

Students' Perspectives on Significant and Ideal Learning Experiences —A Challenge for the Professional Development of University Teachers

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Abstract

The paper presents a study of students' significant and ideal learning experiences as triggers of university teachers' professional development. Students' feedback and teachers' own reflection on their teaching act as important triggers for quality shifts in their teaching and professional development.

The results of empirical research, during which we used a questionnaire with predominantly open-ended questions, will be presented. We were interested in the degree of students' satisfaction with the quality of education and what conceptions about teacher's and student's role they had formed during their studies. Of the many research questions, this paper only deals with analysis of learning experiences which had a particular impact on students, and their notion of an ideal study environment. In this manner we attempted to reflect on the quality of studying and, based on significant learning situations, gain insight into the influence a teacher's teaching may have on their students' professional and personal development. Thus the question arises of how much university teachers are prepared for in-depth reflection on their own practices, to what degree they are ready to take into account feedback they receive from students and whether they are prepared to abandon their customary teaching practices.

Keywords: higher education, learning experience, reflection, student's role, teacher's role

1. Effective University Teaching and Learning

Effective higher education teaching is an "elusive" concept that is very hard to define precisely as its meaning needs to be constantly rediscovered within a changed and changing context (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010). Within its broader meaning it is thoroughly understood as teaching that is oriented to and focused on students and their learning.

Nightingale and O'Neil (1994) emphasize that we have to maintain focus on creating conditions leading to quality learning as this assures the highest degree of quality education. Trigwell (2008) also stresses that the crucial feature of quality teaching is facilitating the learning. Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor (1994 as cited in Trigwell, 2008) with phenomenographic approach identified five qualitatively different ways in which science teachers experienced their teaching. As two most extreme ones they defined: "information transmission/teacher-focused approach" and "conceptual change/student-focused approach" (p. 34). In empirical studies it has been confirmed many times that conceptual change/student-focused approaches are more likely to lead to students adopting deeper approaches to learning, because of that they can be considered higher quality approaches to teaching (e.g. Radovan & Makovec, 2015; Trigwell, 2008). According to Trigwell (2008):

"In adopting this approach, teachers encourage self-directed learning, take time to discuss problems with students, assess to encourage conceptual change and encourage debate." (p. 39)

In the context of this approach we are more focused on, what are the students perceiving and doing, than on what the teacher does and what the contents of teaching are. Trigwell (2008) also emphasized: "The scholarship of teaching is about inquiry that has, as the main focus, the facilitation and improvement of student learning" (p. 39). The teacher's fundamental role is thus to provide conditions for students' learning. This assumes that teachers cannot understand their role only from the point of view of teaching as the transmission of knowledge.

This is the perspective needed for reflecting and regarding students as partners in the educational process.

Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010, p. 122) emphasise that a shared understanding of effective teaching is important to ensure the quality of university teaching and learning, but “this understanding must incorporate the skills and practices of effective teachers and the ways in which teaching should be practiced within multiple, overlapping contexts.” In this respect the ALTC (Australian Learning and Teaching Council) guidelines can be useful, but not without fulfilling the requirements of the context in which teaching takes place. Teaching effectiveness thus depends on more limited contextual factors, such as the type of subject, class size, student ability and assessment practices, from the more complex, such as standards of a certain discipline, department and faculty culture, to the broadest societal, political, economic, technological and demographic change forces (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010). We agree with the authors that ALTC criteria can serve as a good judgment basis and as a guideline in efforts to reach quality teaching and learning, however, they need to be recurrently evaluated in the perspective of the changing context. The authors suggest the following:

- 1) That the first criterion, i.e. “approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn”, deserves additional study and comprehensive understanding of student engagement in the sense of “...enabling students to be active learners, encouraging students to take control of and be responsible for their own learning; facilitating appropriate staff-student and student-student interactions; and improving work integrated learning opportunities.” (p. 121)
- 2) Within the frame of the second criterion “development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field”, it is particularly important to focus on current and future students’ needs. It is undoubtedly reasonable to consider which competences they have to master to be successfully included in their future professional and social life and how to provide them with such opportunities.
- 3) With the third criterion, i.e. “approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning”, we also have to ask ourselves whether individuals are developed as autonomous personalities who can judge their own achievements.
- 4) It is important to understand the fourth criterion, i.e. “respect and support for the development of students as individuals”, in the sense of respecting diversity. This criterion gains in significance together with the massification and internationalisation of higher education. Teachers face the very demanding task of encouraging students, extremely varied in terms of their abilities, previous knowledge, social, cultural and educational backgrounds, to engage in efficient learning and leading them to predefined learning results.
- 5) The fifth criterion, i.e. “scholarly activities that have influenced and enhanced learning and teaching”, requires consideration of how to organise various courses for members of teaching staff, how more experienced teachers can help less experienced ones (peer-review) and moreover, in what other ways they could contribute to quality assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning endeavours.

