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Appreciative Teaching of Social Sciences in Competence Based Approaches to Higher Education

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Antonio SANDU¹

Abstract

In teaching the disciplines in the social-human field, we appealed to the constructionist model of education. In this model, the unity of competence represents a construct resulting from the communicative action as a deliberate act instituted by the stakeholders participating in the social construction of the professional identity. Therefore, such unity is not a given defining abstract itself for a professional activity. Each such unit of competence resulted in a process of negotiation of interpretations on the meaning of the term 'good practice' in a given professional activity. Experimental implementation of certain curricular innovations may constitute an element of added value only to the extent to which this pseudo-experiment takes the form of a process of co-learning and curricular co-construction both in the educational framework, and also for students to acknowledge the partnership in the educational act, and not the magisterial attitude specific to the educational model centred on the teacher.

In this article we present a series of curricular innovations that targeted the expansion of the appreciative-constructionist model of learning as a basis for curricular projection and development. The method consists of using the appreciative inquiry in reformulating the experience of the subjects related to the social reality analysed, and the customisation of different contexts of the social experience.

Keywords: *appreciative teaching, appreciative pedagogy, appreciative inquiry, social sciences.*

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Introduction

The needs identified in students involved in the project "Development of Higher Education based on competences through the improvement of quality and the facilitation of access to study programmes in the fields of Administrative and Legal Sciences – Acronym: DISSAJ, which constituted the institutional framework of implementing innovative elements that fall within this article, have primarily aimed at improving the communication between teachers and students, the increase in the degree of course interactivity, as well as the increase in the relevance of the content studied for the future professional activity of the graduates.

In this article we present a series of curricular innovations that target the expansion of the appreciative-constructionist model of learning as a basis for curricular projection and development. The method consists of using the appreciative inquiry in reformulating the experience of the subjects related to the social reality analysed, and the customisation of different contexts of the social experience.

The appreciative elements represent a transposition in the educational sphere of the appreciative inquiry initially formulated by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), in the field of organisational development. In order to transpose these appreciative perspectives at the level of the theory of adult education and university pedagogy, we need to understand the group of students as a team who are learning, and the educational act from the perspective of the transformational and transactional leadership.

Social construction of professional competences

In teaching the disciplines in the social-human field, we referred to the constructionist model of education. The process of skills training radically differs from the simple process of learning, centred on transmitting information. Through social constructionism we understand a current scientific theory, proposed by Kennet Gergen (2005), which assumes the fact that social reality, as we understand it, is nothing more than the result of negotiation on the interpretations that the individuals, social actors, give to the social phenomena and the social reality they witness. A social construct represents a behavioural interpretative model, which results from a process of social negotiation of interpretation that the members of the community give to an object or phenomenon (Sandu, 2015a). The process of social construction is continuous, being a structured environment of social interaction. A social construct represents the result of a negotiation of the

interpretations on the meaning of a term that occurs between communicative actors of an interpretative community. The subject takes constructs through means of different socialising processes, and transforms them into operational definitions involved in its social action (Sandu, 2015a).

Social construction takes place only in interpretative contexts, and the operational definitions are dependent the context in which they were developed. The constructs, once taken, are perceived as universal, the subject not being aware of the context dependency until after a process of reflection with epistemic value. Good faith is an example of such a construct that should signify the congruence between action and the reasoning of the communicative actor (Sandu, 2015a).

In the light of recent research we have undertaken, we are convinced that this paradigm of social constructionism is convergent to the theory of communicative action proposed by Jürgen Habermas (2000). This semiotical – appreciative – constructionist paradigm allowed us to develop large expansions in various fields, such as philosophy of language, ontology, philosophy of knowledge, social knowledge and cultural anthropology. This theoretical paradigm underpins an educational vision centred on the learning team and the partnership between student and teacher.

