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**ONLINE PEER COACHING FOR OPTIMIZING THE MANAGEMENT OF
TEACHING PRACTICE ACTIVITIES**

Mihaela Gabriela NEACȘU, Georgiana DUMITRU
University of Pitesti, Str. Targu din Vale, Nr.1, Arges, Romania
E-mail: mihaela_g_neacsu@yahoo.com, geo_dumitru81@yahoo.co.uk

Adrian ADASCALITEI
Technical University "Gh. Asachi" Iasi, Romania
E-mail: adrian.adascalitei@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The article presents the architecture of a virtual peer coaching system focused on the management of teaching practice activities, which was experimented for 12 weeks by 6 teaching practice tutors/coordinators from important Romanian university centers. The participants in online peer coaching sessions critically and self-critically analyzed their own experiences of coordinating teaching practice and disseminated them on a peer to peer basis within online discussions and personal reflection themes. Also, tutors valorized teaching practice video registrations, as support of the analyses initiated at the level of the collaborative learning online community.*

Keywords: *online peer coaching, management of pedagogical practice activities, professional competences*

I. ARGUMENT

In specialized literature, peer coaching is described as a strategy for professional development, for the optimization of teaching practices, in general. Peer coaching functions rather as a collaborative process of observation, analysis of, and collegial feedback for, practices or behaviors, rather than as a form to evaluate/review them for the purpose of increasing professional dialogue and optimizing the existing professional practices. (Ackland, 1991; Odell, 1990, Perkins, 1998; Showers & Joyce, 1996). In a peer coaching system, teachers share their didactical experience and provide feedback, support and consult with one another for the purpose of refining professional practices or learning new competences. (Dalton & Moir, 1991)

Other authors draw the attention on the fact that in a peer coaching system, a partnership based on equality, trust and respect functions, which supports the mutual collaboration for professional growth, without the will of collegial evaluation.[10] Also, the online peer coaching system favors virtual professional communication and helps in developing a *common language* among tutors, in setting professional principles, in solving and optimizing practical problems, etc.

Starting from these considerations and taking into account our experience in coordinating teaching practice and involving as researchers in educational mentoring, we were inspired and motivated to initiate an experimental model of virtual peer coaching focused on the management of teaching practice activities. The *management of teaching practice* concept designates the complex activity of managing, at the level of the institution specialized in teachers' training, the activities associated to the performance of practical training probationary stages. The specific management of

the teaching practice activity is ensured by each teaching practice tutor / coordinator with the mentoring teacher in the application school units.

The preliminary documentation of the study allows us to underline the fact that the peer coaching professional development system is too little known and valorized in the Romanian educational system. Also, we established that teaching practice tutors/coordinators benefited too little from professional trainings in the field of the management of teaching practice activities.

The virtual peer coaching sessions intended to disseminate, on a peer to peer basis, within online discussions and personal reflection themes, certain concrete situations and practices from the teaching practice probationary stages of students refining and amplifying the managerial competences of teaching practice tutors/coordinators.

II. METHODOLOGY

The participants in this study were 6 teaching practice tutors/coordinators from 6 Romanian university centers, university teachers with an experience of more than 5 years in teaching practice coordination. Tutors developed on an e-learning support a virtual environment of peer coaching in teaching practice. Tutors put in common on line resources and psycho-pedagogical instruments useful in monitoring practical activities and evaluating the performances of teaching practice students, while disseminating on the discussion forum good practices, opinions, suggestions, recommendations for ensuring a high quality management of teaching practice activities. Qualitative research instruments (qualitative observation and the online reflection log for tutors) and interactive instruments to communicate and collect data (chat-room, forum, instant messages, blog) were used.

