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Recognition of Diplomas and Teaching Practices in the Romanian Universities

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Abstract: It is of general interest now in Europe the focus on competences acquired in education in general and in higher education in particular. In this respect, there are projects developed in Romania aiming to meet labour market needs with curricula contents in the frame of the European Qualification Framework (EQF). The paper proposes a special view on the subject, with a study on how the teachers may encounter, in the middle, the approaches envisaging the requirements of companies – on one side, and students' skills – on the other side. The paper subject is a follow-up of studies undertaken in the frame of a project, supported by structural funds and developed in an international partnership at Danubius University, on how companies and students meet requirements of EQF. Envisaging teachers' role in the required changes toward harmonising competencies to job market needs, the paper identifies the technical and relational aspects through direct investigation (questionnaires) and process analysis of what regards teachers' involvement in that change. The paper refers to new teaching paradigm required when passing from "traditional" academic teaching to the competences centred education, and to the market needs, based on new educational approaches but also on the current view of teachers on the process. The paper comes with and added value to the subject, aiming education processes and education style changes that can be now implemented in Romanian universities.

Keywords: teaching practice; recognition of qualifications; professional competence.

JEL Classification: A20 - General - Economics Education and Teaching of Economics.

1 Introduction

As part of the Bologna Ministerial Conference (June 1999) to build in Europe a landscape of higher education, the European Social Fund has facilitated the financing of transnational projects in Romania, with the aim to promote exchanges between European universities (transfer of best practices, implementing quality processes etc.) about the international recognition of diplomas and qualifications.

To this end, the research laboratories of the University of Rennes 2 in France and Danubius University of Galati, Romania (CREAD and DISEDD, respectively) have conducted scientific studies to identify and analyze practices of teachers in Romanian universities in the context of reform on qualifications, in the matching of skills expected by the labor market, and the skills to be covered by the diplomas.

It was developed a quantitative survey in three universities from Galati, Bacau and Bucharest, which surveyed the views of companies and of the students in the respective towns, regarding requirements on qualifications – on one side, and the expectations and insertion modes in the active life – on the other side. The results indicated a strong need of change in the curricula and in the way the educational process proceeds, in order to amend the traditional educational process. It is not only about the content of the study programs but also the way the teaching (and learning) is realized

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However, the present studies do not focus teachers' needs and expectations, and the required resources or teaching methods Romanian universities and their departments should to pay attention.

The present paper analyzes the teachers' opinion on changes in their teaching, their difficulties in terms of current reforms, and what educational means (as methods and instruments) have they to use to reach the goals. In a heuristic attempt, we will strive to understand how the recognition of diplomas reconsidered in a skills-based approach has influenced teaching practices and evaluation, compared to their subject area, their expectations from the students or possible needs for professional evolution? In a pragmatic approach, we will attempt to highlight the needs of teacher professional growth in Romanian universities the same time to comply to new qualification frameworks – at national and European levels.

2 Teaching Styles towards Competence Based Learning

This chapter explores different ways of learning (i.e. from the student point of view), and how teaching should proceed (as teaching style and instruments) aiming competence oriented education toward specific qualifications. Exploring some perspectives should help thinking differently and more broadly about educational means and results, mostly oriented to experiential learning (Kolb and Kolb 2005), (Armstrong, and Mahmud 2008).

It became obvious that teaching is not just telling, and learning is not just listening. The chart below provides a good overview of some of the main ideas related to learning theory. Many other theories are based on combinations of these basic theories. For example, the constructivist theory which is very popular now, draws heavily on the cognitive approach, but also combines elements of the theories below. Constructivism looks at learning as an active process in which the learner builds on prior knowledge to select and transform information based on their own cognitive structure (patterns of mental action that form intellectual activity).

Some time ago (Säljö 1979) observed what adult students understood by learning. Their responses came from years of school experience and happed to fall into five categories:

1. Learning as a quantitative increase in knowledge, i.e. learning is acquiring information.
2. Learning as memorising, i.e. learning is storing information that can be reproduced.
3. Learning as acquiring facts, i.e. skills, and methods that can be considered and used as necessary situations related to the subject.
4. Learning as making sense or abstracting meaning, i.e. learning involves relating parts of the subject matter to each other and to the real world.
5. Learning as interpreting and understanding reality in a different way: i.e. learning involves comprehending the world by reinterpreting knowledge. (quoted in Ramsden 1992: 26)

Later, (Ramsden 1992) observed that 4th and 5th conceptions are more deep and look to meaning and understanding, while 1 to 3 simply looks to passive acquisitions (e.g. memorising) of facts or information. On the other side, learning seems to be external to the learner and he or she „suffers" it according to a method or style of the instructor. It means that learning is not only matter of acquisition but it is an active involvement of the learner, in an appropriate context, towards understanding and modelling the part of the world under concern.

