

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS THE PRECONDITION OF TEACHER'S PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

**Rasa Dobržiškienė**

Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

**Giedrė Paurienė**

Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

**Aušra Stepanovienė**

Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

**Abstract.** Society is posing higher and higher requirements for teachers regarding their professionalism, efficiency of activity, personal qualities and other aspects. If we treated teachers' professional development as a life-long process, we would find alternative learning forms, which enable continuous, individual and flexible learning. It is important to reveal the role of informal learning in the area of life-long learning process because its significance to teacher's professional competence has not been fully estimated. Knowledge, skills, and abilities that teachers bring into their professional activity, gained as the outcome of informal learning and development, are not adequately valued. Insufficient attention is paid to professionalism and contextuality of teacher's professional competence development. Therefore, it is crucial to perceive experiential learning which determines development of the competence as a constituent part of informal learning. The aim of the article is to reveal the interaction between experiential learning and teacher's professional competence development. Methodology of the research encompasses both theoretical, namely scientific literature analysis and summary, and empiric research methods. Qualitative research data were collected using biographical-narrative interviews while data analysis and findings are based on Abductive Reasoning Theory according to Peirce, Grounded Theory according to Strauss and Corbin and Formulating Interpretation according to Bohnsack. Scientific literature analysis has revealed that experiential learning is frequently random, spontaneous and unplanned. Due to its nature it is considered as a part of informal learning. The results of the biographical-narrative interviews with teachers show that professional activity provides pedagogues with rich experience and opportunity to develop regarding the contents of the subject taught as well as methodological and personal perspectives.

**Keywords:** development of the professional competence, experiential learning, informal learning, teacher's professional competence.

## **Introduction**

Rapidly changing world is the learning environment for adults, which gradually extends to encompass all work and everyday life situations. Teacher's learning, which has other individual's education as the object of activity, was traditionally regarded as a part of consistent education. Now it is becoming more independent and surpasses the boundaries of consistent education. Teachers' professional development should be considered as life-long process whereas informal learning must be provided more significance (Dačiulytė, Dromantienė, Indrašienė, Merfeldaitė, Nefas, Penkauskienė, Prakapas, & Railienė, 2013; Evans, 2019; Molzberger, 2016). On the other hand, not all individuals have equal conditions for life-long improvement and, therefore, establishing structures to develop the competence are needed (Carpenter & Linton, 2016; Hamacher, Eickholt, Lenartz, & Blanco, 2012). However, in order to help, one must initially understand what determines development of the competence by informal learning.

Scientists claim that in comparison to formal learning, significantly less attention is paid to two other life-long learning forms, i.e. non-formal and informal learning in such social institutions like family, various organizations, clubs, community, etc. Those areas still lack attention of education politicians and researchers" (Teresevičienė, Gedvilienė, & Zuzevičiūtė, 2006). The statements show that it is important to reveal the role of informal learning in the continuum of life-long learning as the significance of the learning and its impact on the professional competence of the teacher are not fully perceived whereas it is of crucial importance to regard experiential learning as a constituent part of informal learning determining development of the competence.

The aim of the article is to reveal the interaction between experiential learning and development of teacher's professional competence.

Methodology of the research includes theoretical methods such as scientific literature analysis and generalization as well as empiric study. The data of the qualitative research were collected using biographic-narrative interviews while data analysis and findings are based on Abductive Reasoning Theory according to Peirce, Grounded Theory according to Strauss and Corbin (1996) and Formulating Interpretation according to Bohnsack (2014).

## **Literature Review**

Experiential learning is an important aspect of teacher's professional competence. Regarding cognitive competence conception, experiential learning is considered as strategy of the activity (Carpenter & Linton, 2016), while professional competence with regard to functions is compared to

competitiveness which does not exist alone but is always found within the context of solving a certain problem (Kunskaja, 2018). Experiential learning gains a significant role when describing the development of teacher's professional competence. Occasionally there are situations when solutions are not described by scientific theories. In such cases dealing with the occurring problems one has to apply experience-based knowledge. Thus, learning from experience becomes crucially important within life-long learning paradigm (Carpenter & Linton, 2016) as such learning is usually random, spontaneous and derives from life experience. Due to the qualities, experiential learning can be considered as a part of informal learning. According to Tippelt, informal learning is important for professional development and competence (Tippelt, 2018), because the learner, having experienced something, reflects it. Reflection is perceived as analysis and evaluation of one's actions, beliefs and thoughts. Tippelt indicates reflection as a process through which experience (as long-term memory material) transforms into learning while learning subsequently changes to personal and professional development, which in turn helps act appropriately (Tippelt, 2018). According to Wright, McCarthy & Meekison, by reflecting one's experience and understanding, conceptions and specific conclusions are formulated, which are later tested in new situations and allow one to act more efficiently. As well as this, the quality of the activity changes (Wright et al., 2018).

