



DOI: 10.18427/iri-2016-0059

## **Exploiting the Principles of Coaching in Teaching**

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While the terms *mentoring* and *tutoring* refer primarily to the training of future teachers and the early years of their professional activity, as entrants, under the guidance of an expert, the term *coaching* is used to talk about the complex strategies for professional development which support teaching for understanding, a genuine strategy for leadership. Approaching teaching in the classroom from the angle of coaching is a true challenge for any teacher. The aim of this study is to identify the way teachers exploit the principles of coaching in their teaching activity. The strategies used combined both quantitative research methods and qualitative ones: documents on educational policies, curricular documents, a questionnaire survey and observation. The results of the study have showed that also the teachers claim that they exploit the principles of coaching in their teaching activity, in reality, these principles are not always present in the actual classroom activity.

### *Introduction*

Students' entire learning process takes place under the guidance of teachers, who take the roles of activity organisers, of coordinators, leaders and partners in the students' school journey. Such an approach to education is based on psychological and pedagogical studies which have showed that students learn more effectively if they are motivated. Students' sensibilisation for activities, capturing their attention, arousing their interest, stimulating their desire to work for the learning process to take place are all very important conditions for an effective learning.

The process of education should gravitate as much as possible towards the students' interests and intentions, contents should be chosen by involving students so that their expectations are met (Berce, 2005:195). Today, more than ever, teachers should learn to play complex roles, to grow, in order to be able to offer students the best options for their personal development.

Terms like *mentoring*, *tutoring*, *coaching*, normally used in the corporate world, in that of business, where emphasis is placed on efficiency and effectiveness, on performance and professional, personal development, have been used lately more and more often in the world of education as well.

While the terms *mentoring* and *tutoring* concern mainly the training of future teachers (primarily in practical aspects of teaching) and in the first years of their activity, as beginners, under the direct guidance of an expert, the term *coaching* can be found and used also when talking about activity in the classroom, since the principles of coaching can effectively be applied to build learning situations. Neufeld and Roper (2003) claim that the term *coaching* covers complex professional development strategies which support teaching for understanding.

Our purpose is to present further below some of the principles of coaching which can be taken into consideration when the goal is not to limit ourselves to merely passing on knowledge, but to achieve children's building of knowledge. It is important to understand that in order to perform the education process the teacher needs not only knowledge and competences, which can be defined by professional standards (the criterion-referenced dimension), but also attitudes, values, ethos, reflective spirit (the subjective-expressive dimension, which cannot be standardised). R. Bourdoncle (2000) mentions that the debates on the professional standards of the teaching career ignore the axiological and subjective-expressive dimensions of the teacher's activity or the ethic one, which cannot be standardised.

It has been noticed that the didactic incidence of this personal and professional development system (of coaching) is manifold (Pânișoară, 2009:279). First of all, the fact that teachers should be role models for the students is an aspect that deserves attention (how can the level at which the teacher is still a role model for the students be improved?). Secondly, coaching reimposes the idea of focusing on students, on their assuming of their own personal development objectives, being at the same time a personal and professional development strategy for the teacher as well.

Coaching should cover three aspects: coaching for solution (which aims to overcome a difficulty, for instance, the student's learning problems), coaching for development (which focuses on progress in a certain direction – of support, of maintaining a course of action; the child is learning, but a thorough and constant learning rhythm should be maintained) and strategic coaching (which implies the preparation of an evolution plan) (Angel, Amar, Devienne & Tencé, 2008).

Many of the principles of coaching have been derived from the fields of psychology and education sciences. The methods used in coaching have taken shape based on adults' learning principles, mostly on those presented by *Malcolm Knowles* (Zeus & Skiffington, 2008:266-267). According to his assertions, at the core of the learning process, discovery and curiosity can be found. Thus, Knowles claims that a coach (AN in our entire approach used to refer to the teacher who applies the principles of coaching) should take into account the following premises:

- Individuals with a positive self-image learn better and feel less threatened in a new knowledge acquisition process. The coach can offer them support and encouragement by setting up a working environment based on trust, mutual respect, honest feedback and true dedication to their problems.
- Coaching deals with the development and improvement of strengths. The coach uses techniques which capitalise on and improve the resources the student brings in the coaching „alliance“. Past experiences, successes and failures, the favoured learning methods – all these are part of the student's resources and experience.
- It might happen that students are unable to phrase their specific needs. In such circumstances, the role of the coach also includes offering the opportunity to assess and clarify needs.
- Coaching always deals with real life and practical issues. The role of the coach is to make sure that students have the opportunity to apply in real life situations the things discussed and learnt, while also providing a supportive feedback.

