AN EXPERIMENTAL E-COACHING MODEL USED FOR TRAINING STUDENT TEACHERS

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Abstract*: The article presents a functional pedagogical model in a virtual field, related to the experimentation of online coaching in teaching practice. The purpose and objectives of this study circumscribe to the following purposes: e-learning support for the students in the teaching practice probationary stage, the exploration of resources, activities, online services and instruments, created especially for them and for successful teaching, the dynamic participation in the virtual discussions on the Moodle platform, focused on case studies, video registrations from teaching practice. Qualitative-type engaged methodology.*
Authors highlight, based on the preliminary results, both the advantages and the limits of implementing the designed e-coaching model in teaching practice.

Keywords: *online coaching, competences, performance*

I. INTRODUCTION

A significant study performed under the aegis of the Research Institute for Artificial Intelligence of the Romanian Academy presents as a desiderate the impact of the new information technologies in education: *E-learning systems shall become instruments for shaping users' personality and creativity*.[1]

In other words, modern learning methodologies specific to the knowledge society amplify their role through passing from operational instruments specific to virtual learning environments to complex instruments, designed to stimulate the creativity and critical thinking of beneficiaries. From this perspective, we appreciate that the dynamics of the e-learning process shall make even more responsible the teachers and students interested in the development of intelligent learning environments.

The "Education and Research for the Knowledge Society" strategy (2009-2015) highlights the importance that the teaching staff must give to the production of e-contents for learning as, in the next future, it shall become a professional performance criterion of teachers.

1.1. Conceptual Framework

Such concepts as *training, mentoring, tutoring, coaching,* which were taken over from the language of professional environments, of big companies, interested in the continuous on-the-job professional training of employees or in the practical training of the employed young people,

depending on their concrete and immediate needs, began to be used more and more often also in the Romanian educational system.

We justify our option for *coaching* through the argument that this key concept, which is famous in the sports field (as *workout to performance*) confirms its quality as a special method of personal and professional development focused on the increase of the level of performances and learning capacity (Landsberg, 2005), not only in sports, psychology or business, but also in education. *Coaching* is a learning opportunity (Somers M., J. Wiley, 2007), and learning allows individuals and organizations to grow and change, to reach performance. On the other hand, Grant A.(2006) underlines the force of coaching in valorizing life experience and in maximizing professional performances and the wellbeing of the individual, groups, organizations.[2] As regards the relationship built step by step in the specific coaching activities between the trainer and the trainee, according to Morgan, H., Harkins, Ph., Goldsmith, M. (2005) it functions as a partnership based on trust, faith and progress [3].

Also, we motivate our option for online coaching in teaching practice based on the argument that the future teacher student needs additional support doubling the real exercise in the classroom, in which the student experiments, in real time, relevant behaviors for the teacher profession. And this support, which is complementary to educational mentoring, may be thought by its practice coordinator (the teaching practice tutor) as a **strategy in favor of the student** in a favoring virtual environment.

Through online coaching, students may reach a deep understanding of the significances of the professional behaviors which are exercised in real time in the teaching practice field and have the possibility, based on the video registrations, to re-watch certain sequences in the teaching act in which they were the protagonists themselves, to reflect personally, to consult on the forum/chat etc. Those who mediate and intermediate the running through such learning experiences are resource persons holding teaching practice trainer capacities (tutors, teaching practice coordinators in the university) and have the professional experience necessary to the training/development of the professional competences of students orienting them to performance in the accomplishment of certain tasks, specific to the didactical profession.

Dawson and Guare (2000) offer an important perspective on coaching, setting the main stages of this process: establishment of the purpose, self-monitoring, performance feedback and emergency management. In teaching practice, students set their own objectives according to the objectives of teaching practice, create personal plans for achieving them and are interested in how they are monitored and evaluated (by mentors and tutors) and especially how they have to act for improving their professional behaviors one stage to the other.

1.2. Aims

This study highlights the formative aspects of the application of a possible pedagogical model to optimize pedagogical teaching activities through online coaching. The purpose and objectives of the study circumscribe to the following purposes: e-learning support for the students in the teaching practice probationary stage experimenting the teaching act for the first time, involving students in the exploration of certain resources, activities, online services and instruments, created especially for them and for a successful teaching, the facilitation of students' participation in the virtual discussions on the Moodle platform focused on case studies taken from their teaching practice and common analyses based on the video registrations from the teaching practice.