The constructionist perspective adheres to a post-Kantian position which states that: what is, is what we can interpret. We know as being real that thing that we can signify, that to which we can assign meaning. From this perspective, the constructionist philosophy of education identifies processes of acquisition of competences with processes of creating meaning. The units of competence encompass both a system of theoretical knowledge and one of practical skills and, in addition, from the constructionist perspective, a competence requires building a meaning of social action that enables the practical implementation of the competence gained in concrete (professional) activity. For example, the transverse professional competence, the application of group networking techniques, learning and exercising roles that are specific to team work through developing abilities of interpersonal communication specific to public administration according to the National Qualifications Framework in Higher Education (from Romania), which comprises a series of theoretical knowledge about the group, the group dynamics and group networking, a series of practical skills such as techniques of verbal and non-verbal communication, assertive techniques, non-directivity as a communicational strategy etc. (Sandu, 2015d). From a

constructionist perspective on the theory of education we show that these competences cannot be applied unless they are convergent to the constructive communicational processes, namely with the particular ways of constructing reality where the units of competence will be implemented. Beyond knowing the significance of the idea of the social group, the competence mentioned will be implemented as long as the future professional reinforces the importance of the group in its professional activity and assigns the group activity, and in general the team work, a value which becomes an operational value for its professional activity (David & Mircea, 2015). Without this fundamental axiology, the unity of competence fails to be synthesised, the student not being able to correlate the theoretical perspective with the practical skills involved.

In this model, the unit of competence represents a construct resulting from the communicative action as a deliberate act established between the stakeholders who participate in the social construction of the professional identity. Therefore a unit of competence is not a defining given abstract for a professional activity. Each such unit of competence has resulted in a process of negotiating the interpretations on the meaning of the term of good practice in a given professional activity. For example, the unit of professional competence *the management of activities specific to the field, while respecting ethics and professional deontology*, -included in the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education from Romania – should be, at the same time, compatible with the Occupational Standards specific to each of the occupations to which the graduates of the Public Administration programme have access. Analysing the mentioned occupational standards, we find that these – one way or another – refer to the need for an ethical behaviour and the obligation of respecting deontological standards specific to each of these occupations. Practically, in order to build this unit of competence, we will have to facilitate the student with developing certain cognitive and operational mechanisms that would stimulate ethical reflection and would facilitate the understanding of the process of ethical decision, both of the individual, as a professional, and of the social at the level of the responsible organisation.

The subject *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration* is one of the most important disciplines in the current context of the issue of public administration, since, besides current issues, the public servant must also manage the lack of trust of the citizens in the state institutions (Sandu, 2015b).

Professional ethics and transparency in public administration should have the status of a fundamental and compulsory discipline, and not a complementary and optional discipline as it is currently, included in the curriculum of the public administration specialisation.

We mention this because it is the discipline that best enables the acquisition of the skills of *management of specific activities in the field*, while respecting ethics and professional deontology. Although other disciplines tangentially reach this competence also, the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration* taught in the programme of public administration – in a modern way, enables students to gain an understanding of the ethical climate necessary for the functioning of public administration, as well as the ethical demands of a knowledge-based society. In teaching this discipline in both normal and distance learning, we tried to help students form the skills listed in the discipline requirements, amongst which we mention:

- describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in the organising and functioning of administrative structures;
- formulating hypotheses and putting into operation key concepts and the fundamental principles for explaining and interpreting processes and phenomena that the administrative system confronts;
- the management of activities specific to the field, while respecting ethics and professional deontology;
- use of basic knowledge for explaining and interpreting phenomena processes in public administration;
- using instruments and modern methods of management and human resources management, within the code of conduct of the public servant;
- using standard criteria and methods of evaluating managerial processes in public administration and the performance of public servants;
- diagnosing the management and the human resources management in public administration, as well as the supervision of implementing the recommendations.

As well as the professional competences specific to the field of public administration, in constructing the discipline, we aim to develop a new series of transversal competences: fulfilling in term, rigorously, efficiently and responsibly the professional tasks, while respecting the ethical principles and the professional deontology, applying the group networking

techniques, learning and exercising the specific roles in team work, through developing interpersonal communication skills.

Appreciative teaching of social-human disciplines

Appreciative inquiry is built on the assumption that any Organisation – including a group of students – is an arbitrary social construction, whose limits are only drawn by human imagination and collective will (Sandu, 2012b). Bushe (2010) considers that language and words represent the basis of social life, in accordance with the postmodern (Derrida, 1997) and the social-constructionist vision of language, seen as an active agent in creating meanings. Therefore the theory, particularly the social one, which is encoded in words or images, has the power to shape social organisation since “what we see is what we believe”. Since we desire the change within an organisation, we aim to redefine the way in which its members explain values which lead to success. In an educational context, we aim to change the interpretative paradigm of the very act of learning, through shifting from the traditional model of teacher-student relationship or master-disciple type, to a model of expert student. Change is therefore seen, in the first place, as a change in the attitude of the members that define the organisation and are part of it – in this case the group of students. Change can be achieved through the alteration of “histories” or “stories” that informally circulate, usually in small groups, confidentially, and cannot be discussed in official meetings (Sandu, 2015b).

