

BARBARA ŠTEH & JANA KALIN

CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING AND SIGNIFICANT LEARNING EXPERIENCES AMONG PEDAGOGY AND ANDRAGOGY STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY IN LJUBLJANA AND THE UNIVERSITY IN BELGRADE

Abstract

This paper presents a part of the results of a comparative study in which we scrutinised the study of pedagogy and andragogy at the University in Ljubljana and the study of pedagogy at the University in Belgrade. The main focus of the study is on the questions how students understand the essence of learning at the university and whether these concepts change during their studies. We have also analysed which significant experiences influence these changes. Our arguments derive from the thesis that establishment of the students' conceptions of learning and learning experiences that are analysed represent an important feedback when changes are introduced in the study process in order to achieve higher quality university studies.

Key words: higher education, comparative study, effective teaching, conceptions of learning, learning experiences

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, numerous studies have been involved in the question of quality teaching in higher education. Cases of best practice have been researched and questions of ensuring quality in higher education have been discussed, including how to prompt students to be active co-creators of the study process. Researchers have been focused on various aspects of teaching and learning, especially on approaches which improved learning. The variety of these studies shows that good teaching in higher education is a concept with no universally accepted definition (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010). In this paper, however, we aim to highlight some aspects of quality in university teaching that will help us understand the role of students in evaluating the study process and their inclusion in the processes of ensuring high quality studies.

Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) stressed that effective teaching is broadly understood as teaching that is oriented to and focused on students and their learning. Moreover, they point out two broadly accepted components of effective university teaching: that it requires a set of particular skills and practices (Penny, 2003 in Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010) and that it meets the requirements of the context in which it occurs (Devlin, 2007, *ibid.*). Based on a survey of various sources on effective teaching, various characteristics of effective university teaching can be singled out (Hativa, Barak & Simhi, 2001). Forest (2007, pp. 350-351), for example, paraphrases Lee Shulman and points out that the goal of higher education should be: to (1) ensure that students are engaged and motivated, (2) help them acquire knowledge and develop understanding, (3) enable them to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through performance and action, (4) encourage them to engage in critical reflection of the world and their place within it, (5) develop their ability to navigate the constraints and complexities of the world in formulating

their own judgements and designs for action and (6) foster a lifelong commitment to critical examination and self-development. All the above-mentioned goals are mutually dependent and intertwined. To attain them means to encourage the cognitive as well as affective and social development of an individual.

Kember and McNaught (2007 in Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010, pp. 113-114) proposed ten principles of effective teaching, conceived on the basis of a research carried out among 44 Australian teachers and 18 Hong Kong teachers, noted for their exemplary teaching. Descriptions of their own teaching practices allowed the authors to discover the following principles: (1) teaching and curriculum design need to be focused on meeting students' future needs, (2) students must have a thorough understanding of fundamental concepts even if that means that less content is covered, (3) teaching has to be connected to real-life, current and/or local examples and relating theory to practice, (4) students' beliefs must be challenged to deal with misconceptions, (5) a variety of learning tasks that engage students need to occur, (6) genuine, empathetic relationships with individual students should be established, (7) teachers should motivate students through displaying their own enthusiasm, encouraging students and providing interesting, enjoyable and active classes, (8) curriculum design should ensure that aims, concepts, learning activities and assessment are consistent with achieving learning outcomes, (9) each lesson must be thoroughly planned but flexible, (10) assessment must be consistent with the desired learning outcomes. It is noteworthy that, unlike other authors, Kember and McNaught emphasize "that teaching designs should meet future needs of students with regard to curriculum as well as learning outcomes" (Ibid. p. 114). They point out the importance of teachers being future oriented, while at the same time not forgetting the current needs of students.

It is important to bear in mind that the above-mentioned principles originate in teachers' opinions and thus students' opinions also have to be added in order to get the whole picture. Moreover, one has to consider the background (characteristics of the environment, university, particular faculties and departments) where the studies take place, together with a great variety of students with all their qualities, abilities, prior knowledge, experiences and needs. Due to these principles, university professors are faced with important questions that require answers if so-called professional learning communities are to be formed.

