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STUDENTS' VIEWS ON IMPORTANT LEARNING EXPERIENCES - CHALLENGES RELATED TO ENSURING QUALITY OF STUDIES

Abstract

In the process of assessing and ensuring quality university studies, students have an important role as partners in the learning community. In this empirical study we therefore analysed the learning experiences to which they themselves attributed a significant influence. We were interested in the type of those influences and the key characteristics of their learning experiences. The findings present challenges and guidelines for teachers when planning learning circumstances that may enhance the active involvement and joint responsibility of students.

Key words: higher education, quality of studies, quality assurance, important learning experience

Introduction

The University of Ljubljana defined itself in its mission statement as *»an institution striving for excellence in research«*. The absence of mentioning *»excellence in teaching«* was observed even in 1996 by a group of international experts in the CRE Auditors' report (Institutional Audit of the University of Ljubljana). The promotion criteria for university teachers are still based primarily on the quantity of their scientific production. We can therefore ask ourselves how the quality of studies is assured and in this paper, the Department of Educational Sciences, one of the biggest and oldest departments of the Faculty of Arts, will be scrutinized. The graduates of the department are trained to research educational theory and practice from pre-school to adult education. They gain the competences needed to develop educational science and resolve issues related to management in education. There are approximate 600 students at the Department every year. The undergraduate course in pedagogy and andragogy can be taken as a single subject or combined with one of the numerous other courses within and outside of the Faculty of Arts. Most of the classes offered take the form of lectures, with more seminars in years 3 and 4, but only few exercises in some subjects. Practical training is carried out over two consecutive years, each time for two weeks at various educational institutions. Our study does not include any students of the renewed Bologna programmes, which were first introduced in the 2009/2010 academic year.

Ensuring quality studies

Referring to the cognitive-constructivist paradigm and following Vermunt's (1993, p. 143) definition of *constructive learning* "in which students actively build-up their own knowledge by employing deep and self-regulated learning activities", we as professors have to ask ourselves whether during studies we provide conditions for such quality learning and enable students to get involved as actively as possible in the study process and thus gradually take control of their studies.

Nightingale and O'Neil (1994) stress that high quality learning will emerge in the following cases:

1. When a student *is ready (cognitively and emotionally) to face learning tasks*: it is necessary to obtain a proper degree of imbalance between demands and capabilities, between the difficulty of teaching contents and previous knowledge, so that students are prepared to accept a certain learning task as a challenge.
2. When a student *has reasons for learning*: students naturally perceive reasons for learning in achieving good marks and passing exams, so it is very important to plan an evaluation which will encourage them for high quality learning (when it is not memorizing which is primarily expected from them, but rather higher levels of knowledge). Most of all, it is important to ensure meaningful learning for them.
3. When a student will *clearly link the previous knowledge with the new knowledge*: the authors rely on Gibbs (1992), who maintains that without existing conceptions it is impossible to make new conceptions meaningful; therefore it is essential to include the existing knowledge and experience in the learning process. He also stresses the importance of a well-structured and organized knowledge, for which an active linking process of students is important.
4. When a student becomes *active* during the learning process: it is reasonable to assume that nobody can be completely passive during the learning, but there exist considerable differences in the activities of students. On the one hand there are activities like a detailed learning of explanations from the notes, definition of formulae and their reproduction; on the other hand there are activities demonstrating a student's involvement in the learning process (problem-solving, group work etc.).
5. When the *environment will offer a student a suitable support*: the authors maintain, that by this we first think of support programmes to develop particular learning skills and strategies as well as various counselling methods. But we should also bear in mind how to achieve a better flexibility by means of a more open learning and by planning possibilities for cooperative learning.

Students' role in ensuring the quality of studies

Student participation in quality assurance has become widely recognised in the European Higher Education Area. On their meeting in 2001 in Prague Ministers declared that students are important stakeholders on all levels and reaffirmed the importance of student participation in the “European standards and guidelines on quality assurance”. However, the reasons for student participation in quality assurance, the ways of students' involvement and on which levels they should participate, has not been fully understood yet by all actors in all countries (Brus et. al, 2007, p. 53). A possible contribution to quality by students is often forgotten and neglected.

We would like to stress the importance of students' role in developing the academic community, the culture of learning, in cooperation with other members of the university staff. In order to create and support a culture of participation in all

aspects of university life, however, a continuous effort needs to be made to integrate new members, especially students. One of the most important goals of universities is to enhance students' learning. Students' involvement should be understood as full participation. This close involvement generates an authentic partnership and therefore more open dialogue (Alaniska and Eriksson 2006). The perceived importance of students' role in quality assurance is based on the *students' respected position in the overall academic community*. According to Harvey (2007, p. 84) "...quality culture is about adopting a self-critical reflective approach as a community: a community of students and staff. Quality processes, internally and externally, if they are improvement-oriented, should provide a framework for the effective operation of communicative learning environment." A definite purpose of this study is to listen to the voice of students and to find out if, during their studies, they start assuming a more active role by becoming increasingly independent learners.