Appreciative pedagogy is based on a semiotic analysis of meta-discourses on knowledge, learning and education. In each such organisation, the individuals create a set of stories that reunite what is called organisational culture (Plugaru & Ponea, 2010). Reading these stories in appreciative terms, aims at emphasising successful elements, the moments of appreciation and valuing of personal meanings, of the organisational experience. The culture of an organisation is connected to such successful moments, remarkable people, moments of valuation when the degree of satisfaction of the individuals who are part of the organisation, models and moments of success in the life of the organisation that are intended to be transmitted in the further activity of the organisation (Ponea & Sandu, 2011). Bushe (2010) considers that the great promise that appreciative inquiry does is to offer the organisation a moment of self-support through the upgrading of the values already existing in the system, values that have created superior performance (apud Cojocaru D., 2004). Social learning lies in the collective interaction in

the process of acquisition of competences, a co-construction of reality, the appreciative inquiry is therefore based on an interrogation on the strong points of the system and their understanding, the prediction and maximisation of the creative potential (Sandu, 2015b).

An original contribution to the development of the course of *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration* consists of using the method of appreciative teaching (Sandu, 2009; 2010a; 2010b; Sandu & Ponea, 2012). The method consists of using appreciative inquiry in reformulating the experience of the subjects referring to the ethical subject analysed and the particularisation of the context of didactic discourse on the subjective experience of the students. In the context of the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration*, we introduced the idea of appreciative ethics as a particular form of ethics of virtue, requiring students to identify models of good practice in the implementation of ethics in public administration (Sandu, 2015b).

The didactic projection for the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration* takes into account the specifics of constructionist learning centred on competences. Therefore skills development in students is the result of a constructive-reconstructive process. In the structure of the discipline *Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration*, we have included content such as:

- Conceptual delimitations. Ethics and professional deontology;
- Moral consciousness and social interaction. The relationship between ethics – public administration;
- Fundamental ethical values: responsibility, autonomy (self-determination), justice;
- Derived ethical values: social justice, equity, confidentiality, integrity, transparency;
- Principles and ethical standards in professional practice. Codes of ethics. Ethical conflict;
- Ethical culture, factor for optimising the professional activities of the public servants;
- The policy of ethics and transparency in public administration;
- Appreciative ethics in Public Administration;
- Ethical expertise in public administration. Counselling of ethics/ Discipline commissions;
- Ethics audit.

The ethics of public policies, formulated in course units for normal and distance learning, each contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge and practical abilities sustainably involved in units of professional and transversal competence of the discipline, especially in specific professional competence entitled *Management of Specific Field Activities, while respecting ethics and professional deontology*.

Although the traditional specific of the course is an expository one, we preferred to approach a method of co-construction of ethical competencies through methods that place the accent on learning through experience, learning in teams and appreciative andragogy. Appreciative andragogy has previously been systematised (Sandu, 2009).

Formulating certain directions/objectives of action with a plan of action for continuous improvement of the curricula of the discipline: Professional ethics and transparency in public administration, in the course activity for both normal and distance learning.

Table no. 1 – Action plan for the improvement of the curricula of the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration*, for the course activities for both normal and distance learning

Courses of action:				
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Permanent update of the contents of the discipline; 2. The student-teacher relationship as an educational partnership; 3. Deepening appreciative andragogy in teaching the discipline 				
No	Objectives (O) that contribute to the materialisation of the directions of action	Actions/ activities that are meant to contribute to achieving objectives	Resources, tools, techniques, necessary and useful methods for fulfilling the activities	Additional observations (if necessary)
1.	O1. Continuous documentation regarding the current ethical theories in the field of social ethics referring to the ethics in public administration and the ethics of social responsibility	<p>A1.1. Consulting the literature available in IDB</p> <p>A.1.2. Developing and publishing certain theoretical and research articles targeting the latest insights into ethics</p> <p>A.1.3. Improved support material through publishing new editions of the volume <i>Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration</i></p>	<p>- Anelis access, available at: http://www.anelis.ro/summon/; and through the USV library</p> <p>- resources necessary for publication, including covering the costs for publishing and participation in conferences</p> <p>- collaboration with a CNCS acknowledged publishing house</p>	