Informal learning is based on consciousness criterion (Cerasoli, Alliger, Donsbach, Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Orvis, 2018), which states that a person, deliberately but without any additional efforts learns from all activities of his/her life in order to develop (by applying reflection of literature, media and other experiences). Tippelt (2018) relate informal learning to development of professional competence itself. He emphasizes the factor of competence transfer from social environment to the professional area. Informal learning, as it is claimed by Laur-Ernst (2001) and Evans (2019), is based on individual demand, i.e. it is initiated by the individual himself/herself and happens both deliberately and intentionally pursuing personal aims or removing the competence deficit and learning unconsciously without perceiving that one is learning. One more aspect of informal learning is the learning environment, which is usually informal and has no pedagogic intention (Straka, 2003). Moreover, progress of informal learning for each individual is different and has no definite time. Transfer of knowledge and abilities occurs from professional to personal environment and vice versa. Abilities, knowledge and skills gained by learning in informal settings can be transformed to formal environment (Straka, 2003). It is confirmed by Gerzer-Sass (2001), who claims that competences gained in family environment can be transformed to work environment. Thus, the quoted

scientists, according to Paurienė (2017), envisage continuum between learning processes occurring in both formal and informal learning environments.

Discussing the concept of informal learning, significance and relevance of experiential learning become obvious. It can be regarded as a part of informal learning because experiential learning affects informally gained knowledge and skills (Dehnbostel, 2016; Meyer-Drawe, 2019). One usually learns informally via personal discoveries. Employees' professional competence and ability to act in a reflective way, according to Dehnbostel (2016), lie within professional development. Substantiation of informal learning concept can be found in definitions of other scientists: natural learning every day (Meyer-Drawe, 2019); learning, the source of which can be everyday life (Tippelt, 2018); learning during everyday activity at work, at home or in one's free time (Burkšaitienė & Šliogerienė, 2012). Thus, experiential learning as the condition of teacher's professional development is obvious because numerous situations in teachers' work are related to experience-based knowing. Knowledge of pedagogy is insufficient as a lot of situations at schools when communicating with students require more knowledge than bare pedagogy. Teachers, being employed, are obliged to do the job of a certain profession, specialisation or qualification abiding the regulations of an education institution. However, it is not reasonable to claim that there are no new, unexpected situations for a teacher in practice. Here experiential teaching takes its place as the learning process is closely related to changing activity, complex reflection of condition-action-result relationship and integration of knowledge into previous experiences (Kunskaja, 2018; Meyer-Drawe, 2019). Thus, on one hand, different challenges and problems of one's professional activity encourage to look for new solutions and learn from experience while on the other hand, there is the demand to find theoretical basis for knowledge gained via experiential learning (Paurienė, 2017). In other words, random learning can transform or determine deliberate target learning (Evans, 2019). Sustainability of experiential learning is determined by emotional experiences, their discussion and reflection. Thus, when analysing processes of informal learning in professional area and transfer of informal learning processes from personal to professional area, the relation to experiential and reflective learning becomes apparent.

### **Research methodology**

**Research design.** When conducting the research, qualitative research model was applied (Blaikie & Priest, 2019), based on positions of social constructivism and pragmatic knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In order to achieve the goal of the research, biographic-abductive (Grounded Theory) research strategy was selected.

**The study sample.** 14 respondents participated in the research (13 females, 1 male). The average age was 44. Research population included teachers who have at least 7 years of teaching experience disregarding the education institution. Criteria of informants' selection was duration of pedagogic experience on the basis of Hubermann's (1991) model of Teachers' professional competence development, which related teachers' professional competence to duration of pedagogic experience claiming that after 7 years one feels confident in his/her profession and has the intention to experiment as well as to self-evaluate himself/herself. Research respondents were selected by applying non-probability sampling method, i.e. by using convenience and snowball sampling. Appropriate research sampling was considered as the number of research participants is considered as appropriate sampling when having described the phenomenon; one can claim that the additional data will not lead to new findings. It is known as data saturation.

**Method of data collection:** biographic narrative interview. Learning and competence development are regarded as biographic experience restored in the form of the narrative (Alheit & Dausien, 2005). Scientists emphasize work at biographies as one of the research strategies in order to track competences gained while learning informally. Biographic research allows to envisage the relationship between life procedure and development processes (Geißler & Orthey, 2002).

**Methods of data analysis.** The analysis of the obtained data and results are based on Abductive Reasoning Theory according to Peirce (1991), Grounded Theory (subsequently GT) according to Strauss and Corbin (1996) and Formulating Interpretation according to Bohnsack (2014). Software *Maxqda 12* was used for the analysis of qualitative research.

