

MODERN PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE TEACHING PROCESS IN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Most universities in Bulgaria use standard teaching methods that have been developed and implemented in education for years. Although they are effective and successful on the whole, today's students need a modern approach to teaching and presentation of the material. The aim is to improve their capacity of acquisition and reproduction of new knowledge and skills which are often made difficult by the burden of Bulgarian students' everyday life and the dynamics of modern times.

Key words: training, quality, psychological approach, techniques, psychology, teaching, education, system, students, medical specialists

INTRODUCTION

The everyday life of full-time students in most of Bulgarian universities is heavily burdened. The learning process usually combines theory and practice which alternate depending on the specific curriculum of the respective specialization. Most often training includes lectures (theory), and the acquired knowledge is implemented and consolidated by means of exercises and/or practice. Both forms of teaching are based on well tested and approved pedagogical principles and methods that have proved their success and efficiency over the years.

The dynamics of our living environment, however, has brought about some serious changes in the student profile and that demands changes in the overall professional approach of university teachers. It necessitates the addition of a significant psychological component to the teaching process and the introduction of a variety of alternative psychological techniques of work with students adequate to the requirements of our modern society. The aim is that the learners should fast and easily acquire a maximum volume of knowledge and skills and be able to reproduce them best at a later moment and implement them most effectively in practice.

This article is trying to present a system of modern psychology-inspired techniques of work with students during their training. The approaches presented here have been applied during practical training of students from the specializations of "nurse", "midwife" and "occupational therapist" in the Vratsa branch "Prof. Dr. Ivan Mitev" of the Medical University – Sofia. The goal of the system is to perform a number of major tasks for a more complete and comprehensive work with the students.

MAJOR TASKS

1. To achieve a state of relaxation
2. To create trust
3. To generate interest
4. To provoke activity
5. To have fun
6. Emotional commitment

TASK 1: TO ACHIEVE A STATE OF RELAXATION

Motives: It is well known that a mind at peace is much more receptive and “helpful”. When thoughts run smoothly and coherently and are not scattered in different directions, people more easily acquire new information. Bulgarian university programs usually do not give any “rest” for the mind, especially during theory lessons. No special relaxation techniques are envisaged and used (both physical and psychological) between separate lessons and subjects besides the legally regulated time break that students spend outside the classrooms. This break, however, does not give them the necessary psychological “mind relax” which could provide better concentration and receptivity. Here we present the theory that it is possible by the application of a few minutes of relaxation technique at the beginning of some of the classes under the guidance of the teachers. In the effort to achieve the desired results during the lessons of pedagogy and psychology of the students of nursing, midwifery and occupational therapy, the following methods were used:

Methods:

- **Music therapy** – listening to 5 – 10 minutes of relaxing music with sounds of nature, bells, drum therapy and rhythm therapy melodies, monotonous chants, etc.
- **Aroma therapy** – lighting of aromatic sticks.
- **Art therapy** – coloring of mandalas.
- **Brief psycho-therapeutic relaxing session** within 3 to 5 minutes intended for physical and psychological relaxation.
- **Relax therapy in a rocking chair** – the students are offered a rocking chair where anyone who feels stressed can sit in during the lesson or rock in before or at the beginning of the lesson.
- **Relaxation by physical body comfort** – the students are invited to take the most comfortable sitting position, including the cross-legged lotus position on the floor, etc., and remain in it during the lesson.

TASK 2: TO CREATE TRUST AND CROSS THE GAP

Motives: The lack of trust in the teacher and the presence of a big gap between the teacher and the learners is a serious obstacle to a beneficial training process. When there are clearly established relationships of friendship and cooperation, the degree of trust is increased, the bilateral flow of information is unimpeded and that improves the quality of education provided. Good trust and shorter gaps guarantee an excellent feedback. The students will not be shy to tell what they need, what corrections in teaching are necessary to meet their requirements, what disadvantages they see in the educational institution as a whole, and they will share their positive opinions about the teaching process, if they have any.

Methods:

- **“Use my first name.”** – The academic circles of Bulgarian universities have established the practice for the teachers of addressing the students as “colleague, colleagues, Mr., Miss, Madam, Mrs.”. The students address their teachers as “Mrs., Mr., Assistant, Professor, Doctor So-and-so”. Although such communications clearly establish the positions of the two parties and define authorities, the degree of trust and sense of closeness are rather low. Foreign practices show that when students and teachers address one another by their first names, the barriers are removed and fruitful friendship is established to beneficially influence the training process.
- **Blending with the majority or part of the whole** – During the lessons he/she does not change his position relative to the students. At the same time the students sit on desks against the teacher’s desk. The change of this purely physical position can change also the psychological positioning of the teacher and the learners. The teacher can become part of the whole or “blend with the majority” to achieve a certain closeness only by an alternative organization of the environment –

by placing all desks in a circle with the teacher sitting among the students. This is the idea of the mandala, the circle, where any point is part of the whole so that there is a full blending of everything in the circle. If the available space does not allow a reorganization of the environment, blending can be achieved by the teacher mixing with the students and positioning his body within the space of the students – sitting at a closer distance, walking between the rows of desks, using the same type of chairs, etc.

