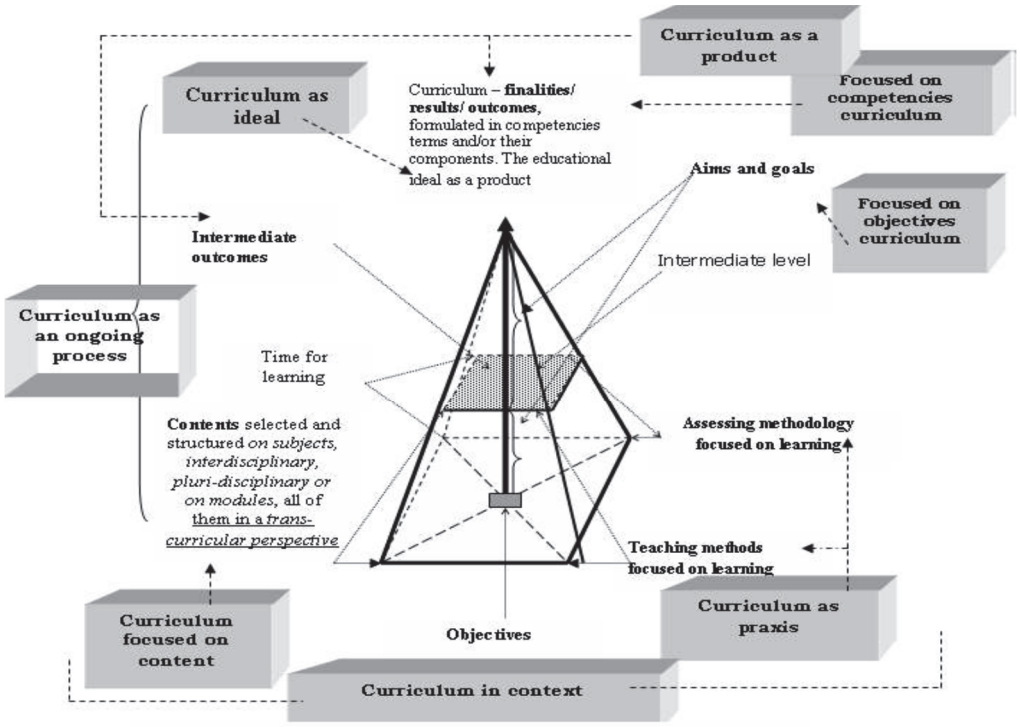

Fig.VI.2. Relation between the pyramidal approach of curriculum and different interpretative models

Figure 3. Relation between pyramidal approach and different interpretative models of curriculum

A cubic or a pyramidal vision (as I suggest) cannot essentially exceed the synchronic analysis; this pyramidal approach tries to move one of the five components of the learning situation on a third dimension; it is here a pentagonal model transposed in three-dimensional plane trying to encapsulate the germ of the dynamics of educational process.
I am trying to explain the dynamics of this approach suggesting a possible analogy with a "billiard table" model (together with Lear-Lord and, tangentially, with the dynamic billiard theory).

A synchronic analysis of the "billiard table" analogy could suggest a model which is as static as the others. But a "bird's eye view" of the table shows: (1) a number of colored balls, with a specific configuration (differently structured contents, one component of the learning situation); (2) several billiard-holes (the general targets of the action, analogy with the general expected outcomes/ aims of learning situations understood as sets), with strategic points on the green-table as intermediate expectations (goals and objectives);(3) a billiard-cue which, following the milestones of the aims, goals and objectives (the strategic points figured on the billiard table) can give direction for the action; (4) we can also see the players. Without scrutinizing their strategy of playing, we can lose the dynamic side of the game. The action strategy involves the methodology of playing with assessment moments (two other components of the learning situation). A definite time for play is the other component of the leaning situation within the analogy. The billiard game can be considered a dynamic system (Kokshenev V. B.(2005) , when it is analyzed in motion.

The same dynamic vision is necessary for the multi-pyramidal approach of curriculum, understood in a Matryoshka dolls configuration (Niculescu,2010:85). A lesson plan only prefigure the motion involved by the implementation. The personality of the actors (educator and learner), the context, the feedback received through the intermediate moment of evaluation within the process, both in billiard game and the education process give life, show what is necessary to be done further, reveal the possible necessity of adjusting the initial design. This means dynamic.