Involvement and interest, and not compliance, can determine and support learning and behavioural changes, as continuous processes in schools (Popa, 2011:178). Involvement depends on the extent to which students value their learning experiences and feel that they belong to themselves. And a good coach knows how to provide them learning opportunities.

## *Method and results*

The objectives of the research were: (1) identifying the way teachers exploit the principles of coaching in the classroom, (2) identifying the way classroom activity is planned, implemented and assessed in light of these principles (3) analysing the correlation between the teachers' theoretical perception of the principles of coaching and the reality in schools - „espoused theory“/“theory in use“. The hypothesis of the study was that even though teachers are sure that they manage to exploit the principles of coaching in the classroom, things do not always happen like that.

The sample of the research consisted of 116 teachers (N=116) from pre-university education, with more than five years of teaching experience, from schools in Bihor county, Romania. The instrument used was a questionnaire with 18 close-ended questions.

Besides this questionnaire, an important role in this research was played by the participation as supervisors in classes held by students from the University of Oradea as part of their teacher practice programme, as well as by observing the activity of pre-university teachers who applied to obtain Teacher Certification level 1. The answers of the teachers are presented in the following tables.

Table 1.

<i>Items</i>	<i>Always %</i>	<i>Very often %</i>	<i>Some- times %</i>	<i>Seldom %</i>	<i>Never %</i>
Do you prepare your teaching activity taking into account the students' interests?	58.8	25.4	11.8	4	0
Do you always consider your students' personal development?	63.4	29.4	7.2	0	0
Do you encourage your students' curiosity?	47.1	47.1	5.8	0	0
Do you exploit in class the students' life experience?	23.5	52.9	21.5	2.1	0
Do you give your students supportive feedback, offering them opportunities to apply in real life situations those discussed and learnt during your classes?	5.9	61.5	29.4	3.2	0
Do you take into account the emotions felt by your students during classes?	29.4	50.1	17.6	2.9	0

The items included in Table 1 focus on how teachers make sure that teaching is based on the students' interests, helping their personal development too, not only the professional one, showing them that they will be able to apply in real life situations what they have learnt. Unfortunately, only 58.8% of the teachers claim that they always take into account the students' interests, while 4% do that only rarely. Most arguments refer to the overloaded compulsory curriculum, which leaves little freedom to teachers. We think this is a false problem, since compulsory topics can be approached through various, effective strategies which exploit the abilities, talents, knowledge, interests of students. In coaching, the focus is on identifying the resources of each individual and on building strategies which make it possible to reach the objectives set forth together with the students.

The answers given show that the students' life experience, which should be the starting point in any learning process, is exploited to a great extent in class (always 23.5%, and very often 52.9%). Those who claim that they exploit it to a smaller extent are the teacher with less than five years of teaching experience, or teachers of history, philosophy, physical training.

Creating emotional contexts which motivate is a priority for each coach. The answers given to the last item in Table 1, the one which focuses on the importance of a positive emotional climate, are varied. There are situations when this aspect is of very little importance to the teachers (2.9%). It is widely known that students under emotional stress are unable to think or to process information. Learning, acquiring new

knowledge is much favoured by a safe, unthreatening environment, which does not disturb cognitive processes. It is equally true that an optimum level of stimulation and challenge is also required, without that, acquiring new knowledge can become boring and the information is not assimilated properly. Each teacher should be concerned with this aspect. It is also known that emotions can determine the effectiveness of an effort. How much students learn depends on their self-confidence and on their tenacity when they face obstacles. And that is encouraged by offering them supportive feedback continuously. The answers to this item show that most teachers claim that they do that.

Table 2.

Items	Always %	Very often %	Sometimes %	Seldom %	Never %
Does teaching in the classroom focus on students' understanding of the content (taught)?	76.5	23.5	0	0	0
Do you regularly check while you are teaching to what extent students understand the topic?	52.9	47.1	0	0	0
After teaching something, do you ask yourself whether you could teach it more effectively next time?	35.3	35.3	29.4	0	0
Do you ask yourself, after each teaching experience, whether you could have used different techniques?	11.8	58.8	29.4	0	0

Learning is a personal experience. Each student has a favourite learning method. The coach must take this into account. Furthermore, the coach should realise to what extent students understand that what they have to learn suits them and to what extent they consider that a given task is or not a priority to them. It is of utmost importance for the coach to be aware of the students' level of self-confidence and their concerns about the challenge to learn. Too big challenges can generate anxiety and resistance, and if they are too small, students can lose interest and motivation. For this reason, the items in this table focus on how teachers organise, carry out and assess their own activity. The answers given by the teachers interviewed show that reflective behaviour is present their activity.

