

CURRICULUM DESIGN IN VIEW OF GRADUATE EMPOWERMENT – COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT: Now, more than ever, knowledge has come to play a key role in today`s fluid, unpredictable and constantly changing and challenging society. However, the acquisition of information that can be stored and retrieved at use does not suffice. Knowledge can only become a strategic advantage if it is adequately shaped, expressed, contextualized and internalized (see Nonaka model). The recent dynamics of the higher education system highlights the key competencies that empower graduates for both real life and the labour market. The present paper shall focus on the communication competency – lately revived to the limelight – given the employer expectations reflected in the questionnaire interpretation. “Knowledge is not power until it is applied” (Dale Carnegie)

1. RATIONALE

The current Romanian Education Law, which came into force in 2011, sets out the vision of “promoting an education focused on values, creativity [...] fundamental knowledge as well as applied knowledge, competencies and skills in view of further use in society and profession.” {art. 2(1)}. Furthermore, its mission is to “train, by means of education, the mental infrastructure of Romanian society, in keeping with the new requirements entailed by Romania`s recent EU membership accompanied by globalization, as well as the sustainable creation of highly competitive national human resource, able to perform efficiently in the current and future society.” {art. 2(2)}[1]

General and subject-specific key competencies endorsed by transversal competencies highlight the ability of graduates to perform an integrative approach to the assigned professional tasks, to communicate their ideas effectively, as well as their willingness and propensity to relate and function properly in a team. Hence, communication competency serves as a common denominator for the right mix of attitude, skills and knowledge that empower an individual in a particular context.

Why Communication Matters Nowadays?

An accurate and thorough approach to communication should highlight its integrative nature and interactive character between its actors. Informed and unbiased knowledge endorsed by enhanced awareness of “otherness” is a prerequisite in a

highly interdependent and borderless world where each participant to the communication process is equally important and can be valued in its particular context. Thus connectivity is a term appropriate not only for the recent development of information and communication technologies but also for the communication process by means of contextualization. [9]

“Four trends combine to usher in a more interdependent future that shapes our differences into a set of shared concerns and a common agenda: (1) technological development, (2) globalization of the economy, (3) widespread population migration, and (4) the development of multiculturalism. Taken together, these dynamics argue eloquently for the development of more proficient intercultural communication.” [8]

Communication is neither an isolated nor a one-way process; on the contrary, effective communication relies heavily on the ability to build bridges, to connect individuals, groups or masses of people instead of emphasizing and deepening the divide. Communication competence enables an individual or a group of people to provide, maintain and ensure smooth and successful interaction, both in intra- and inter-cultural contexts. [6] Moreover, effective communication skills empower individuals both in their personal life and professional development and facilitate the evolution to leadership. The present paper sets forth a model of communication that resembles Nonaka`s knowledge management model, briefly summed up as: Socialization – Externalization – Combination – Internalization. [9]

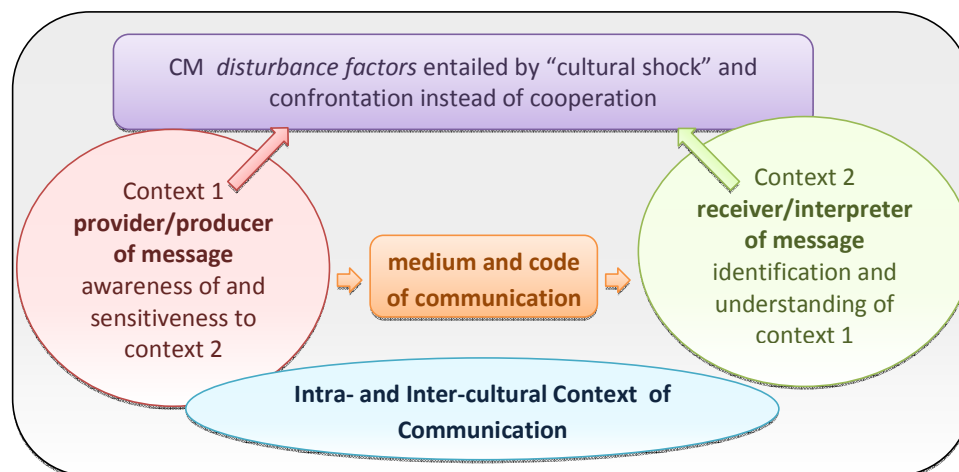


Figure 1. Entrepreneurial University: from knowledge dissemination to knowledge creation

The new model of entrepreneurial university defines a strategic and coherent community of academics focused on the creation of knowledge, fostering innovation as well as empowering graduates with the necessary competencies for dealing with the present and preparing them for the future.

