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Teacher responsibility in distance education

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Abstract

This paper is focused on characteristics of education, including distance education and comparison of the extent of teacher responsibility. We are researching whether, and if so, how the scope and the content of teacher responsibility change in connection with the implementation of ICT into the educational process. The question is whether teachers in distance education bear greater responsibility. The issue of teacher responsibility is often addressed in declarative documents, codes of ethics, and legal regulations. The aim of this paper is to capture different levels of responsibility and the tendencies in the perception of teacher responsibility in connection with the changing concept of education and with the use of ICT in distance education. The paper primarily uses hermeneutic approach, the interpretation being based on a frequency analysis of motifs from students' essays. Surveying teachers was used as a complementary method. Our results are based on a frequency analysis of motifs from essays written by students of pedagogical faculties in 2013 and 2015, and their interpretation. They are complemented with ideas which occurred in a survey carried out among teachers at the Pedagogical Faculty and the Faculty of Informatics and Management in 2013.

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Keywords: Teacher responsibility, ICT, distance education;

Motto

„If all responsibility is imposed on you, then you may want to exploit the moment and want to be overwhelmed by the responsibility; yet if you try, you will notice that nothing was imposed on you, but that you are yourself this responsibility.“ Franz Kafka

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1. Responsibility and education

Responsibility is usually defined as a political, criminal, legal and ethical category which expresses complementary connection between a person’s action, their consequences and his or her consciousness within the ethical system accepted by him/her. Within the context of a reflection on so-called global problems, the concept of responsibility does not only refer to a person’s responsibility towards himself/herself, to responsibility of a person to another person, a group of people, a community, a nation, humankind, but also to responsibility for the whole biotic and abiotic environment, biosphere and ecosystem. The issue of responsibility is dealt with in one of the most significant books of the 20th century – „Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation“ by Hans Jonas. Although it was first published in 1979, it has not been exploited enough in the area of education. In addition to responsibility for human actions and responsibility for the past, Jonas also defines the need for responsibility for non-human life forms and inanimate nature, in the meaning of curator’s / custodian’s responsibility. With regard to responsibility defined in this way Jonas reformulated Kantian categorical imperative like this: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”. This Jonas’ maxim is also referred to in a recent monograph „Morální odpovědnost a její aspekty“ (Vlastimil Hála et al., 2013), mainly in connection with social functioning and the authenticity of an acting human. The relation between this new “jonasian” ethics to the previous ethics is not a negative one, it is complementary. This imperative and concept of responsibility is becoming very up-to-date in connection with our civilization’s considerable independence on ICT, which is also naturally reflected in education (Semradova, Hubackova 2013). Education, which is perceived as continuity, communication and differentiation, and the content of which is always closely related to the ability to understand one’s period, one’s world, its context and its value dominants, is currently more and more often realized not only through face-to-face forms, but also through distance forms using ICT.

2. Frequency analysis of motifs from student essays on the issue of teacher responsibility in distance education

In 2013 and 2015 the issue of teacher responsibility (especially moral responsibility) in distance education became the subject of reflection for students of the Pedagogical Faculty - future teachers. 100 essays were available for further analysis each year. A number of subjects for reflection and discussion were collected (students mentioned a number of relevant motifs in their works). The content of the essays was derived from the topic of the essay and from sub-questions which the students were supposed to concentrate on. Besides defining responsibility, its dimensions, manifestations and connections, the students were also asked to reflect upon the question whether teacher responsibility is the same in both face-to-face and distance education, or whether teacher responsibility in distance education is diminished or greater. Based on the frequency analysis of motifs contained in the essays, a typology of re-occurring statements was compiled.