Purpose of the study

With our empirical study we attempted to find out how students, after four-year studies of pedagogy and andragogy, perceive their own role and themselves as students. We were interested in how they define, at the end of their studies, some essential concepts of the professional field of their studies, such as knowledge and the roles of teachers and students. Of the many research questions, this paper only deals with the following: which learning experience they quoted as the one that influenced them most, what was the nature of that influence and the key characteristics of that important learning experience.

Method

In the empirical research we employed a descriptive and a causal-non-experimental method of educational research. With the causal-non-experimental method we mostly search for answers to the question "why", and explain causality of phenomena. The method is mainly used when we want to discover rules of a certain pedagogic phenomenon and, together with its description, also determine its cause-and-effect relationship (Sagadin, 1993). We attempted to include all the 4th year students of pedagogy and andragogy at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana at the end of their studies in the 2009/10 and 2010/11 academic years in our study. Questionnaires were applied in April and May 2010 and 2011; we received 69 completed forms. The questionnaire included multiple choice items, scales, open-ended questions and unfinished sentences. In the questionnaire we were interested in the following questions: students' satisfaction with their studies, how they perceived the main role of a student and that of a teacher, what was for them the essence of learning and the essence of knowledge, how they judged their own readiness for knowledge assessment, what influenced the most their conceptions of knowledge, learning, student's role and teacher's role, which learning experience they quoted as the one that influenced them most. This paper presents only answers to last of the open-ended questions that were categorized, on the basis of students' answers, in three groups depending on their contents. The data was processed with the help of SPSS for Windows.

Results and discussion

Important learning experience

Students were asked to recall, in any of their years of education, one learning experience that had a truly strong influence on them. They were asked to explain the nature of the influence and to describe that learning experience as precisely as possible.

54 students answered this question. Two female students answered that they did not remember any important learning experience. Only contributions of 52 students who gave their answers and represent 75.4% of the whole sample were further processed. Among them 94.2% (N=49) specified a positive learning experience and 5.8% (N=3) specified a negative one. On the basis of the answers to the open-ended question, we formed categories in reference to the origin of the learning experience and to its contents.

Answers regarding the *source of the important learning experience* were classified into the following categories, ranked according to their frequency:

1. Presentation of a seminar (experiencing a presentation of a particular subject, various forms of feedback information, active participation) – 25%.
2. Practical training (under their mentor's guidance, students come in direct contact with the work of a pedagogue and andragogue, they are included in direct work with pupils and other participants in educational process) – 19.2%.
3. Lectures (useful knowledge obtained from the lectures; learning contents that open several questions; regular attendance of lectures assists personal studies) – 17.3%.
4. Weekend seminars (they take place in a non-academic environment, promote socializing, students and professors get to know each other; their theoretical knowledge can be used in dealing with practical problems) – 15.4%.
5. Visits of institutions (visits to various educational institutions, institutions for children with special needs, rehabilitation institutes, prisons; forms of guided student fieldwork) – 11.5%.
6. Other: individual study, joint learning, e-learning, examination – 11.5%.
7. The teacher's personality (an entertaining teacher who makes a subject interesting; the teacher's clarity; the teacher supports students in forming their own knowledge and concepts; fairness) – 9.6%.

In students' opinions, presentations of seminars are therefore a frequent source of important learning experiences. They generally emphasized the importance of their experience of presenting certain contents to colleagues, of intensive and in-depth study for a successful presentation, of problem-oriented presentation, and they put a lot of stress on the possibility to get feedback on their performing. Especially precious was an opportunity of video feedback information and analysis of their performance at one of the subjects. This gives students insight into their strengths and typical errors, enables self-reflection, development of particular competences and performing skills, and allows them to overcome nervousness.

For every fifth student, important learning experiences occurred within their practical training, which they usually stress they want more of. It provides them a unique opportunity to experience their future work first-hand, to acquire work

experience with various groups of pupils, connect theory and practice, and verify the usefulness of theories in solving actual problem situations.

Considering frequency of quoted answers, lectures present an important learning experience for students. These lectures most often challenge them to think, discuss, deepen their theoretical knowledge, and open new questions. They are also aware of how important it is to attend lectures to prepare themselves for examinations and to connect different parts of knowledge into one. Last but not least, some emphasize their realization that some theoretical contents can be practically transferred and used in their personal lives.

