

# Synergy between Formal and Non-formal Learning Approaches in Teaching at University

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## **Abstract**

Education is at the heart of sustainable development and is the key to the professional success of young people. In modern living conditions, the student needs a wide range of key competences to adapt successfully to the rapidly changing environment, and the rapid pace of development necessitates innovative approaches to teaching in the university environment.

**Keywords:** nonformal, formal education, methodology, innovation

## **1. Introduction**

In the current situation of reform of secondary and tertiary education in Bulgaria, it is necessary to focus attention on the need for innovative and flexible teaching methods that meet the needs and potential of the students. This provokes the author to look at the possibilities of quality interaction in school and the universality of formal and non-formal educational approaches.

The need to seek innovative approaches in the educational environment is conditioned by a number of factors. As major challenges related to the quality and compatibility of Bulgarian higher education, the Ministry of Education and Science defines:

- Abandonment of teaching methods, demotivation of young teachers and researchers, ageing of the faculty.
- Low student motivation for science and research careers, as well as for acquiring fundamental knowledge (especially in the natural sciences) and their application in practice.
- Out-of-date curricula.<sup>17</sup>

A European Commission report on education and training in Bulgaria in 2016 states that while our country is on track to meet its national 2020 goals, there are also challenges in terms of the quality of Bulgarian higher education and its compatibility with the European higher education system, due to teaching methods that are lagging behind in new trends.<sup>18</sup> They are, in turn, directly related to the competences and personal motivation of the teacher, which is a role model for the student. The challenges faced by the educational system in our country are also related to the changing needs of the trainees, related to the practice oriented models of teaching and the interaction of the university with the labor market. These needs strongly contrast with the current reality in the Bulgarian educational system.

### **1.1. Formal education**

Formal education is usually based on a "vertical" relationship between teacher and learner whereby the knowledge holder provides knowledge to the successor in the form of courses and curricula. The momentum of decades of education in our country and the insignificant pace of introducing innovative teaching methods reinforce the disruption of the teacher-student relationship. Education in Bulgaria, like in many other countries, is still based on the paradigm of learning and learning, and there is no contribution from the learner himself. This, to a certain extent, disqualifies students and students and reduces the teacher's influence on them.

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<sup>17</sup> Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2014-2020

<sup>2</sup> Monitoring education and training (2016). Bulgaria, ec.europa.eu/education/monitor

According to Ilieva (2017)<sup>19</sup>, people do not always listen to what they are told because of the truth or usefulness of the content, but because of their respect for the speaker. In her monograph she identifies the need for a role model in the learning environment. Increasing the motivation of future specialists at the level of university education requires the inclusion of new teaching methods and rethinking the current role model of the teachers. The quality of teaching at the university is not only a matter for the educational institution but also for the individuals involved in the learning process. The main tendencies in the development of modern education are several and according to Ivanov (2004)<sup>20</sup> they are characterized as follows:

- From activity - centered to person - centered pedagogy
- From passive to active memorization
- From training based on external stimulation to constructivist and developing learning

### ***1.2. Non- formal education***

The holistic principle and the active participation in the learning process, which are the basis of non-formal education, make it an appropriate, complementary element in the formal educational environment. In support of the thesis of the need for synergies between non-formal and formal education at university, we should highlight the good example of applying innovative educational practices in Europe. In modern Germany, alternative methods of education such as FH / Fachhochschule / - universities offering a large base of practical knowledge in each of the specialties with which they work are becoming increasingly popular. Much of the lessons are not in the form of lectures, but in workshops. Students are involved in projects that best meet their skills, have more freedom in their decisions and ideas, and the learner is able to draw the best of the practical lessons. In Estonia, the established form of education is still a lecture, but it is increasingly being added to the creative approach and group activities of a project, encouraging the active inclusion of students. Students in Denmark attend lectures, learn independently and prepare individual or group projects. As in Estonia, the classic method also interacts with system innovations.

