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ON THE ISSUE OF EDUCATIONAL MILIEU IN THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The most critical questions facing the academic world nowadays are: What does it mean to be an educated person in the 21st century? How not only to equip students with an adequate education in their field of study, but also to arm them with skills and knowledge required to leverage technologies effectively in the workplace? Much of the literature concerning these question dwell on educational milieu and space as two important notions in the context of the modern student-based approach in higher education. The professional experience and analysis of research papers have shown that the successful realization of educational aims greatly depends on the quality of educational milieu and space. Student-based approach, which is becoming more and more popular in educational practice, emphasizes the importance of an individual approach to every student, the necessity to take into account learners' needs, targets and interests. Now the role of a teacher consists not only in knowledge transfer, but in introducing a variety of information sources and problem solving techniques to students, thus facilitating the process of their becoming independent, creative, motivated and responsible professionals.

1. Introduction

The great changes in technology and economy have a significant effect on higher education. Over the next decade advanced technologies will put education within the reach of many more individuals around the world and will allow greater specialisation in curriculum and teaching methodologies. The most critical question facing the academic world is something far more fundamental: namely, what it will mean to be an educated person in the 21st century.

In today's economy, many universities find themselves facing a new challenge: how not only to equip students with an adequate education in their field of study, but also to arm them with skills and knowledge required to leverage technologies effectively in the workplace. A lot of universities are concerned that current graduates will be able to compete successfully in today's global marketplace. That's why the changes that took place in higher professional education, in particular, a two-level system, have greatly increased the requirements for learning process. This process is implemented in adequate educational space and environment.

In present day's education scientists consider the concepts «educational space and educational milieu» from different points of view, but some researchers often mix these two notions. They think that the concept "educational milieu" is inserted into a more general concept "educational space". There is an opinion that information, infrastructure and certain social conditions are necessary to transfer experience from generation to generation and these are the factors which form educational space.

It is very important to understand the difference between these two concepts. According to Novikov, educational space is closely connected with the organizational structure and participants of learning process while educational milieu deals with conditions and potential of the organizational structure (Novikov, 2013). Novikov also worked out the philosophical meaning of space and environment applied to learning process.

Some other researchers, such as Berezhnova, have opinion that educational milieu is a specific form of human practice the aim of which is to transform vital functions of people in organizing the conditions for solving important educational problems (Berezhnova, 2003). From John Dewey's point of view the environment includes a number of external conditions which could contribute to success and impede the activity, that is typical for a living being (Dewey, 2000). Educational milieu and space are in the centre of numerous studies in different countries (Bligh & Crook, 2017), (Dourish, 2006), (Burke, Grosvenor, & Norlin, 2014), (FitzGerald et al., 2013), (Luckin, 2008), (Rienties, & Toetenel, 2016), (Schroeder, 2013), (*The future of higher education*, 2008), (Thomas, & Chavan, 2015).

Many scholars believe that only educational institutes and their environment possess the most beneficial conditions which favor learners' development and formation of qualities which cannot appear in non-educational environment. (Shatskiy, 1980) On the other hand, it should be noted the relation between a person and his educational milieu is of dynamic character: while the formation of individuality is significantly affected by educational milieu, the latter can be subject to the changes caused by human, in our case students', activity.

Thus, education efficiency mostly depends on quality of educational milieu and space, which are interrelated and significantly affect each other. However, the present paper mostly deals with educational

milieu as it is largely connected with various types of information, educational means and contents contributing to the productive activity of a student.

2.   Research Questions

A student-based approach stresses the idea that of most importance for students' development is not inside, but outside classroom, and therefore, the educational process itself should be organized based on it. In this case teaching and learning will stop being something rigid and invariable and will not lose touch with "the professional reality", that is they will pursue the goals and try to meet the requirements set by the professional environment for university graduates. Only when educational environment is built so that everyone can realize his or her potential to the fullest extent without any outside compulsion but motivated by his or her proper individual incentives, one can speak about well-balanced development of an individual.

