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INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING AND REFLECTIVE WRITING IN THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Abstract: Are students ready to cope with what the future has in store for them when they leave school? Are they able to analyse, reason, and communicate their ideas effectively? Do they have the capacity and preparation for a lifelong learning process? These are some of the questions that educational systems leaders and professionals in charge, parents and school learners always ask oneself. This is also the socio – cultural background for an interdisciplinary educational approach. Interdisciplinarity changes school into a space of real life learning and behaving as it sets the learner within the authentic context of using their knowledge and experience to respond to different real life problems or challenges. An immediate outcome of this is the fact that it is a strategy through which learners can become more motivated to take on the responsibility for their education and progress in their studies. A second advantage is that interdisciplinarity offers an opportunity of approaching the contents of learning from an intercultural perspective, therefore building up a set of up- to- date values and attitudes.

Given the context, the present paper aims at emphasizing the role of free composition/ free essay writing in the process of self-discovery of the learners' professional identity and motivation for a career option.

Keywords: interdisciplinary learning, reflective writing, career development.

The society of knowledge demands two identically justified itineraries of personal development. These are the transition from informative to formative and knowledge and a flexible responsive behaviour and responsible behavior which shows adjustment to the learning process so that each individual should be prepared for the challenges of change. Thus, lifelong learning becomes the essential strategy in education as it promotes active civic attitude and leads to an increase of the rate of employment on the labour market.

The education for the prospective labour market insertion *becomes an inseparable part of the career counseling process and it is put in practice through teaching and learning activities associated with*

career training, development and planning. This is done when the educational career counseling process includes activities in which learners are requested to find out and use their transferrable skills, to set personal goals and make decisions on reaching these, drafting a plan for career action, and also, to develop their communication and self – marketing skills for a successful job application and employment.

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Viewed within such a framework, learners' training for choosing a career is a permanent and continuous process which involves mastering a set of knowledge on various domains of real life practice, developing skills and abilities, developing multilateral interests and dominant professional options, developing general and special skills, shaping up a positive attitude towards work and its importance, building up a superior motivation and a professional ideal.

Contemporary career counseling occurrence supposes a liberal approach, taking into account labour market malfunctions. It goes without saying that the other kinds of approaches to career counseling (conservative and progressive, cf. Watts, 1996) are equally entitled and used in this process depending on the individual's personal needs. What is worth mentioning, however, is that career counseling and guiding becomes a way of being and knowing how. School is yet the starting point of this kind of training. The mean point is the professional life and social existence, chronologically considered.

Interdisciplinarity is a useful, necessary and, sometimes, a compulsory instrument for testing one's career options, so important for an effective counseling.

The reason for an interdisciplinary approach of learning contents is that of providing a complete and coherent image of the knowledge to be mastered by crossing the traditional borders of other academic disciplines. An integrative approach of knowledge is essential and compulsory in the information society. The interdisciplinary perspective facilitates *building up a unitary vision of reality" and developing an "integrative way of thinking* (Stanciu, M., 1999)

Interdisciplinarity supposes a certain degree of integration of the various domains of knowledge, and of their various approaches, as well as the use of a common language that allows the learner and trainer to make conceptual and methodological exchanges.

Basarab Nicolescu (1999) views interdisciplinarity as a threefold transfer from one discipline to another. The three sides of interdisciplinarity are: applicative, epistemologic and new disciplines- generative.

The criteria of classification for interdisciplinarity varies substantially from one author to another. For our paper we will take the one referring to interdisciplinarity as distributed knowledge, a method of attacking a subject from different angles of complementary disciplines (that is, problems that cut across disciplines and require several disciplines to pool their approaches and modify them in order to reach a common goal: that of understanding or solving problems), to methodologic interdisciplinarity (applying the methods of studying one discipline to another) and conceptual interdisciplinarity (the concepts of one academic discipline apply to another in order to do some research)

Connected to school syllabuses this option looks rather strange, as humanities provide development and training in a set of knowledge and skills in the domain of culture especially, whereas technological disciplines are greatly applicative and specialized.

The framework of interdisciplinarity provides a favourable development of multiple functional skills meant to prepare the individual for his success in life, career decision making, further education or labor market insertion. In essence the framework captures the essential skills of managing self, managing relationships with others and managing own learning performance and work.