1. In support of this thesis, there is also a 2000th Recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which states that only formal education systems cannot respond to rapid and permanent technological, social and economic changes in society and that they must be reinforced by non-formal learning practices.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of non-formal education by definition is broad, even uncertain. But it would be impossible, even meaningless, to give this concept a universal definition, since what distinguishes non-formal education is the variety of forms that it can take in response to the different demands and needs of different individuals or groups. Moreover, non-formal education can be defined only in terms of its function in a specific context. We must remember that non-formal education is designed to compensate for the shortcomings and contradictions in the traditional school system and to satisfy often the urgent needs that are neglected by formal education.<sup>22</sup> In this article, we will adopt the definition of non-formal education as a specific approach, using different methods by which the learner is directly involved in the learning process.

## **2. Synergy between formal and non - formal**

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<sup>19</sup> Ilieva M. (2017). Interaction with the Roma Family in a Multicultural Educational Environment

<sup>20</sup> Ivanov I. P. (2004). Theories of Education, Shumen, Bulgaria

<sup>21</sup> Parliamentary Assembly - Origin - Assembly debate on 24 January 2000 (1st Sitting) (see Doc. 8595, report of the Committee on Culture and Education, rapporteur: Mr Dumitrescu). Text adopted by the Assembly on 24 January 2000 (1stSitting).

<sup>22</sup> Non-formal education: a definition of the concept and some examples - Ali Hamadache Prospects - Quarterly Review of Education, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1991 (Issue 77) - Planning of Education in an Era of Crisis: Regional Approaches (UNESCO; 1991

Prominent connections and relationships between the main pedagogical concepts allow education to be defined as the bearer of the civilization sense of education and training. Its content will include these pedagogical activities, interactions, processes and systems that are directly related to the development of the priority social spheres in the concrete context - ideological, political, institutional, management, economic, scientific, technological, social, political and other. The specific rates of culturally-civilization development also determine the existence of educational standards and priorities. In formal and non-formal education, the overarching objective is to improve the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the quality of formal education. Such would be achieved by collaborating between formal and non-formal learning methods.

Characteristic of non-formal education is that the individual is actively involved in the learning process. Humanistic psychology and pedagogy recognize as the only effective educational interaction what all participants can behave naturally, accept other people and rely on acceptance, seek mutual understanding and reconcile their positions through dialogue that is characteristic of non-formal education. Personal development and individual approach are central. The methods used are intended to give people tools to develop their skills and attitudes, which in turn affect the learner's internal motivation. The National Youth Forum in Bulgaria, in its report, describes the benefits of non-formal education that support the use of non-formal methods as an appropriate complementary element of the formal university environment. According to the authors, "the participation of young people in non-formal education methodologies provides a direct opportunity for the practical application of accumulated knowledge and skills in the field of formal education. Non-formal education is an environment in which innovative and creative thinking is greatly encouraged, and the direct route from idea to realization can be seen as a direct result. This is an environment in which the acquisition of theoretical knowledge is directly related to their practical realization."<sup>23</sup>

In practice, non-formal learning approaches include gaming and simulation methods. As a major obstacle to the introduction of teaching in the university, Stoykov, Vassilev and Ilieva pointed out the insufficient provision of didactic and didactic-methodical materials on the problem, as well as the lack of interest of many teachers in the inclusion of gaming methods in the training process. (Stoykov, Vassilev & Ilieva, 2014)<sup>24</sup>.

In this connection, the necessity of setting up methodologies for introducing the non-formal educational approaches into the formal education and provision with appropriate training materials is determined. A key point is the use of international experience as well as that of organizations in the non-governmental sector in the field of non-formal education. The Council of Europe, and in particular the Council of Europe Youth Department, as well as a number of other international organizations, have a rich history in the field and are actively working to develop methodologies and concepts directly linked to different strands of education.

