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Specific Methods For Increasing Learning Abilities In Students

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Abstract

The present paperaims to underline the importance of acquiring competence by students while learning. They, as future teachers, must develop abilities, capacities and skills in order to be better educators. So they must change the way they think about their future profession, about their future pupils, andabout their professional status. The capacity to think critically, to identify many different ways of solving a problem or a complicated situation can be acquired by applying critical thinkingtools. It is important that students think more rationally and accurately and, first at all, have the courage to apply this in every day practice. There are many ways to explore, to question, and tosearch foranswers and solutions neededto increase competence in our students. We will attempt to underline somein this study.

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1. Introduction

Unprecedented changes in oursocial life hasled to numerous changes whichaffect the entire society. The global financial crises contributed to the occurrence of problems in people's lives that have an impact on all aspects of life.They are felt even at the university level. Thus, the vast majority of students attend college and simultaneously get employment in orderto support themselves financially.

Following the observations made in recent years, we have seen an almost repetitive phenomenon. In the first year of study, students are enthusiastic and attend their courses frequently, whilein the second year of study the number of students attending courses decreases by half. In the last year of study, students have an overall attendance record of only 30%. This happens because most students find employment, some part time and some of even full time. Also, the traditional composition of the groups of students has changed in the last twenty years. One can observe in all faculties an influx of non-traditional students who already have training and experience in the workplace, but who do not have higher education and want to complete it.

The *Primary and Preschool Pedagogy* curriculum deigned by the Faculty of Education Sciences, Psychology and Social Work, has split the sophomore student body into several groups: students coming from high schools with teaching profiles; students coming from schools with different profiles; students with training in another field; and students who have experience in a professional field and even experience as pre-school teachers and teachers. The fact that in a course or seminar room there are novices and people with experience in the area of study,raises some

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problems for the teacher. The information submitted should be interesting, not redundant for all students present in the classroom. Another issue raised by the heterogeneity of the groups of students is represented by their school attendance. The vast majority of students who are employed are unable to attend all classes.

Another reason of concern in recent years is thestudents' lack of interest for study. Thus, we are concerned for the future training of the teachers for primary and preschool. We see a decline of student interest in learning activities and an interestin activity that do not require sustained effort. Mature students who work in the field of education are characterized by an open spirit, courage in addressing concepts, tendency toward collaboration and cooperation; they are conscientious, agreeable and have great emotional stability. These students are more motivated to study and more confident than the younger students. However, they can attend classes only occasionally, which is obviously a drawback.

Younger students also differ depending on their individuality: some tend to learn at every opportunity with interest, others attend only to assimilate the required number of hours of attendance and learn very superficially. We ask ourselves what we should do to raise the interest of students to attend classes, to study thoroughly, and be more motivated and self-confident. Our concerns are increasingly moving toward finding the most reliable ways to optimize the students' learning capacity, even more because these students will be teachers.

Optimizing the learning skills of students requires not only accessing the strategies to stimulate learning motivation, learning skills development, but also taking into account their personal learning styles. The empirical and theoretical studies come to the idea that the improvement of students' learning skills is a viable goal. That is why pedagogy researchers and practitioners concentrate their efforts in finding those methods that lead to intense assimilation of students in the general expertise and the rigorous training required for their future profession.

Our faculty prepares future teachers to teach in the primary and pre-school educational sectors, who willin their turn become trainers. This implies the formation of pedagogical and methodological skills so that they can effectively train and educate students in kindergartens and primary schools. It is very clear to everyone that there are differences of perception, understanding, assimilation and application between students, while their individual differences are also requiring individual ways of teaching. The individual aspects require specific learning strategies, as a set of decisions relevant in a plan that includes methods for specific activities which facilitate the assimilation of knowledge by students.