In order to acquire and develop fundamental concepts such as organising oneself, managing change, taking responsibility and perseverance, learners will need to apply skills from all groups in a wide range of learning contexts during their formal education programmes of studies. In terms of behaviours learners gradually become independent enquirers, creative thinkers, reflective learners, team workers, self -managers, and effective participators

in shaping up their ideas about what their social and professional future will look like so that they may fulfill their potential, and achieve their goals according to their realistic self evaluation of context and personal capabilities and expectations.

The current paper aims at analyzing the role of free composition in the pursuit of discovering one's professional identity and vocational motivation. The research focuses on two categories of students. The first category are the students in the 9th grade. They are going to be monitored for the whole period of four years of secondary school. The second category is that of final grade students. If for the first category the importance is laid on the type of secondary school chosen, for the second one, the process of building up own professional identity is determinative.

The research extends over a larger time interval (four years) for 9th graders and involves the use of free composition method in several other academic disciplines belonging to different curricular areas with the starting point in the language and communication area. Technological disciplines will be connected with language and communication area. This means an interdisciplinary transfer of learning methods. From the conceptual point of view, the method of free composition/ free essay is taken from the domain of critical thinking. It is worth mentioning that critical thinking has an extremely wide range of application for the subject and part of our research, namely, professional/vocational training. Firstly, it comes to developing students' interest in approaching the information society open-mindedly, and subsequently the outcomes this has in their professional, social, interrelationship, creative and multicultural formation. *Critical thinking is the way of reasoning that has the capacity of self-analysis while processing judgments starting from the evaluation of alternatives, with the purpose to state opinions supported by arguments and to act.* (Simona-Elena Bernat, Maria Kovacs, 2004)

Critical thinking is a competent, responsible way of thinking that facilitates good judgement and reach reasonable, appropriate conclusions because *it relies on criteria, it allows self-correction and is sensitive to context.* (Mathew Lipman). The criteria and standards of critical thinking in the context of educating young people for an open, inquiry – driven community are:

a. Self-correction

- questioning own procedures and methods of reasoning
- self-discovery of one's own reasoning weaknesses
- readjustment

b. Criteria based reasoning

- coherence
- relevance
- accuracy
- consistency
- self-evidence
- principles
- rules
- procedures
- laws
- conventions
- definitions
- facts
- values etc.

c. Context awareness

- special constraints
- exceptional and irregular circumstances
- general configurations (Simona Bernat, Maria Kovacs, 2004)

Creative thinking is the ability to create something new and original, to generate new ideas by combining or modifying existing ideas with a view to stimulating curiosity and promoting diversity.

Free composition writing is a method that recalls experiences, knowledge, thoughts of those who learn. Text writing as free composition writing reveals the inner side of one's self as there is no topic or author's censorship. In this respect, free composition or essay is viewed as an exercise of sincerity and a dialogue with one's own self, an activity or a process which is not censored by a superior authority. It is obvious that this interaction between the sides of one's self cannot happen but within the context of food for thought providing environment, where one's personality is acknowledged and diversity is valued.

The debut of the experiment was given for the two groups by the use of the method of the cube in order to test their liking for the trade, their understanding of the social context in which they are

going to involve themselves as future professionals and, undoubtedly, their interest in being part of this experiment.

The method of the cube involves exploring a subject from different angles. Consequently, the students had to solve individually their homework task about jobs and professions from six different perspectives: describing the job as they see it and understand it (for those in the 9th grade, the way in which the students in their final school year see it, too), comparing the job with other jobs or professions/ with their desired one, analyzing the option within the personal context they were at the moment, and, finally, giving arguments for their opinion about their job or specialization.

The cube has brought forth some troubling aspects of reality for the participating subjects.

There were cases in which the learners felt frustration when they could not identify their appropriate prospective job, and cases in which they made the decision of never taking up a job about which they hardly knew anything. Also, there were cases in which the learners were vaguely aware of what the job involved but still felt incapable of practising it. Certainly, these are typical situations for individual career counselling and when they addressed the specialist, some of their doubts, fears or indecisions were responsibly cleared or explained and the subjects were helped to get over them in order to make a better option.

Career counselling in the situations described above takes into account the individual's particular personality features and will focus on helping a learner discover himself. A modality of career counselling is that of keeping a record of one's experiences or ideas by writing a real time diary. There are several such types: metacognitive, learning experience record, double entry diary and reflective diary. These types of diaries have their origin in the writing and keeping a personal diary. The task was set for entering notes for one week on the topic of *what I want to become*. The request was also that the subjects should take 20 – 30 minutes daily and reflect on the topic in written form. Although this was not fully complied by, we believe that a first step in the process of developing learner's awareness of the need of identifying his professional self has been taken. The reflective diary constantly used during technical disciplines classes brings additional clarification to this psycho – social area of one's self and reasoning.