2.	O.2. <i>Continuous development of the educational partnership</i>	A.2.1. <i>Publishing a new edition of the sociology and ethics seminar (Sandu, 2014; 2015e)</i>	- <i>collaborating with a CNCS acknowledged publishing house</i>	The volumes include a series of papers of applied research carried out by students coordinated by myself accompanied by a number of appreciative perspectives that highlight the elements of added value by the students in the learning process through research, and also of the systematic ways of improving the theoretical reflection and the methodological instruments
3.	O.3. <i>The implementation of appreciative andragogy as a way of developing courses for the discipline Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration, as well as units of learning for the same discipline</i>	A.3.1. <i>Appreciative exposure</i> A.3.2. <i>Learning by discovering (research);</i> A.3.3. <i>Emphasising the appreciative experiences in learning</i>	The course <i>Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration</i>	The method consists of using appreciative inquiry to reformulate the experience of the subjects referring to the ethical theme analysed and the particularisation of the context of the didactic discourse on the subjective experience of the students. In the context of the discipline "Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration" we introduced the idea of appreciative ethics as a particular form of ethics of virtue, asking students to identify the models of good practice in implementing ethics in public administration

In the context on the discipline *Elements of Sociology and Logic* (Sandu, 2015a), the course was structured in a unitary manner so that both the elements of sociology and logic could be significant for the professional future in public administration. Teaching the improved curricula for the discipline *Elements of Sociology and Logic* allows future students to create significant competences regarding the understanding of the social context of the functioning of public administration, including the dynamic of the functional, namely the dysfunctional bureaucracy. Therefore students can create an integrated vision between the elements of normativeness studied in the disciplines with a legal character, and the ones referring to the strategic action studied in the economic disciplines. The sociological perspective doubled by the communicational one (Hatos, 2014) allows students to

understand social action as a particular form of administrative activity and the way in which different types of action can be integrated as communicative action.

Appreciative seminars

During the seminar of the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration* both for normal and distance learning there were developed a series of improvements to the curricula for a greater compatibility of knowledge and abilities gained by students with, specifically, the competences regained in the National Council for Research in Higher Education (CNCIS).

In particular, an improvement of the activity of the seminar is found in the approach of the appreciative constructionist perspective that, in the DISSAJ project, represented a self-assumption regarding the development of innovation in educational technology.

Designing seminars was done starting from the constructionist and appreciative approach of teaching philosophy (ethics) and of social sciences that we theorised in a series of previous articles (Sandu, 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Sandu & Ponea, 2012).

The development of the seminars was based on their approach from the perspective of the model of a philosophical café, as a specific form of philosophical practice. The difference in the classic model of the philosophical café is reporting the discussions to the content of the philosophical, social or humanist discipline, and the bibliography recommended in the course.

The idea of appreciative seminars starts from our idea on education which we see as a partnership between the student and the teacher, based on reducing the inequalities of power and the social distances between the partners of the educational act by changing the orientation of the didactic communication from the difference in the volume of knowledge to the inherent equality in creative potential and the inherent ability to generate efficiency and efficacy in different acts of expertise of each of the partners in education. Appreciative seminars are a branch of andragogy which we developed starting from identifying the inherent positivity of educational communication and the mutual transformation of the resources of both partners through stimulating collaborative creativity.

Education is not only an act of discovery done by students under the guidance of the teacher. Rather, it can be seen as a research (inquiry) and as

a celebration of discovery (called by us “research as celebration”). Stimulating the interrogation potential of the students takes into account the principle according to which the development of a system is privileged in those areas in which the interrogations are formulated (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987). The construction of appreciative seminars starts from the identification of the areas of maximum creativity of students and the co-transforming potential, being less relevant than the quantity of knowledge actually transmitted during the educational process (Sandu, 2010).

Identifying the positives in knowledge takes the form of successful experiences in collaborative learning through identifying successful moments in learning and the awareness of the strategies that lead to this success and the way of transposing the successful strategies into further acquisition of other competences. The process aims to transfer the successful strategies into learning as they are identified in different learning situations, and their reconfiguration into new formative contexts. We therefore aim to transform a group learning task into an opportunity for constituting the learning team which we consider specific for the civilizational paradigm of a knowledge-based society.

Eliminating the formal specifics of the educational process can be done through “playful learning” or appreciative “learning as celebration” and “festival of discovery”.

