Strategies for interpersonal and inter-group communication in the educational process: 21-st century skills

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Abstract: This research involves discovering the difficulties in teaching the new generations at university to and how both professors and students can overcome them. The goal is to show that the political, social, economic and cultural situation has changed and for this reason the applied approaches should be much more flexible than before. This research highlights the importance of collaboration, development of literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving in shaping the actions of all the participants in the educational process. This research project analyzes innovative strategies for communication that have the potential to draw young university audiences to follow classes and be more involved in the educational process. We will evaluate the top factors and categorize them based on their usefulness and effectiveness by identifying 21-st century skills and all their subtypes, the specific Bulgarian educational background characteristics. We will eliminate the assumption that all professors and students, living in different periods of time, have the same characteristics. This will allow for more individual consideration of problems for all the key-factors involved in the educational process and may direct future research to these factors' impact. They will be learner-driven. Factory-model or top-down are old stories, part from the past. Global education does not necessarily take place between four walls.

Keywords: communication, education, strategies, methods, development, self-awareness, collaboration.

Introduction

The most effective way to prepare students for real life challenges through education is to implement what is already known. Professors should try to stimulate students to adapt to the fast changing situation, through self-management, non-routine problem solving and to learn in order to produce from sources the necessary information against the set deadlines. The multilingual and multilevel communication changes the perception level of each student. There are four relevant clusters according to 'Literacy in the Digital Age' [1]: digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, high productivity in the classroom, at the university and in the workplace. All of them have subclusters but in general we can put them in the framework: 'educational clusters' characteristics'. The first literacy involves the technological, cultural,

economic and information literacy as well as global awareness. Sometimes, because of family or school environments, students are not eager to admit to some of their 'gaps'. If professors do not discover them, things can become harder at the university and in the workplace. Inventive thinking includes adaptability, flexibility, curiosity, risk taking, decision making. Effective communication should be interpersonal and inter-group, between students in the same class and faculty, between students from different faculties, between students and professors, between students and administrative staff… It involves teaming, collaboration, interpersonal, personal civic responsibility, interactive communication. All the abovementioned will lead to high productivity through priorities', plans', tasks' fulfillment and accomplishment. This research will prove that the use of real-life methods and development of real life skills to communicate efficiently in real-life situations to solve real-life problems is possible by giving relevant practice-driven examples.

First of all, we should start with the definition of some key notions relevant for this paper. This study is based on the issue of communication as an ongoing, ever-changing process of interaction with other people, a dyad, formed of at least two parts. In this case: between students and professors. According to Peter Hartley's interpersonal communication study [2] communication is a "universal notion". There is a variety of definitions of the subtypology called *interpersonal communication*. Hartley says that it is "the communication between one individual and another… […] which is face-to-face" [3]. In the digital age it is not only face-to-face but also technology-based. However, this study will focus only on the direct aspect of interpersonal communication.

Research results

The reflection of the personal characteristics of the individual is very important. But also their social roles and relationships between them. As it happens between persons and not between roles, masks, stereotypes it is relevant to outline the position in which each of the party is. The professor is in the social role of the authority who has power over another person, in this case – over the student. Communication between professors and students can be impersonal, interpersonal or hyperpersonal, following Hartley's model. The impersonal one is when the strong part of the dyad asks questions and does not care about the answer, e.g. 'Do you know when was this book was first published?' and does not wait for receiving any information from the other part. It can be interpersonal when there is an appropriate and adequate level of

communication and each of the parties is contributing to the successful interaction, being as active as possible, or even assertive in some cases, but not passive at all. In terms of hyperpersonal communication, it is not an object of this study as it surpasses the emotion of face-to-face communication due to online communication's influence.

Secondly, we should outline the interpersonal and inter-group characteristics of communication. In this study we will use these notions not interchangeably because of the academic context. By interpersonal communication we mean communication between professors and students and inter-group: within the class or the group, between students. As all types of communication this one also is two-way and there is exchange of messages. One of the issues to be raised is about the passive and active approach. Usually, students tend to develop a passive approach and tend to be passive responders. One of the main goals a professor has is to increase their interest by increasing their level of motivation and transforming them into active responders and collaborators in the educational process.