Summary of the overall results of the frequency analysis of student essays

2.1. Concept of teacher responsibility

Table 1. Concept of teacher responsibility

	2013	2015
We distinguish between criminal, legal liability and professional, moral responsibility.	32	30
We are responsible for our actions, we bear the consequences.	24	28
We have to take responsibility for our decisions.	24	25
We bear responsibility even for unintended consequences of our actions.	24	25
Responsibility is a quality which allows a person to face problems and situations he /she encounters.	21	24
Responsibility is an ability, willingness to accept the consequences of one’s own actions.	19	21

A teacher is responsible for his/her professional results.	19	18
A teacher is responsible for his/her behavior and actions.	19	17
A teacher bears responsibility for the respect and dignity attributed to his/her profession.	13	18
We are responsible for our pupils and their motivation to learn.	13	15
We are responsible for the reach of our pedagogical actions into the future.	13	14
We must not forget that we are responsible for promoting a certain ideal of education.	12	14
We are responsible for maintaining our own and our pupils' authenticity and integrity.	11	13
We are responsible for the quality and ethics of communication between ourselves - the teachers and our pupils.	10	12
A teacher is responsible for the development of pupil competences.	10	11
A teacher is responsible for the development of his/her own professional, methodological, social and personality competences.	10	9

2.2. Connection between responsibility and competence

Table 2. Connection between responsibility and competence

	2013	2015
The scope of responsibility is derived from the content and range of competence.	25	28
A responsible teacher is supposed to be competent, to fulfil his/her duties in compliance with the code of ethics, and to promote his/her school's good reputation through his/her actions.	22	27
The greater the competences, the greater the responsibility.	22	27
A person is responsible for things within his/her competence.	20	26
A good teacher uses his/her competence to behave in a responsible way.	19	21
A teacher is responsible for fair evaluation of his/her pupils.	14	20
A teacher is responsible for keeping to the professional code of ethics and for not exceeding the limit of the minimum threshold of acceptable behavior.	13	15

Authentic students' statements (2013, 2015)

- „Competence and responsibility are interconnected. As I have some competences, I am responsible for their fulfilment. As I know that I am responsible for them, I try to act in a “competent” way (i.e. in compliance with rules, codes and legislation), not to be punished. ...“
- „From what has been mentioned it is clear that in an ideal case competence should go hand in hand with responsibility, but in common practice it is rarely that way.“
- „A person is responsible for many things and actions in his/her life, but only a fraction of them are under our control, in our competence ...“.
- „A teacher is responsible for keeping up-to-date in his/her field.“
- „A teacher, just like other professionals, is responsible for the quality of his/her teaching, for evaluation of pupils and for notifying their parents in an adequate way ...“.
- „Responsibility combines with competence into the ability to identify ethical problems and avoid them.“
- „If a teacher is authoritative, he/she bears the greatest possible responsibility.“
- „A teacher is responsible for handling conflicts between professional and personal activities, between his/her professional and personal interests.“

- „We need to keep in mind that there is lack of clearly defined rules of relations between competence and responsibility; each of us even understands the concept of competence in a different way ...”
- „Competence means authorizing someone to make decisions, delegating responsibility for a particular task.”
- „Responsibility is an ability to bear the consequences of one’s actions and decisions, making oneself aware of proper and improper behavior; competence also involves connecting morality and reality.”
- „A teacher’s consciousness is an important aspect of competence.”
- „A teacher should act in the same way he/she would like his/her pupils to act. He/she is responsible for that.“
- „A teacher is responsible for observing the code of ethics, for being trustworthy, and for correct treatment of his/her pupils.”
- „A teacher is obliged to observe the code of professional responsibility, including the rule that he/she is not allowed to do anything which could harm the people entrusted to him/her.”
- „The first rule of teacher’s profession, just like medical profession, is “NOT TO CAUSE ANY HARM”. This lies within each teacher’s competence and responsibility. What does it mean “NOT TO CAUSE ANY HARM”, though?
- „Responsibility and competence – it is a closed circle, one is based on the other.”
- „Responsibility and competence are interconnected. Based on my occupation, I have certain competences and responsibility arising from them.”
- „The most important of all competences is responsibility for entrusted pupils.”
- „A teacher’s irresponsible decisions upset the inner balance in the class.“
- „As a teacher I am responsible for the selected style of teaching and treating pupils, at the same time I am also responsible for the choice of style I have made.”

