"Didactica Nova" – a Challenge for the Academic Curriculum

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Abstract
The concept of “totally alienated students” has evolved, in the last 40 years, focusing our attention towards what we can call “alienated education practices”. Lately, higher education institutions are getting visible results in their efforts to raise the quality of the education process by implementing various measures to determine students to be active participants in their own learning. Celebrating 150 years since its establishment, the University of Bucharest launched a challenge for the academia, calling for innovation in the curriculum design and delivery. It aims to foster an update in the curricula, in order to improve the teaching methods and the learning process in Romanian universities. The declared objectives of the project are oriented towards promoting a continuous improvement of the teaching methods to match younger generations’ changing profile. Specific arguments are presented in the article, in an attempt to build the basis for a theoretical construction with meaningful applications to be used in the next academic year.

Keywords: Higher education, education practices, academics, new methods of teaching and learning

Introduction
The (higher) education environment comprises four main elements: the student, the teacher, the content of learning, and the didactic strategies. In order to fulfil its functions, these components “must serve, complement and derive meaning from each other” [1], in other words, the requirement of “curriculum alignment” to be correctly calibrated. ICTs are coming to assist and bring into attention the shift towards the critical role universities are envisaging: quality education. Mainly brought into institutional policy documents as an imperative, but left at the abstract level due to the ICTs’ scatter on various usage benefits and to their relative novelty, the task of ICTs integration into education activities resides in the pool of educators’ roles and competencies.

In the context of integration of higher education graduates in the labour market and in the dynamic professional activities of present times [4], the professor should improve teaching, to adapt the teaching methods in order to avoid learning by memorization, bearing in mind the continuous assessment of learning outcomes, and developing higher-order thinking skills and competencies such as student autonomy, critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork. In turn, students must have an active participation in all educational and collaborative activities that are required, to show solidarity within those work teams that require complex efforts. [2]

Better educators, better students. Towards bettering higher education practices
In defining a new framework for an adequate academic curriculum, the main assumption is that students today are different from students 20 years ago. Some authors even talk about a “different mind” of young people today and a different attitude towards knowledge acquisition and skills development. More and more, the concept of “totally alienated students”, used for the first time 40
years ago [1], would gain in significance without university coordinated efforts to improve the education environment and to adequate it to the cultural, technological and social realities nowadays. In addition, “a professional approach to teaching and educational management will end the mythic orientation and the unavoidable improvisations. Vicinity with artistry and giftedness doesn’t seem to offer nowadays the desire perspective on the teaching profession.” [3]

Controlling the conditions in which learning occurs is not the only condition – it is also about creating an appropriate cultural climate for preparing authentic professionals of the (near) future. Some key elements are described as it follows, regarding the professors’ activity and the students’ (expected) behaviour [2] [5] [6].

Professors’ behaviour

Teaching Style. Theory and applications

The teaching style and the approach of theory and practical applications must motivate students to participate actively and with pleasure in learning activities. Professors should replace monotonous lectures, possibly with a dialogue that he/she launches for students during a course or class. Course content must include both theory (concepts, terms, methods, techniques etc.) and, most important, applications and practical examples for the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The share between theory and practice will be reflected in the final assessment.

Competency-oriented content

The course content and the teaching activities will target students' ability to act in solving various problems through encouragement of: critical thinking, logical thinking, experimentation and creativity, project work and teamwork. The university professor must adapt the methods to determine students to eliminate "learning by heart", inefficient and tedious activities. For deep learning, specialists in pedagogy are recommending that the educator describes, for each concept, evolution, history and its role in the context of the theory studied; in this way, students can understand more clearly the concepts they need to apply.

Interactivity in presentation and dialogue

Presenting a course must be done through active means – using, where appropriate, PowerPoint-type slides or Prezi, simulations of processes, the use of specialized software, representations, etc. – in order to favour an interactive approach of the content and to determine students to participate in a dialogue in which they can help with ideas on topics. Contrary to the habits of teaching through lectures, it is much more an effective method by which students are invited by the teacher to ask questions on topics discussed and explained in class.

Teaching and deep learning

University teachers must act as co-learners, to determine appropriate methods on-the-way, and to be able to continuously assess learning effectiveness. It is recommended that students which have difficulties in solving learning tasks to be assisted to overcome moments of misunderstandings regarding theory and practical applications.

Student’s behaviour

Motivation and learning

Students must have an ongoing concern in finding the motivation to attend classes and all learning activities arising from the curriculum. Family and faculty staff should help them be receptive to learning tasks and to actively participate in solving practical applications.

Active participation and solidarity

Consulting and regularly using educational resources recommended by a professor for both theory and practical applications would increase students’ capacity to cover the curriculum and the development of skills required for active professionals. Students must have an active participation
in all collaborative activities that are required, showing solidarity within team members in tasks requiring complex efforts. They must actively contribute in eliminating misconceptions through efforts in correctly formulating problems, tasks, (investigative) questions when they are in dialogue with educators or peers.

Systematic training and professional ethics

Creating a learning behaviour to determine a constant concern for competencies development and knowledge acquisition could be acquired by weekly participation in all the duties of the academic curriculum and by continuously preparing for regular systematic assessments. Intolerance for fraud of any kind, combined with a special respect for faculty staff and colleagues are means towards development of authentic professionals of tomorrow.

These recommendations are only the top of the iceberg, being empowered through a meaningful institutional concern for quality assurance. “Schizophrenic educational environments” [3] and alienated education practices cannot be avoided without mechanisms assumed by both institutions and each institutional actor, without trust, confidence and day-by-day commitment towards education.

A mean to boost innovation: a contest for education improvement

During the 2013-2014 academic year, the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences is organising the competition "Didactica Nova", celebrating 150 years since the establishment of the University of Bucharest in 2014. The contest theme refers to an innovative academic curriculum: conception, design, development and promotion of digital academic resources. Digital university courses are required to have a new design and to embed teaching methods appropriate for younger generations.

The initiative for this action is aiming to motivate, stimulate and mobilize academics towards the use of new technologies and computer in higher education, towards employing appropriate and innovative teaching methods when working with nowadays’ younger generations. Stated objectives requires individual and collective responsibility, improved educational actions and approaches, as an invitation for students to be active participants in their own learning, as a call for using technology as mediator of quality education, in the light of the new role of forming new perspectives on education, research and innovation.

The contest is a way to challenge the academic staff of Romanian universities towards changes regarding not only the curriculum process, but as well concerning the networking and participation abilities, their capacity to collaborate with private sector and to learn from relevant practices how to improve their presence and influence in the labour market and in the life of their direct beneficiaries, to “encourage and establish practices for transversal and horizontal learning” [3].

References


