PROMOTING A DEEP APPROACH OF LEARNING THROUGH CURRICULUM ADJUSTMENT. THE EXAMPLE OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS OF AUREL VLAICU UNIVERSITY OF ARAD

Camelia-Nadia Bran PhD.
Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad
brancamelia@gmail.com

Abstract: *From the perspective of lifelong learning, higher education must achieve a paradigm shift in the conduct of the educational process, from traditional pedagogy to the modern student-centred pedagogy. University is one of the leading suppliers of adult education, students groups are redefined in terms of age, life experience and learning expectations. Within this context, to appeal to the principles of higher education pedagogy and modern didactics it is required if the universities want to increase the efficiency of the educational process and to meet the learning needs of the students.*

Keywords: *students 'learning, deep approach of learning, curriculum adjustment, social work*

1.Introduction

When organizing students learning we should considered that face -to - face activities should be appropriate to their superior intellectual abilities in conceptualization, understanding and addressing complex problems for their psycho-individual progress. Higher education students' needs for training and development, their learning motivation, purpose and objectives, their attitudes and values are different from those of children and adolescents requiring differentiated educational treatment appropriated to the age and level of intellectual development, to their statuses and skills as adult learners.

In the case of higher education, the proportion between social programmed learning and the one achieved by their own effort is changed, getting closer to the self -directed learning (Șchiopu, U., Green, E., 1997). According to the same authors, learning in higher education is classified as organized, systematic, original, embedded, interpolated and incidental. If the first forms find their realization in the learning organized within the educational process, the latter three forms continuously develop themselves

during higher education studies, being embedded in the concept of enculturation.

Higher education students detain refined learning strategies involving diverse interests and aspirations and stimulating intellectual potential favoured by the complex psychic development. (According to Green E., Green, F., 2003).

Organizing the educational process in universities in terms of approaching students as adults must go to the following principles (Knowles, MS, 1984):

a) Students become increasingly more independent, more autonomous and able to direct their own lives, assuming responsibilities in this regard.

b) Adults have accumulated some experience of life that constitutes a rich (re) source to achieve continuous learning.

c) Adults are willing to engage in training activities when and if they feel the need for learning in order to enhance their knowledge in a certain field.

d) compared with children, who are more focused on the learning content, adults focus mainly on learning through problem solving; they are guided by practical purposes, they are being more realistic;

e) For adults, the factors with the strongest motivating force in achieving learning are intern factors; the desire to know how to do something, to have certain skills and competencies the sense of self-fulfilment, the desire to get ahead and achieve social recognition are reasons for learning deeper in adulthood than in childhood . Intrinsic motivation is prevalent in adult learning, as opposed to children, who are motivated to learn by external rewards.. (Dumitru, I.Al., 2001, p 171)

2. Learning approaches in higher education

The comparative analysis between students' learning and pupils' learning shows the existence, in what concerns the students, (according to Şchiopu, U., Verza, E., 1997) of a several characteristics: a greater cohesion of the ability to join the forms of abstract and concrete analysis in the learning process; a faster extraction of what is important and meaningful in the material to be learned; a more critical and pragmatic acceptance of what is new; a more visible attitude of denying what is unclear; a clearer evaluation of the sources of information which has the effect of increasing the independence towards them;   an increased orientation towards the applicative and pragmatic dimensions of knowledge; a more obvious need to supply knowledge from various fields with the appropriate abilities and skills; a higher specification of knowledge.