- ***“I am you and you are me”*** – this psychological role play allows the teachers and the learners to put themselves in the other’s place to better understand the other’s needs, difficulties and working strategies. The teacher periodically invites a student to take his place, prepare and conduct part of the lesson. The duration of the role play is specified in advance. The teacher, in his turn, becomes a student with all responsibilities, activities and rights of a learner.

TASK 3: TO GENERATE INTEREST

Motives: Even if the first two tasks are successful, teaching the material will be difficult and doomed to failure, if the audience is not interested in the information or at least in the manner it is presented. That is why one of the basic principles of teaching is to generate interest in the audience especially during the first 5 to 10 minutes of the lesson. Maintaining a constant interest among the students will guarantee they will remember a greater part of the material and will repeat and implement it more successfully at a later stage.

Methods:

- ***Use of non-conventional training tools*** – use of unusual objects, instruments and materials the students do not expect to see during the lessons of the three medical specializations. For instance, a drum, stones, fruits, balloons, pastels, etc. The use of strange and atypical training tools kindles the interest of the audience who start asking itself about the relationship between the unusual objects and the material taught.
- ***Telling of interesting tales, legends, stories and parables*** – a tale that is remote from the nature of the studied material and at the same time is related to it in an original way will attract the curiosity of the students and produce a desire to listen and participate in an eventual discussion at a later moment. This approach achieves lasting results in memorizing the information. Experience shows that the material presented in this original manner is much easier to remember because of the attractive presentation and the unusual association with the story told by the teacher.

TASK 4: TO PROVOKE ACTIVITY

Motives: As is known, one of the major principles of teaching is the activity principle. When students are active, the teaching process is more successful and the results are more lasting. Sometimes, however, students refuse to be active for some reasons. In such cases work is difficult, teaching is slow and results are poor. There you can use different psychology-inspired methods to stimulate activity.

Methods:

- ***Project method*** – the assignment of individual or group projects to be performed during the lesson or as a homework task is a serious provocation to the learners to be active. The participation in a specific task is the easiest way to stimulate activity, and when the task is related to the personal interest of the student, the results are usually excellent.
- ***Joint work or work in groups*** - When the task is performed jointly or in groups, the active participants influence the passive ones. The chance to discuss, plan and work together stimulates activity and provokes a desire to act.

- **Assignment of tasks of competitive nature** - competition in itself stimulates people to strive for better results and jump over one's own limits. It always needs to have a winner and losers in the end, as well as a reward for the best ones. The desire "to be the best" provokes the students to work more, even if the rewards have no material nature and if the only reward is to be declared "winners".
- **Discussions on current topics** - When the topic of discussion is directly related to the students' everyday life, they participate in it more actively, exchange opinions and experiences, try to solve conflicts, if any, or receive more benefits, privileges and good results.

TASK 5: TO HAVE FUN

Motives Although universities educate adults above 18 years of age without any other age limit, there is a small child living in each of them. This psychological theory is very important and it is recommendable to bear that in mind throughout our whole life. The small child in the adult would always want to be spoilt, amused, awarded, to jump, paint, run, be encouraged, protected and most of all to play. When the child in each of us is allowed from time to time to do all that, resistance is decreased and it is easier to penetrate into some finer psychological levels. At the same time, striving for better results, concentration, memory and desire for learning are increased. When someone is having fun while learning and working, he is satisfied, expects new tasks and obligations with pleasure, and his working and training process is never routine. When training provides an element of fun, attendance of lessons is better and the next lesson is expected with interest and desire.

Methods:

- **Role play and psychodrama** - This teaching method features a student and/or a teacher coming into a character that is not inherent to them. Role plays are the best method to achieve several results simultaneously. Knowledge absorbed thereby is the most lasting because people feel and experience things that leave lasting memories in them. Simultaneously, it is always unusual, strange, interesting and funny, and sometimes difficult, to look at the world through someone else's eyes. Only role plays can give us the chance to shift the viewpoint and "get into the skin of the other". They are one of the best methods to understand the other and feel for a short time part of his feelings and experiences. Besides that, role plays permit us to live through a real life situation in the conditions of a safe situation which guarantees certain security and stability for the "characters". On the other hand, "the audience" watching the performance of the students get fun that is largely equivalent to the fun one can get in a real theatre. The impact on the audience in the classroom is as great as the impact of a real theatrical performance. That is why psychodrama methods are as strong and effective during a lesson as they are in the treatment of a specific psychological problem. And, certainly, last but not least, the role play is a PLAY. This is the key word when we think about fun for the child in us. Play permits us to break down the stereotypes, inhibitions and seriousness in the adult, to laugh, cry and stop being one's own self at least for a little while. This is both funny and releasing, and these effects are hard to achieve by other methods.
- **Painting, dancing and singing** - It seems strange to relate these three activities to the serious training of medical specialists. The experience, however, of the Vratsa branch with these so typically childish activities shows that they strongly influence the "fun effect" which, in its turn, makes the training process more productive and effective. The small child in each student paints, dances and sings with pleasure. The boring adult will find it hard to connect these activities with the care for the patients, but the child will easily do that. The following quotation of a third-year nurse student demonstrates how such radically different activities like *dancing* and nursing can be related in a curious way: "When I take care of my patients during my practice in the hospital, I dance with them in my thoughts. I invite them to join my dance, to feel the pleasure of it and then keep it in their memory. I arrange my patients in a circle in my mind and imagine everybody swaying happily in the rhythm of the dance. I feel happy, too, with this imaginary interaction and give them my care with pleasure." The strength of *singing* has the same impact. Even without

