IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM STUDY ENVIRONMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCES OF HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT SPECIALISTS

Iveta Balode
Information Systems Management Institute, Latvia
E-mail: ivetaisma@inbox.lv

Abstract

Introduction. The article deals with the issue of the organization of hospitality management studies in the critical constructivism environment from the viewpoint of student learning and development of professional competences. Goal. By comparing the study environment, to offer a conception of critical constructivism, which brings into the centre of educational development a personality who is motivated to obtain life-long education. Methodology of Research. In the article, analysis of pedagogic literature is used, a pedagogic research including questioning of students has been carried out in the Information Systems Management Institute, as well as comparison and observation of the pedagogic process has been provided. Results of Research. The methodological foundations of the critical constructivism study process have been outlined, and suggestions for the improvement of the hospitality management study environment have been provided. Conclusions. It is necessary to improve the study environment, paying more attention to the organization of studies oriented to an individual in the context of life-long learning.
Key words: *life-long learning, sustainability, learning skills, personality.*

Introduction

Education is the field of human activity that most directly influences the quality of life, and it is considered to be a process and aid for the development of personality. Education is an individual aid for the development of the professional career and simultaneously also an active process of constructive social interaction (Valbis, 2005). Implementing the study process in higher educational establishments, it would be important to organise the study work in a way that ensures a possibility for each student to reveal their own abilities and improve competences in the context of sustainable development. For sustainable development a sustainable education is necessary as well. The driving force of sustainable development is the attitude and knowledge of the society. Due to this reason learning should be understood as an aid of self development, which provides ever new opportunities for the personality to be realised within the profession and life in general.

Norbert Ropers treats the present pedagogical situation as a conscious look at oneself, the others and the world, which today corresponds to the viewpoint of every human being, in order to promote learning values of life-long education, and the understanding of co-operation and communication within the multicultural information society (Ropers, 1990).

The accession of Latvia in to the European Union in the viewpoint of western tourists serves as an

assurance of quality for a high level of service ensuring of which is expected from tourism and hospitality specialists. Education of average level management and marketing specialists for the hospitality field in the Latvian higher educational establishments was initiated in the second half of 90-ties. Due to this fact, development of theoretically methodological approaches for professional bachelor's study courses is of great importance, including the study course "Hospitality Management" which should foster the development of personality, students creative thinking when taking decisions, and ensure the acquisition of students intellectual, professional and practical competences.

In the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for life-long learning (Brussels, 10.11.2005), the priority change from the transmission of knowledge to the development of alterable skills has been reflected, which prepares young people for life and future education. It requires both different approaches in the organisation of studies and new skills for teachers. The innovative conceptions on which at the present moment scientists and practitioners are working in all education levels are aimed at the organisation of such study process that ensures the possibilities of construction of individual experiences (Tiļļa, 2005).

Due to the influence of the increase of labour productivity and competitiveness factors, hospitality enterprises are ready for changes. The changes shall depend on the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes of the employees, which increase motivation and ensure satisfaction regarding the work and the quality of work. This, in turn, involves more people in sustainable development and democratic citizenship. Besides, in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for life-long learning (Brussels, 10.11.2005), it was indicated that in 2005 only 15% of the newly established workplaces will be appropriate for people with elementary education, but for 50% of the workplaces employees of higher qualifications will be required.

Goal

In order to prepare young people for a successful economical and social integration, Information Systems Management Institute offers to acquire a professional bachelor's study programme „Hospitality Management". One of the goals of the programme mentioned above is to promote the acquisition of the set of students professional bachelor's competences which would ensure the professional qualification competences and foster a creative growth for future and competitiveness in the changing socio-economical conditions and international labour market (Balode, 2007). While reaching the goals, modern pedagogic activities were searched. Due to this reason, a necessity arose to compare the traditional study environment to the critical constructivism study environment from the students point of view.

Methodology of Research

The model of the research has been chosen in relation to the pilot project of the didactical model of critical constructivism in the studies of hospitality management – accepting the opinion that the development of competences may be evaluated only by permanently observing the independent learning of students, as well as by observing how they daily use the critical power of reasoning and the constructive process that includes also the social and cultural environment.

Within the work, qualitative research methods were used, including students survey, observation of the pedagogic process for the comparison of study courses and analysis.

During the research, 60 students of the Information Systems Management Institute were inquired to reveal their evaluations about the bachelor's study courses which they acquire within the study programme „Hospitality Management".

