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FUTURE EDUCATORS' LEARNING TRENDS AT THE UNIVERSITY: HOW IMPORTANT AND SIGNIFICANT THE LEARNER'S EXPERIENCE IS?

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Abstract. *The structure and content of studies at a higher education institution, educating specialists in the field of education studies, are more oriented to subject-centred rather than pedagogical preparation; insufficient attention is paid to students' practical training, where through self-reflection and reflection students' sensations turn into experience. The problematicity lies in the fact that often students' practical experience is limited only to technical skills applied in concrete situations; the basis is mechanical learning, when the focus is on theoretical knowledge gained at the university, which is not integrated with the students' experience outlived earlier or during practice. On the other hand, theoretical knowledge is often not related to the practical activity. The results of the quantitative research disclose future educators' teaching and learning trends at the university by analyzing, assessing and linking learners' outlived experience with a specific learning context.*
Keywords: *future educator, learning, university, the learner, experience.*

Introduction

In educational strategies and in practice, the transformational function of education is increasingly coming into prominence: to initiate positive societal changes, creating a better world (Eurydice, 2015; European commission, 2015; UNESCO, 2016; UNESCO, 2017; Eurydice, 2018). Many scholars discuss the problems of teaching/learning at the higher education institution, developing lifelong learning ideas and the synthesis of theory and practice in the educational process (Clegg, 2000; Nicholls, 2001; Mezirow, 2003; Brookfield, 2005; Colomer et al., 2013; Bruno, Dell'Aversana, 2018, et al). The latter authors emphasize in their research that the successful preparation of students to become specialists in their field will depend on whether they developed the ability to learn from their experience during their studies and whether they became researchers of their activities; i.e. if the student can be characterized as a person who is constantly acting, reflecting and changing his employed theories, relating theory and practice, adjusting his actions and creatively implementing values in action.

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The aim of teacher education in Lithuania, as well as in teacher education practice abroad, is to prepare qualified educators who are able to respond to currently relevant needs of the person, society and state development, to educate a person who is independent, flexible, open, responsible, creating, knows how to solve problems and adjust to the changing conditions of the environment (Teacher Education around the World. Changing policies and practices, 2012; Regulation of Teacher Training, 2018). Educators working in the education system must acquire a university education that would guarantee both the highest-level subject preparation and proper understanding and skills of education and training activities (Reform of Teacher Training, 2018). To achieve the latter aim, much attention should be paid to the educated specialists' competence development, ensuring that the prospective specialist is able to analyze his experience and learn from it. Teacher education studies cannot be based solely on basic knowledge of the subject and pedagogy. It is essential to develop the educator's ability to constantly analyze and reflect on his professional activity. Future teachers must be able and know how to use knowledge, reflecting on their experiences and feelings so that they can solve problems professionally.

It is important for teacher educators of higher education institutions to apply reflective practice strategies and methods enabling students to move from technical knowing to know-how. Thus, preparation for the profession in higher education studies must be based on reflective learning, one of the main sources of which is the learner's experience and its analysis (Larrivee, 2000; Conway, 2001; Hixon & So, 2009; Schmidt, 2010; Salter et al., 2013; Benade, 2015). The essential aim of the study process, seeking to improve students' teaching and learning, is orientated to the development of reflection abilities. The teacher must be able to work with different types of knowledge, analyzing, testing, reflecting on it, deepening his knowledge and understanding, learning from his experience and treating learning as a lifelong process. The process of learning, and, thus, reflecting on experience, is individual, arising from personal attitudes, approaches and values. Students' experience acquired during studies is based on hidden reflection when the theoretical knowledge systems presented during the lectures are related to previous practically outlived experience, and vice versa. Often, students' practical experience is limited only to technical skills applied in specific situations. On the other hand, the theoretical knowledge acquired at a university is not related to practical activities. Regardless of what formal knowledge will be provided in the educational process, the individual will develop a peculiar understanding of a phenomenon or activity by creating personal theories related to outlived experience. It is important to create possibilities for learners to explore and discover on their own so that ideas and knowledge come from real solutions related to learners' personal experience.

