

# **Student Initiative in the Classroom as a Prerequisite for the Development of University Education System**

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This paper discusses the problem of engaging students in teaching activities. Their initiative is an indicator of the quality of university teaching and teacher competencies. The starting point of the study is a model of effective relationship between teachers and learners (students), created by Thomas Gordon. The aim of this study was to determine the attitudes of students towards their initiative in the classroom, which determines the quality of acquired knowledge and the possibility of its implementation in practice. The study sample comprised students of the Faculty of Education, University of Kragujevac, Jagodina (N=120), who were interviewed in organized focus groups. Their answers were divided into three categories, in relation to the subject of study: a) quality of cooperation between students and teachers as a determinant of student initiative; b) conditions for the student initiative in the classroom; c) teacher competencies that encourage student initiative. The study results confirmed that students recognize the teacher as the main factor that encourages their initiative in teaching activities. Their good cooperation can encourage students to engage, research and express creatively. In addition, students recognize the creative potential of teachers as the competence with which it is possible to encourage student initiative.

The fact is that the system of university education undergoes permanent changes when it comes to organization of teaching activities. They occur in order to improve the work with students and the quality and effectiveness of university teaching. These changes imply a more complex and multi-dimensional role of teachers in working with students. Modern educational and methodological theory and practice confirm that one of the most important competencies of teachers is their ability to stimulate student initiative in teaching

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activities. Only in this way is it possible to meet the requirement of modern teaching, in which the students are seen as active participants, learning experientially, acquiring quality theoretical knowledge and mastering the skills needed to apply the acquired knowledge in practice. This initiative assumes a high level of student interest to take part in the teaching process. It is determined by the quality of their cooperation with teachers. Through teaching activities, they jointly decide on paths that lead to information and ways of solving problems. It is certain that this kind of work requires good material and technical conditions. In addition, the student initiative is determined by the competencies that teachers express, and the students recognize.

This paper addresses the problem of student initiative in the teaching process as a significant factor for improving university education. This problem is viewed through the competencies of university teachers, which should encourage student initiative.

### *Theoretical approach to the problem*

In search for possibilities of encouraging student initiative in the teaching process, the theoretical context of Thomas Gordon was chosen. This author deals with issues of the quality of relationship between teachers and students, which is also applicable in the work of university teachers with students. His model of effective relationship between teachers and participants in the teaching process involves continuous improvement of teachers' work. He believes that their quality relationship is recognized through: 1) mutual *openness* and honesty; 2) care and mutual *respect*; 3) *interdependence*, which in no case implies dependence; 4) *autonomy*, in the sense of individuality and creativity of each individual; 5) *freedom* of individuals to meet their needs, and at the same time not violate the needs of others (Gordon, 2008). Unlike the examples in practice that indicate unacceptable behaviour of learners (students) in the classroom (indiscipline, obstruction of others, indifference), this model contributes to creating an atmosphere in which they approach tasks seriously, carefully follow instructions of teachers, are willing to cooperate in a group and work together to come up with a solution. Such work involves acceptable behaviour of participants in the teaching process that the teacher gradually develops and nurtures in working with children (youth).

Acceptable model of relationship between teachers and students implies favourable conditions for effective learning, acquisition of knowledge, sharing experiences and adequate preparation of students for their future profession. Many theoretical findings of

researchers who have studied the problems of improving teaching at all levels, confirm that interest, capabilities, attention, cooperation and creativity of the participants in the teaching process determine their achievements (Baer, 1997; Dryden & Vos, 2004; Israel & Buzan, 1999; Jamess, 1958; Kolenc Kolnik, 2009; Schaeffer, 2012). They point to the fact that only a creative teacher can develop creative potential of students and the ability of their divergent opinions. It is also important for teachers to be trained methodically in order to knowingly select the methods, which would make the processing of teaching content and its adoption more efficient. It is necessary for teachers to provide a stimulating learning environment in which students would be interested in the content that needs to be adopted. The partnership and cooperation between teachers and students is of particular importance in teaching and learning. In relation to these requirements, it is clear that teacher competencies are the basis of quality university education of students.