practicing singing or dancing during training, and only by discussing their impact, there will be a remarkable improvement of the quality of the teaching process. *Coloring and drawing* – some of the most typical childish activities – are among the most pleasant ones for the students during their lessons. It is amazing how these activities can help us in the acquisition of knowledge designed for adults. In our case, in the branch of “Prof. Dr. Ivan Mitev”, the methods of painting, singing and dancing have been used to teach specific subjects like medical psychology, andragogy, didactics, pedagogy, general psychology, psycho-diagnostics and generally for a better understanding of the material taught.

- **Use of imagination** - The specific techniques used in part of the training of nurses, obstetricians and occupational therapists are “imaginary trips to a favorite place” and “disposal of emotional waste in an imaginary trash can”. Both activities stimulate the imagination to make learners have various emotions that the teaching environment cannot give them otherwise. Such lessons provoke curiosity, interest and fun. They also have a partial therapeutic effect to achieve a relaxed state of mind for better learning and practicing.
- **Qi-gong, yoga, sports** - The introduction of elements of these activities, so distant from medical training, attracts students’ curiosity. The following techniques are used: solving a problem by one-minute practice of qi-gong, relaxation on a physical level by a yoga technique of muscle tension release, specific kind of yoga breathing to demonstrate the connection between body and psyche, brief physical exercises from different sports.
- **Laughter therapy** - The use of short humorous remarks, jokes of permissible content and telling funny stories make the training process more desired, funnier and more pleasant. Experience shows that students join in the listening, telling and even enacting funny stories with a great pleasure. When they laugh, their emotional attitude to the training rises sharply in the positive direction. Simultaneously, another long-established beneficial effect of laughter therapy is achieved: laughter is health for mind and body alike, and healthy body and mind are an excellent prerequisite of “healthy” knowledge.
- **Learning in the open** - The change of learning environment has always been welcome. Lessons in the open, in fresh air, are not only fun but they “refresh” the psyche and improve the learning capacity of the students. At the same time, they create variety, which makes tedious lessons more desirable.

TASK 6: EMOTIONAL COMMITMENT

Motives: In the profession of nurses, obstetricians and occupational therapists, the issue of humanity, high morals and ethics is particularly important. According to some psychological theories, when a person is emotionally committed to a certain problem, his desire to help people with a similar problem is greater. That is why to stimulate students to look for the connection between cases in their own lives and cases of their future professional practice, without much empathic commitment, would mean to increase their humanity and desire for mutual aid. Here we should bear in mind the danger of the burnout syndrome and the risk for the professional himself of extreme empathic behavior. We should work for the establishment of a safe limit of emotional empathy to guarantee the psychological stability of the medical professionals.

Methods:

- **Sociodrama** - As a highly specialized approach similar to role play and psychodrama, sociodrama permits us to live in a social situation. In the case of the training of medical specialists, the situations have a medical orientation. Sociodrama can help the student to partially identify himself/herself with a real or imaginary personality used by this technique and live in his drama. It is supposed that, with a correct dosage of emotional empathy in similar situations in the future, the specialist will be more adequate, knowing the specific features that accompany the case.

- **Sharing personal experience** - Students are invited to participate in various discussions by telling about medical cases related to their relatives, friends and themselves. This partial contact with the personal space of other people improves their understanding of the humanity, ethics and morals of nurses, midwives and occupational therapists. That means that, besides their excellent medical education, the students will demonstrate a high degree of humanity in their real working environment.

CONCLUSION

The system presented here of modern techniques for work with students from the specializations of nursing, midwifery and occupational therapy has so far been implemented only on an experimental level. The results achieved, however, are excellent. The authors intend to more deeply study the impact of the methods described above on the students and inquire in detail into their opinion. The good attendance of lectures, excellent results of the exams, benefits to the personal lives of the learners and the practical work with the patients are all evidence of the effectiveness of this system of psychological methods. The expectations are that the students who have successfully finished their curriculum will have excellent knowledge and skills, offer high-quality professional and moral services to their patients/clients and their education will meet the real needs of the ever changing and ever more exacting world around us.

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