Questioning 9th graders is highly illustrative in an attempt of outlining a generation's profile. Students starting secondary school or highschool studies come to a particular school with a set of prejudices and stereotypical views. The kinds of stereotypes met in common texts can be grouped into three categories: language, gender/ ethnic group membership, attitudes and values. It is into this last category that we could place stereotypes related to jobs, social self, professional self. Great emphasis is laid on mercantilism. A trade or profession becomes a source of rapid income with little work done to earn it. Well, where does this attitude come from?

It is certainly in the family, in the messages of the media, in the relationships of the learner with his peers, at the current social role models where we should look for the source.

Currently, interdisciplinarity yields its benefits. Learners' diaries show that 9th graders come to highschool with a mind framed by some social prejudices whereas the learners in their final school year become more and more aware of their professional self.

The interdisciplinary connection was made by transferring school into the real world. Thus the Romanian language class became suggestive by two aspects. The first is linked to the literary character and the second is materialized through transfer items. It is the moment when a literary character becomes a role model for the learner's real life professional or vocational domain.

The individual studying of one's personal reflective diary on the topic of *what I can do with what I've learnt* is of some particular importance. It postulates self-interrogation.

It is obvious that a 9th grader will find or give an answer that aims at his near future, without making a direct connection with the purpose of this task in as far as his future career involvement is concerned (e.g. what I have learnt will help me with my term test paper, or to get good marks, etc.). On the other hand, the student in his final school year will take his reasoning to a higher level of abstraction (e.g. *it may represent a role model for my life*, or *I was in such a situation during my practical training class and the exemple offered helped me with an answer*, etc). It can be noticed that one's personal project becomes coherent by transferring school

learning into the real life context. Readings and applications based on the topic of career opportunities and options for a successful professional or vocational fulfillment represent important moments and experiences in the learners' careers counselling process, especially when they are accompanied and strengthened by the vocational training progressive development in the school workshops or during students' practice stage at the economic agents.

Experiencing real life job search and application through simulation or with the help of economic agents in partnership with the school is another domain which Romanian language and literature classes may have a definite contribution to learners' career counselling. It is during these classes that the students first learn how to write a CV and a letter of application (cover letter) for a job. From the careers counselling point of view, these two types of text show the degree of one's self-awareness. The completion of writing these types of text can be followed up by a simulation of the scenario of a job search and interview.

Free essay/composition writing, particularly, writing diary entries is useful for career counseling, as, in a realistic manner, it helps identify the inner resources of the individual or school learner: abilities, skills, knowledge range and variety, motivation, interest in a certain domain, as well as potential barriers in one's personality, such as nervousness or lack of self – assertion, etc. If they are read with scrutinizing mind, they bring forth in a second perspective the external obstacles which can make career decision or choice difficult. We discuss here about the unsatisfactory level of performance and achievement that the student accepts as a pleasant state of facts (e.g. *it was a relaxing day of practical training: we played cards, or my car doesn't work well, I don't know what to do, I have no money to repair it and I didn't understand what the foreman had explained to me about possible causes and repairs*).

Free essay/composition writing works as a basis for a future compilation to make up a personal well – documented competence portfolio. The texts produced in the period of one's secondary school studies may offer the learner a view on an essential distinction between "to know how to do something" and "to know how to be someone". To know how to do something, thus, becomes the sum of one's competences that may facilitate the

learner to find an appropriate option for his career or profession. The training and counseling for career decision making meet at this point as far as teachers of technical disciplines, who allow and ask students to make diary entries on a regular basis during their classes, work along with the careers counselor. To know how to do something, or the documents certifying the qualifications one has got are associated with the competences one has developed in order to offer a complete picture of the young adult who is to opt for a career or job. Another noticeable aspect is the learner's social and personal development through self – exploration, understanding of the socio – economic background or environment in which he lives, and especially through understanding and asserting his personal identity. Professional or vocational training and education starts from self – evaluation of one's intellectual potential and from self – exploring the motivation which enables the individual to develop intellectually.

We may conclude that free composition/ essay writing used in an interdisciplinary manner promotes a more realistic self – awareness of one's own resources which are relevant for a particular career option (personality traits, abilities, skills, interests, values, etc.). This leads to personal autonomy in career decision making as a final outcome of training the learner's capacity of self – control, self- evaluation, and objective evaluation skills.

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