Within the evaluations, 18 questions asked, that allowed to inquire the students attitude and compare the pedagogical activities in the traditional and constructive study environment (see Table 1).

In accordance with the internal logic of the pedagogical research, three methodological approaches were used: empirical, hermeneutical and ideologically critical (W.Klafki, 1992). The empirical approach expresses itself by combining the qualitative and quantitative research. According to the model of research, the hermeneutical method was used for the interpretation of data, but the ideologically critical method, in turn, was used to reveal the ideological layers in student's decisions, as well as for the critical analysis of the study process of hospitality management. The specificity of ideological

Iveta BALODE. Importance of Critical Constructivism Study Environment in the Development of Competences
of Hospitality Management Specialists

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Volume 7, 2008

11

critics as of a method is its orientation towards revealing of such factors that become an obstacles for the opportunities of emancipation in the thinking and acting of the subject, for example, prejudices, stereotypes, etc. In the critical constructivism researches, it is necessary to analyse not only the positive experience of students and the preconditions of gaining it, but also the negative one. The ideologically critical approach can be used by combining it with the hermeneutical and empirical approaches in order to ensure the presence of the constructive aspect.

Results of Research

From the viewpoint of constructivism, learning, communication and co-operation are active processes in which new experience can be gained. It has been researched by the psychologists Vygodsky (Выгодский, 2000), Leontiev (Леонтьев, 1983) and Galperin (Галперин, 1985), emphasising that as the result of activity a connection between the outer subjective world and the inner cognition structures appears. Liev Vygodsky (Выгодский, 1984, 2000) specifically emphasises the cultural environment of learning. To be constructively effective, the studies, co-operation and communication shall be directed to the further development of the subject. It means that students in their study, communication and co-operation environment shall be offered such learning contents that would challenge them and arise interest in them not only ensure the reproduction of the existing knowledge. Imitation does not encourage the students to learn constructively and creatively.

John Dewey (Dewey, 1986) states that activity is the beginning of everything. A human being changes within the process of gaining experience, which usually happens in a certain environment, therefore, when organizing studies, the fact should be considered that knowledge, skills and attitudes obtained in certain situations become an instrument that helps to understand other situations and activities in these situations. This process is life-long.

The results of the survey proved that the youth studying hospitality management are less likely to accept statements that are critically not evaluated and authoritarian, but they are willing to discuss and collect information that might be useful for them, acquire new ways of learning, as well as bear the responsibility for the results.

The comparison obviously shows, that critical constructivism within pedagogy brings into the centre of development a personality who is motivated to obtain life-long education (see Table 1). The answers of the respondents stress the necessity for the organization of a critical constructivism study process, as it provides the opportunity to develop a self-determined study strategy. Self-determined studies are considered to be an independent process of learning or studying in which the subject of learning actively participates by managing and organizing it, as well as by analyzing, researching and evaluating. Self-determined studies are based on a personally important activity and on the setting of aims, and it encourages the ability to mobilise oneself for studies, as the responsibility is to be beared by the students theirselves. The students who seriously plan and organize their studies by critically evaluating both themselves and the faculty, tend to gain personally important learning experience, less complain about overload, badly organized study process or inadequate requirements. Similarly, the students have also pointed out the importance of self-evaluation in the stimulation of their professional and academical growth instead of comparing the study results to the achievements of other students. Frequently the respondents had mentioned the importance of discussions in the study process. Discussion is possible only if equal co-operation exists between the students and the faculty.

Table 1.   Comparison of traditional (1) learning environment with constructivist (2) study environment.

	Questions	Most frequent answers
Aim	(1) How do you evaluate study courses aimed at the acquisition of a specific content?	Certainly, what has been assigned, should be acquired; it is clear what has to be acquired; no problem situations;
	(2) How do you evaluate study courses aim of which is open and important especially for you?	Knowledge is obtained, that helps me perform the necessary tasks; it is possible to share experience among course mates, that encourages thinking; a possibility to expand knowledge;