3.   Purpose of the Study

Post-industrial society puts forward special demands to the quality of professional training, thus reflecting the shift in the attitude towards labour and in the interests of contemporary people who are now keen on developing their talents and practising more creative activities. (Ivanova, 2016) At present it is believed that the most significant achievement of educational process is to gain profound and well-formed professional skills (or competence, or expertise if to use terminology of different pedagogical approaches). As a result, the educational programmes of higher education should be reconsidered and altered accordingly to this modern trend. Consequently, every element of educational process, including educational milieu, should undergo transformation.

A favourable and well-organized environment in higher education forms a basis for professional training and should represent a real world in miniature, imitating the relationships between a subject and real life or between subjects under the real world conditions.

Obviously, a subject always enters into some relationships with his educational milieu. The versatile interaction between a student, a teacher and an educational environment brings diversity, interdisciplinarity and flexibility into a classroom.

A student-based approach implies that a student can determine his own level and pace of learning. Therefore, the result of educational process in the case of each particular student will be different, and to predict it with absolute certainty beforehand appears impossible. However, favourable educational milieu will stimulate personal involvement and independence in making decision connected with educational activities, contributing to the development of student's personality.

The next question to answer is: What is the role of a teacher in organizing an educational environment? The traditional approach to education implies a systematic transfer of knowledge, skills, values assisting in both personal development of an individual and preserving social system. It is assumed that the information and abilities acquired at higher school will allow a person to continue his education and master his level independently in his future professional career. That's why the traditional pedagogy emphasizes the importance of educational and formative goals of learning process, but the interplay between an educational milieu and a student is not considered. The formative goals include the ones

which aim at forming an individual within the framework of government norms and requirements. They mostly refer to the features of an educational environment which must actively cultivate and propagate these values. The function of a teacher in this respect is generally limited to maintaining discipline and order in the classroom, establishing positive attitude to studies and controlling students' behavior.

A student-based approach requires a different type of a teacher. Instead of being the only source of correct information, educators initiate data search and processing, advise on the available sources of information and methods of research, teach to analyze the results, etc. In other words, they act as facilitators of educational process. The teacher's main task is to organize the environment which will favour efficient and successful learning (proper atmosphere, emotions, praise and criticism, analysis of failures and success together with students). A teacher studies "together" with his students trying different ways and taking into account students' needs and pace of learning. In this case one of the most important tasks of a teacher is deep investigation into a student's personality to be able to select the best methods and forms of teaching and learning perfectly suited for this particular person.

4. Research Methods

As it was already mentioned, a student-based approach to teaching in higher school begins with understanding the needs of modern industries, the qualities and skills they seek for in nowadays employees. The educational process should be brought as close as possible to the reality imitating the business world and, thus, preparing students for their professional careers. As a result, there has been a shift in the organization of teaching methodology. Instead of using classical approach focused on memorisation and numerous revisions of material by the students, instructors should focus on the application of knowledge to particular problems and introduce tasks which are creative in their nature and simulate the actual conditions of the particular professional environment, such as projects, research, discussions, case studies, etc. However, it is important that all this homework, quizzes, projects, etc. be designed in such a way as to require genuine thoughtfulness on the part of the student. That paradigm shift offers enormous potential for advancing educational quality.

This requires richer and more versatile educational environment than with the traditional approach, which is achieved by proper and purposeful organization of learning space under the guidance of a teacher. "The properties of the environment and the interaction style reflect the values of the teacher, his or her ideas concerning norms and ideals of educational process" (Zeer, 2010). Open and friendly interaction between a teacher and a student, a variety of information sources available to pupils and a wide range of technological means used in education are certain to have a positive effect on the results of training.

Of most significance are specially formulated "open" tasks which do not have a fixed, given or the only possible answer, but which stimulate independent and creative activity of students. This activity, if it is really relevant for a student, encourages him to use various sources of information, study different opinions and approaches, often touching on other disciplines and areas, which are not always allied to the topic of initial research, but arouse learner's interests and motivate his further studies. One can argue that this educational activity is of no practical use as it lacks systematic and purposeful character. But as has been mentioned several times, it fully corresponds to the modern paradigm of lifelong learning when to

be a real professional means to be open to new ideas, methods and technologies, be able to implement them in one's professional field and be a source of creativity and innovation himself. A recent survey has revealed that one of the most interesting result of the shift in educational paradigm will be increase in number of interdisciplinary majors and broader inter-university collaboration among students from multiple institutions (The future of higher education, 2008).