Weekend seminars present an important experience as they make theory meaningful through practice and dealing with actual situations students meet in their practical training. Forming a suitable work climate is also important, together with relaxed relations and opportunities to meet and discuss things outside faculty walls.

A good tenth of students stress the importance of insights they acquired during visiting and attending various institutions. On such occasions, some of them clarified the role of a pedagogue or andragogue, experienced the problems of a specific area in practice (for example, working with prisoners), while other changed their point of view after meeting different people (for example in the Rehabilitation Centre for the Disabled) and now they are more aware of the precious "small matters in life".

Contents of important learning experiences and how they, in their own views, influenced them

Based on open-ended answers, we formed categories that provide deeper insight into the question of the content of the learning experiences that were important for students and how such experiences influenced them. Eight categories were formed, which are ranked according to their frequency as follows:

1. Connecting theory and practice (using theoretical knowledge in real-life situations; making theory meaningful in practice) – 25%.
2. Acquiring new knowledge and actual work experience (testing oneself in various situations; how to prepare well for classes; I experienced what it means to organize a learning event and how much energy is needed to carry it out; experience of individual work with pupils) – 23.1%.
3. Development of skills (performance, evaluation of one's own performance, self-evaluation, performing an interview, preparing a portfolio, carrying out field surveys) – 21.2%.
4. Open expression of one's opinion in a discussion (learning together with others and from others) – 17.3%.
5. Deepening theoretical knowledge (opening new questions, in-depth consideration, changing conceptions, revealing the essence, viewing the contents from different perspectives) – 17.3%.
6. A change of perceptions and/or actions (changed actions to achieve a goal; I prepare for exams in a different way; an incentive for additional education; higher study motivation; new meaning of studies; I changed my opinion of the world and of what is really important) – 15.4%.
7. Clarification of a pedagogue's or andragogue's role (getting to know the work and what I really want to do in my life) – 13.5%.

8. Disappointment (teachers' inconsistency; low grade in spite of work input; assessment criteria not clear) – 5.8%.

All the most often quoted aspects are closely interrelated. On the basis of the answers, we conclude that students, when answering open questions and challenges of the practice, find the constant intertwining of theoretical knowledge and its usefulness as well as acquiring new theoretical knowledge extremely important. Also important are learning experiences that enable them to develop the professional skills they will need in their future profession. These skills are developed primarily through presentation of seminars and experiences acquired at practical training during their studies. It is noteworthy that students think not only of their performance, but view as important skills more generally connected to planning, carrying out, or evaluating a certain activity, opportunities to develop listening skills and active participation in professional discussions as well as performing various techniques of research work.

Participation in discussions and deepening theoretical knowledge occupy the fourth and the fifth position in the frequency rank of answers on the contents of important learning experiences. Quality discussion clarifies the essence of a learning content and enables confrontation of different opinions, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the content. Moreover, students mentioned the importance of learning from others and with others as well as their awareness of their own contribution in a discussion, allowing them to constructively add to its quality.

Sixth in terms of frequency is the answer that students changed their acting or perceptions on the basis of an important learning experience, while at seventh place is the answer that their experience significantly influenced their professional identity. This most often occurred during practical training or when visiting educational and other institutions.

Three respondents reported that their important learning experience resulted in disappointment: due to unclear examination criteria, dissatisfaction with the grade or inconsistent criteria when performing their duties for a certain subject. All these three answers can be an important challenge for teachers when setting study requirements and conveying quality feedback that students need also (or especially) when they fail at assessments of their knowledge.

Conclusion

As the descriptions of important learning experiences quoted by students demonstrate, students need opportunities for their increased active involvement and responsibility in the study process together with challenges to connect theory and practice. Special care has to be given to building quality mutual relations and to organizing learning circumstances that facilitate confrontation of various opinions and participative learning. As Nightingale and O'Neil (1994) put it: when we start thinking of students as active participants in the learning process, sharing their experience with a teacher, or as partners in the learning process, we will more easily keep focused on creating circumstances which lead to quality learning. Within the context of ensuring quality university studies and vision of the university that strives not only for *»excellence in research«*, but also for *»excellence in teaching«*, the role of students as active co-designers of the studies has become indispensable. Finally, it is important for all university teachers to endeavour for quality through their

reflection of their own work, looking for feedback information from students, providing optimal conditions for their own work and creating university culture where students are increasingly co-designers of the study process. We are convinced that habilitation criteria which would take into account a more balanced ratio between pedagogic and research work may become a lever for higher quality university studies. After all, it is our professional ethics that bind all teachers to strive for quality.

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