When judging the quality of teaching it is important to include varied sources, students being one of the sources that are not to be neglected (Martens, Lueckenhausen & McCormack, 2004 as cited in Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010; Ermenc Skubic, Živković Vujisić, & Spasenović, 2015). A definite purpose of this study is to listen to the voice of students and to find out if, during their studies, they start assuming a more active role by becoming increasingly independent learners, assuming the role of expert and partner in accordance with the concept of Alaniska and Eriksson (2006). Certainly the question arises whether teachers are ready to accept students as experts and partners. This means that we as teachers should be prepared to embrace new challenges, modify the existing work routines and step outside our own comfort zones. We also need to bear in mind that genuine professional development includes risk-taking (Korthagen, 2005; Meijer, 2009).

2. University Teachers as Reflective Practitioners

The modern conception of professional development poses the teacher as a critical and reflective professional (Clark, 1995; Craft, 1996; Day, 1999; Fullan, 1992; Kohonen, 1993; Oser, 1992; Terhart, 1997; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Effectiveness and responsibility are inseparable competences of such a teacher and key elements of his professional action. Reflection is the central ingredient of a modern conception of an expert’s practice and development.

Rogers (2001) establishes that authors, when defining reflection, use various expressions depending on various theoretical conceptions. In synthesis, he points out that the definitions of reflection:

- “includes reflection as a cognitive and affective process or activity that (1) requires active engagement on the part of individual; (2) is triggered by an unusual or perplexing situation or experience; (3) involves

examining one's responses, beliefs and premises in light of the situation at hand; and (4) results in integration of the new understanding into one's experience." (p. 41)

For teachers who research their everyday practice, who reflect "in" and "on" action, Schön (1983, 1987) introduces the expression "reflective practitioners". Reflection in action refers to the process of decision making by teachers whilst actively engaged in teaching. Reflection on action occurs outside of the practice which is the subject of reflection. Schön also points out reflection about action, which represents a broader, critical stance which involves inquiry into the moral, ethical, political and instrumental issues embedded in teachers' everyday thinking and practice. Reflection is part of a broader self-evaluation process which aim is "to ensure quality, development, and progress in educational institutions," (Podgornik & Mažgon, 2015, p. 411) and "lead to the preparation of the action plan, which includes the introduction of changes, improvements, and innovation to the appropriate areas" (ibid.).

Korthagen (2005) offered his well-known onion model of core reflection stressing that all layers, together with two deeper levels—the individual's identity and mission—should be included in the reflection process, "because this kind of reflection brings people into contact with their core qualities" (p. 90). Teachers should be helped in their efforts to harmonise the separate levels as this enables them to strike a balance in integration of the professional and the personal in teaching (Niemi & Kohonen, 1995; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2008; Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009). It is important to highlight our beliefs and conceptions, but our feelings, needs, desires, etc., also influence our way of teaching and our way of handling certain teaching situations, so that it is particularly important to highlight these non-rational sources of behaviour in the process of reflection.

The goals of university studies can only be successfully achieved through constant reflection at several levels that include both teachers and students and provide adequate conditions to encourage learning. Teachers should be aware of the way students perceive their own role and that of the teacher. This basis will enable us to prepare conditions for their learning, active co-operation and co-creation of knowledge and to challenge students to grow in their own conceptions or to develop an understanding of their own role and an understanding of teaching at a higher level—in the sense of teaching as producing changes and encouraging personal growth.

Understanding what really happens at the level of university studies and what students' significant learning experiences are can also represent a challenge for university teachers, leading them to "better and higher levels of professional development" (Terhart, 1997). In the basis of our mission, teachers are committed to progress and learning which to a great extent takes place in our interaction with students.

3. Defining the Purpose and Methodology of the Research Study

3.1 The Goals and Purposes of the Research Study

With our empirical study we attempted to find out how students, after four-year studies of pedagogy and andragogy, define some essential concepts of the professional field of their studies, such as knowledge, learning and the roles of teachers and students. Moreover, we wanted to obtain insight into the learning experience they referred to as the one that significantly influenced them and their idea of the ideal learning situation. Of the many research questions, this contribution only deals with the following:

- 1) What conceptions of teacher's / student's roles do students of pedagogy or andragogy possess?
- 2) Which learning experience they quoted as the one that influenced them most, what was the nature of that influence and the key characteristics of that important learning experience?
- 3) What is their idea of the ideal learning experience?