An essential factor having influence on educational environment structure and contributing to the development of a student's personality is the diversity of information sources. The use of different approaches and views when explaining one and the same phenomenon helps a student to identify his or her best way of learning, thus choosing his or her own trajectory of training and developing such qualities as independence and self-analysis. Only that educational milieu which is active in its nature and able to stimulate and promote the creative character of the teaching process can bring up all-round and highly skilled professionals who are in need nowadays.

5. Findings

Nowadays modern educators have a lot of methods and technologies that allow them to provide individual approach to every student. The most popular of them are project activities, case-study, role plays and research projects. The aim of these technologies is to create a real situation in which students pretend to be managers, designers, lawyers to learn and master practical skills and abilities or deal with different problems that are necessary for their future professional activity.

Using project educational technologies means creating some problem situations or tasks requiring solutions. While performing these tasks students develop creativity, independence, self-control and self-criticism.

In Moscow Polytechnic University project activity is the basis of the educational process, which means that students should conduct projects for different academic disciplines in close connection with graduating departments. For example, students are offered to make up a rating of the university, to produce a video clip, to create a website, to take part in an innovation project, etc. After finishing the project students should make a report or presentation. That is why the Department of Foreign Languages decided to include students' project activity in an educational process for first and second year students at the Faculty of Economics. To make a report in English is a difficult problem for many students, so the teacher plays a significant part, explaining how to structure a report, use language cliché (common English phrases) logically, avoid grammar and vocabulary mistakes. Only after that students start to work with the text which implies learning how to analyse it, choose the main idea, select information from different sources, create a new text and express their own thoughts on the world around them. Then they are able to use their knowledge and skills for making the reports based on the results of their project activity in different professional fields, or on the topics which interest them. Finally, the students make presentations in English, using computer technologies.

The usage of this approach in learning foreign languages has a number of advantages in the context of a student-based approach. Firstly, students understand the importance of acquired knowledge and skills, see the practical value which greatly increases their motivation and personal interest in learning process. Secondly, besides mastering language material and communicative skills the work with

the text requires the development of critical thinking, cognitive, analytical and creative abilities of students. Thirdly, an individual approach to learning process is being realized: the students choose the topics of their reports themselves without any limitation of their content and volume. Even a student with any level of knowledge in English is able to make a report after he has thoroughly studied the training material. The influence of a teacher gradually decreases moving from from ont stage to the next one. He stops being a strict judge, but turns into a good advisor. At last, the defence of reports is conducted as a scientific conference, «a round table», imitating the conditions of a scientific conference or a business meeting to help the students be well prepared to inevitable stressful situations in their professional career.

6. Discussion

Learning process may be effective only when there is subject–oriented milieu. Normative environment which was widely used in traditional education did not provide any motivation for learning. Traditionally educated students had to carry out a great amount of work under teachers' pressure. The only reason of their studying hard was fear of obtaining low grades. So it is important to organize educational environment in such a way that students will be interested in taking an active part in learning process (which should be diverse).Teachers should recommend students a great number of different sources for this or that subject, create a friendly and warm atmosphere for individuals that confirms student-based learning. The usage of various sources (the Internet, television, books, radio) and new technologies are quite obvious in today's educational environment because it helps to increase motivation and makes learning process much more efficient.

7. Conclusion

Educational milieu is of great significance for any high educational establishment. It can be realized by means of different programmes and technologies to provide required conditions for learning. Education milieu may change simultaneously with students, thus decreasing stress factor of learning process. High motivation for learning, its goals and tasks give students all-round development.

In our age, the principles of education are the same as they have always been, but the existence of new technologies is adding some challenging questions. How, for instance, does technology affect learning process? Is new technology enriching or undermining learning? Education isn't about having the right answers: rather, it is about asking the right question.

The role of a contemporary teacher is not only to impart knowledge, but to facilitate the process of inquiry and dialogue. His (her) role as a facilitator and co-learner in a student–centered learning process is not only the model for education; it has become an accepted criterion of pedagogy. Today, the chief challenges are to locate and evaluate the right information for one's needs and to use it in learning process. Education with techniques of critical thinking is a key part of a 21st century approach to learning.

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