2.3. Teacher responsibility in connection with ICT implementation into the educational process

Table 3. Teacher responsibility in connection with ICT implementation into the educational process

	2013	2015
It is the same in terms of both content and scope.	51	49
It is greater if the teacher is also the author of the course in distance education.	47	48
It is diminished if the teacher uses courses prepared by another author.	12	3

Previous research is complemented by capturing motifs from interviews with teachers, or from responses given in an electronic survey. Surveyed teachers suppose that their responsibility is greater or the same if they use distance education courses not only as their authors, but also as user of existing courses. They compare this responsibility to the responsibility for using textbooks. If, at the same time, they are the authors of the courses, they also emphasize their responsibility for the quality of their “digital” instruction and competence.

2.4. Motifs concerning the issue of responsibility taken from responses by 18 teachers (10 from Pedagogical Faculty, 8 from the Faculty of Informatics and Management).

- responsibility for making use of everything the teacher knows and can do for the students’ and his/her own benefit
- wide general knowledge, expertise in his/her main field
- fairness – not to show fairness or antipathy through marking
- individual approach
- openness to different opinions and attitudes
- creative approach to teaching (new methods, alternative approach)
- humor (not irony and cheap joking about pupils, but fitting witty remarks may liven up teaching; avoid mockery and derision; situational humor)
- distinctive style, being a strong personality, a model in thinking, in opinions, in treatment of pupils

- allowing space for expressing oneself, for activity, but NOT boundless benevolence
- leading and organizing teaching, use of ICT
- preparation for lessons, teaching, effort to get feedback, creation of courses for distance learning
- assessing and solving disciplinary problems
- responsibility for the choice and condition of teaching aids
- for the manner of communication with pupils, parents, colleagues and other staff at school
- communicating information in such way that enables students to understand the subject matter; in case of unclarity, it is necessary to add further explanation
- education is not a mere transfer of information, it is also an important aspect of socialization; teachers should not be interested only in their students' test and exam results, they must pay attention to their behaviour in the group, too, and help to solve possible problems.
- for reliability and accuracy of information which is passed on
- for personal attitudes and opinions which are included in his/her teaching
- understandability of communication
- moderateness and adequacy of the content of teaching
- to guarantee fulfilment of a certain minimum by all pupils
- for the procedure and form of teaching
- key responsibility is to enable pupils to understand the topic and the teacher
- explication should be made interesting for students
- additional questions and feedback mechanisms
- a teacher should not force pupils into parroting, unquestioningly repeating his/her opinion, on the contrary, he/she should help the pupils develop their own opinions
- for making preparation conceptual:
 - the complete content of the course, division into individual lessons, units, formulation of the overall goal and partial goals, inclusion of revision and checking, a specific timetable to make it clear from where, where and why we are going to proceed
- for making learning enjoyable for pupils, helping them remember as much as possible
- for pupils' knowledge, but only to a certain extent
- for establishing pleasant environment at school
- anything that happens in the classroom in the teacher's presence, is a subject of his/her responsibility (or even in his/her absence if he/she was supposed to be in the classroom and he/she is not e.g. was late)
- for good behavior and language both on his/her part and the part of his/her pupils; a joke may be suitable every now and then
- for the discipline in the classroom
- for maintaining his/her authority
- for making explication comprehensible and interesting or entertaining, if possible
- for ensuring that he/she teaches something to his/her pupils, which will widen their horizons, for ensuring their good behaviour
- for preparing them for their future life
- however, a teacher cannot be responsible for failure of a pupil who does not want to study, who is not trying, who is not interested, who is indifferent
- for pupils' education, health and safety, although the greatest responsibility should be borne by parents
- a teacher should pay attention to pupils' possible mental problems, if detected, he/she should get in touch with the parents, school psychologist, ...
- for making sure that no one feels oppressed, humiliated, ridiculed
- for providing pupils with reflection, for letting them know about their results and in case of younger/underage pupils for letting their parents know IN TIME
- for environment of good pedagogical quality

- deeper responsibility: to make their pupils better people (this cannot be achieved by the teacher alone)
- respect and rapport in relation to pupils
- providing help to pupils.

Authentic teachers' statements (2013)

"Teacher responsibility is always the same. It is always equally high. It educates new and new generations, either directly or via computers. In eLearning I see less opportunity to fulfil that responsibility."