## Research Results and Their Discussion

Studies of pedagogy in higher education institution encompass not only theoretical preparation but also professional practice, which helps the learner to better prepare for working activity. The data of the research clearly manifests that experiential learning in pedagogic activity determines the process of teacher's professional competence development.

In their professional activity teachers have to regularly respond to novelties, adjust to learners and society's needs. One of the most significant challenges is the need to change one's point of view, which affects continuous teacher's learning. A teacher is supposed to restructure his/her activity when he/she encounters new situation in his/her activity, i.e. when he/she changes his workplace from higher education institution to a gymnasium or conversely, by changing his/her teaching course(s) or undertaking administration work as well

as facing more motivated students than previously: “*work nature was completely different. I had to start from scratch again ... to learn how to work with pupils instead of students.*” (Interview No. 14); “*I am satisfied with children with whom I work... their nature is slightly different... you can work with them differently and their work has slightly different nature. (...) children are more motivated .... because I have someone to compare to. I have worked in the school where I had to think carefully how to manage the class for 45 minutes rather than what extra assignments to give ... while in this case I am supposed to find something more interesting and challenging.*” (Interview No. 2).

Apparently, in everyday activity knowledge of modern technologies is useful and it calls for new competences. Frequently it becomes the real challenge for teachers who have been working at school for a very long time: “*We, as teachers, have also faced different innovations because computers appeared and we needed to enrich our knowledge.*” (Interview No. 14).

Informal learning processes are highly determined by recognition and evaluation in teacher's profession. It is important for a teacher to see success or its possibility in professional activity because it proves that he/she is able to accomplish something. Self-esteem is regarded as one of the reasons that encourages the intention to learn and develop. Such aspects like the feeling of success, job satisfaction by seeing astonishing results, students' gratitude as well as principal belief in the significance of one's work become the basis of informal learning activities: “*I truly believe in principle that what I am doing is right. I see favourable results (...) I continuously learn. I read and learn all the time and look for new information... I can see the importance of the English language.*” (Interview No. 10); “*..job satisfaction is the outcome... and if former students come to thank me, it is what drives me forward... .*” (Interview No. 3).

A very important stimulus for learning is the feeling of confidence. Self-confidence is one of the most important conditions for development. From ethical point of view, in self-confidence we can find the moral values that are related to interpersonal obligations based on belief that the other person is responsible, competent, hard-working, etc.: “*I still experience lots of support and hear good words... . For example, X school was being established and I was invited to take a position of a teacher there... well, hmm, ...I was reluctant at first, but the headmaster persuaded me and ... I started working there.*” (Interview No. 7).

Confidence of colleagues and school administration as well as recognition of one's professional competence motivate one to work further and stimulate processes of informal learning.

Teachers regularly observe what is happening in their environment. Learning by observation is based on cognitive learning theory, which focuses on mental procession of information. The ability to learn by observation is regarded

as useful and efficient because in such a way one can master models of integrated actions and does not need to learn from personal attempts or mistakes. The main modelling source is the environment where the individual lives and coexists as well as the mass media (Monginaitė, 2010). In the interview one can find a range of moments which illustrate that one of experiential learning forms is observation of professional and social behaviour: *“attending any Goethe institute seminar we gain so much knowledge – both theoretical and practical... we can use it in class with our students... . We can see in reality how other teachers work.”* (Interview No. 2); *“I learn myself...hmm ... I read literature and observe other teachers’ work in the kindergarten... I have never attended any kindergarten myself ... neither have my children.”* (Interview No. 1).

The research has revealed that development of teacher’s professional competence happens not only by observing colleagues’ work and websites, but also the learners themselves: *“you can learn youth from children .. (laughing). Living among the young you do not feel that old... Children probably teach me to hear the young voice and perceive that ...hmm... the world hasn’t stopped near the edge of my youth.”* (Interview No. 7).

By observation learning, as it is illustrated by interviews, methodical teachers’ competence develops, i.e. “how to do it by observing others working”, different approaches relevant to personal competence are adopted, “the world hasn’t stopped near the edge of my youth”.

Development of abstract concepts is included in experiential learning. Teachers during the interview reveal that via experiential learning former attitudes change, one gains new understanding about teaching, the significance of motivation and authenticity of teacher’s expression: *“It is crucial for a teacher to restructure his/her activity ... because there cannot be routine (...) students must believe in what you have rendered...; it is more important to know how.... morality is ... hmm...when you have no mask, you are not afraid to make a mistake or be embarrassed... I am not afraid not to know... the belief in you as a teacher is important.”* (Interview No. 4); *“At school it was said that we, teachers of the Lithuanian language, were not loved...well, ... no one understood what we were actually doing... It is natural that we perceive through ourselves, through our experience (interview No. 3)... . Now, it’s holiday time. God ... the holidays are just correcting papers, nothing more... .”* (Interview No. 7).