The analysis of some of the learning approaches in higher education started from N. Entwistle' conception (1998) which says *the development of the conception regarding students' learning (from memorising to transforming*) and intellectual development *(from dualism to relativism)* are

factors that influence the option for a certain approach to learning and they are based on the argument that a learner doesn't approach leaning in just one way. Other research emphasise the role of ***the educational environment as the third factor of influence regarding the approaches to learning.*** This involves the nature of the working task, the circumstances in which performance will take place, providing the data concerning the task etc. (Bigss, J., 1987). Starting from the above we have identified three approaches to learning as noted in Table I:

Table.1 Ways of approaching learning			
	Deep learning	Surface Learning	Strategic learning
Definition	Examining new facts and ideas critically, and tying them into existing cognitive structures and making numerous links between ideas.	Accepting new facts and ideas uncritically and attempting to store them as isolated, unconnected, items.	Targeting the students' learning process towards achieving maximum academic performance, by the objective means of grading.
Characteristics	Looking for meaning. Focussing on the central argument or concepts needed to solve a problem. Interacting actively. Distinguishing between argument and evidence. Making connections between different module/chapters/units. Relating new and previous knowledge. Linking course content to real life.	Relying on rote learning. Focussing on outwards signs and the formulaeneeded to solve a problem. Receiving information passively. Failing to distinguish principles from examples. Treating parts of modules and programmes as separate. Not recognising new material as building on previous work. Seeing course content simply as material to be learnt for the exam.	Relying on both rote leaning and meaningful learning, depending on the assessment task. Using systematic learning methods to receive the highest mark possible. Two focus points: the academic material and the requirements of the assessment.
Encouraged by Students'	Having an intrinsic curiosity in the subject. Being determined to do well and mentally engaging when doing academic work. Having the appropriate	Studying a degree for the qualification and not being interested in the subject. Not focussing on academic areas, but emphasising others (e.g. social, sport).	Choosing the subjects/specialisations where they get highmarks easily. Extrinsic motivation. Wanting to receive high marks and other

	background knowledge for a sound foundation. Having time to pursue interests, through good time management. Positive experience of education leading to confidence in ability to understand and succeed.	Lacking background knowledge and understanding necessary to understand material. Not enough time / too high a workload. Cynical view of education, believing that factual recall is what is required. High anxiety.	external rewards (scholarships etc.) Driving to succeed. Paying attention to the teacher's requirement and to their own assessment. Good time management. Using efficient learning techniques. Pragmatic view of education and learning Results oriented.
Encouraged by Teachers'	Showing personal interest in the subject. Bringing out the structure of the subject. Concentrating on and ensuring plenty of time for key concepts. Confronting students' misconceptions. Engaging students in active learning. Using assessments that require thought, and requires ideas to be used together. Relating new material to what students already know and understand. Allowing students to make mistakes without penalty and rewarding effort. Being consistent and fair in assessing declared intended learning outcomes, and hence establishing trust	Conveying disinterest or even a negative attitude to the material. Presenting material so that it can be perceived as a series of unrelated facts and ideas. Allowing students to be passive. Assessing for independent facts (short answer questions). Rushing to cover too much material. Emphasizing coverage at the expense of depth. Creating undue anxiety or low expectations of success by discouraging statements or excessive workload. Having a short assessment cycle.	Providing feedback only by means of marks. Not being aware that the educational environment which they created and coordinate leads to a certain students' approach to learning. Creating a competitive educational environment. Appreciating the students who receive the highest grades.

263

Deep approach to learning and especially strategic approach to learning involve students' good knowledge of the task, and of the ways of solving them efficiently. They also mean good planning skills, the monitoring and assessment of the resources and processes involved in learning.

3. Adjusting curriculum for a deeper approach of learning. An example

3.1. Adjustment's dimensions

Between March and June 2015, within the project called "Socio Plus", a curricular adjustment was piloted for two disciplines of the of Social Work study program of the "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad. The adjustment was done on four dimensions: *content adjustment; teaching strategies adjustment from the perspective of students' participation in order to develop their professional and transversal competencies; references actualization and resources diversification.*

Within the discipline „European reinsertion projects for the ethnic discriminated groups" proposed to the second year students, the team of curriculum experts have analysed the curriculum documents specifics for the social work programme. The analysis was conducted against the **graduates 'competencies profile** elaborated by the employers, beneficiaries and graduates themselves. Taking into account the results of the analysis we have developed new, improved curricular documents.