"eLearning is focused only on instruction, I do not have to deal with organizing things or with pupils' behavior, I receive their results straight away ... There is greater responsibility for formal presentation, for using all tools which are available. A pupil must understand without the opportunity to ask and check task instructions, for example. Copying and using unauthorized aids in tests is easier."

"The main pluses of traditional (in-class) teaching include personal contact. The possibility to perceived facial expressions or gestures enables understanding whether the subject matter has been comprehended or not even without words. Many examples of ambiguity may occur in explication, eLearning lacks the personal component!"

"A teacher who prepares for traditional teaching has great responsibility in terms of passing an inaccurate or incomplete piece of information, which may happen unknowingly. It is also because he/she is responsible for conducting the lesson including pupils' behavior, solving disciplinary issues. We can say that in this respect a teacher preparing eTeaching has less responsibility. In his/her case, however, much greater emphasis is put on accuracy and clarity of information which is passed on by him/her. He/she might face the "only the written word remains" approach, and he/she does not have a direct possibility of correction.

Therefore, I am not able to determine who bears greater responsibility, but I would say that it prevails in traditional teaching, after all."

"A teacher preparing for traditional teaching. He/she does not have such possibilities as those provided by the computer, and does not have to communicate with pupils face to face. If something unexpected arises, a teacher in the classroom must react immediately. A teacher at a computer may think his/her action much better."

"Misunderstanding may arise much more often in computer communication. No matter if the teacher teaches in a traditional way or through eTeaching, he/she must always prepare properly for it and pass as much information as possible to his/her pupils."

"A teacher should be responsible for silence within the area he/she teaches in - such atmosphere should be induced where pupils can concentrate, the teacher should induce harmonic relationships and cooperation. No one should feel left out - everyone should be given space to express themselves. The teacher should have solid knowledge of the subject matter (required education) and should be able to reply to questions (or explain the subject matter in another way)."

"Responsibility in traditional teaching is greater than in eTeaching. The teacher does not have to reply to questions immediately, does not explicate the subject matter in person, does not have to care about good environment for teaching - he/she, however, has to provide learning material."

"In my opinion, the difference between traditional teaching and eLearning is huge. The teacher has much less responsibility; he/she does not have to take care of pupils. There is no responsibility for their behavior. He/she does not have to teach them manners; of course, even in the electronic form he/she has to use proper language and require the same from his/her students. Preparation, in my opinion, does not change, but it is simpler. There is no direct confrontation - was the subject matter interesting for them and has it been treated well, or is it completely boring?"

„The advantage of a virtual learning environment for teacher is that he/she is left to work in peace, he/she does not have to be concerned about behavior in the class, but his/her responsibility is much higher because he/she cannot

“see” that his/her students do not understand his/her explanations, and he/she cannot clarify anything further if need be. There is also a problem with attendance - how to check it.”

- “A teacher does not have to bear responsibility for pupils’ safety. Even in a virtual course, though, the teacher has responsibility for students’ results and education. Responsibility for preparation of teaching and study materials is greater. There is a greater possibility of non-comprehension and non-understanding in a virtual environment. Therefore, in my opinion, both eLearning teacher and traditional teacher bear a similar amount of responsibility, which lie on different levels, though:

- in traditional teaching there is higher responsibility

- in eTeaching for study materials, for meeting deadlines, for thorough reflection and feedback on performance

-in internet teaching, teacher responsibility is lower, the teacher should have only as much responsibility as he/she has power, the power to influence student’s learning on the internet is undoubtedly smaller; the responsibility is taken over by the students themselves, or by the parent who are aware that their children are taking part in self-education.

-internet teaching provides the teacher with a longer reply time, when he/she is supposed to answer questions; he/she can prepare better and in peace; it is less demanding, there is less responsibility.“

3. Conclusion

In their essays students - future teachers express their opinion that teacher responsibility in connection with the implementation of ICT into the educational process is the same or higher if the teacher is also the author of a distance education course. The surveyed teachers assume that responsibility in traditional face-to-face teaching is generally higher than in distance education. The stated outcomes do not aspire anything else than to point out a number of different approaches and their justifiability.

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