The model of appreciative seminars aims to constitute the best possible framework for self-development of the creative potential both of students and teachers. We aimed to introduce the appreciative methods in education as collaborative centring on the task, as identification of the most motivating tasks for a student to achieve in a team, followed by the appreciative referential of other colleagues as underlining the successful elements of the team’s innovation and originality and, not least, of the transformation of the potential of knowledge in a system of gained competences.

Another specific of the appreciative seminars is the request for repositioning from the elements of knowledge already acquired (reframing), focusing on different meanings of the symbolic elements and the overcoming of the limiting interpretative conventions for knowledge in a certain direction.

The opening pretext of the collaborative research can be appreciation and systematic analysis of a social, political event, but also the movie analysis, jointly elaborating an essay, a micro-research.

Another appreciative element aims to encourage the exploration of the elements of novelty considered by the participants in the educational act as being meaningful in terms of previous experiences. In this regard, the pretext of the development of the appreciative seminar consists of an element of everyday experience in which the learning team and any of its members has previously acquired a success, therefore creating a motivating context for learning.

In general, the themes of the appreciative dialogue start from the proposals of the students, and the dialogue is oriented towards discovering innovative and appreciative elements that the students claim as being their own.

Formulating action directions/objectives with a plan of action for continuous improvement of the curricula of the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration*, at the seminar activities both for normal and distance learning.

Using the method of appreciative teaching represents an original contribution to the development of the seminar of *Elements of Sociology and Logic* that we grounded in different papers published and presented in the country and abroad (Sandu, 2010; 2011; Sandu & Ponea, 2012). The method consists of using appreciative inquiry in reformulating the experiences of the subjects referring to the social reality analysed and the particularisation of the different contexts of the social experience. In the context of the discipline *Elements of Sociology and Logic*, we structured the seminar in a unitary manner, so that both the elements of sociology and of logic would be significant for the future professional in public administration.

In the programme titled “Development of Higher Education based on competences through the improvement of quality and facilitating access to study programmes from the fields Administrative and Legal Sciences – Acronym: DISSAJ” were made a series of improvements of the curricula for the discipline *Political Sciences*, the course activity in the meaning of concrete explanations of the explicitness of the adequacy between the contents studied at the seminar and the units of competence. Thus, each unit of competence was assigned a series of didactic contents as seminar themes and of certain tutorial activities and themes of control. This adequacy was transposed in a more efficient structuring of the seminar topics and the moments of conducting seminar activities. For example, subject *C1. Object and issue of Political Sciences* contributes to the formation of the following units of competence: *C1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures*

used in organising and functioning administrative structures and CT.2. Applying techniques of group networking, acquiring and exercising roles specific to team work through the development of the abilities of interpersonal communication.

Further development of the seminar activities will take into account all units of competence described in CNCIS for the discipline *Political Sciences* both for normal and distance learning.

We will further illustrate the way of adequacy between the contents of knowledge and the practical abilities transmitted, and the units of competence to whose construction these contributed.

C1. The object and issue of Political Sciences – contributes to the formation of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures, and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

C2. Politics. The purpose of politics – contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures, and C.5.3. Selecting principles and methods with the role of solving the issues specific to organising events.

C3. From politics to public policies – contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures, and C1.2. Formulating hypothesis and operationally key concepts and the fundamental principles for explaining and interpreting the processes and phenomena that the administrative system is facing.

C4. Power. Types of exercising power – contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures; CT1. Fulfilling in rigorous, efficient and responsible terms the professional tasks, while respecting the ethical principles and the professional deontology and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

C5. History of political ideas – contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories,

methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and C5.3. Selecting principles and methods with the role of solving issues specific to organising events.

C6. The birth of democracy in ancient Greece - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

C7. De civitate dei. Medieval political philosophy - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

C8. Nicolo Machiavelli. The genesis of political realism - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

C9. French revolution. Liberty, equality, fraternity - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and C5.3. Selecting principles and methods with the role of solving issues specific to organising events.

C10. Max Weber. Politics, vocation and profession - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

C11. Models of political relationships. Model of conflict. Model of cooperation. Rule of majority. Limits of the aggregates of preferences - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1.

Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and C5.3. Selecting principles and methods with the role of solving issues specific to organising events.

C12. The theory of communicative action and the public sphere - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

C13. Political order. Democracy and constitutionalism - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures and C5.3. Selecting principles and methods with the role of solving issues specific to organising events.