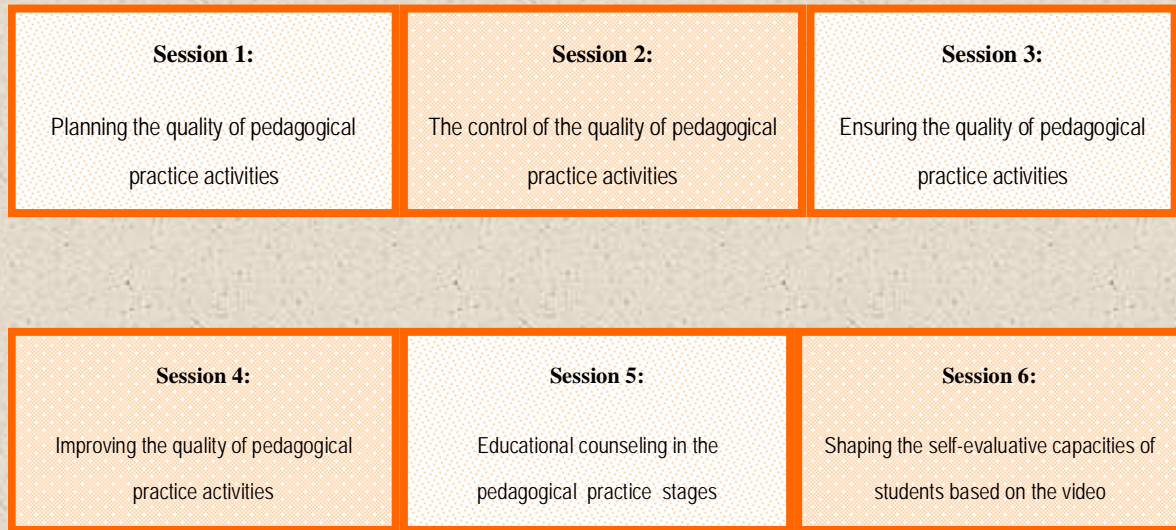
III. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Online peer coaching sessions lasted for 12 weeks (November 2011-February 2012 on the Romanian Moodle platform at the level of the *Virtual coaching of pedagogical practice* course. 6 teaching practice tutors/coordinators in 6 Romanian university centers (*Bucharest University, Pitești University, A.I.Cuza University in Iași, Bacău University, Oradea University, Suceava University*) consented to this project. The participants in online peer coaching activities critically and self-critically analyzed their own experiences related to the coordination of teaching practice and shared their good practices to their partner colleagues. Tutors exchanged psycho-pedagogical instruments, work techniques and procedures which proved to be efficient in coordinating teaching practice and received feedback from their colleagues. Please find below the manner to organize online peer coaching sessions (Figure 1) focused on the optimization of the management of pedagogical practice activities.

The participants in virtual peer coaching sessions went through the following stages:

- accepted to be a member in the online community of peer learning and logged on the platform
- provided their colleagues with important psycho-pedagogical resources they considered useful in the performance of peer coaching sessions
- disseminated relevant practices regarding the management of pedagogical practice activities
- analyzed the internal mechanisms of an efficient pedagogical practice management
- took over and adapted certain managerial practices and applied them in particular situations of pedagogical practice coordination
- analyzed along with their colleagues the feedback obtained further to experimenting new managerial practices in pedagogical practice

Figure 1. Virtual Peer Coaching Sessions [SPCV]



Session 1 virtual peer coaching [SPCV₁]

Tutors reached an agreement as regards the following aspects related to the planning of the quality of teaching practice activities:

- the establishment of the strategic teaching practice objectives and their communication to practicing students
- the specification of targeted competences, of criteria and forms for evaluating teaching practice
- the definition of the main practical activities meant to support the strategic objectives of teaching practice
- the establishment of the relationship between these designed activities
- the clarification of the roles of the actors involved in teaching practice (mentor, tutor, students, pupils) and the organization of the teaching practice group;
- the estimation of the terms for finalizing each (main and secondary) activity
- the identification of the resources necessary to perform each designed activity
- the verification of the deadlines and the modification of the action plan so that there is sufficient flexibility
- the SWOT analysis of teaching practice (at the end of the probationary stage).