Regarding qualifications, hence competence, the understanding implies some skills and abilities that learners should obtain, not only to describe the part of the world they are interested in but also being able to act upon and to transform it.

2.1 Learning Styles

There are differences in how people process information and learn. Constructivist, student-centered teaching focuses on teaching for understanding rather than covering the curriculum. Student-centered teachers create learning environments (in the classroom or online) which encourage learners to examine their current beliefs, enable them to explore and be exposed to new ways of thinking, and include experiences which require them to re-formulate their understanding. Instructors and designers of learning experiences should have an awareness of the diversity of learning styles which allow them to include features that appeal to different kinds of learners and help students get the most out of their learning experience. This approach need not be taken to the extreme, but often small modifications to a basic design can dramatically expand its utility for different learning styles. Instruction which focuses on development of the "whole brain", including intuition, sensing, imagination as well as analysis, reason and sequential problem solving, will reach a greater portion of students with various learning styles.

Table 1 Learning styles (http://uncw.edu/preeng/files/handouts/ls%20strategies.pdf).

Learning Style	Characteristics of students	Strategies for instructors
Active	"Let's try it"; sitting through lectures is difficult; likes to work in groups	Discussions, problem-solving activities; students retain information better when doing something with it
Reflective	"Let's think about it"; likes to work alone; lectures are difficult if not given time to 'digest' the information	Provide time to think about the material, not just read & memorize; write summaries, devise questions and possible applications of the content
Sensing	Likes learning facts and using established methods, dislikes surprises; difficulty with abstract, theoretical material; good with details, memorizing fact and hands-on work	Establish connection from material to the real world with examples of concepts and procedures, practical applications
Intuitive	Discovers possibilities & relationships; likes innovation, good at grasping new concepts; works quickly	Interpretations and theories which connect facts will help in learning; provide time to read questions thoroughly and recheck results
Sequential	Learn best in logical steps; linear format	Break material down into smaller logical chunks; give overviews of material before getting into the content specifically
Global	Digests material in leaps and bounds; tends to look at the big picture and tries to make connections to prior knowledge	Provide overviews of material before getting into specifics; show how topics are related to other relevant course material or knowledge students may have from previous experiences

The teachers should also be aware of the motivational feedback that can provide engagement from the student. A friendly and personalized feedback on the studens' effert and success is not related directly to learning but will stimulate learners' sense of understanding and will help to remembering or performing the ideas they should learn. There are some approaches on feedback as regards the theories of learning, as presented below:

- Behaviorism: feedback in the form of positive and negative reinforcers for learner behaviors, with the goal of encouraging desired behavior and discouraging undesired behavior (positive and negative reinforcers).

- Cognition: particular facts and ideas which are important for the subject are tested during the teaching procedure to check if knowledge was received or check for schema revision.
- Social & Situational: social learning feedback obtained through media and social networks put learners to observe the others (real or video etc.) modeling behavior and experiencing consequences. Teachers can observe consequences to models.
- Constructivism: knowledge constructions happening within the learner are important even though there is no emphasis on right or wrong.
- Collaborative exchange of ideas to others and listen to what others are thinking is important in order to compare it to their own ideas; e.g. peer review can to encourage further thinking.

2.2 Teaching Styles

We often have discussions on good teaching and the instructors may develop a style based on their beliefs and models, personal preferences, abilities, and norms. Some teaching styles are suited to some instructors and not suited to others: some are "teacher-centered" - when the teacher is an expert and as an authority presents the information, others take a "learner-centred" approach – when viewing their role as more of a facilitor for the student learning.

Teachers, as individuals, may have a dominant teaching style and they also mix the two above. It is sometimes a matter of generation or a matter of auditorium and teachers have to be able to adopt any of those styles.

Table 2 Teaching styles (http://vudat.msu.edu/teach/teaching_styles).