3.2 The Research Method and Sample

In the empirical research we employed a descriptive and a causal-non-experimental method of educational research. We attempted to include all the 4th year students of pedagogy and andragogy at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia at the end of their studies in three successive study years. Questionnaires were applied in April and May 2010, 2011 and 2012; we received 96 completed forms. A half of included students attended lectures often (51%), followed by students who attended lectures occasionally (26%) and those who attended lectures very often (17.7%), while the fewest are those who rarely or almost never attended lectures (5.2%). Their average grade of satisfaction with their studies was 3.72 (SD = 0.58) on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 denotes absolutely dissatisfied and 5 absolutely satisfied), while the average grade in pedagogic and andragogic studies is 7.54 (SD = 0.46; in our assessment system the highest grade is 10, while the lowest passing grade is 6).

The questionnaire included multiple choice items, scales, open-ended questions and unfinished sentences. In the questionnaire we were interested in the following questions: students' satisfaction with their studies, how they

perceived the main role of a student and that of a teacher, what was for them the essence of learning and the essence of knowledge, how they judged their own readiness for knowledge assessment, what influenced the most their conceptions of knowledge, learning, student's role and teacher's role, which learning experience they quoted as the one that influenced them most and how they describe ideal learning experience. This contribution presents only answers to the previously exposed research questions.

The answers on open questions were categorized based on theoretical background and previous empirical research results. On this foundation we formed adequate content categories that served for further statistical processing. The data was processed with the PASW Statistic 18 program package for Windows. The following statistical processes were used: descriptive analysis of variables, χ^2 test or Kullback test, when more than 20% of theoretical frequencies were lower than 5.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Students' Conceptions of Teacher/Student Roles

We studied students' conceptions about the role of teachers and students from how they completed two unfinished sentences, namely "*The main role of a teacher is ...*" and "*The main role of a student is...*". Our classification of answers about teacher's and student's role was based on classification of teaching conceptions—personal theories of teaching, which were identified by Fox (1983) regarding higher education teachers, and modern cognitive-constructivist notions of knowledge, learning and teaching (Marentič Požarnik, 2008; Simons, 1997; Trigwell, 2008; Vermunt, 1993). We also referred to previous empirical results, obtained on the sample of pedagogy and andragogy students at the end of the 2006 study year (cf. Kalin & Šteh, 2007; Šteh & Kalin, 2006; Šteh & Kalin, 2008) and on the sample of primary education teacher students (Valenčič Zuljan, 2007).

Students' answers referring to the teacher's role were thus classified into the following three hierarchical categories:

1) Transmission of knowledge and subject mastery

Within this category, students stress that the teacher has to be a skilled lecturer, to provide clear and engaging explanation, be systematic and exhibit mastery of his / her subject: "*...masters the lectured topic...*", "*...is motivated to render the subject matter, knows how to approach students in different ways and knows how to present the subject attractively.*"

2) Shaping the students

Here students stress teacher's focus on students, but teachers still retain their dominant role as persons who have to teach, motivate students and ensure that they master a certain subject matter and show their knowledge: "*...motivates us and encourages our enthusiasm for the subject.*", "*...shapes students' knowledge and moderates their respective activities.*"

3) Encouraging independent thinking and personal growth

Students emphasize that a teacher's role is to encourage their independent, critical thinking and knowledge building. In order to classify an answer into this category it was not enough for the students to mention that a teacher helps, leads and steers them—on the contrary, they had to be more explicit and clearly point out the teacher's role in encouraging their independent construction of knowledge, critical thinking and personal growth: "*...encourages students towards their own critical thinking.*", "*...presents subject matter to students or organizes lectures, discussions, role plays, through which students reach conclusions themselves. Accustoms students to critical thinking, to connecting between subjects, and professional fields...*"

Definitions of their own role, as given by students, were also classified into three hierarchically arranged categories:

1) Receiving knowledge and learning

Within this category students mostly said that it is a student's duty to attend classes and try to gain from them as much as possible and diligently learn what the teacher demands. Students mainly point out their duty is to study diligently, without giving explicit explanations about what their own role should be: "*...to acquire the necessary knowledge to be properly used later in profession.*", "*...to get as much as possible from lectures and exercises.*"

2) Involvement

In this group, students go beyond mere listening to lectures, making notes and diligent memorizing to

learning activities that indicate more mental activity: “...to actively participate and listen.”, “...always and with interest attend lectures and look for interconnections.”, “...to deepen knowledge obtained at lectures...”