II. METHODOLOGY

50 practicing students of the Piteşti University, in the IIIrd year, from the Psychology Faculty and the Faculty of Economic Sciences, also attending psycho-pedagogical studies; 2 trainers/tutors /teaching practice coordinators in the Piteşti University and 1 system administrator, computer-assisted education teacher in the Gh.Asachi Technical University in Iaşi took part in the study.

The engaged methodology is in accordance with the structure of a qualitative research. The following were used as research instruments: the online reflection log for students, the qualitative

observation and the online interview for 6 experts. Through collaborative learning on e-learning support, students developed along with their trainers/tutors a virtual environment of coaching in teaching practice. By means of interactive instruments such as chat-room, forum, instant messages, blog, the e-coaching teaching practice system dynamized and part of the data of this study were collected.

III. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

For the construction and implementation of this pedagogical model, the trainers/tutors designed a weekly e-coaching agenda in teaching practice. The subjects debated with the students in the November 14, 2011 – February 15, 2012 period correspond to the analytical curriculum of the Ist semester teaching practice probationary stage and were organized depending on the needs of practicing students in each phase of the probationary stage:

- Practical manners to fill in the assistance sheet in the demonstrative lessons held by mentor teachers in application school units;
- Practical examples of application of the techniques related to the operationalization of the objectives of specialty lessons;
- Exercises to design and teach specialty lessons;
- Exercises to apply didactical methods by different training sequences;
- Exercises to design and apply didactic materials useful in the teaching act;
- Exercises to design and apply a pedagogical test;
- Procedural aspects of ensuring the didactical principles in the specialty lesson;
- Exercises of collegial analysis of the held lessons /case studies, of model lessons from video files;
- Exercises related to the self-evaluation of students' competences acquired in teaching practice (application of the self-evaluation grid).

The students' participation in the virtual discussions on the Moodle platform were focused on case studies from their teaching practice, on the analysis of video files with teaching practice filming depending on the following **pedagogical indicators:**

- The relevance of the purposes and objectives of the analyzed video lesson
- The argumentative-persuasive power in presenting specialized contents
- The adequation of didactical methods and strategies to the peculiarities of the presented contents
- The quality of the used evaluation methods and instruments
- The valorization of evaluation feedback functions
- The ability to center the didactical process on the pupil
- The ability to stimulate cooperation processes and team work
- The quality of communication techniques with pupils

The students were involved in the exploration of resources stored or recommended with link (*Creativity in teaching, Differentiated education, Gender education*), activities (*homework*), online services and instruments (*online log of reflection on teaching practice*), created especially for them and for a successful teaching. Please find below several significant fragments from the first teaching experiences shared by the students in an e-coaching system (stored in the online log of reflection on teaching practice).

a. „It is wonderful to see how everybody's attention is focused on you...on what you say...I then realized how important is the manner to manage emotions, so that they do not affect your

communication with pupils and allow you to continue teaching what you intended ....” (A.H, student at the Psychology Faculty, IIIrd year)

b. „I taught at the IXth grade the lesson called „Organizations from the external environment". Mostly, pupils collaborated with me during the class and they mentioned practical examples from their real life, which makes me think that they understood very well what I had explained ... I am looking forward to the next semester for me to teach again and I hope that my voice shall no longer get shaky.” (R.B., student at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, IIIrd year)

c. „I taught an interesting lesson called „Body language”, which is largely applicable in day to day life. I informed a lot before making the lesson project. My faculty courses were useful to me, but especially online consultations. What I liked the most was that I had a personal counselor at any time day and night ...because I confess, I raised a lot of questions and I cudgeled my brains a lot during the night...I always found qualified support both on line, but also off line and I felt I was supported from the shadow. The tutor challenged me with some questions on line which were meant to make me think, and then the solutions seemed to come by themselves, because I had proposed them. For instance, to the question „What didactical methods do you have in view for teaching this lesson?”, I suddenly remembered that I had experimented role-playing at the didactics seminar. The tutor confirmed me on the spot that I made a good choice and then a new question followed: „Why did you choose role-playing?” My answer was: because, through the role-playing pupils understand much better the significances of certain gestures, executing them themselves, consciously and carefully, for instance: handshaking in salute, the manner to sit on the chair, the manner to put hands, making eye contact with the dialogue partner, etc.”. (A.G.S., student at the Psychology Faculty III)