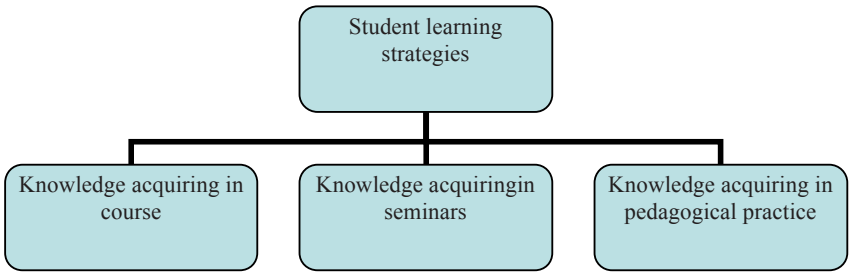


Figure nr.1.Relation between knowledge and learning

2.Literature review

We wonder which are the factors that lead to learning with emphasis on thorough knowledge and not on the mechanical memorization of information that disappears in time. Educational theoreticians argue that certain skills can be improved through interactive learning strategies, critical thinking, using techniques that lead to an involved, active and conscious learning. We believe that the teacher, who leads the teaching activity, plays an important role in fostering effective learning by stimulating the creative abilities of the students, by arousing their ambition, by

creating an atmosphere of intellectual emulation during the course in which each student can feel valued (Sorin Ivan, 2012). The teaching methods lead to cementing a basis for the smooth assimilation of the subject matter. The more the student is involved in his own training the more it will increase the learning effectiveness. A teaching system based on the techniques of critical thinking puts students in the position of linking the elements taught to their experience of life, to create the relationship between the known and the unknown, respects the principles of didactics. There are students who study diligently trying to understand the learning material, while others show superficiality. This relationship between the intention to learn and the learning process is called "the approach to learning" (R.Lonka, E.Olinkinuora, J.Makinen, 2004). According to the specialists in this field, we can distinguish four sets of motivational orientations in the learning process, namely understanding concepts, transfer in concrete situations of life, practical application and the satisfaction of work properly fulfilled.

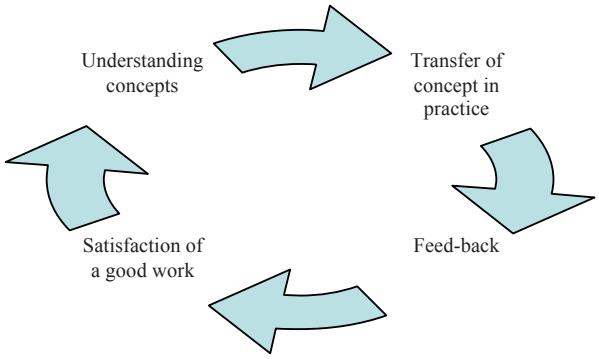


Figure nr.2.Motivational orientation in student's learning

The strategies of critical thinking were induced by the constructivist learning theory, which defines learning as "a process in which students are actively involved in building a coherent and organized learning", aiming at student-centred learning (R.Mayer, 2004). The characteristics of the centred teaching methods are:

- an activity based on independence of the student;
- a coaching role of the teacher;
- knowledge which is regarded as a tool instead of an aim (F.Dochy, M.Segers, D.Gijhels, P.Van den Bossche, 2002).

The interdependence between learning and motivation demonstrates that effective learning is primarily associated with intrinsic motivation. Thus our effort goes into finding those strategies that lead students to acquire the necessary knowledge for their good theoretical and practical training in order to become competent in the teaching profession (Light, G. and Cox, R., & Calkins, S. 2009).

3.The study

The curriculum for our study programme does not provide a pedagogical practice prior to the earlier years of study. The actual practice begins only in the second year of study. We believe that when the student is informed about the profession that he wishes to accede, when he sees with his own eyes what it means to be a pre-school or primary teacher, when he is directly involved in what is happening in the classroom, he will have a different attitude toward his preparation for the chosen profession.

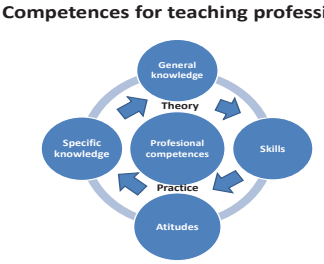


Figure nr.3. *Professor's competences*

In our study we want to highlight the bi-univoqual relationship between practice and theory as a means of stimulating students' motivation for learning. For this purpose we carried out at the beginning of the first semester the observational teaching practice over two weeks, one week in the kindergarten and one week in the primary school. In this study took part 25 student volunteers from the first year of study, they basically started college by making two weeks of observational teaching practice, a week in kindergarten, a week in schools. Each day of practice started and ended with discussion sessions with the coordinating teacher. All these discussions took place based on critical thinking techniques (Lauren Starkey, 2004), following:

a. The definition of a problem, distinguishing between actual problems, symptoms and consequences;

b. Systematic observation:

- using your own senses;
- listening to what others are telling you;
- personally gathering the information.

c.Brainstorming and developing conceptual maps

d. Problem solving starting from the cause to the solution:

- Recognize the problem.
- Define the problem.
- Practice focused observation to learn more about the problem.
- Brainstorm possible solutions.
- Choose a solution(s) and set goals.
- Troubleshoot any problems that get in the way of your goal(s).
- Try the solution and assess your results.
- Use, modify, or reject the solution. Repeat the process if necessary.

e.Setting short-term goals

- The objective
- What breaches its realization
- How I can reach the goal
- Step1
- Step2
- Step3
- The time required
- What not to do
- Possible solutions

f.Argumentation based on quality indicators:

- it gives new information
- its topic is accepted as fact
- when accepted, it removes or lessens a problem

- it is relevant.

g.Feed-back and self-assessment.
Students had the opportunity to talk openly with the coordinating teacher about what expectations they had from their hours of practice, if what they previously thought about his chosen profession corresponds with what they actually observed in practice, to discuss and explain different aspects that they met both in the kindergarten and the primary school.

4.Discussion

The study that we conducted concludes that the relationship between practice and theory will lead to the personal development of students in terms of understanding the concepts through a practical relationship between theory and practice. By realizing the link between theoretical knowledge and practice in the classroom, students can more easily understand the relevance of the curriculum, the need to achieve the objectives, the importance of knowing the level of the group/class, and the peculiarities of children in group/class. The students who participated in our study were able from the very start to know the specific aspects of the profession they have chosen, by direct observation of the educational environment with everything it represents: financial resources, human resources, curricular resources, understanding the complexity of the educational process. In the course room and seminar room, through the methods of using critical thinking, they have been directed to fix systematic concepts in an integrated way by the opportunity that they had to make the relationship between theoretical knowledge and the practical environment in the classroom.

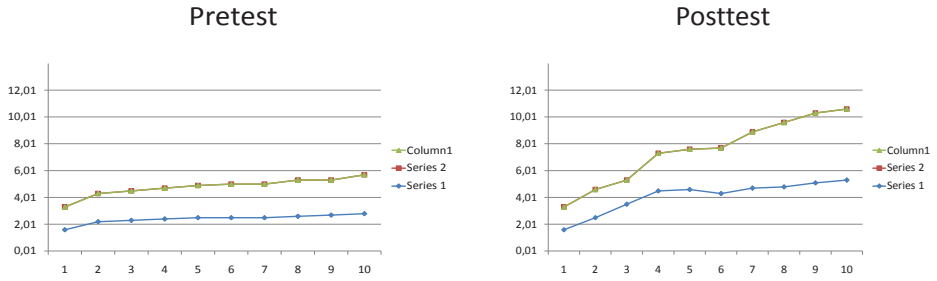


Figure nr. 4. Results –improving learning

At the beginning of the year the two groups of students stood along the same lines in terms of their attitude to their chosen profession, their interest and specialized knowledge, the motivation to participate in the learning activities. At the end of the first academic year, after applying the post-test, we observed differences between the two groups of students. Students who participated in our experiment had much better results as opposed to the students in the control group. The pedagogical dimensions of the positive changes can be identified in the following coordinates:
• in terms of learning outcomes, the focus shifted from assimilating information to understanding and processing information;
• in terms of concepts, they are interpreted and related to the previous ones;
• in relation to the interaction teacher - student, there is a bilateral relationship, a more flexible and relaxed one;
• in terms of learning responsibilities, we noticed a shift from passive reception to active involvement in knowledge;
• in terms of assessment, it moved its focus from the teacher to the student
On all these dimensions, we noticed significant positive differences in the students from the experimental group.

5. Conclusions

We believe that the students who take part in observational pedagogical practice before starting their courses become more motivated to learn, especially if the teacher leads the classes and seminars with different methods of

critical thinking, determining them to understand all aspects of a problem, to ask questions, seek solutions to difficulties, to decide between several options on the most viable, to evaluate themselves etc. A motivated and valued student will be more involved in his/her own professional skills training, understanding that only through rigorous study one can become a good teacher.

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