Lesson plans implemented one after another lead to the achievement of the umbrella goals of their objectives, and further of the general aim. The same situation can be found within the context of a championship of billiard game. Motion according to a flexible strategy, interested and devoted actors, good conditions and favorable contexts are the ingredients of success both in billiard game and education process

3. A methodological approach aiming to develop the committed learning style as an effective factor of a qualitative learning

A previously published paper (Niculescu R., 2014: 244) has presented the concept of committed learning style with its core features seen at the

specific level of the early education within curriculum reform context. This learning style (seen both as a connected condition and effect of a genuine curriculum reform) can be essentially developed at any age. More difficulties appear, of course, when it is about to change or correct an old and less efficient learning style wrongly developed along the ontogenesis process. The reason of a strong necessity for a learner to have an effective learning style is implied in the following argumentation. The existence of such a style determines the use of any learning situation as a learning opportunity turned into a rich learning experience. This is the reason of focusing our attention to developing this style to our students.

A long term research has been run in the last more than twenty years concurrently to the didactic activity. Only a few aspects involved in our research have been selected for the reasons of this paper. They are focused on curricular aspects, on the way to help the proper transformation of the learning opportunities into personal effective learning experiences to our students. The students are seen as citizens of a changing Planet who strongly need to learn effectively and, consequently they need an effective learning style.

Two main aspects were considered: (1) the learning process is seen as a *studying one*, involving voluntarily the learners, with conscious aims and self-control; (2) *metaphor and drama* have been involved as two effective methods both in teaching and in assessment process; they have been harmoniously connected to other methods of critical thinking and, where necessary, with traditional methods.

The methodological approach is seriously responsible for the students' involvement in the learning process. This methodological approach depends on (1) clarity of expectation, both for the designer of the learning situation and the learner; (2) flexibility of contents of curriculum structuring, aiming to maximally use the contents as important means of developing students' competencies; (3) the clarity and transparence of the assessment process; (4)mastery of educator as designer and runner of the learning situation; (5) material and financial resources; (6) degree of involvement of students accordingly to their developing personality involving their already existing learning experiences.(7) complex elements of climate and educational contexts.

An important factor of influence for this transformation process from learning situation to learning experience is the cultural/multicultural context. The context has an explicit and implicit influence upon the educational circumstances and on each involved actor.

A few core and synthetically considered conclusions are selected among a significant number of our theoretical and experimental approaches, after more than twenty years of teaching and experimentation of different methods of improving curriculum design and implementation.

As previously has been mentioned, a concept emerged from the educational activities, teaching - assessing focused on learning activities with

the students. This concept expresses a *learning style* under the name of: *committed learning*. Some considerations have to be briefly mentioned.

First of all, I have to stress the idea of considering the learning process as *a studying* one, *involving voluntarily the learners, with aware aims and self-control*. Secondly it is important to mention the *role of methodology* of teaching and assessing and to stress the impact of some modern methods on the students' attitudes and especially on their motivation for learning. Primarily, it is about metaphor and drama that, as it have been mentioned, were used in harmony with a wide set of other modern and traditional methods. They have been involved as two effective methods both in teaching and in assessment process. The modern trend has been engaged in teaching and evaluation, while the modernism for its sake has been avoided.

During the academic years of reference focus groups with students were organized aiming to detach the core features of this specific learning style. Three categories of items, each with its subcategories, resulted from a long and interesting list, describing the necessary competencies involved by this committed learning style

A. Specific manners of activating knowledge and capacities within the learning process, connected to: (1) active manipulative and mindful learning, (2) complex learning looking for hypostases, perspectives, exploring for understanding; (3) effective communication involving proper capacities/abilities and actions

B. *Committed to learning as attitude* detailed in: (1) reflective attitude and action; (2) intentional learning

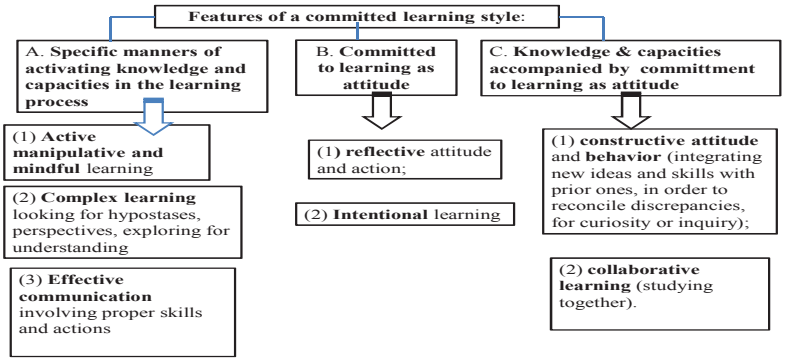

Figure 4. Features of committed learning style

C. *Knowledge & abilities accompanied by committed to learning as attitude* connected to the following details: (1) constructive attitude and behavior (integrating new ideas and capacities with prior ones in order to

reconcile discrepancies, for curiosity or inquiry); (2) collaborative learning (studying together).