3) Taking initiative and responsibility

This category shows that students see their role to also involve taking initiative and responsibility and care about their personal growth: “...to discover new findings themselves and to supplement them.”, “...to be independent, responsible...” , “...to grow personally during the studies ...”

On the basis of theoretical and empirical findings we assumed a compatibility of conceptions of teaching, teacher’s role, student’s role and teaching approaches; we defined related and comparable categories as shown in Figure 1.

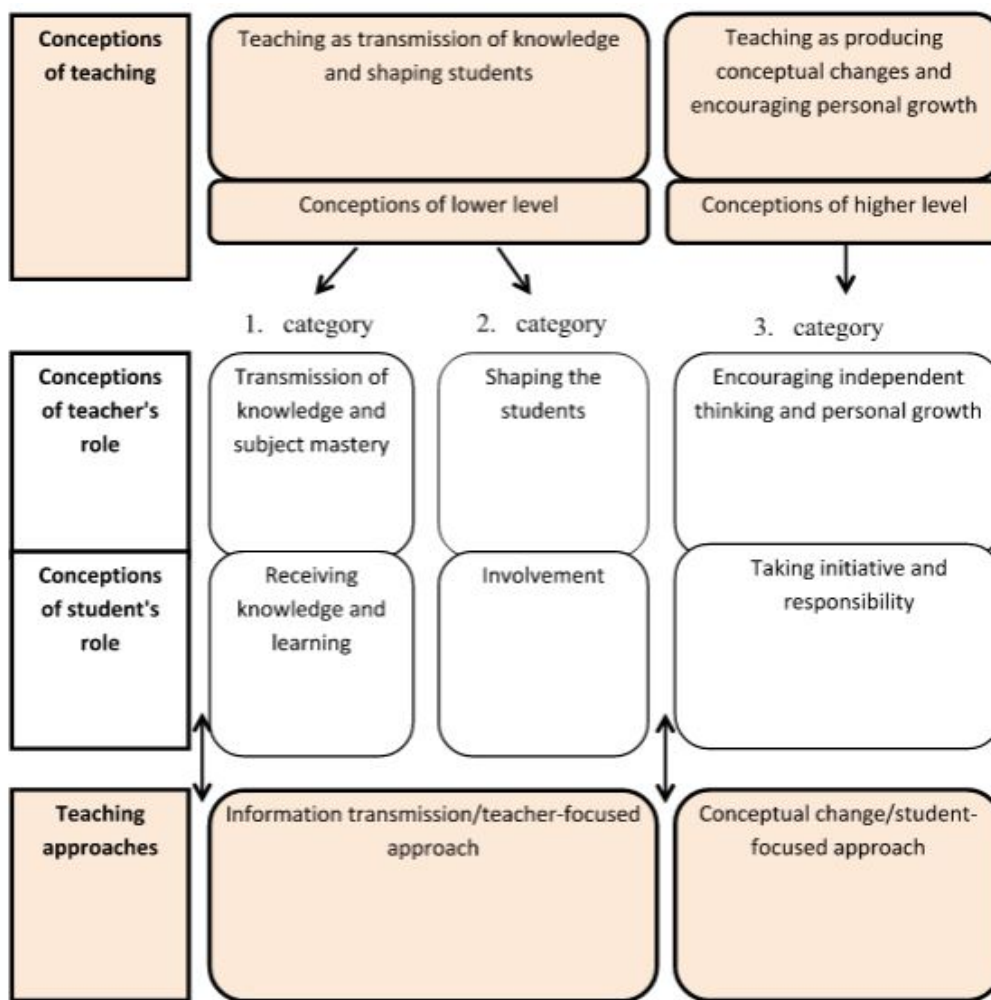


Figure 1. Model categories of conceptions related to teaching approaches

In Table 1 we can see that the majority of students (57.4%) define teacher’s role as the one of shaping the students. On the basis of students’ answers, we can conclude that the majority mostly want their teacher to focus on them and show an interest in their needs, while at the same time keep their dominant role and provide a source of motivation. Teacher should also ensure that students achieve certain knowledge. 16% students’ stress that the teacher has to be skilled lecturer, to provide clear and engaging explanation, be systematic and exhibit mastery of his/her subject. In most cases, when students define the teacher’s role, they attribute responsibility for effectiveness of the educational process to the teacher. Only 26.6% students emphasize that a teacher’s role is to encourage their independent construction of knowledge, critical thinking and personal growth. The majority of

students still identifies teacher's role in accordance with lower teaching conceptions. But only within higher level teaching conceptions are the students viewed as partners that assume more inclusive and more responsible role.