d. „I taught together with my good friend and colleague, D., the lesson called “Communication barriers”. We seriously prepared before and exactly shared between us what each of us was to teach. It was a hard work which lasted for one week ...in which we wrote daily for the lesson project, conceived work sheets for pupils, repeated aloud what we were to teach, and timed everything to see if we finish in time ...After D. left, I used to also repeat alone my lesson sequences before the mirror and then connect to the internet to find out from my colleagues and the tutor little secrets of the teaching art. We forgot about one thing: we did not think on how to proceed if pupils would not interact with us, as I found out today on the forum...when a colleague asked the tutor where she was wrong as pupils had not wanted to answer her questions and she had been talking to the walls ...I do not know if we were lucky or it is rather true what our tutor instructs us: if you know what methods to choose so as to focus the teaching on the pupil, your lesson is built easily and circularly around pupils”. (TN, DL, students at the Psychology Faculty, III)

e. „I thought that if I established the lesson plan well everything would be perfect in the classroom. But I was wrong. I taught alone. I had exercised alone at home and I even tortured my mother to assist me as if she had been my pupil. Then, on the internet, I asked the tutor the questions I was worried about and I was satisfied with the answers thus thinking that I hold the teaching secret. I was sure that if I took into account the experiences shared by my colleagues, I do my homework in the weekly agenda and apply the tutor's recommendations in different situations I shall be successful because I was yearning for it. But it was only at the end of the Will lesson that I realized that being a teacher does not only mean to establish some clear objectives to pursue during the lesson, does not only mean to structure the content of the lesson well and allocate time for each moment...Rather, being a teacher means even more than being an orator and an expert of science ...Being a teacher means, first of all, being the parent of each of your pupils, being kind and warm, so that you can establish that invisible thread to your pupils getting you close to them, making you feel their level, their capacities and needs, delicately getting close to their soul and once you gained them on your side they shall accept to go with you on a journey on the knowledge land.”.(T.M.C., student at the Psychology Faculty III).

Also, teaching practice tutors configured an activity report depending on 3 main indicators:

- the analysis of the involvement degree of the students participating in this virtual course
- the analysis of the correction of solving the proposed themes
- the analysis of self-evaluations

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Teaching practice tutors who initiated this pedagogical model were interested in the utility of the initiated model and the direct and continuous feedback received both on the part of students and of colleagues, with expertise in teaching practice. For this reason, the *online interview* with the role of surveying the opinion of 6 experts in education sciences was integrated in the platform.

To the question „*Which are the themes you appreciate as the most important for an e-coaching in teaching practice?*"

the interviewed experts are of the opinion that the important themes whose approach in the e-coaching system would be justified may be:
- School institution and organizational culture of school
- Good practices in designing specialized curriculum
- Good practices in the organization of the didactical process
- Good practices in the evaluation of school results
- Good practices in the evaluation of teaching practice
- Stages in preparing students for teaching practice
- Phases in monitoring the activity of practicing students
- Efficient communication exercises
- Virtual guidance of drafting lesson projects
- Frequent mistakes of students at the first teaching attempts
- Catching pupils' attention throughout the lesson
- Adjustment of the teaching act on the way
- Continuous class evaluation

To the question „*In your opinion, which are those themes which can lead practicing students to performance in teaching?*"
- the interviewed experts estimate that, among the themes that may lead practicing students to performance in teaching, there are the following:
- the stages of systemic designing, of curricular type, of the lesson
- the adequation of teaching strategies to pupils' peculiarities
- the construction and integration of education means in the lesson (including of e-learning resources)
- the assurance of a permanent feedback along the lesson
- the training differentiation and individualization
- the mastering of efficient communication techniques
- interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary teaching
- the organizational culture of the school
- the creative application of didactic strategies focused on the pupil