For three academic years (2012-2015) specific assessment items have been elaborated; they have been focused on each of the mentioned features of the committed learning style, according to the nature of the subject. The tasks including the items of assessment and the involved criteria have been communicated to the students from the very beginning of the period of study. The teaching process has been directed to obtaining the expected outcomes. The students have produced the written and/or oral presentation as team and individual tasks (mixed items for each subject). A clear algorithm for registering students' results has been imagined, in order to keep the same manner of assessment in quantitative terms, no matter what subject and what types of tasks the students had been asked to solve. The data has been and are going to be further processed in SPSS software. This is a multi-phase research still in progress:

Master y.2 RUE MC							Specific manners of activating knowledge and skills within the learning process			Committed to learning as attitude		Knowledge & skills + committed to learning as attitude	
Number 337-357		sex	level	Year of study	age	Specialty	Active manipulative Mindful learning,	Complex learning Hypostases, perspectives, exploring for understanding	Effective communication Skills and actions	Reflective attitude and action	Intentional learning	Constructive attitude and behavior (integrate new ideas and skills with prior ones in order to reconcile discrepancies, for curiosity or inquiry)	Collaborative learning (studyingtogether)
							A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	C1	C2
							1 point=100%	0,5 points=100%	0,5 points=100%	2 points= 100%	1 point=100%	1 point=100%	4points= 100%
1.	B.A.	W	2	7	2	4	100	60	30	82,5	100	80	75
2.	B.A.M.	W	2	7	2	4	100	90	70	62,5	100	50	75
3.	B.I.A.	W	2	7	3	4	50	25	25	30	75	75	50
4.	B.S.	W	2	7	2	4	100	90	70	42,5	10	10	75
5.	C.L.	W	2	7	3	4	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
6.	G.O.L:	W	2	7	2	4	100	60	30	77,5	90	80	75
7.	M.R.E.	W	2	7	2	4	100	90	70	52,5	50	50	75

Figure 5 An extract of documents which registered the performance on each committed learning style feature

This is the subject of another future work. In this context I want to stress only several conclusions connected to the topic: the students can involve themselves (with a wide spectrum of involvement and qualitative results) in

the learning process that is able to provide them the context to develop the previously described features of a committed learning style. A questionnaire applied to a consistent part of students showed that this way of working is not only accepted but even preferred, especially by the students who do their studies for a serious career development not only for being students. As everywhere in the world we have both these categories of students.

Students considered the committed learning style as an engine of an effective education, with distinct and interesting implication in their career development.

Several factors have been highlighted by the students as determinants of the proper evolution of the committed learning style. Firstly they have mentioned the methodology of teaching-assessment process. Thus, metaphor and drama as teaching and assessing methods have been highly appreciated by our students. The extension of using metaphor in different other moments of their activity, without being asked to, has mentioned and proved the. More than this, messages of stressing the utility of the use of metaphor in their daily professional life have been received many years after graduation. The clarity of the assessment items/ criteria, the climate of learning environment, and even the effects of the hidden curriculum are considered as factors that determine the existence and the development of this learning style. How much and in what specific manners these factors influence the quality of learning are areas waiting for response from the above mentioned research in progress. The aspects of a multicultural learning environment have been also analyzed but they will be a topic of a distinctive paper.

It was interesting to find out how the students assess what they feel about a stimulating learning environment within which metaphor and drama are considered methods. These methods had some main effects (according to students' opinion): (1) development of analogical thinking; (2) high level of practicing verbal communication; (3) communication, with a trained para-verbal and non-verbal component; (4) a better capacity of expression through symbols or images; (5) an obvious development of awareness and openness when using body language in communication; (6) capacity of inter-evaluation; (7) capacity to argue in a synthetic but convincing manner.[2]

These ideas together with the quantitative results of the research will be fundamentals of other written synthesis of our work.

4. Final reflections

Some more reflections about curriculum and its connected issues and effects within the educational process will follow as normal steps of our research; the ongoing research process will have some more other steps with

[2]A consistent portfolio with students' works (papers and DVDs are proves of these ideas

their specific results to be presented in distinctive papers A core idea should be also highlighted: within our team of academic teaching staff, some other connected researches take place. Their results can and will be analyzed in their intrinsic connections. As a reflection in this moment, it is necessary to be said that never a scholar or a team of academic staff should forget the essential of their work : they work with unique humans' minds and souls, no matter from what perspective their didactic influence takes place. And professors as researchers are firstly educators. They must cooperate with the researchers as professionals, both of them being in the service of an increasing effective educational process.

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