Table 1. Students' conceptions of teachers' and students' role

	Conceptions of lower level		Conceptions of higher level	
	1 st Category		2 nd Category	
	f ^o %	f ^o %	f ^o %	f ^o %
Conceptions of teacher's role (N = 94)	Transmission of knowledge and mastery	of subject	Shaping the students	Encouraging independent thinking and personal growth
	16.0%		57.4%	26.6%
Conceptions of student's role (N = 96)	Receiving knowledge and learning		Involvement	Taking initiative and responsibility
	27.1%		32.3%	40.6%

Table 1 also indicates that in defining their role, 27.1% of students predominantly expose the diligent fulfilment of all study obligations and teachers' requirements. A third of the students (32.3%) point out the importance of their active participation to reach an understanding of a certain subject matter, while the largest share (40.6%) emphasise their own initiative and responsibility—to independently reach insights and take a critical distance to the contents studied or topics connected to the area of their studies. When students are required to explicitly define their role, they thus in a slightly greater share expose the importance of their own initiative, independence and responsibility, if compared to identification of teacher's role, as only 26.6% point out that teacher should encourage their independence and personal development.

4.2 Students' Important Learning Experience

Students were asked to recall, in any of their years of education, one learning experience that had a truly strong influence on them. They were asked to explain the nature of the influence and to describe that learning experience as precisely as possible.

78 students answered this question, which represent 81.3% of the whole sample. Among them 94.9% (n = 74) specified a positive learning experience and 5.1% (n = 4) specified a negative one. On the basis of the answers to the open-ended question, we formed categories in reference to the origin of the learning experience and to its contents.

Answers regarding the *source of the important learning experience* were classified into the following categories, ranked according to their frequency:

- 1) Presentation of a seminar (experiencing a presentation of a particular subject, various forms of feedback information, active participation)—24.4%
- 2) Practical training (under their mentor's guidance, students come in direct contact with the work of a pedagogue and andragogue, they are included in direct work with pupils and other participants in educational process)—17.9%
- 3) Weekend seminars (they take place in a non-academic environment, promote socializing, students and professors get to know each other; their theoretical knowledge can be used in dealing with practical problems)—16.7%
- 4) Lectures (useful knowledge obtained from the lectures; learning contents that open several questions; regular attendance of lectures assists personal studies)—14.1%
- 5) Visits of institutions (visits to various educational institutions, institutions for children with special needs, rehabilitation institutes, prisons; forms of guided student fieldwork)—11.5%

6) The teacher's personality (an entertaining teacher who makes a subject interesting; the teacher's clarity; the teacher supports students in forming their own knowledge and concepts; fairness)—7.7%

7) Other: individual study, joint learning, e-learning, examination—15.4%

In students' opinions, presentations of seminars are therefore a frequent source of important learning experiences. They generally emphasized the importance of their experience of presenting certain contents to colleagues, of intensive and in-depth study for a successful presentation, of problem-oriented presentation, and they put a lot of stress on the possibility to get feedback on their performing. Especially precious was an opportunity of video feedback information and analysis of their performance at one of the subjects. This gives students insight into their strengths and typical errors, enables self-reflection, development of particular competences and performing skills, and allows them to overcome nervousness.

For 17.9% of students important learning experiences occurred within their practical training, which they usually stress they want more of. It provides them a unique opportunity to experience their future work first-hand, to acquire work experience with various groups of pupils, connect theory and practice, and verify the usefulness of theories in solving actual problem situations.

Weekend seminars present an important experience as they make theory meaningful through practice and dealing with actual situations students meet in their practical training (16.7%). Forming a suitable work climate is also important, together with relaxed relations and opportunities to meet and discuss things outside faculty walls.

Considering frequency of quoted answers, lectures present an important learning experience for students. These lectures most often challenge them to think, discuss, deepen their theoretical knowledge, and open new questions. They are also aware of how important it is to attend lectures to prepare themselves for examinations and to connect different parts of knowledge into one. Last but not least, some emphasize their realization that some theoretical contents can be practically transferred and used in their personal lives.