Comparing the results in this table (Table 2) with those in the previous one (Table 1), it can be seen that there is a difference between the espoused theory and the one in use. While the teachers state that they exploit the principles of coaching in class, in reality things are not exactly like that. They claim that they place emphasis on the students' understanding of the things taught to them, that they regularly check that

this happens, that they assess their own work continuously. However, the goal of learning seems to be forgotten. This fact is reinforced by the participation as supervisors in classes held by students from the University of Oradea as part of their teacher practise programme, as well as by observing the activity of pre-university teachers who applied to obtain Teacher Certification level 1.

## *Discussion*

The change proposed by coaching is a *generative* one. This means that it operates with abilities, talents, knowledge, in order to creating something of higher quality. Students always aspire to something better, have dreams, wishes or even bold visions and are seeking means to carry them out.

While a person becomes more and more aware of the way their learning experience takes place, they may become more interested in the learning process as a whole. Instead of looking at learning as a mere process of acquiring knowledge and strategy, they will start to perceive it as a process of change and growth, the so-called *transformational learning* (Zeus & Skiffington, 2008:265). According to the authors mentioned above, a coach should be familiar with the following factors:

- *Self-concept* – the students' self-image and self-esteem are based on past experiences, which influence the way they learn. A positive self-image and a high self-esteem are associated with a positive answer to the situations which involve learning.
- *Stress and anxiety* – if a person feels threatened in some way, their energy will be diverted from learning and they will develop defensive behaviour, which will distract their attention from the learning process. The coach should be aware of the students' level of stress, should work on decreasing it and on providing conditions for a genuine, optimum participation.
- *Past experiences* – students' past experiences, the meanings they give to the things and the values they believe in, may have an impact on the way they receive new information. Experiences and knowledge should be valued by the coach, but whenever they become obstacles in the learning process, they should challenge students and point to the limitations of their knowledge and abilities in that moment.
- *Motivation*. Coaching always focuses on the individual's needs and objectives, and aims at developing and improving those abilities which can increase self-confidence and facilitate personal development.

John Maxwell states that success in coaching is also given by the way reflective practice becomes an intrinsic component of the teacher's/coach's personality. In general, the paradigm of professional

expertise focuses on success, and the paradigm of reflexivity on understanding. Understanding assumes investing effort in seeking the reasons behind success and finding the ways to improve action by transferring this experience to other situations. Training of teachers-to-be should focus mainly on acquiring this process of understanding. In other words, success should be subordinated to understanding the action performed. Thus, Maxwell determines five aspects a coach should reflect upon all the time:

1. *„Do I have the ability to communicate and to positively influence others?“* The author says that this is not possible unless you love people.
2. *„Am I a good listener?“ „Am I the person who speaks most of the time or who listens most of the time?“ „Am I an active listener, do I like learning, listening and finding out about the others?* You cannot talk with your students if you do not know how far they have got. And how can this be achieved without listening? How can you train someone effectively if you do not understand them? If you do not walk together, if you do not know their stories? If you do not know their dreams? What are their passions?
3. *„Do I love my job and what I do?“*. The passion for learning, for experience will attract the others. Do not be detached. Passion for what someone is doing and the desire to share that with the others become contagious. *„Can I become attached to people?“ „Can we do things together?“ „Can we grow together?“ „Can I add value to my students' personality?“ „Do I have this passion“?* Only this will give the coach the energy and tenacity they need for what they do.
4. *„Do I learn every day?“ „Do I learn from the people I spend time with, do I learn from my own experiences?“* Experience means very little if we cannot extract from it that understanding, knowledge and wisdom which make us better. Wisdom is given by the ability of comprehending experiences and of learning from them, of applying them on yourself in a positive way. Reflection on what we know, on what we can share is a must. The best coaches learn continuously and share their knowledge.
5. *„Can I lead the class effectively?“ „Do I have the ability to influence my students?“* Influencing means adding every day value to people, students and those surrounding us.

## Conclusions

Approaching teaching in the classroom from the angle of coaching is a true challenge for any teacher. Such an approach requires that teachers reflect thoroughly on their own professional behaviour, on their ability to choose the most relevant situations for learning to become teachers, on the best methods which facilitate students' learning. Coaching assumes

knowing how to develop a true leadership strategy. It means paying attention, at the same time, both to the group and to each individual; it means helping people think about things, about problems, about relationships with the others, about the processes they notice, about the consequences of their deeds; it means being always active and thinking creatively. „Coaching means knowing how to create an exercise which can show in a simple way what, in its essence, is hard to discover alone” (Păun & Ezechil, 2012). Because, as John Maxwell says, „it is not only important what you learn, but also who you learn it from”.

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