Focus On:	Content	Learning
Learner	Seller or Demonstrator: Information-oriented Works best with students who need little direction from the instructor, and/or those who accept responsibility for their own learning. Example practice: Emphasis on independent learning activities for groups and individuals.	Coach or Facilitator: Learner-oriented Works best with students who accept responsibility for their own learning, enjoy working with their peers, and/or those who may become easily frustrated when facing new challenges not directly addressed in the classroom Example practice: Role modeling and coaching/guiding students on developing and applying skills and knowledge
Teacher	Professor or Expert/Formal Authority: Instructor-oriented Works best with students who may become easily frustrated when facing new challenges not directly addressed in the classroom, and/or students who may compete with peers for rewards and recognition Example practice: Traditional Lectures	Entertainer or Delegator: Relations-oriented Works best with students who enjoy working with their peers, needing little direction from the instructor. Example practice: Collaborative learning such as group work, peer review and other student-centered learning processes consistently emphasized in a course.

Depending upon instructor preferences, academic discipline or class size adopting a teaching style it will fall into one of the categories:

- formal authority;

- demonstrator;
- facilitator;
- delegator.

In order to personally obtain qualification and competence, the learner should have the opportunity to experiment and to practice by his or her own practical matters in the subject fields. In consequence, the teacher have to move teaching styles from the traditional ones (the first two above) to the more open and practice oriented ones (the third and fourth above).

Teaching rhythms are also important for the success of the learning, while (Atherton 2011) shows that teaching is a way of incorporating knowledge into learners as the oil is incorporated into the mayonnaise: adding the oil requires patience and a constant attention to the state of the emulsion so far: going too fast will result in overload and the separation of the elements. In the same way, the teacher should pay attention to what and how the learner acquired and understood knowledge and practice and it will take some time (different from learner to learner) to "digest" them properly.

Moreover, the teacher have to encourage interaction between students, because they "help each other" in understanding either by competing, either by sharing knowledge between them. So, there are some questions to think about

- When you teach in the classroom, how do you facilitate interaction between the students? Do you have whole class discussions, break the class into groups, etc.?
- When you teach in the classroom, how do you deliver the content to the students? Do you use powerpoint complete with chalkboard, audio or video?
- When you teach in the classroom, what sorts of interactive things do you use in the course? Do students move their desks around to setup the classroom the way they want it?

2.3 Assessment as a Reaction

Assessment and measurement strategies provide feedback to both the student and instructor. Students learn more effectively if they receive frequent, meaningful, and rapid feedback. Feedback may come from the instructor directly, from assignments and assessments which have feedback built into them, or even from other students.

Feedback to learners about where they are and where their instructors want them to be comes in many different ways, such as:

- instructor participation in a discussion assignment;
- writing assignments that require submission of a draft for instructor comments and suggestions for improvement;
- self-mastery tests and quizzes that include informative feedback with each answer choice;
- interactive games and simulations that have feedback built in.

Technology can provide automated assessments which provide instant right or wrong feedback. Interactive media provide feedback when they add a visual change to indicate mouseover, or a sound to accompany an action. This very simple form of feedback lets the learner know their input has been received. More sophisticated technologies can offer constructive criticism. Technology can also help by gathering and organizing student performances and making it easy to offer feedback. However, human participation is often a necessary part of feedback.

3 The Competence Centred Teaching and Learning

In view of the above discussion, we perceive a need to consider that one of the models which can be used, in the approach for the teaching practices, is the one regarding the 'interactive process related to current context". It allows not only realize the meaning of the teaching-learning process in its interactive processes and locations, but also identifying the combination of its various interacting variables (Baconnier, 2006).

3.1 The Systemic Model of Teaching-Learning

The general idea of the study of teaching practices is therefore to identify interactions between teaching and learning activities. The researches are not about a scheme comprising dependent variable (student achievement), independent variable (teaching method chosen by the teacher) but in a systems approach and associating a combination of several variables. Among those variables, Bru (1991) identified three types of action variables: the structuring and implementation of the content (content selection and organization, operationalization of the objectives, activities on the content), processing variables (dynamic activity, distribution of initiatives among teachers and students, records of communication, evaluation methods) and the material frame along with the place and the device (place of the scene, time management, students grouping, equipment and teaching aids). The systemic model of Bru (1991) is depicted in Figure 1.