A good tenth of students stress the importance of insights they acquired during visiting and attending various institutions. On such occasions, some of them clarified the role of a pedagogue or andragogue, experienced the problems of a specific area in practice (for example, working with prisoners), while other changed their point of view after meeting different people (for example in the Rehabilitation Centre for the Disabled) and now they are more aware of the precious "small matters in life".

The lowest share (7.7%) of student answers refers to the teacher's personality as the source of the important learning experience. In reference to this they particularly point out the teacher's attitude towards students, establishing appropriate climate of respect and enabling learning.

4.3 Contents of Students' Important Learning Experiences and How They, in Their Own Views, Influenced Them

Table 2. Contents of students' important learning experiences

Students' important learning experiences	f %
Connecting theory and practice, acquiring new experiences and development of skills	58.5
Deepening theoretical knowledge	23.1
A change of perceptions and/or actions	16.7
Discussion	14.1
Clarification of a pedagogue's or andragogue's role	12.8
Disappointment	5.1

Based on open-ended answers, we formed categories that provide deeper insight into the question of the content of the learning experiences that were important for students and how such experiences influenced them. Six categories were formed, which are ranked according to their frequency as follows:

1) Connecting theory and practice, acquiring new experiences and development of skills (using theoretical knowledge in real-life situations; making theory meaningful in practice; performance, evaluation of one's own performance, self-evaluation, performing an interview, preparing a portfolio, carrying out field surveys; testing oneself in various situations; how to prepare well for classes; I

experienced what it means to organize a learning event and how much energy is needed to carry it out; experience of individual work with pupils)—58.5%

2) Deepening theoretical knowledge (opening new questions, in-depth consideration, changing conceptions, revealing the essence, viewing the contents from different perspectives)—23.1%

3) A change of perceptions and/or actions (changed actions to achieve a goal; I prepare for exams in a different way; an incentive for additional education; higher study motivation; new meaning of studies; I changed my opinion of the world and of what is really important)—16.7%

4) Open expression of one's opinion in a discussion (learning together with others and from others)—14.1%

5) Clarification of a pedagogue's or andragogue's role (getting to know the work and what I really want to do in my life)—12.8%

6) Disappointment (teachers' inconsistency; low grade in spite of work input; assessment criteria not clear)—5.1%.

The most frequent answer regarding the contents of their important learning experience referred to connecting theory and practice, acquiring new experiences and development of skills. Moreover, students mentioned very specific experiences in which they were able to connect acquired theoretical knowledge and practical experimenting with it in action. Very important are learning experiences that enable them to develop the professional skills they will need in their future profession. This is in compliance with the second ALTC key guiding criterion for providing excellence in university teaching (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010), which highlights the importance of taking into account the current and future needs of students and to particularly focus on the question of enabling them to acquire key competences they will need to successfully integrate in professional and social life. These skills are developed primarily through presentation of seminars and experiences acquired at practical training during their studies. It is noteworthy that students think not only of their performance, but view as important skills more generally connected to planning, carrying out, or evaluating a certain activity, opportunities to develop listening skills and active participation in professional discussions as well as performing various techniques of research work.

Almost a quarter of answers (23.1%) referred to the deepening of students' theoretical knowledge. They are aware of the importance of the theoretical knowledge and deepened insights into the contents of their studies. Some point out changing of their subjective theories, deeper understanding and revealing of the essential. The frequency of this answer indicates that students are also aware of the importance of acquiring quality theoretical knowledge, new findings and various perspectives regarding professional questions.

Third in terms of frequency is the answer that students changed their acting or perceptions on the basis of an important learning experience.

Participation in discussions occupies the fourth position in the frequency rank of answers on the contents of important learning experiences. Quality discussion clarifies the essence of a learning content and enables confrontation of different opinions, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the content. Moreover, students mentioned the importance of learning from others and with others as well as their awareness of their own contribution in a discussion, allowing them to constructively add to its quality.

Clarifying the professional role of the pedagogue or andragogue is pointed out as an important revelation by 12.8% of students. This happened most frequently during practical training, when they were actively included into work and activities in the roles as adopted by the pedagogue and andragogue.

Four respondents reported that their important learning experience resulted in disappointment: due to unclear examination criteria, dissatisfaction with the grade or inconsistent criteria when performing their duties for a certain subject. All these four answers can be an important challenge for teachers when setting study requirements and conveying quality feedback that students need also (or especially) when they fail at assessments of their knowledge.