For this reason, in the comparative study entitled "Ensuring quality university study: the role and responsibility of students and teachers" that took place in 2012 and 2013 at the Department of Educational Sciences of the Faculty of Arts, University in Ljubljana, and at the Department of Pedagogy of the Faculty of Philosophy, University in Belgrade, our intention was to obtain students' feedback regarding the structure and contents of study programmes, learning and teaching forms and activities, resulting competences and their conceptions of the essence of learning, as well as their own and the teachers' roles. Undoubtedly, the results make a good basis to analyse each teacher's own practice. At the same time, in an effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning, they encourage teacher-student discussions and also discussions between teachers working in different environments – at the Universities in Ljubljana and in Belgrade.

Purpose of the study

One of the central purposes of the comparative study was to obtain an insight into the way how first and third year pedagogy and andragogy students in Ljubljana and pedagogy students in Belgrade included in the first level of renewed Bologna programmes understand the essence of learning at the faculty. Furthermore, we wanted to establish the significant learning experiences that third year students encountered during their studies and the impact of those experiences. Answers to these research questions are presented in this contribution. We were, of course, also interested in the differences between answers of students in Ljubljana and in Belgrade.

Understanding learning is one of the key concepts of the pedagogical and andragogical subject area and we were interested whether it changes and approaches modern scientific concepts on active and constructive learning during the studies (Simons, 1997; Šteh, 2004; Vermunt, 1993). Moreover, with their empirical studies, researchers have established that the subjective conceptions of learning influence the quality of learning itself. A shift to higher conceptions of learning is desired, as the latter are more likely to lead to a deeper approach to learning.

Method

The study involved first and third year students studying pedagogy and andragogy at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, and first and third year students studying pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade in the 2012/13 academic year.¹ The sample at the University in Ljubljana included 78 first year students and 54 third year students, while the sample at the University in Belgrade included 57 first year students and 56 third year students. Data collection took place in January 2013 through a questionnaire that included closed-ended and open-ended questions together with scales of attitudes. Statistical processing was performed with the SPSS software package.

Results and discussion

Conceptions of learning

To obtain insight into existing students' conceptions of learning, we asked them of the essence of learning at the faculty and offered them a choice of various descriptions of learning. The traditional classification of learning conceptions created by the pioneering author in this field – Säljö (Boulton-Lewis, Wilss & Mutch, 1996; Kember & Gow, 1994; Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty, 1993) and further empirical findings (Marton et al, 1993) was used as the basis to define the essence of learning. Thus students could select between the following descriptions of the

¹ At its first level, the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana offers a uniform three-year study programme of pedagogy and andragogy, while the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade offers two separate four-year programmes – Pedagogy and Andragogy – already at the first level. Further on, when presenting results and comparisons, only students of pedagogy will be mentioned, although in Ljubljana students of the pedagogy and andragogy programme were included in the study.

essence of learning;² learning as *acquiring and memorizing* knowledge; learning as *acquisition of useful knowledge*; learning as *understanding*; learning as *a change of views*; learning as *personal growth*.

Most first year students of pedagogy both in Ljubljana (71.1%) and in Belgrade (73.2%) answered that the essence of learning is in obtaining useful knowledge. There were no statistically significant differences in the representation of particular learning conceptions among the first year students of both universities. Statistically significant differences, however, occurred in the conception of the essence of learning among third year students of both universities ($2\hat{I} = 20.822$, $n = 110$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$).³ Third year students of pedagogy in Ljubljana who understand the essence of learning as obtaining useful knowledge are no longer the majority. In comparison to third year students of pedagogy in Belgrade, students in Ljubljana show an increased share of those who emphasize that the essence of learning is in understanding and changing of views (10.7% : 29.6%) as well as in personal growth (17.9% : 38.9%). Thus at Ljubljana University, 68.5% of third year students expressed a higher level learning conception, compared to only 28.6% of Belgrade third year students. From the first to the third year, Ljubljana students of pedagogy therefore demonstrate a shift towards more modern and higher level conceptions of learning. The question arises whether this holds true only at the declarative level, since various learning conceptions and also learning theories are discussed as a part of their study programme, or whether they have really internalized higher conceptions of learning and reconstructed their previous concepts which also guide their own learning. On the other hand, among third year students in Belgrade, the emphasis on obtaining useful knowledge is still prevailing (66.1%), also due to the fact that until then they experienced no study practice and they go through more doubts regarding usefulness of knowledge they are to master during their studies.