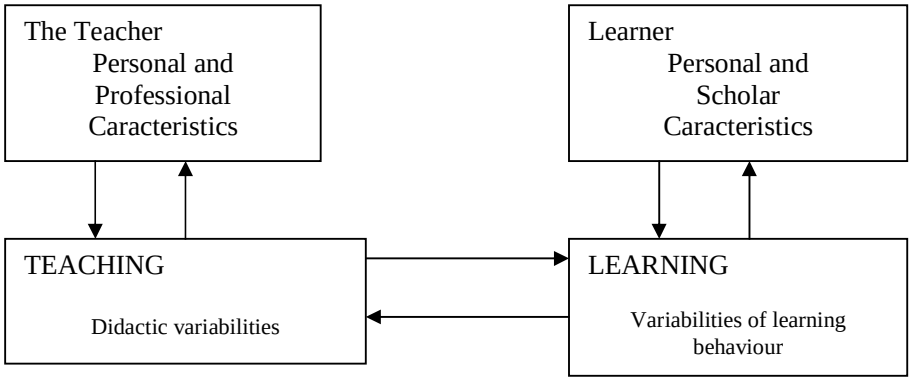

Figure 1. The systemic model of Bru

This model determines the main variables of students' actions and interrelations with the action variables of the teacher. It highlights the personal and professional characteristics of teachers and students, concerning cognitive and native aspects, psychological, social and emotional needs of each actor involved in the training process.

The research directions envisage now a heuristic of the teachers' practice. It is about describing the teachers' practices, taking into account the empirical data, but also it is important to explain and understand those practices. In this framework, the study of processes which reveal the internal organization of the practices, the resource mobilization, the personal and professional resources of individuals and of the teaching group, along with the examination of the accommodating process to the real needs, contribute significantly to the explanation and the understanding of the shapes of practices observed in a teaching-learning situation. The research on the organizers of the training process give a sound characterization of the teaching practices and also allow the identification of the regularities and of the variations.

3.2 Towards a Model of Skills Teaching-Learning?

At the moment, it is not irrelevant to emphasize the systemic model of teaching-learning process, while the competence passed approach, that crosses today the area of higher education, can be studied as a operating model - on the one hand, but also as a heuristic model - on the other. Indeed, in its systematic and trans-disciplinary approach (ergonomics, labour psychology, professional didactics, social psychology), the ensemble of competence definitions refer to cognitive, native, psychological, physical resources of the individual.

For the education, the competence seems to lay on an axis starting from basics of pedagogy by objectives to reach to the reflective analysis of the concerned actions and of the results of those actions (Jonnaert, 2012). This approach addresses again the new teaching strategies such as effective contextualization and collaborative dimension of the action.

In our attempt to make intelligible the practices of the university teachers, in the context of transformation and mutation of the teaching profession, it seems that looking for new model of teaching toward competences will actually change fundamentally the academic view on higher education. In this regard, we anchor our thinking to the systemic model of teaching-learning, because the notion of competence, as defined in the education is strongly linked to the notion of real situations, to working and acting interaction, to extended internal and external resources for teachers and learners.

3.2 Discussion on Teachers' View on Competence Based Education

The analysis on companies' needs on competencies and on the students' view regarding the subject, produced some results that indicate how education could be changed – from the student's point of view. In was no analysis on the teachers' point of view, i.e. the one responsible with the profound change and the one who could question specific companies on how his or her subject is fitted, more or less, to the working needs of the employee. Through a new set of questionnaires, the teachers responded to questions regarding 'own expectations on students' behaviour' or 'what students' expectations are'. The questionnaire addressed behavioural also educational aspects of the both sides.

Another chapter of the questionnaire regarded technical aspects of teaching and learning, referring to styles, methods and instruments, in order to comply with the competence based learning envisaged.

4 Conclusion

The paper takes into consideration the main aspects that of the teaching and learning – as process, results and approach, trying to extract what could be the main features of an educational process that leads toward competence based teaching-learning. In this aim, studies take place on companies and students as important factors; the focus of the paper is the teachers' view on the subject. In this respect, the results are oriented mainly toward two directions: (1) the importance of links to the real world (industry and economic milieu) aiming practical matters of the profession and the aspects of various competences needed; (2) the change of the education processes, regarding not only the knowledge content of teaching but also procedures and instruments that could intensify the practical aspects for envisaged qualification for students.

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