4.4 An Ideal Learning Experience in Students' Opinions

Students were asked to describe their ideal study situation as graphically as possible. Responses to this open-ended question were classified into six categories:

1) Quality lectures: teacher's explanations are clear, the subject matter illustrated with examples, students are asked questions, theory is lined with the teacher's experience, appropriate ICT is used (*"Lectures where the professor presents the subject matter in an interesting way, not only dry theory.*

The professor explains theory with a practical example.”; “The professor is motivated to convey knowledge, uses varied approaches and awakes interest for the subject matter in us.”).

2) Discussion: students expose both discussion with the professor and among students and their cooperation; discussing the teaching contents from several points of view, resulting in an exchange of opinions and viewpoints (*“The teacher asks questions and encourages thinking, so that quality discussions develop. It is ideal to hear different opinions—we start to see the problem from another perspective.”; “We get material in advance so that we can study it and then discuss it during class.”).*

3) Problem solving and applying knowledge in practice: connecting theory and practice, using theory in action (*“We address a specific problem and our teacher presents us various views of the problem and then introduces us directly to problem solving and reflection.”; “Reflection on a specific target group for which an educational programme is prepared and later implemented in action.”).*

4) Experiential learning: this category contains answers that point to a specific learning experience, students’ own activities, personal development, autonomy and critical approach; practical training (*“Cooperative learning in a group with specific tasks, goals, where all students contribute to achieve the set goal or task.”; “The teacher should entice students into as active studies as possible. The teacher should not only provide material, but make us search, research, critically judge by ourselves, ensuring that we transfer as much knowledge/theory as possible into practical experiences.”).*

5) Social climate: emphasis is on respect between the teacher and students, on everybody’s readiness to work, on cooperation; with the teacher encouraging enthusiasm for the subject matter in students (*“Increased cooperation with professors.”; “Connection with students; zeal, motivation, enjoyment by both professor and students.”; “When I am in a group of students where I feel accepted and thus also relaxed.”).*

6) Other: less structured answers were classified in this category, including the following: *“Attendance at lectures, practical training and seminars.”; “Interesting subject matter, sufficient time for studies, ensuring that I understand the subject matter.”; “There is no such situation.”; “When the professor does not see his or her subject as the only important matter.”*

Table 3. Ideal learning experiences according to student opinions

Ideal learning experience	f	f %
Experiential learning	29	30.2
Discussion	26	27.1
Climate	12	12.5
Quality lectures	9	9.4
Problem solving and putting knowledge into practice	9	9.4
Other	11	11.5
Total	96	100

When describing their ideal study situation, the most frequent students’ answers are experiential learning (30.2%) and discussion (27.1%). Both categories involve so-called student-focused approach, where the student is an active co-designer of the learning process, whom professors include in active cooperation and participation, and where students build their knowledge on their previous knowledge and experiences. It is noteworthy that in the “experiential learning” category, students greatly emphasised the development of their own thinking, critical thinking and autonomy. This implies learning from life situations, also learning within the frame of practical training, where they have to address specific connections between theory and practice. More than half of students clearly demonstrate a desire to actively participate in the studies or they see the ideal study situation as one with their own active involvement – at least in discussion with colleagues or the professor.

When describing their ideal study situation, a good tenth of students (12.5%) notably expose the importance of the learning climate in the group, appropriate mutual relations among students and between the professor and students. Experiencing acceptance, respect and co-operation is what they find particularly important.

Less than a tenth of students describe their ideal learning situation in terms of quality lectures: the most is learnt

directly from the teacher through quality explanation, systematic conveyance of the learning content, supported with examples, teacher's experiences and appropriate use of varied learning methods and teaching aids to enhance the illustrative quality of lectures (such as video).

An equal share is occupied by the answer that their ideal learning situation is marked with problem solving and the use of acquired knowledge in new situations.

5. Conclusion

Our analysis of the empirical results in the perspective of theoretical concepts, in which we tried to present some modern views of quality in university studies and the importance of professional development of university teachers, which is based on continuous reflection on one's own work and includes asking students' feedback, indicates some crucial (and critical) questions that will in future require not only teachers' response, but also the creation of such a university culture that will encourage, to a greater extent than before, students' participation in acquiring and using their knowledge. Let us expose some of them.