Significant learning experience

Further on, we were interested which positive learning experiences from the time of their studies significantly influenced the third year students in their opinions. We wanted to find in which study form this experience occurred and which aspects of changes have been detected by students on the basis of that experience. Some answers were offered to them based on students' answers to an open-end question from prior studies in this area (Šteh & Kalin, 2012).

There were statistically significant differences among students of the universities in Belgrade and Ljubljana in reference to their answers to which form of organized study prompted the significant learning experience ($\chi^2 = 47.034$, $n = 110$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$). The answer most often given by students of the University in Ljubljana was that their practical training represented the significant learning experience (63%), followed by lectures (18.5%). The latter was the answer most

² In the questionnaire, students had a choice of descriptions without any name attached to the category of learning. Furthermore, descriptions were given in a random order without being orderly distributed from lower to higher conceptions of learning as they are presented in this text.

³ Due to the low frequency of representation, in calculations we merged the third and the fourth categories which emphasize the in-depth understanding and a change of views, since, in reference to the contents, one complements the other.

frequently selected by Belgrade students (33.9%), followed by learning experiences that happened in group work with colleagues at projects, seminars, etc. – 19.6%, and during organized visits to institutions – 17.9%. Each of the last two answers was selected only once by students of the University of Ljubljana. Exercises would be expected to represent an important learning situation that enables students to challenge their existing subjective theories, test themselves in various new situations, and personally consider pedagogical issues. However, students' answers imply that exercises have less power – this answer was more frequently selected by Belgrade students (14.3%), while only 9.3% of Ljubljana students opted for this answer. This poses the question of the concept and scope of exercises or their contents, goals and realization. Notably, it was mostly students of the University in Belgrade who experienced the most important learning experience at lectures (33.9% of answers) – which can encourage more responsible and high quality performance of lectures. The differences in answers between Belgrade and Ljubljana students to some extent reflect the differences in the way the study programme is conceived at each university. For example, the University in Belgrade has practical training as late as during the summer semester of the third year (which was after the survey was made), so the answers did not refer to practical training.

We were further interested in the influence of such significant learning experiences students recognised in themselves. Various answers were offered, among which they could select no more than three that were most relevant to them. Students of the University in Belgrade most often pointed out that the important learning experience during their studies encouraged their motivation for study (48.2%). This was followed by the answer that development of competences relevant for professional work was important (30.4%), while next came the equally frequent selection of two aspects – one was recognizing usefulness of theory in solving actual problems and the other acquiring new experiences through work (26.6% each). While students of the University in Ljubljana most often selected the answer that the important study experience was testing themselves in actual situations (37%), it is followed with a balanced choice of two answers: first, that they acquired knowledge on the usefulness of theory in solving actual problems, and second that they developed competences important for their professional work (each selected by 35.2% of students). All these students' answers can be connected to the principles of effective teaching which were pointed out by Kember and McNaught on the basis of their study (2007 in Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010) and are presented in the introduction. The answers students gave to this question are strongly related to the place where the important learning experience took place. Among Ljubljana students it very often occurred during their practical training where students had the opportunity to work and test themselves in some typical situations in which pedagogues or adult educators work. A considerable gap and statistically significant differences between the answers of Ljubljana and Belgrade university students are noticeable in some items, such as: acquiring experience of individual work with pupils, learning with others and from others in group discussions and increased motivation for studies. Acquiring experiences in individual work was strongly emphasized by students of the University in Ljubljana (20.4%); among Belgrade students the prevailing choices were learning with others in group discussions (19.6%) and increased motivation for their studies (48.2%).