In order to outline the main charactheristics of both roles – according to the dyad – strong-weak – we need to focus on certain social aspects. The social context, identity, perception, time and place where communication happens. The social context is the academic environment. Identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" [4].

As far as perception is concerned, it will be analyzed later. As for the time and space it is in the 21st century as specified in the title.

This research focuses on the vision of communication as a skilled behaviour. The key concept in this case is *skill*. Following the definition of skill, it is "the representation of the physical behaviour" [5]. Skills can be divided into motor or physical, for example playing sport, and social ones – how to conduct a conversation, to extract information, to interact. This study focuses on social skills and to be more precise: on the social skills' model which can be implemented in the academic context of interaction and interpersonal communication between students and professors.

Michael Argyle talks about the social skills model in one of his first publications dating back from the 1960s research on social skills and behaviour. In the "Experimental Analysis of Social Performance" [6], the result of his work with Kendon, as well as in the "The Psychology of the Interpersonal Behaviour" [7] he outlines the main aspects of communication: motivation, goals,

perception, translation, motor responses and changes in the outside world. The goal in the case of students is to focus on a diploma, to learn new skills that can be useful for realization on the labour market. When the educational process begins, at an academic level, the main goals and sub-goals can be outlined by the professor. Next come the correspondence between students' goals and professors' goals. The way to achieve these specific goals can be shown to students in an appropriate way so that they can be motivated to follow the path.

As far as translation is required we should make it clear what we mean by this notion. According to Harley [8] it is "to choose the correct action to meet the circumstances". Goals vary viewed from students' point of view to professors' point of view. As mentioned before, we have analyzed students' goals. As far as professors' goals are concerned, one of the main is to be seen as an interesting lecturer. The question in this case is how it can happen. Preparation is fundamental. Collecting material on relevant topics, providing examples, giving clear instructions, presenting in an appropriate way are very important aspects. However, it is always crucial to bear in mind the audience. The communication established between professors and students shall be based on perception. The 'strong part' of the dyad should not misjudge the mood, the facial expression, the gestures, the postures, the tone of voice, the mannerisms of the audience. In other words non-verbal and paraverbal communication is essential to the interpersonal relationships established within the communication environment, in this case: the university.

Another important aspect is feedback. Through written requests, inquiries, surveys, polls we can gather information regarding our presentation as lecturers. But we also need to understand from our face-to-face communication whether students are reluctant or willing to learn and why. One question we should ask ourselves is how we can outline students' needs according to the social skills model.

To put it in more practical terms, we can begin with a simplification of students' representation by giving an example with a problem case of a student. Let us say that we have a student who is called Maria. We can start with the goals she has. Perhaps Maria does not have a clear idea of what she is doing, why exactly she is studying at this faculty and how she behaves or does not behave in certain situations. Our role as an academic staff, 'professor, advisor and counsellor' is to try to help her by directing her along the path she has the intention to follow. This happens by asking questions which help Maria in defining the "gaps" she has as for example lack of knowledge and skills. Later, we continue by showing her the tools she can use in order to

understand what she wants and does not want to do. We do it by providing further information on topics that concern her directly, trying to make her feel involved in the whole process, part of the whole, a very important part indeed. As for the perception, Maria may do wrong things at the wrong time simply because she does not know how to behave appropriately, to come to classes regularly, to take notes, to extract information from lectures. Most probably she also shows lack of interest. Of course it may be because of the characteristics of the generation which is not so interested in many issues and takes a lot for granted. But also it is because she may understand what is required from her but does not apply it into practice. Laziness or indifference. We can call this the lack of an eagle/bird's-eye point of view on the situation. As for the behaviour, she does not understand how people, both colleagues and professors, react to her behaviour and continues in the same way. What is our role as professors? To teach her the social skills she needs in order to understand what she looks like according to others' views, how to react in a flexible way according to the circumstances.