Respondents tell about their development and they understand that by teaching others they learn themselves. Experience of teaching, preparation of methodological material and seminars are regarded as active experimenting that leads to development components – development of personal, didactic, subject content competences: *“Seminars are beneficial ... especially, well, we know that by teaching the other person you learn yourself (...), by preparing the*

*material your subject content competence is extending ... whether you intend it or not ... because you have to prepare everything yourself ... well, you have to adapt it and regularly work at it... so consequently this competence is extending.”* (Interview No. 2).

Learning from experience can be identified as learning from personal mistakes when they determine the procedure and experience of learning. Informants list both personal mistakes and those made by other individuals. Significant experiences from which they learned are often related to erroneous decisions, unsuccessful stories or unexpected problems. Only recognized and analysed mistakes help the individual concentrate on learning and personal improvement as well as on development of teacher's professional competence: *“It was difficult ... I did not manage the class because I wanted to teach a language; ... I wanted the situation to be different from my own experience at school ... hmm... where I had to memorize texts but I did not succeed... well, I didn't manage to involve students and motivate them... but I lacked pedagogic knowledge ... I had only my learning experience. I was always very zealous and probably it was difficult for me to perceive others... Then the deputy told me that the individual could not be equal to zero ... and I could not write zero in the register... .”* (Interview No. 12); *“I had the source to learn from ,... there are numerous things that I should not do and .. hmm, I am trying not to do it ... but I saw how things should not be done and what should not happen.”* (Interview No. 7).

Informal learning processes are accompanied by various emotional impressions and feeling-based experiences. Due to emotional charge these processes gain significant sustainability. Each experiential process leads to individual's change, new knowing and ability to see the surrounding world differently and at the same time it makes impact on the process of professional competence development. In order to relate emotional experiences and cognitive evaluation one should talk about that, discuss, and cooperate: *“Now for the last three years communication with close colleagues at school helps... we have close relations and they help me a lot... we can gather together and when some problems emerge, discuss them, ... advise and help each other.”* (Interview No. 2).

Thus, it is important for teachers to share their experiences, feelings, emotions rather than learn from one's own experiences only. Teachers must be open to others' ideas and learn from them. The same is true with mistakes.

Professional activity for teachers provides rich experience and possibility to improve from subject content and personal perspectives. Professional activities related to different experiences and emotional impressions lead to learning processes perceived by the individual himself/herself, which are regarded as experiential and informal, and are related to both internal and external

motivation. Development of professional competence is affected by encounter with the new teaching aspects, other individual's confidence and self-realization. Integral parts of teacher's professional competence are personal, didactic, subject content competences, which are developed by observing work environment and relevant internet media. On the basis of individual professional activities new perception of professional activity is formed while false teachers' decisions and actions lead to efficient learning processes. Sustainability of experiential learning is determined by emotional experiences, their discussion and reflection.

The conducted research reveals that personal reflection serves as the method of personal and professional development, which responds to scientific research (Dehnbostel, 2016; Tippelt, 2018; Wright et al., 2018). Reflective informal learning process allows one to newly look at the obtained knowledge via experience. Evaluation of previous experience-based knowledge and perceived former experience are considered to be the components of teachers' informal learning process. Retrospective look at one's experience when learning from close environment as well as the intention to satisfy the needs of new generation learners lead to informal learning processes.

### **Conclusions**

Experiential learning in professional activity provides teachers with a possibility to develop subject-content, methodological and personal competences as integral parts of professional competence. Interaction between experiential learning process and teacher's professional competence development is defined by the following statements: Theoretical knowledge gained in educational institutions does not fully satisfy the need of integral professional competence parts that has emerged in teaching activity. This need determines learning processes when one seeks to combine theoretical knowledge and practical activity. On one hand, various challenges and problems of teaching activity encourage to develop professional competence by learning from experience while on the other hand, there is a need to base theoretical knowledge that has been gained via experiential learning. Professional activities, through the challenges faced, provide incentives for learning and collegial co-operation whereas satisfaction of personal psychological needs and other factors of internal and external motivation (perceived personal responsibility, experience of self-realization, and trust expressed by others) contribute to sustainable continuous informal learning. The more acknowledged and self-realizing a teacher feels in his/her professional activity, the stronger the learning motivation and the more frequent informal learning activities are. Satisfaction of

psychological needs is regarded as the factor of informal learning activity and individual professional competence development.

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