C14. Separation of powers within the State. The State of law - contributes to the development of the following units of competence: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures; CT1. Fulfilling in rigorous, efficient and responsible terms, the professional tasks, while respecting the ethical principles and the professional deontology and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities.

In the context of implementing the seminar of Political Sciences, the debates held gave the opportunity for peer evaluation, the students self-evaluating and evaluating their colleagues starting from a series of instructions received from the teacher. The peer review in the debates constituted a strong form of formative assessment which allowed us to implement the co-construction of the units of competence in the process of constituting the learning teams.

The most important direction in which the curricula were improved for the discipline *Political Sciences* was introducing certain appreciative elements in seminars.

The transformational perspective was manifested especially at the level of communication between the student and the teacher who aimed to create an empowerment at the level of the group of students. It was intended to make the students realise their nature as agents of the educational act, decreasing the passive reaction in the process of formation and development. The student who listens to a professor presenting, or even another colleague presenting, a paper is replaced with the student who actively presents a series of contents chosen from the seminar curricula of the discipline, but on which he has informed before, in a team, either previously or during the seminar. In this regard, we bring to the discussion the presentation of the idea of soft power which was done through identifying online certain existing projects at the level of the international organisation, or even the European Union, accessing the links: <http://www.fundatia.ro/>; <http://www.icr.ro>; <http://infoeuropa.ro/>.

Applying the Mosaic method in identifying Soft Power aimed at achieving, on groups of students, a qualitative analysis of the programmes whose purpose was to observe the elements of Soft Power that underlie the elaboration and the implementation of those programmes. It therefore developed the ideas of both learning teams, and of a specific form of learning through discovery and the superior correlation through learning through research (Nye, 1990). The knowledge of Soft Power (Nye, 2004; 2011) correlated with the abilities in concretely identifying the elements of Soft Power which lead to the establishment of the competences: C.1.1. Describing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures; C5.3. Selecting principles and methods with the role of solving issues specific to organising events and CT2. Applying techniques of group networking, learning and exercising roles specific to work teams, through the development of interpersonal communication abilities (Sandu, 2015c).

For example, we presented the sequences of implementing the curricula from the seminar of *Political Sciences* entitled: **Soft Power**.

The moments of implementing the curricula were the following:

- Introductory Moment. In this step, we created with the students an icebreaking method called: The method of compliments. The students were asked to come to the front one by one, their colleagues complimenting them, starting with the appreciation of certain intellectual and psychic qualities they have proved over time.

- Collective discussions (Mosaic) – defining the term “Soft Power”. In this step, the students were invited to organise in groups of 4 or 5. Each group would have to formulate a definition for the following terms: Power; Influence; Manipulation; Persuasion.
- Case study – “Soft Power”. The influence of the SOROS Foundation for an Open Society. In this step, the students were asked to divide into groups of 4 or 5. Each group was asked to identify online, using the wireless access devices, laptops, mobile phones etc., at least two of the programs developed by the SOROS Foundation for an Open Society in Romania (Worksheet). They could use as a resource the website <http://www.fundatia.ro/>. Each group was asked to argue for or against, regarding the character of soft power in the activity of the SOROS Foundation for an Open Society in Romania.
- Debate – “Soft Power” versus Strategies of Force in International Relations. In this step, the students were asked to separate into 2 groups. The first group had to argue the nature of soft power of the European programs from ERASMUS+ that are developing at the level of the European Commission and the EU member states, and the second group had to argue the nature of soft power of the Operational Sectorial Programme for the Development of Human Resources (POSDRU). Each group had to present the arguments referring to the strategies of Soft Power in the EU with referral to the programmes they had to analyse. The members of the opposing groups had to address at least 5 clarifying/problem raising questions to the representatives of the other group. Starting from the argument itself and the answers, there were established at least 3 arguments that would cause problems to the opinions of the other group. The representatives of each part answered the arguments of the opposing group, supporting their own point of view.
- Practical works – The analysis of the ICR functioning as International “Soft Power” strategy in Romania. In this stage, the students were invited to divide into groups of 4-5. Each group was asked to identify online, using the wireless access devices, laptops, tablets, smartphones, at least one cultural program developed/financed by the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) and argue the existence and non-existence of the elements of soft power in this

program. They had to use as a resource the website <http://www.icr.ro>

- The systematisation of information; at this stage, the students were invited to summarise the content of the seminar and reformulate the conclusions referring to the following topics: defining the term “Soft Power” and the exercise of soft power in different states or supra-state and/or trans-national organisations.