Nowadays, the requirements of modern education are realized through lifelong learning, distance education, education in accordance with individual potential, quality education for all, and other. The system of modern education searches for priorities in relation to creating the system of applicable knowledge, which leads to the need for maximum engagement of students in the educational process. Along with this requirement, there is a need for continuous development of university teachers, in order to acquire new knowledge, develop personal competencies, share experiences and improve their own practice. Among the most important competencies of teachers in the system of modern education are interpersonal skills. These include team participation, acquisition of new skills, management training and others (The Secretary's Commission..., 1991).

Such education involves active teaching and learning of students, development of their communication competencies, their willingness to carry out tasks in terms of discipline and skilful management of student behaviour by teachers. This development requires conditions that foster teamwork, where students are able to express their own potential, take a critical look at their own and other people's activities, participate in distribution of tasks, responsibilities and rights within a group. Such work enables the development of the strategy of active teaching of students who are gradually being prepared for the process of authentic learning (Cowley, 2006; Kopas-Vukasinovic 2006).

This paper addresses the competencies of teachers, but from the perspective of learners in the teaching process, or more precisely those who are expected to acquire knowledge and skills. Therefore, student attitudes towards the competencies of teachers, upon which the development of student initiative in the teaching process

depends, were examined. In analysing the study results, the analysis of the presented teacher competencies in relation to the aforementioned Gordon's model of effective relationship between teachers and participants in the teaching process was attempted.

## *Method*

*The aim of this study* was to determine the attitudes of students towards their initiative in the classroom, which determines the quality of acquired knowledge and the possibility of its application in practice. The views of students were identified through teacher competencies that students have recognized in teachers or think that teachers should possess.

According to the set aim, the following basic *research tasks* were defined:

1. Identifying competencies that students value in teachers;
2. Determining to what degree these competencies contribute to the development of initiative and cooperation between students and teachers in the educational process.

The study was conducted using the *descriptive method*, the method of content analysis (student answers obtained in an interview).

*The study sample* comprised students of the *Faculty of Education, University of Kragujevac, Jagodina* (N=120), who were interviewed in focus groups during the 2013/14 school year. They attend classes of the courses for preschool teachers and dormitory teachers. Students responded to questions, expressed their opinions in group discussions where they came to common positions.

The interview with students was unstandardized and focused on the following questions and tasks:

1. What competencies in teachers do you value?
2. What competencies do you recognize in your teachers?
3. Do teacher competencies contribute to the development of student initiative in the educational process?
4. Explain the statement that teacher competencies contribute to the development of student initiative in the educational process.
5. Through a group agreement, try to reach common positions on particularly important teacher competencies, which encourage student initiative.

## Results and discussion

### a) *What competencies do students recognize and value in their teachers?*

In search for an answer to this question, the competencies that students recognized as important for the work of teachers were classified into four categories (*Table 1*).

*Table 1: Categories of teacher competencies*

Organization of teaching activities	Attitude towards students
Evaluation of student commitment and achievements	Teacher's approach to work

When it comes to teacher competencies that contribute to the *organization of teaching activities*, students recognize the following:

- Involving students in the teaching process;
- Encouraging students to *express their opinion* (openness);
- Students participate in planning activities (respect);
- Students participate in the implementation of activities (autonomy);
- The teacher must be clear, specific, comprehensible, prepared for class;
- The teacher must be genuine (freedom);
- The teacher uses modern literature and makes it available to students;
- The teacher encourages students to think;
- The teacher encourages student interaction (interdependence);
- The teacher is able to keep the attention of students and peace in the classroom.

In this part of the interview with students, they have clearly defined their common position that *a teacher must always think, speak and act in the same manner*.

In the category of teacher competencies *attitude towards students*, as a prerequisite of their initiative in teaching the students have identified the following teacher competencies:

- The teacher is willing to listen to students, he is dedicated to students;
- He is honest (openness);
- Availability, accessibility of the teacher;
- Consistency;
- Knows how to control his emotions;
- Respects the rights of students (respect);

- He is open to cooperation (interdependence);
- Reinforces students and provides feedback (freedom, autonomy);
- Does not favour or belittle.

After they have listed these competencies, students have found a common position when it comes to attitude of the teacher towards students, which is that *a teacher must know how to joke at times*.