An intensified emphasis on knowledge creation and capitalization will shift the focus on acquiring competencies rather than degrees, such as: entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and interaction, public speaking/the art of argumentation, learning to learn, information literacy, soft skills. Martha Nussbaum calls to our attention and advocates the urgent need of training students with the “skills for life”:

Citizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to those two, is what we can call the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. The cultivation of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of democratic education, in both Western and non-Western nations. [10]

Communication has emerged as a top-ranking criterion for employers in the process of graduate recruitment. „The main aspects that employers are concerned about regarding a university graduate have little connection with his or her academic studies. In a hierarchy of ‘things’ employers look for in a graduate, the first four positions are poorly connected with the academic characteristics: the graduate’s ability to work in a team, to organize his or her work, his or her punctuality, morality and communication skills – with peers, superiors, customers, etc.” [3]

Not only is communication an essential vector for employability but it is also the main criterion for defining a „good teacher” as it emerges from the ARACIS Report on The State of Quality in Romanian Higher Education – Quality Barometer 2010: “In the students’ opinion, communication and dialogue with students, professional qualities and the ability to explain represent, in this order, the basic qualities of a ‘good teacher’. Thus, the pedagogical abilities are emphasized, namely the trainer abilities (the capacity to communicate and explain), and the abilities of a good professional in the field, only come next.” [2]

There is an urgent need of an awareness that the “I am right, you are wrong” [11] perspective is bound to fail and need to be replaced by an ability of balancing and negotiating differences.

Education is a dynamic process rather than static, therefore it should trigger creativity more than analysis, critical thinking versus mechanical reproduction; inquisitive and open-mindedness instead of retrospective background. “We see what we are prepared to see. We see what we want to see. We see what we are used to seeing. We see what our emotions have sensitized us to see. { ... } We are excellent at analysis but not nearly so good at design, because design needs a very different sort of thinking.” [12]

Shifting perspective from elite to mass education towards differentiation and diversity in higher education

Universities must be able to shape appropriate strategies and select their priorities in teaching and research such as to shift from resistance to change further to adaptation to challenges towards anticipation – as predictability creates a strategic

advantage in view of meeting the demands of academic competition and excellence, as well as community and society utility.

The change from elite to mass higher education has entailed a significant challenge: i.e. university management should shift the emphasis from a quantitative (in terms of student numbers - short-term institutional benefit) towards a qualitative approach (focus on updated study programs and strategic curriculum design in keeping with society demands in view of sustainable development). Likewise, student goal and academic undertaking should primarily focus on the acquisition of competencies rather than degrees. Universities worldwide have readjusted their patterns, mission and academic culture in order to cope with the demands of changing societies. Nowadays, higher education institutions have to compete for resources: e.g. human resources - experienced and highly qualified staff; top-ranking as well as financial resources) as well as addressability (top-ranking students; responsiveness from the employability market). [7]

The Presidential Strategy: Education and Research for a Knowledge Society advocated **university differentiation and resource concentration** based on quality criteria at all levels: institutions, study programs and departments, as the main vector of attaining excellence. Thus public funding shall be prioritized for those units demonstrating high quality performances. [4]

The idea of diversity in terms of university mission is encouraged and promoted by Commissioner Androula Vassiliou, in her speech delivered on the occasion of the EUA Annual Conference (Palermo – October 23, 2010):

In my vision, higher education is at the core of the economic and social matrix that defines our world. Universities are uniquely poised to shape our emerging knowledge-based societies, and are taking on new roles in order to do so. I understand, too, that there is great diversity among these institutions, both in their orientation and scope: not all higher education institutions have had the same beginnings, or share the same history. But in our complex world, diversity is a strength. In my view, we should invest in this diversity, addressing issues related to quality assurance, funding, accessibility and governance. And in parallel, to take forward the growing consensus on two other issues that affect every university: democratising higher education and making better use of resources. [5]

In view of reconciling differing stakeholders’ views about the ability of universities to prepare graduates for society in general and the labour market in particular; Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu has recently launched the initiative called **LBUS Dialogues** – under this aegis the university organized the first event focusing on the topic “University as knowledge broker and competencies trainer”. The main goal of such an endeavour is to redesign the evolution of LBUS in view of becoming more open and responsive to the external context, and providing increasing competitiveness and welfare for its community by means of the high quality educational services. The exchange of ideas, knowledge and competencies is a two-way process and it should therefore engage all stakeholders: representatives of the business community, local administration and cultural institutions. An initial outcome of this event is the setting up of several focus groups, made up of teaching staff and specialists, in order to receive and analyse accurate feedback from employers and adapt study programs and curricula accordingly. [13]

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