Students were at first reluctant about the idea of Soft Power which they considered as being a strategy of manipulation located in the arsenal of corrupt politicians. As the workshop developed, they understood the meaning of the idea of Soft Power and of the strategies of communication especially in international relations, noting that the strategies of Soft Power may lead, in the long term, to a decrease in international conflicts and the more emphasised integration of the member states of the European Union, becoming aware of the risks of losing their own identity in the case of adhering without judgement to values that come from other cultures.

We held, in the same constructionist-affirmative perspective, the seminars of the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration*, on the topic *Ethics and Organisational Culture*.

The curricula were implemented as follows:

1. Introduction. In this stage, we did an icebreaking task with the students, called *The Method of Compliments* with the role of familiarising the students with the appreciative practice and to develop competences of cooperation and team-work. The students got involved in this exercise and were very receptive.

2. In the second stage, we presented the students with the following content: Organisational Culture: Mosaic method. The students were invited to present elements that are specific to the student organisational culture that they, as members of student organisations, have received. In case the students were not members of such organisations, they were invited to present a few elements from their own organisational culture as students.

3. The students were presented with the idea of a Philo Café, and then they had to develop a Case Study – organisational culture in public administration, followed by watching a multimedia resource referring to the implementation of ethics in the organisational culture.

4. In this stage, referring to the importance of transparency and responsibility in the development of an organisational culture in public institutions, the students were invited to a debate starting from the

fragments contained in the worksheet. This worksheet contained excerpts from the paper Sandu, A. & Caras (Frunza), A. (2014). Some Considerations on the Construction of Ethics Policies. Shared Ethics and Communicative Action. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 149, pp. 846-854.

In the stage of systematising information and conclusions, we invited students to synthesise the content of the seminar and draw conclusions referring to the following topics:

- Defining the term 'organisational culture';
- The ethical characteristics of an organisational culture;
- Organisational culture in public administration;
- The importance of transparency and responsibility in the development of an organisational culture starting from the worksheet.

We aimed to apply, in this seminar, the appreciative principles, outlining mainly the merits of the students. The subject proposed gave us our own reading of the issue, developing a series of considerations on the topic which, although are not included in the content of the seminar, may bring clarifications to the subject mentioned.

Appreciative evaluation as a form of formative evaluation

The evaluation of the degree to which the students have acquired knowledge referring to the ethical dimensions of the administrative activity are based on a component of appreciative evaluation. Appreciative evaluation seeks the positive elements with transforming potential existing in the student's speech, and the added value, avoiding focusing on mistakes. Being an instant performance evaluation, and not of the competences resulting from completing the discipline, the results of the evaluation attest to the understanding of the students of the contents and the beginning of the process of internalising the knowledge and skills in the purpose of transferring them into units of competence (Clipa, 2015a, 2015b). As such, we consider it useful to develop the evaluation through the *Methodology of Appreciative Evaluation* (Rogers & Fraser, 2003; Kung, Gilles & Hagan, 2013).

Stefan Cojocaru (2008) shows that appreciative evaluation constitutes a field that has developed in recent decades and attracts a large number of researchers for the consolidation of the corpus of models, theories, research methods and techniques of data collection used to develop certain appreciative evaluations.

Referring to programmes in general, Stefan Cojocaru (2008) states that: “The most meaningful ways of evaluation are given by a series of definitions that aim to relate both the purposes, utility and results with the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data”; thus, “evaluation represents the systematic collecting, analysing and interpreting of information on the activities and results of the program, in order to enable the interested persons to make judgments on certain specific aspects of the program and to improve the program” (Patton & apud Mățăuan, 1999, pp. 63-64). In this context, we consider that the definition can be translated in the educational plan as an analysis of the relationship between the educational objectives and the curriculum content, and between the educational objectives and the curriculum content reflected as competences acquired by students.

Starting from those mentioned by Professor Stefan Cojocaru (2008), we support the distinction between formative and summative evaluation (Scriven, 1967) according to which the formative evaluation aims to improve the educational programme, and the summative’s purpose is the measuring of the performances gained by the students, seen in their acquisitions turned into units of competence.

Formative evaluation is done during the implementation of the educational programme – the period of time of the seminar, including elements that analyse the progress made until the moment of the evaluation, being a form of continuous measurement of the activities” (Westat et al., 2002). We bring into discussion the example offered by Stake, according to which: “when the cook tastes the soup... [evaluation, n.n.] is formative”... and “when the guests taste the soup, this is summative” (Stake & apud. Westat et al., 2002).