Here we may describe the main problem, or one of the most important ones, according to us, in the 21-st century educational process. Students do not have a high level of developed social skills. The solution for this diagnosis: "undeveloped social skills" is to teach them how they can develop the skills they have at a very low level by a variety of training methods we can implement in this situation. Hartley, but also Clark, Philipps and Barker [8] make the distinction between three methods we can apply in the educational process. To put it in a more comprehensive way: these are the thinking, the feeling, and the doing method. The first one is through developing students' thinking through lectures, discussions and talks. The second one is through focusing on their feelings, emotions and reactions. The third one is through teaching them skills by doing new things, making them learn how to work in groups (developing inter-group communication) through role play and case studies. Our opinion is that we can apply all these methods one at a time considering the level of development the audience's skills. The last one, through doing, is the highest level of knowledge that can be reached by students. The first and the second method can be implemented easily, taking into consideration non-verbal and paraverbal communication as well. We can question a lot, trying to extract the information we would like to receive. As far as the types of questions are concerned, they can be open and closed. The open ones are appropriate for uppr-level classes and not for beginners, for students who have a high level of readiness. A question like 'What do you know about Dante's Hell?' can

show the level of preparation of students. But a closed question like 'Do you agree with Dante that there is the existence of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise?' can show how students think and feel about this division of space. It makes communication interpersonal. It is far more personal than it is supposed to be and students are far more prone to think and react. At this moment we use the second method. The last step is to divide them into groups and to organise a role play so that one group is representing Hell, the other one –Purgatory, the third one – Paradise. In this case each group has to think over the characteristics of the three spaces, who can be sent there and what Dante's general idea is. Students should feel free to express their points of view and to 'play' the role of Dante so that they can cooperate with each other and with the professor in the most successful way which is efficient enough. This activity illustrates two main goals. The first one is to teach students how they can develop their social skills through communication with their professor and with the other students (a good strategy for development of interpersonal and inter-group communication) and the second one is to show them that only by using their imagination after adequate preparation can they succeed at university and not on their own can they find countless possibilities, so the solution for any situation, problem, task is not only one.

The congruent presentation of all the activities to be done is very important. To begin with, we should give students clear instructions. A factual opening is the description of what is going to be done. A motivational opening is fundamental: why we should do it. Here a key part of interpersonal communication is that students are not going to do everything alone. They are going to work in groups helped by their professor. In this case their interest is stimulated. They feel free to express but also safe and supported by their mentor, advisor, counsellor: the professor.

The last aspect on which this study will focus are the characteristics of the audience or in other words: the types of listeners. According to Hartley's and also to Bolton's studies [9] there are three types of listeners - the pretend ones, the limiting ones and the self-centered ones. The pretend listeners seem to be attentive but their minds are elsewhere, e.g. in the academic environment thinking of their boyfriends, girlfriends, parents, pets, parties, etc. The limiting listeners focus only on certain topics and later we lose their attention. The self-centered listeners are interested only in their own point of view, this is the only thing that matters and they are a kind of selfish beings who do not care about authority or someone's else point of view like their colleagues' or friends' one. These are the three clusters that are very problematic for a professor. The first step is to try to individualize them. The second one is how we can influence their

perception as in all three cases it is very limited. There is the possibility to add to these distinction a fourth type of listeners: we can call it the actively listening-perceiving listener or the interpersonal listener who not only follows but also cooperates to achieve an efficient educational process. This category of listeners implements the social skills model and has very well-developed attending, following and reflection skills.

When it comes to interpersonal communication, Johari's window is a very good representation of the way people perceive information and understand what they really have in their minds. It is named after the two authors – Joes Luf and Harry Ingham [10]. They divide information in open, hidden, blind, unknown as in the table below:

OPEN/ ARENA	BLIND/ BLIND SPOT
HIDDEN/ FAÇADE	UNKNOWN

The open, or arena, is the things other people know about me and I know about myself. The blind is what others know about me, but I don't know about myself. The hidden information is what I know but I am not ready to reveal to others. The unknown is the information that is not known by anybody but may appear at some point. Our task as professors is to try to develop the open information in students and to diminish the level of blind information for them as they can acquire a high level of self-awareness of their behaviour and develop their social skills in the most appropriate way. Our definition of a socially skilled student is a person who is able to behave in an appropriate way according to the situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study provide some fascinating insights. According to our predictions there are very problematic groups/clusters of students in the academic environment. If we follow the distinction of listeners, we may be disappointed with the current situation due to the influence of information over the digital-age generations. This research and other research to follow will contribute to the definition of the new notion of the interpersonal listener. Through

applying different methods a professor can correspond to the role of an interpersonal speaker who can guide students in different directions, even to the hidden and unknown ones.

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