Reconstruction of experience while learning is a central, and at the same time, continuous aim, which is pursued in many areas of teacher education (Griffiths, 2000; Walkington et al., 2005; Simoncini et al., 2014; Naylor et al., 2015). To achieve this aim, learners must reflect analysing their values, approaches and emotions, which transform their understanding in their own way and give new meanings to ideas, linking them with previous knowledge and obtained information.

The research aim is to analyze trends of prospective educators' learning at the university, disclosing the significance and importance of learners' experience.

Research Methodology

Sample. The study was attended by 128 prospective educators who have chosen study programs of pre-school and primary education and childhood pedagogy at 4 universities of Lithuania. The respondents were selected applying targeted-criterion selection method, encompassing the entire population. 98,4 percent of respondents who participated in the study were women. The average age is 22,1 years. By the year of study the data were distributed as follows: students studying in year one made up 26,6 percent; year two, 30,5 percent; year three, 25 percent; and year four, 18 percent.

Research methods. Data were collected using a modified questionnaire[1]. It contained 18 statements reflecting university students' learning peculiarities and the significance and importance of the students' experience in this process. The respondents expressed their views on the statements of the questionnaire by choosing one of the following: "I completely disagree", "I disagree", "I don't know", "I agree", and "I completely agree". The survey was conducted meeting the respondents and by electronic means. The collected data were analysed performing statistical analysis (using IBM SPSS 21.0 software): a) quantitative descriptive statistics of the research data; b) the multidimensional statistical method – factor analysis, based on the analysis of the correlation between the variables and transformation of the initial space of the variables to the space of smaller measurements (factors). To process the research data, an exploratory factor analysis was used, which establishes the number of factors and the variables constituting a factor, while the latter help understanding what these factors mean.

[1]Some of the statements given in the questionnaire in previous studies were presented to other groups of respondents. For more information, see: 1) Bubnys, R. (2010). Integrity of Reflection on Action and Learning in Theoretical Studies at the University. *Pedagogy, 99,* 38-44; 2) Bubnys, R. (2011). Manifestation of Integration of Theoretical Knowledge and Personal Experience in Social Work Studies. *Professional Studies: Theory and Practice, 8,* p. 79-85

Research Results

Having performed the factor analysis of the data on future educators' learning trends at the university, four factors disclosing the significance and importance of learners' experience in this process were distinguished. The coefficient 0.82 of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) scale shows that the matrix suits the factor analysis well. The distribution typical for the scale 67.3 % (from 22.9 % to 10.8 %) shows that all factors explain not less than 10 % of the distribution and can be interpreted. Internal consistency coefficient of the factors of the scale (subscales) Cronbach alpha (α) fluctuates between 0.85 and 0.66, this shows that the scale is homogeneous. The variables of all factors satisfy the condition $L \geq 0.5$ and are solid from the point of view of methodology. The data of the factor analysis and the rating of the suitability and reliability of the scales are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 ***Factor variables and statistical validity indicators***

FACTOR VARIABLES	**Factor weight** (L)	**Descriptive distribution of the factor** (%)	**Cronbach** α
KMO = 0,82			
MECHANICAL LEARNING *VS* SIGNIFICANCE OF EXPERIENCE WHILE STUDYING			
The most important thing while studying is knowledge and facts, and experience is important only when you are at the workplace	0,73	22,9	0,85
I learn many things without thinking where I will be able to use the acquired knowledge	0,71		
Learning is art how to please concrete teachers	0,69		
I think I could describe my learning as quantity without quality	0,67		
Most often, while learning you have to memorize separate facts without analyzing your own experience	0,58		
You have to cram a lot by heart in order to successfully pass the exams	0,56		
During accounting teachers evaluate my ideas and experiences less favourably than those I convey from textbooks	0,52		
POSSIBILITIES AND IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WHILE STUDYING			
During my studies, I am encouraged to analyze the acquired experience, projecting possible new experience	0,78	19,5	0,78
While studying, possibilities are created to learn from your own experience, discussing previously acquired theoretical knowledge	0,72		
Many of the teaching / learning methods used in the lectures promote to ground on previously acquired experience	0,60		
While studying, life events are often reflected on and analysed; therefore, I can often ground on the already possessed personal experience	0,58		