Answers of Belgrade students can be understood in the context of answers to the question where the important learning experience took place, in which they strongly referred to the importance of lectures, group work with colleagues on projects and during seminars as well as visits to educational institutions. All these work methods evidently reflected in increased motivation for studies among Belgrade students.

Conclusion

The results of our empirical study show the importance of providing students with an opportunity for active and responsible involvement in the study process with very diverse methods. Again and again one has to look for ways to stimulate students for a higher quality level of learning, taking account of explicit learning goals, students and other contextual factors, as already emphasized by Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010). Thus it is no surprise that students in Belgrade point out that their important learning experience took place at lectures, during group work with colleagues and in organized visits of institutions, while students in Ljubljana mostly emphasize practical training. High quality discussions, organizing learning situations where students can test themselves and show their knowledge, such as individual research work or group work on a project, well organized practical training, etc. – all these can contribute to significant learning. However, the importance of the role of students' feedback in ensuring high quality university studies again became evident, since it reveals both strong and weak points of study programmes and their implementation, while indicating guidelines for introducing changes to the study process. This paper presents a small part of the results obtained in the comparative study, yet even this shows that the challenge in Ljubljana may be more frequently organizing quality discussion and particular forms of participative learning, while in Belgrade, the challenge may be integrating more opportunities for students to test themselves and show their knowledge in practical situations already in the first two years of the studies. It is particularly important that students in both Ljubljana and Belgrade are offered adequate support in connecting theory and practice, as this allows them to add meaning to their studies, work through their misconceptions and develop an in-depth understanding of contents in the areas of pedagogy and andragogy as well as independently solve topical issues and problems encountered in this subject area.

References

- Boulton-Lewis, G. M., Wilss, L. & Mutch, S. (1996): Teachers and adult learners: their knowledge of their own learning and implications for teaching. *Higher Education*, 32(1), 89-106.
- Devlin, M. & Samarawickrema, G. (2010): The criteria of effective teaching in a changing higher education context. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(2), 111-124.
- Forest, J. J. F. (2007): Teaching and learning in higher education. In J. J. F. Forest & P. G. Altbach (Eds.) *International Handbook of Higher Education* (pp. 347-375). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hativa, N., Barak, R. & Simhi, E. (2001): Exemplary university teachers: Knowledge and beliefs regarding effective teaching dimensions and strategies. *Journal of Higher Education*, 72(6), 699-729.
- Kember, D. & Gow, L. (1994): Orientations to Teaching and Their Effect on the Quality of Student Learning. *Journal of Higher Education*, 65(1), 58-74.

- Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G. & Beaty, E. (1993): Conceptions of learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 19(3), 277-300.
- Simons, P. R. J. (1997): Definitions and Theories of Active Learning. In D. Stern & G. L. Huber (Eds.) *Active Learning for Students and Teachers, Reports from Eight Countries OECD* (pp. 19-39). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Šteh, B. (2004): Koncept aktivnega in konstruktivnega učenja. In B. Marentič Požarnik (Ed.) *Konstruktivizem v šoli in izobraževanje učiteljev* (pp. 149-163). Ljubljana: Center za pedagoško izobraževanje Filozofske fakultete.
- Šteh, B. & Kalin, J. (2012): Students' Views on Important Learning Experiences – Challenges Related to Ensuring Quality of Studies. In N. Popov, C. Wolhuter, B. Leutwyler, G. Hilton, J. Ogunleye & P. Almeida (Eds.) *International Perspectives on Education*. BCES Conference Books (pp. 291-297). Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society (BCES).
- Vermunt, J. D. H. M. (1993): Constructive learning in higher education. In J. K. Koppen & W.-D. Weblar (Eds.) *Strategies for Increasing Access and Performance in Higher Education* (pp. 143-156). Amsterdam: Thesis Publishers.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Barbara Šteh
barbara.steh@guest.arnes.si

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jana Kalin
jana.kalin@guest.arnes.si

University of Ljubljana
Faculty of Arts
Slovenia