	Questions	Most frequent answers
Tasks	(1) How important do you consider study courses task of which is to specify several smaller objectives?	Feels fragmentised; it is not possible to analyse all possible situations; it is easier to learn and answer;
	(2) How important do you consider study courses in which demands for the organisation of studies are set basing of you prospective ensuring?	It is possible to listen to others; support can be felt, so that I can learn and develop my skills; complicated , as we have to understand what we will need it for;
Content	(1) How do you evaluate study courses in which the content is strictly structuralized?	There is a lack of topical information; not all topics are interesting and necessary;
	(2) How do you evaluate study courses in which the content is open (an opportunity to offer topics and alternative activities)?	A wish arises to get to know more for ourselves; a student is being listened to; an opportunity to discuss problems and share experience;
Media	(1) Do only teaching aids have to be used while acquiring a study course?	In hospitality management specialities, there is a lack of teaching aids;
	(2) Do you consider that various information sources should be used when acquiring study courses?	Yes, new technologies are of specific importance;
Learning	(1) How do you consider learning that includes knowledge reproduction (repetition to the pedagogue)?	It does not encourage thinking; the obtained information is being reproduced directly; the information has to be learnt by rote;
	(2) How do you evaluate the way of studies where you yourself are responsible for what you are learning?	Thirst for knowledge, insistency arises; necessity to acquire new ways of studies arises; personally useful information is being searched for;
Students attitude	(1) Do you prefer to be passive, directed and controlled by the pedagogue, while acquiring study courses?	Only if the content is boring; in interest has not risen; only if it is not directive control, but a true interest is being shown;
	(2) Do you prefer to be active, directed and co-operate with the pedagogue and course mates, while acquiring study courses?	Only if the pedagogue is co-operative and allows us express ourselves; it is better to work in groups, as then we do not wish to show our laziness to others and we have to brace ourselves up;
Teaching	(1) What do you think about study courses which include teaching – the transmission of the pedagogue's knowledge to the students?	Students interests are not considered; we do not have to spend time in libraries; lots of theoretical contents, few examples;
	(2) What do you think about study courses where the pedagogue organizes the study process and is the advisor?	Opportunities for dialogues; the pedagogue suggests, but does not force; the necessity to acquire new information; the necessity to sort information - what is needed, what is not needed;
Pedagogue's attitude	(1) Do you think that the pedagogue is the one to present the content, to explain it and control?	Yes, it is traditionally accepted; no, it is an outdated way of teaching; of course, everything should be explained;
	(2) Do you think that the pedagogue is the one to organize the study process, encourage thinking, participate, observe and also learn something from the process?	Quite interesting, but such pedagogues are very fiew; yes, then the interest will not get lost;
Evaluation and assessment	(1) How important for you is the evaluation of knowledge by using tests and similar ways of controlling the level of your knowledge?	The pedagogue cannot evaluate me objectively, I better know, what I know; in case I manage to cab, I understand that the grade does not prove anything;
	(2) How important for you is the way of evaluation of knowledge in the learning, co-operation and communication processes and results together, by observing yourselves and self-evaluation?	It ensures the feeling of competition; we feel responsibility for the results;

Consequently, it is important to state and summarise what the differences in the pedagogical process are between the traditional study environment and the critical study environment within the context of development of the competences of the future hospitality management specialists.

The criteria for the interpretation of the answers of the respondents were chosen in accordance

with the understanding of critical constructivism regarding the orientation of the pedagogical and social practices to self-determination, co-determination and solidarization (Klafki, 1992). Self-determination was associated with the development of the personal prospectives of a critically thinking individual, but co-determination - with the prospective of higher school, i.e., the institutional prospective. Solidarization, in turn, was associated with the public prospective in which attitude to public process is built.

The interpretation of the results of the research reveals the advantages of critical constructivism theories within pedagogy, which are discussed by the author:

1. If the **goal** of pedagogic activity is set towards the students responsibility about what they are learning, the study process is organised on the basis of the existing knowledge and the model of information processing by the help of which it is important to acquire various learning strategies that help the students remember and recall the necessary information.

2. In 70-ties and 80-ties, the pedagogical **tasks** did not stimulate personal initiatives and free, individually determined, responsible activities. The pedagogical freedom, in turn, has provided various interpretations of the content of the educational model, in order to allow students acquire general and professional skills within the studies.

3. The **content** of studies is not a closed system, but the interest of students is evaluated and their questions considered. Learning is solution of problems, that have occurred due to discrepancies between what has been and what has not been known before, that motivate students to obtain knowledge, so that they can solve problems that they had not faced before.

4. **Study materials** include initial cognition sources and materials that can be used in the study process. Students evaluate the literature offered by the pedagogue. They get acquainted with the different viewpoints. After acquiring the topic, students summarise the most essential parts, the main concepts of initial cognition. A skill is being developed to find the most important, the most essential information, which means critical thinking.