Session 2 virtual peer coaching [SPCV₂]

Tutors analyzed the conditions of meeting the requirements of teaching practice quality and underlined that an efficient control involves not only efficient methods and techniques to measure teaching practice results, but also operative actions to correct/review, on the way, the deviations from the initially established action plan. The following question was addressed at this peer coaching session: *Who exercises control over teaching practice activities?* Tutors named the main *actors* involved in the control of the quality of teaching practice activities and identified 5 levels of control depending on the degree of responsibility and authority of *actors*.

- the persons in charge with performing the action plan of the teaching practice probationary stage – level 0;
- the mentors in application school units –level 1;
- the tutors in universities - level 2;
- the managers of the university in charge with training the teachers and the managers in application schools - level 3;
- managers of the school inspectorate in charge with mentoring activities - level 4;
- managers in the line ministry -level 5.

Session 3 virtual peer coaching [SPCV₃]

Tutors underlined that the assurance of the quality of teaching practice activities supposes the generation of trust in satisfying the requirements related to quality at a macro and micro level:

- the general management of teaching practice, the internal management of the school activity, the particular management of the classroom of pupils;
- the management of didactical and educative activities (the quality of notes in teaching practice notebooks, the quality of students' lesson projects – the adequate endorsement by the mentor, the quality of work sheets with pupils and of the evaluation tests conceived by students – the adequate endorsement by the mentor, the quality of the various psycho-pedagogical instruments used by students-recommended by tutors: *the observation and analysis sheets of the lessons taught by students, grids for the evaluation/self-evaluation of the didactical behavior of the student at the trial/final lesson, the grid for the periodical evaluation of the performances of the practicing student, questionnaire for evaluating students' perception on the mentor's activity, questionnaire for evaluating pupils' perception on students' activity, etc.*)

Session 4 virtual peer coaching [SPCV₄]

Tutors agree that the improvement of the quality of teaching practice activities is a continuous process supposing the increase of the capacity to satisfy quality requirements. Practicians recommend periodical meetings between the managers of teaching practice activities and the beneficiaries thereof, for giving feedback. Tutors believe that focus must be on self-control and the periodical review of performances.

Session 5 virtual peer coaching [SPCV₅]

Tutors identified the main stages of students' educational counseling and underlined their importance during the teaching practice probationary stage:

- the existence of a program of pedagogical consultations for the students who will hold trial/final lessons
- systematic support in designing lessons, in filling in the teaching practice notebook, other sheets necessary to teaching practice activities
- explanations offered to students based on models to organize/hold different lesson types
- facilitation of the students' access to the use of various didactical materials necessary to hold lessons
- explanations regarding the importance and the manner to fill in psycho-socio-pedagogical sheets: pupil's sheet, classroom sheet
- examples of psycho-pedagogical counseling and professional orientation of pupils
- common analyses with students based on written notes or video registrations for finding ways to optimize future activities.

Tutors debated the advantages and the disadvantages of teaching practice filming and submitted to the analysis certain didactical behaviors of students. Tutors underlined the importance of shaping self-evaluation capacities upon the development of students' metacognition through involving them in the self-reflection of practical activities, of experiential learning processes and, implicitly, in the reflection of the obstacles they encounter everywhere in their training process for the didactical career. Also, tutors carried on line discussions based on grids for the self-evaluation of the competences acquired by students at the end of the teaching practice probationary stage and analyzed the concrete manners to fill them in by students.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary results of experimenting the online peer coaching model focused on the optimization of the management of teaching practice revealed the advantages of common professional approaches built on the principle of the group cognition of all participants regarding the managerial strategies to make teaching practice more efficient. An electronic database for teaching practice was formed and the premises of a future research project regarding the optimization of teaching practice, assisted by computer, were created. These results constitute important anchors for continuing and extending research through the opening and flexibilization of the virtual environment of collaborative learning in a peer coaching system and with other tutors (in the country and abroad), interested in transferring from the professional competences to other colleagues wishing to perform in the management of teaching practice activities.

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