The syllabus of the "European reinsertion projects for the ethnic discriminated groups" discipline was enriched with *5 new professional competencies and 7 new transversal competencies* needed to be developed for a social work specialist. The old syllabus contained only 3 professional competencies and 2 transversal ones. As regarding the content of presented in the syllabus we have restructured the old one for the perspective of project management theory and practice correlated with social policies for the ethnic discriminated group. The contents were presented in correlation with active student-centred teaching strategies such as: *The cube, The World cafe, the jigsaw, the investigation, study cases* etc. The evaluation design reflects the importance of students' work in developing a grant proposal for the specific target group.

The training materials consisted in the elaboration of different complex documents such as:

• Teaching scenarios, one for each face-to face meeting, elaborated after the ERR model (Evocation-Sense making and Reflection)

• A new course support, a comprehensive booklet of 100 A4 pages, containing units' objectives, contents and working tasks, references

• Working sheets, leaflets, movies, brochures and other material for each training session

The training sessions were conceived after the model proposed by Kurtis S. Meredith şi Jeannie L. Steele (1995) in order to assure a creative-reflective frame for the educational process. In each session the students were challenged to evoke their knowledge about the training topic, to propose ideas for social projects, to interact with the new information and to reflect on how they can use the new information into the professional life. Interactive, critical thinking, learning through cooperation methods were used. We mention here methods like: the thinking hats, the role play, the study case, the cube, the reciprocal teaching and learning, simulation etc.

The reference adjustment was done by incorporation into the syllabus the latest Romanian and international resources on project management and social inclusion.

3.2. Students' perception about the adjustment process

3.1. Methodology

In order to measure the impact of the adjustments on students we have applied, in June 2015, we have applied 150 questionnaires to 30 students enrolled in the pilot programme. The questionnaire purpose was to test and validate the curricular adjustment tools: **teaching strategies, didactical resources, references, curriculum structure**. Also, as an expert in curriculum implementation, I have completed a specific questionnaire for assessing the pilot program. The questionnaires were constructed as opinion items on a Likert scale, with 10 intervals. Students were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with each affirmation within the questionnaire. 1 meant „not at all true", 10 meant „Perfectly true". When analysing the results, I have cumulated the results of each student for the 4 dimensions and I have converted them on a scale from 1 la10.

The hypothesis is that students will appreciate mostly the diversification of the teaching techniques

3.2.1. Results for the variable „Teaching strategies".

We have studied the difference between the expected frequencies and observed ones for each variable of the instrument „**Teaching strategies".** By using **chi-square test** we found that in the case of **25 variables ot of 30** the differences were significant positives. In the case of the if 5 other the positive differences were not significant. Differences were recorded within the upper range of the distribution curve (8-10), so the students have appreciated in a significantly positive manner the adjustments of the teaching strategies.

In terms of average scores obtained by the questions within the variable „Teaching techniques", we find that the highest average is obtained by „*Teachers are given the opportunity to ask questions" (q14)* (9.04 average), followed by average 9, 03 for „the teachers ask questions during lectures / seminars" (q13) and variable „*Attitude of the teacher made me treat my training more seriously". (8.93).* Position number four was obtained by the question related to the students 'participation during the class (q15, 8, 87*)* The question related to the diversity of the teaching methods obtained the average(q14) 8, 76, occupying the fifth position.