5. If the pedagogue applies a **learning** model based on a cognitively active mind in contrast of passively adaptive activities, the students learning within the communication and dialogue with the pedagogue is directed towards activation of thinking instead of obtaining some specific knowledge.

6. If the pedagogue by encouraging thinking offers the **students** a choice and responsibility, the perception of knowledge is dynamic instead of inert and tends to change together with the experience. Students themselves process the information in the form they need. They are searching for a subjective sense within the studies.

7. Constructivism ideas can appear in the pedagogical practise also without a tight study plan. **Learning** is solution of problems, and discrepancies between what has been and what has not been known before encourage unpopular and critical viewpoints and doubts; the new experience gained in the study process encourages students to obtain knowledge, so that they can solve problems that they had not faced before.

8. Within constructivism, both students and **pedagogues** have their own new roles apart from the traditional study environment where a pedagogue was considered a distributor of information. The pedagogue has an interactive role based on a dialogue. Students in their relations within dialogue express their evaluations, thus ensuring new experience.

9. In the **evaluation**, the study, co-operation and communication process, the observations, the viewpoints and self-evaluation is included. The process is as important as the end product.

Conclusions

After the comparison of pedagogical activities in the traditional and critical constructivism study environment it could be concluded that acquiring professional study courses in the bachelor's

study programme „Hospitality Management" in the Information Systems Management Institute, main attention should be paid to new models of educational environment.

The study process in a higher educational establishment and the process of further education means a permanent construction of knowledge, using the critical judgement based on rational argumentation. It is an integral part of democratic education. Ensuring of pedagogical attitudes through the critically constructive model of education programmes would foster the improvement of competences of students and pedagogues.

It is frequently discussed about the necessity to improve the skills of employees in order to ensure sustainable development in the economics directed towards knowledge, which is increasingly more based on the service sector, including tourism and hospitality services. Development is an open process which begins with a qualitative elementary education, continues with higher education and passes over to life-long learning. Due to the rapid technological progress, the knowledge obtained in the study process very fast becomes outdated, therefore the content of studies should be frequently revised and improved.

References

Tiļļa, I. (2005). *Sociālkultūras mācīšanās organizācijas sistēma*. Rīga, RaKa.

Balode, I. (2007). Kritiski konstruktīva darbība praktiskajā pedagoģijā profesionālo studiju mācību procesā. *Pedagoģija. Teorija un prakse 5.Rakstu krājums*. Liepāja: LiePA, 199 - 208.

Valbis, J. (2005). *Skolēnu personības attīstība – izglītības virsuzdevums*. Rīga, RaKa.

Eiropas parlamenta un padomes ieteikums par pamatprasmēm mūžizglītībā, Briselē, 10.11.2005

Dewey, J. (1986). *Eryiehung durch und für Erfahrung*, Stuttgart.

Henschel, T.R. (2002). *Dialogische Hahdlungs- und Entsch eidungskompetenzen, Welche Bildung brauchen wir für das Wissensyeitalter?* Retrieved March 05, 2007, from http://eusg.de/admin/upload/artikel1.pdf

Klafki W. (1992). *Grundzüge kritisch-konstruktiver Erziehungswissenschaft*. In: Eryienhung – Humanitat – Demokratie. Erziehungswissenschaft und Schule an der Wende yum 21.Jahrhundert. Neun Vortäge. Tokyo: Eingel. und hrsg. von Michio Ogasawara, 35-53.

Rogers, C.R. (1983). *Freedom to Learn*. New York.

Ropers, N. (1990). *Vom andered her denken. Empathie als paradigmatisher Beitrag zur Völkerverständigung*. In: Reiner Steinweg & Christian Wellmann (Redaktion), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 114-150.

Выгодский Л.С. (1984). *Мышление и речь*. Собр. соч.: в 6 т. Москва: Педагогика.

Выгодский Л.С. (2000). *Психология*. Москва: ЭКСМО.

Галперин П.Я. (1985). *Методы обучения и развития ребёнка*. Москва: изд.МГУ.

Леонтьев А.Н. (1983). *Избранные психологические произведения* (в 2 томах). Москва: Педагогика.

Adviced by Vija Dislere,
Latvia University of Agriculture, Latvia

Iveta Balode   PhD student at Latvia University of Agriculture, Jelgava, Latvia.
Lomonosova Street, 1A, Riga, Latvia.
Phone: +371 29499780
E-mail: ivetaisma@inbox.lv