While studying, possibilities to learn from your own experience are created	0,54		
THE LEARNER'S INTUITION AND MEANINGFULNESS OF KNOWLEDGE			
When I have to learn a lot, I intuitively guess what can be important and what to focus on	0,73	14,1	0,74
Yes, as if I remember something, I would say something about most of the previously studied subjects	0,68		
REFLECTION ON PERSONAL LEARNING AND SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS			
During studies, I devote enough time to reflect on and evaluate how I learn	0,72	10,8	0,66
During studies, I devote enough time to reflect on and evaluate my learning achievements	0,62		

The first factor "Mechanical Learning *vs* Significance of Experience while Studying" emphasizes university students' learning priorities, emphasizing the priorities of experiential *vs* mechanical learning and trends of the conformist relation with teachers (see Table 2).

Table 2 ***Statistical Indicators of the Factor "Mechanical Learning vs Significance of Experience while Studying"****, (%)*

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	**Completely agree**		**Agree**		**Don't know**		**Disagree**		**Completely disagree**	
	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%
The most important thing while studying is knowledge and facts, and experience is important only when you are at the workplace	14	10,9	31	24,2	10	7,8	42	32,8	31	24,2
I learn many things without thinking where I will be able to use the acquired knowledge	13	10,2	28	21,9	16	12,5	48	37,5	23	18
Learning is art how to please concrete teachers	14	10,9	35	27,3	21	16,4	27	21,1	31	24,2
I think I could describe my learning as quantity without quality	13	10,2	30	23,4	31	24,2	39	30,5	15	11,7
Most often, while learning you have to memorize separate facts without analyzing your own experience	7	5,5	56	43,8	26	20,3	29	22,7	10	7,8
You have to cram a lot by heart in order to successfully pass the exams	23	18	36	28,1	23	18	35	27,3	11	8,6
During accounting, teachers evaluate my ideas and experiences less favourably than those I convey from textbooks	10	7,8	19	14,8	53	41,4	35	27,3	11	8,6

It was found that more than a half of the prospective pre-school and primary education teachers who participated in the study assessed experience as an important factor while learning (57 percent), but almost half of them (49,3 percent) had to memorize separate facts while learning without analyzing their experience. It should also be noted that about one third of the respondents (35,1 percent) prioritize knowledge and facts while learning and consider experience as important only when you are at workplace. 32,1 percent of students learn without thinking where they will be able to use acquired knowledge, a share of them – 12,5 percent – have not even realized the practical value of the acquired knowledge. 42,2 percent of future educators describe their learning as quality learning, without prioritising the quantity of learning alone, but a significant proportion of students maintains that the quantitative scope of learning is relevant and significant (33,6 percent). Many (41,1 percent) students find it difficult to identify the value of acquired knowledge while learning and to predict whether personal ideas and experiences will be assessed favourably during accounting compared to those conveyed from textbooks. Conformist behaviour of students in their relations with the teacher is observed: as many as 38,2 percent of students agree that learning is art how to please concrete teachers.

The second factor of "*Possibilities and Importance of Learning from Personal Experience while Studying*" highlights the possibilities and conditions of learning from personal experience at the university as well as the importance of reflection on experience while learning, applying experiential teaching / learning methods (see Table 3).

Table 3 ***Statistical Indicators of the Factor "Possibilities and Importance of Learning from Personal Experience while Studying"****, (%)*

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	**Completely agree**		**Agree**		**Don't know**		**Disagree**		**Completely disagree**	
	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%
During my studies, I am encouraged to analyze acquired experience, projecting possible new experience	27	21,1	81	63,3	13	10,2	6	4,7	1	0,8
While studying, possibilities are created to learn from your own experience, discussing previously acquired theoretical knowledge	22	17,2	81	63,3	16	12,5	8	6,3	1	0,8
Many of the teaching / learning methods used in the lectures promote to ground on previously acquired experience	18	14,1	75	58,6	18	14,1	16	12,5	1	0,8