Teacher/student-focused approach in teaching displays that students' expectations about teacher role are still traditional and connected to teaching as information transmission further to the fact that only few students understand teaching as a conceptual change. The majority of students (73.4%) still identifies teacher's role in accordance with lower teaching conceptions. Ideas about teacher's facilitating the learning (Trigwell, 2008), providing conditions for learning and teacher's role which encourages learning, preparing opportunities for self-directed learning, guiding students to develop deeper approaches to learning (Alaniska & Erikson, 2006; Dewlin & Samarawickrema, 2010) are not present in the subjective conceptions of students, although the students who were included into research, have encountered ideas of student-focused approach in teaching and student role of an active designer of learning process during their study. We expected that students would have largely expressed higher conceptions of teacher's role. Only 26.6% students emphasize that a teacher's role is to encourage their independent construction of knowledge, critical thinking and personal growth. The research confirms that merely knowledge is not enough for an individual to form adequate attitudes or concepts.

The majority of students (57.4%) mostly want their teacher to focus on them and show an interest in their needs, while at the same time keep their dominant role and provide a source of motivation. According to Dewlin & Samarawickrema (2010), the provision of quality teaching and learning implies a higher degree of students' independence in study. They emphasize the respect and support of students as individuals and respect of diversity among students, which we can find in students' answers. In defining their roles, the greatest share of students in our study (40.6%) already point out their own initiative and responsibility, and one third the importance of their active participation to reach understanding of a certain subject matter. Describing their role in the study process, students' answers show higher conceptions in comparison to describing teacher's role. In this part, the research points to some possibilities for a greater integration of students into study process especially from the point of view of usability of study in real life situations, for connection theory with practice (real usability of theoretical knowledge) and for active collaboration of students in the study process. This is confirmed by our study on students' important learning experience.

Students' current and future needs and development of competencies, important for their future professional work are some of important criteria of quality teaching and learning (Dewlin & Samarawickrema, 2010). For most students (58.5%) the important learning experience is connected with discovering how theory and practice are intertwined within their studies, with acquiring new experiences and developing various competences. Such experiences have so far been available to them within various work methods that to a greater extent include students as active co-designers of the learning process, as partners in discussions and the learning process (such as presentation of a seminar, discussion with the teacher and between colleagues, practical training, etc.).

In students' views, the ideal learning situation is most often (30.2% answers) the situation that enables experiential learning—students' own involvement, personal development, autonomy and critical thinking as well as discussion on open theoretical and practical questions (27.1%). Both answers are closely connected with student-focused approach, in which we are primarily interested in student' input in the learning process, and are therefore, less focused on what a teacher do. Answers to the question on ideal learning situation lead to thinking about more active participation of students. Here we see a special possibility for more quality university study. A systematic analysis of feedback and self-analysis of teachers could provide conditions for cooperative learning and directing of students to the development of their competencies for future work.

An interesting and surprising finding of our study was the gap between the level of perceiving the teacher's and student's roles in university studies. When explaining their role, reporting on their important learning experience and describing their ideal learning situation, students show a greater share of higher conceptions of learning and

teaching. When describing the teacher's role, they still see it predominantly at the lower conception level. Our question is whether these answers do not originate in their everyday experience of the teacher's teaching. Should it signify that too few teachers at the university level introduce the so-called student-centred approach and thus enable students to form a different view of the teacher's work and role? This can be seen as an important challenge for the teacher's professional development. However, the question arises whether teachers are aware of that and whether they see it as an opportunity and a path to further professional development. We ask ourselves how to strengthen the community of teachers and students who are committed to learning and ready for challenges and their own changing in the existing context which at this moment is not the most favourable in Slovenia: excellence in research is still in higher esteem than excellence in teaching, financial means to carry out study programmes are being reduced, the "Bologna reform" of study programmes has led to numerous optional subjects of smaller scope, putting their implementation under question, while the student population is becoming increasingly varied in terms of abilities, previous knowledge and their socio-economic status. This means no lack of challenges for university teachers. The way to face them depends on each individual and on all of them together in the so-called professional learning community. One of the important features of development of university study and its quality is the fostering of reflection among teachers. Reflection includes a systematic and planned rational estimation of learning and teaching process as well as a research of affective processes, individual's attitudes, values and behaviour. It is important that the decision is free. Only in this case the reflection leads to changes in everyday teaching practice and to introduction of deeper understanding of study contents, development of skills and formation of student's attitudes, values and beliefs. Further research should be directed to questions about university teachers' attitudes towards reflection of their own work, how they implement it and to which extent they are ready to change their teaching having in mind very demanding conditions of their work and formally more evaluated research work in comparison to pedagogical work (habilitation conditions at Slovenian universities). Thus, the question of wider context of university culture and climate and a university learning community that fosters or obstructs the professional development of university teachers appears.

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