The next category of teacher competencies that students have recognized relate to the *evaluation of student commitment and achievements*. This category included the following competencies:

- The teacher evaluates the regularity of attendance (respect);
- Fairness and objectivity in assessment;
- The teacher appreciates the work and respects the effort of students;
- Sets clear demands (openness);
- Assesses the quality of work;
- Has clear criteria, it is clear what has to be and what can be done.

At the end of this part of the interview, a common position of students was that *the work of teachers is manifested through the results of students*.

Finally, in the fourth category of teacher competencies, which include *teacher's approach to work*, the students identified the following competencies:

- The teacher is responsible and organized;
- Complies with the rules that were set by him (respect, openness);
- Is ready to explore (freedom);
- Links theory with practical examples (autonomy);
- The demanding nature of the teacher leads to higher student achievements and better knowledge (interdependence);
- He is hardworking, interested and prepared for class.

As a final, common position of students in this category of competencies, they emphasized the following: *"The teacher should care that we learn something."*

The established teaching competencies were compared to the presented Gordon's model of effective relationship between teachers and participants in the teaching process. It was confirmed that the presented competencies encourage respect, openness, freedom, autonomy and interdependence. Such relations are a condition for quality cooperation between teachers and students. It is certain that they contribute to the development of student initiative in the

classroom. This statement was attempted to be tested through an interview with the students from the sample.

b) *To what degree do teacher competencies contribute to the development of student initiative in the educational process?*

Student responses to this question have been presented through their views, which could be classified according to the established and already mentioned categories of teacher competencies:

1. Regarding the competencies related to the *organization of teaching activities*, the students agreed that these teacher competencies enable good student *interaction* in the teaching process. In conditions of good organization of teaching activities, when the teacher is clear, comprehensive and genuine, students are *encouraged* to think, express their opinions and originality and interact. Such engagement of students is a prerequisite for their quality learning, acquisition of knowledge and skills they need for their future professions.
2. Competencies related to *attitude of the teacher towards students*, when the teacher is available, open to cooperation, encourages and gives them reinforcement; the student *intrinsic motivation* is strengthened, which introduces them to the world of independent research. Achievements of students in these activities encourage them to engage in new activities.
3. *Evaluation of student commitment and achievements* is an important factor in their further commitment to activities and achievements. In reviewing teacher competencies in this category, of particular importance is their view that teachers need to be clear about what they demand of students (it should be clear what has to be and what can be done). In such circumstances, students solve tasks step-by-step; they are gradually introduced to more difficult actions, with permanent *support and encouragement* from teachers. This behaviour of teachers encourages student initiative in the teaching process.

These responses of students confirm the statement that respect, openness, freedom, autonomy and interdependence in the relationship between teachers and students represent a condition for their quality cooperation and manifestation of student initiative in the classroom. Therefore, it is important to emphasize one more time the common positions of students in relation to the quality of teachers work: 1) the teacher must always think, speak and act in the same manner; 2) the teacher must know how to joke at times; 3) the work of teachers is manifested through the results of students; 4) the teacher should care about the students mastering the syllabus.

At the end of this paper, it should be noted that the students in focus groups knew how to realize teacher competencies. At the same time, they were very clear in their views in relation to the conduct of teachers in classroom. They recognized the importance of established teacher competencies for the development of student initiative in the teaching process, which is an important factor in the quality of teaching and the success of students.

## *Conclusions*

The fact is that modern system of university education recognizes student initiative as an important determinant of their success in the educational process. Students also recognize it as their need. When it comes to organization of teaching activities, attitude of the teacher towards students and evaluation of student commitment and achievements by teachers, teaching competencies are a prerequisite for development of student initiative. They include the conditions in which respect, openness, freedom, autonomy and interdependence are evident in the relationship between teachers and students. In situations where teacher activities are stimulating, when there is evidence of consistency, objectivity, clarity and precision in the work of teachers, student initiative is recognized in the planning and implementation of teaching activities. It is certain that in these circumstances, students become associates of teachers in the educational process, and their initiative is prompted by the need to learn, explore, examine and create. In this context, it is believed that the results presented in this paper will be of use to researchers in search of ways to develop teacher competencies, which can encourage student initiative in the system of university education.

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