While studying, life events are often reflected on and analyzed; therefore, I can often ground on the already possessed personal experience	30	23,4	70	54,7	14	10,9	11	8,6	3	2,3
While studying, possibilities to learn from your own experience are created	32	25	64	50	22	17,2	9	7	1	0,8

Although the results of the study disclose that almost one-third of students pay more attention to mechanical memorization, the majority (84,4 percent) admit that university studies encourage to analyze the acquired experience, projecting potential prospects in the future. 75 percent of students who participated in the study agree that they are provided with the conditions and possibilities to learn from their experience. A similar number of students (80,5 percent) indicate that possibilities to learn from their experience by analyzing previously acquired theoretical knowledge, using methods that encourage to ground on previous experiential knowledge are created (72,7 percent). The use of the methods promoting the processes of experiential analysis at the university is proved by the fact that as many as 78,1 percent of students indicate that during studies they reflect on and analyze life events based on the already possessed personal experience.

The third factor *"The Learner's Intuition and Meaningfulness of Knowledge"* discloses the importance of intuition in learning and the importance and significance of provided learning material in the future (see Table 4).

Table 4 ***Statistical Indicators of the Factor "The Learner's Intuition and Meaningfulness of Knowledge"****, (%)*

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	**Completely agree**		**Agree**		**Don't know**		**Disagree**		**Completely disagree**	
	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%
When I have to learn a lot, I intuitively guess what can be important and what to focus on	20	15,6	79	61,7	15	11,7	6	4,7	8	6,3
Yes, as if I remember something, I would say something about the majority of previously studied subjects	11	8,6	63	49,2	19	14,8	24	18,8	11	8,6

The obtained results prove that intuitive learning at the university is not an important way of learning for students. 77,3 percent of students indicate that when they need to learn a lot, they do not try to intuitively guess what can be important and what they must focus on. 11,7 percent of students are not sure whether their learning is guided by intuition, guessing what may be important.

For a share of students (11 percent), intuitive guessing is an acceptable way of learning at the university. Attention should be paid to the paradoxical situation: although the majority of students maintain that meaningfulness of learning is important, as many as 57,8 percent of students agree with the statement "yes, as if I remember something, I would say something about the majority of previously studied subjects".

The fourth factor "Reflection on Personal Learning and Self-assessment of Achievements", reveals the trends of analysis, observation and self-assessment of learners' learning (see Table 5).

Table 5 ***Statistical Indicators of the Factor "Reflection on Personal Learning and Self-Assessment of Achievements"****, (%)*

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	**Completely agree**		**Agree**		**Don't know**		**Disagree**		**Completely disagree**	
	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%	No. of resp.	%
During the studies, I devote enough time to reflect on and evaluate how I learn	27	21,1	72	56,3	15	11,7	14	10,9	-	-
During the studies, I devote enough time to reflect on and evaluate my learning achievements	26	20,3	59	46,1	18	14,1	22	17,2	3	2,4

It is evident that during studies, the majority of students (77,4 percent) devote sufficient time for reflection and self-evaluation of their learning, only a small share (22,6 percent) have not realized or do not devote time for reflection on their learning experience and self-assessment during studies at the university. 66,4 percent of students devote sufficient time for reflection and self-assessment of learning achievements during their studies, which is positive in order to learn from one's experience.

Conclusions

The results disclose that experience and its analysis are important and significant for learners who have chosen early childhood studies at the university. Although memorising of facts, conformist tendencies in the relations with teachers and not always realised areas of the use of knowledge are relevant for students, it is acknowledged that conditions and possibilities for analyzing outlived experience and learning from it, based on previously acquired knowledge, are created.

The trend is observed that students try to memorize new knowledge and mechanically accumulate facts, but the fact that prospective educators allocate sufficient time for reflection on their learning achievements and self-evaluation creates preconditions for learning from their experience. It is paradoxical that although meaningfulness of learning is important for the majority of students, they find it difficult to remember factual material and use it for the analysis. The need to create conditions for students to reflect on their activities and integrate it into practical activities more often comes to prominence, which would create preconditions for increasing the meaningfulness of memorizing theoretical material and its use in the future.

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