Among the advantages of implementing the pedagogical online coaching model over the term of the first teaching practice probationary stage, the interviewed experts named:
- the valorization of e-learning for experimenting the e-coaching model in teaching practice;
- increased interactivity and a better communication (mediated by the computer) of students with teaching practice tutors from which students have most to learn
- the formation of the habit to work/cooperate virtually with the colleagues for the valorization of good practices in view of professional and personal development.
- flexibility in time management (both sides, students-tutor);

- the creation of a virtual practical community dedicated to the same purpose and to the same interests;
- monitoring the involved students step by step through verifying the proposed themes and applications;
- rhythmic and sustained interventions of the tutor in favor of satisfying *the needs* to *sound out* teaching by students;
- the resuming of learning situations from the concrete field of practice through the access to the video files filmed during practice for the purpose of learning from mistakes;
- the personal reflection on the student's actions and on the didactical behavior exercised in real time;
- ecological advantage (no paper, consumables are consumed, etc.)

The limits brought into discussion by the interviewed experts regard:
- technical difficulties related to the impossibility (and quality) of connecting to the internet network
- absence of direct interactions with pupils and therefore the absence of the classroom feedback
- dissimulated behaviors of students and/or pupils, when they know they are filmed (the absence of sincerity and naturalness in approaching the didactical act)
- the quality of filmed materials depends on the quality of the registration
- the absence of involving tutors as teaching practice experts in students' filming and therefore the risk that films do not catch the characteristic elements of the teaching exercise
- indirect observation (by means of the webcam or filming) of students' didactical behaviors being shaped
- consumption of time and effort on the part of tutors in preparing the different actions/activities/virtual services
- the absence of the fidelity of the human observer under the conditions of a direct observation, in real time
- increased focus on the satisfaction of pedagogical mechanisms, especially on the functionality of the didactic technology and the minimization of psychological factors, of human interaction
- the transfer in virtual plan of the direct connections with the life of the classroom, of indirect experimental type, reducing the savor and the formative relevance of the approach
- difficulties related to the psychological nature of students (preconceptions, fear, insecurity)

The experimentation of this pedagogical model leads us, the tutors, to an important conclusion: teaching practice trainers exercise complex roles related to the observance and application of quality standards, leading to performance in teaching. In an e-coaching system, trainers closely assist students, correct them in time and offer them the needed resources for the performance of their professional exercise, while continuously challenging them, inviting them to continuously reflect on relevant aspects to revert, correct, grow and even surpass themselves.

This study offers the premises for continuing the started pedagogical experiment and deepening the research during the second stage through reconceptualization and the optimization of the designed model.

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Appendix

Virtual coaching of pedagogical practice - IVPP		
Activity report calculated from the logs of Friday, 9 March 2012, 10:50 PM		
Activity	**Views**	**Last accessing**
Announcements and novelties!	309	Friday, 9 March 2012, 03:56 PM
Adascalitei log	105	Saturday, 3 March 2012, 07:12 PM
Social forum	24	Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 10:45 AM
PEER COACHING AMONG PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE TUTORS	82	Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 10:47 AM
Theme 1		
Log of reflection on pedagogical practice	879	Saturday, 3 March 2012, 07:33 PM
ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXPERTS	171	Saturday, 3 March 2012, 07:28 PM
ANALYSIS OF A TRIAL LESSON	320	Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 06:21 PM
Theme 2		
Grid of the pedagogical practice coordinator. doc	20	Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 06:22 PM
CREATIVITY.pdf	23	Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 06:22 PM
Theme for the week comprised between 9-15.0.2012	290	Monday, 13 February 2012, 02:07 PM
Theme 3		
Log of reflection on pedagogical practice for the week comprised between 16-23 January 2012	82	Monday, 27 February 2012, 11:55 PM
Theme 4		
http://www.unpasinainte.edu.ro/teme/profesorii-modele-in-societate	31	Tuesday, 31 January 2012, 11:57 AM
Good to know for the 2nd semester.doc	13	Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 06:23 PM
PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE IMPRESSIONS	17	Wednesday, 29 February 2012, 06:23 PM

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WTA web traffic analysis

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