We regret that due to the exigencies of the DISSAJ programme, the experience of formative evaluation in didactic activities of appreciative seminars, we had to make notes when it should be shown as elements of added value that the students feel as first-hand experience during the seminar.

Appreciative formative evaluation starts from an educational philosophy according to which the process of evaluation is a particular form of social construction (of negotiating the idea of value in education). If the classic evaluation presumes obtaining objectivity by identifying the existing deficiencies at the discursive-performative level of the student, appreciative evaluation aims to identify the added value that the unit of content brings to

the learning experience of the student in terms of accessibility of its transfer from information/aptitude towards a complex system of competences.

Appreciative evaluations lead to a higher degree of performance, creating the belief that the discipline is approachable, starting from the everyday experience of maximum success of the student in exercising the competences to be acquired.

The evaluation was a formative one and encompassed both the individual activity during class and the final exam at the end of browsing all units of content. Within each unit of content, we added optional learning tasks that facilitated the deepening of cognitive contents and transforming them into competences, through means of learning by discovering and team work. The evaluation criteria considered were the following:

- Knowing main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in organising and functioning of the administrative structures;
- The capacity for formulating hypotheses, the operational key concepts and the fundamental principles for explaining and interpreting processes and phenomena with which the administrative system was confronted; ;
- The ability to manage the specific activities in the field, respecting ethics and professional deontology;
- Clear understanding and explanations in real terms, of the managerial issues in the system of public administration and in accordance with the human resources management, but also with the principles of ethics and professional deontology;
- The capacity to use basic knowledge for explaining and interpreting the phenomena and processes in public administration;
- The ability to use instruments and modern methods of management and human resources management, within the limits of the code of conduct of the public servant;
- The ability to use criteria and standard methods of evaluating managerial processes in public administration and the performance of public servants;
- The capacity for diagnosing management and human resources management in public administration, as well as supervising the implementation of recommendations.

We are facing an ongoing formative-summative evaluation which aims to form the competences following the immediate learning experiences,

the questions referring to the very contents of implementation in this unit of content.

For the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration*, the elements of added value appeared in the students' speeches during the evaluating-discursive moment, namely: experimenting ethics as a communication act and the development of the empathic capacity to establish responsibilities towards one another.

These formative appreciative elements exceed the framework of a multiple choice test evaluation which coincide only partially with the constructionist model of education which we have taken into consideration in projecting the curricula for the discipline *Professional Ethics and Transparency in Public Administration*.

Criteria of appreciative evaluation:

- Knowing the main concepts, theories, methodologies and procedures used in the organising and functioning of the administrative structures;
- The capacity for formulating hypotheses and the operationalisation of key concepts and fundamental principles for explaining and interpreting processes and phenomena that the administrative system is facing;
- The ability to manage activities specific to the field, while respecting ethics and professional deontology;
- Clear understanding and explanations, in real described terms, of the managerial issue in the system of public administration and in accordance with the human resources management, and also the principles of ethics and professional deontology;
- The capacity to use basic knowledge for explaining and interpreting phenomena and processes in public administration;
- The ability to use instruments and modern methods of management and human resources management, within the limitations of the code of conduct of the public servant;
- The capacity to use criteria and standard methods of evaluating managerial processes in public administration and the performance of public servants;
- The ability to diagnose management and human resources management in public administration, as well as supervising the implementation of the recommendations.

The students' maximum receptivity has resulted in interest in the topic *Ethics and Organisational Culture*. By understanding organisational culture as an expression of the dynamic of the existing relationships at the level of an organisation correlated with constitutive values, namely their operational ability.

Maximum grades obtained by students are explained by the particulars of the appreciative methodology in projecting the seminar and the evaluation, which is focusing, in the formative stage, on the development of elements of added value from the previous stage of the student, on their acquisitive system.

Conclusions

The experimental implementation of certain curricular innovations may constitute an element of added value to the extent to which this pseudo-experiment takes the form of a process of co-learning and curricular co-construction both in the didactic framework, and for the students to become aware of the partnership in the educational act, and not the magisterial attitude specific to the educational model centred on the teacher.

Appreciative evaluation does not mean increased tolerance to error, but, on the contrary, the decrease in errors by transforming the evaluative moment in learning by discovering, for example, through self-correcting, the tests based on the scales and explanations of the teacher regarding the correct answers.

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