Means for each questions of the variabile teaching strategies
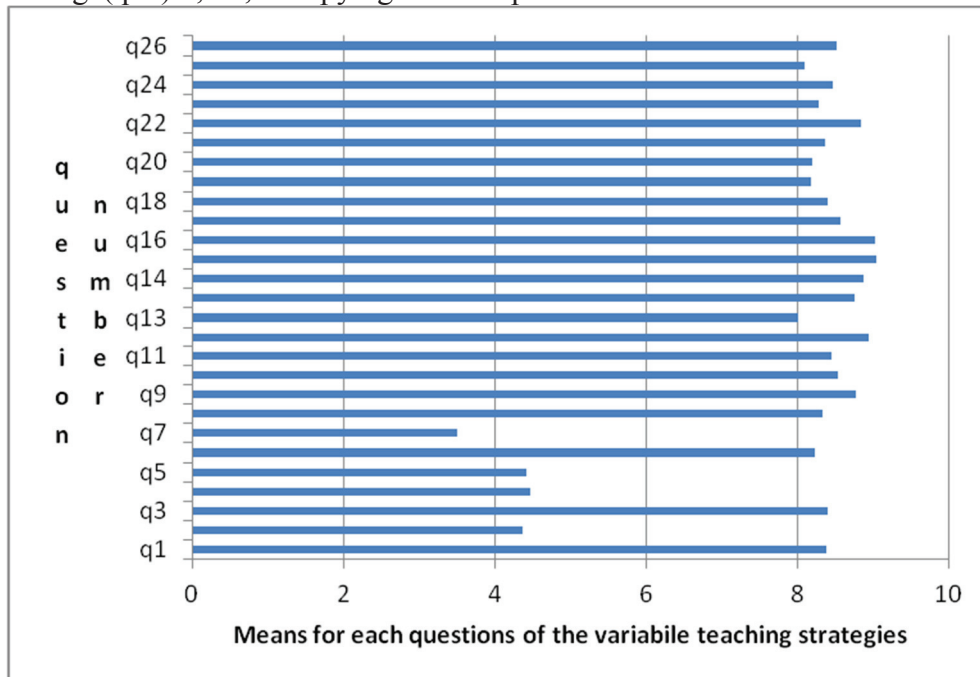
In contrast, the smallest averages were obtained by the control variables. Those scours validated responses and the impact of the adjustment program.
The appreciations of the students towards

Conclusions

In this article we have highlighted the characteristics of the deep learning approach as a main goal for learning in higher education. We have described our endeavour for improving the curriculum for students enrolled in social work programme of the Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad. The adjustments were made on four dimensions. We have analysed the students' answers related to the adjustments of the teaching techniques. *Students valued mostly*

the active pedagogical context in which they have the liberty to express themselves, to ask questions in order to clarify their misunderstandings. Only in the context of freedom and trust, university professors can promote measures for developing a deeper approach of learning among the students. The subjects appreciated the space for debating and challenging ideas, a place where the knowledge is the co-constructed by the members of the group. This place should be created in any course, for any program.

References

Bradford, K. (2004). *Deep and Surface Approaches to Learning and the Strategic Approach to Study in Higher Education; Based on Phenomenographic Researc*.www.arasite.org/guestkb.htm.

Bran, C. (2012). *Repere pentru o învăţare eficientă,*.Editura Universitatii"Aurel Vlaicu". Arad.

Dumitru, I.Al. (2001). *Educaţie şi învăţare.* Editura Eurostampa, Timişoara.

Entwistle, N. (2000). Promoting Deep Learning Through Teaching and Assessment: Conceptual Frameworks and Educational Contexts. Paper presented at the *TLRP Conference, Leicester* (www.ed.ac.uk/etl/ publications.html.

Glava, A. (2007). *Metacogniţia şi optimizarea învăţării.*Teză de doctorat, Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, Cluj-Napoca.

Knowles, M.S. (1984). *Andragogy in action.*.San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Marton, F., Saljo, R. (1984). Approaches to learning*, i*n Marton, F., Hounsell, D., Entwistle, N.(1984). *The experince of learning*.Edinburgh:Scottish Academic Press.

Mashisi,M.K., Rabin, C.E., (1999), *A study of the approaches to learning, engagement with the learning context and conceptualization of learning of a group of fourth year accounting students,* HERDSA Annual Ineternational Conference, Melbourne, 12-15 July, 1999

Roman, A , (2014), *Evaluarea competenţelor. Perspective formative,* Editura Pro Universitaria, Bucureşti

Tait, H., Entwistle, N.J., & Mc Cune, V., (1998), *ASSIST: a reconceptualisation of the Approaches to Studying Inventory,* în C. Rust (ed.) „Improving students as learners" Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development

Şchiopu, U., Verza, E., (1997) *Psihologia vârstelor, ciclurile vieţii,* E.D.P.-R.A., Bucureşti

www.socioplus.eu