By focusing on the development of the field of non-formal education as part of the overall national lifelong learning strategy, which focuses on putting learners' needs at the heart of the education process, a Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on access to the social rights of young people from vulnerable neighborhoods provides the legal basis and impetus for the development of partnerships between schools and institutions in this direction. It examines the individual person, i.e. those working in the field of non-formal education, as an essential element of the overall strategy for lifelong learning, underpinning national educational priorities and interests. In practice, through the texts of the Recommendation, EU Member States are encouraged to seek appropriate options for the recognition and certification of knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal education.

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<sup>23</sup> National Youth Forum (2014). Position on non-formal education. Benefits and Challenges

<sup>24</sup> Stoykov A., Vassilev R., Ilieva M. (2014). "Forming functions of the business game in the process of education of the students in the specialty" Social activities ". XIV International Scientific and Practical Conference on "Psychological-Pedagogical Problems of the Development of the Personality of the Professional in the Condition of the University Education", KITEN

Non-formal education is an essential part of the educational concept and the current educational model of modern Europe. Moreover, the Recommendation provides the opportunity to work towards national validation and validation of this model and to achieve significant learning outcomes. The methods and models imposed by this European tendency in terms of training activities find a consistent and ever wider realization in our country.

According to Nikolaeva, in the last years in the sphere of education there are large processes of change of priorities, expansion, restructuring and reorientation of the existing traditional educational institutions and their governing bodies and units, the redistribution of educational functions and responsibilities among a wide range of public subjects, integration and standardization not only at national but also at international level (Nikolaeva, 2015)<sup>25</sup>. The overall aim of all these changes is the need to respond to the needs of today's people, characterized by a wide range of knowledge and skills, key competences and flexible professionalism opportunities offered to learners in an appropriate way.

### 3. Collaboration

It is essential to apply the European recommendations to adequately adapt the methodologies and manuals to the environment. Another key point in the realization of methodologies based on non-formal education is cross-sectoral cooperation. The non-formal educational approaches are typical and are implemented in Bulgaria mainly by the non-governmental sector and by some of the programs of the Ministry of Education and Science.

It is necessary to be aware of the general reasons for work and the objectives of representatives of formal and non-formal education. Successful collaboration would be achieved by setting up working groups of experts - practitioners of the relevant specialty, certified non-formal education educators, teachers from different universities as well as students. The main objective is that the working groups on the different strands are to offer a methodology of teaching that is based on the expertise and need of the listed stakeholders. Developing state-of-the-art methodologies, including the expertise and recommendations of all stakeholders, will deliver benefits at all levels. It will increase the interest of the trainees in the subjects taught, their perception, and the quality of the teaching material. In terms of teachers, the benefits of developing innovative methodologies for formal education environments include enriched instructional tools for teaching, increasing the share of successful students and creating conditions for working in a more comfortable environment.

Starting from the differences between the value systems and the perception among the different generations, teachers and learners, striving for a better world in which to develop their existence, come to the natural need of the evolution of education. Higher education institutions are no exception to this need. On the one hand, the academic community, through their formal approach, conveys the authority, the severity and the prestige to learners. On the other hand, the new generation of young people seeks not the abstractness, but the specificity and interactivity that is brought to them by modern technologies and rapid access to information. This leads to remoteness and distance, which should create their own common intersection points through which knowledge can be transmitted. Currently, education all over the world suffers from similar problems arising from the very nature of the system itself. Its fundamental principles and foundations are in contradiction with the natural accumulation of every young person to develop; with the interest and curiosity of learning, which is natural to every living being. The synergy between formal and informal teaching methods in teaching gives the opportunity to develop students' cognitive skills.

According to Comenius and Rousseau, teaching must be built on a historical and logical basis, not psychologically and sociologically. The learning process should stimulate the interest of

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<sup>25</sup>Nikolaeva S. (2015). Non-Formal Education. Philosophy. Theories. Practices, Sofia

learners and motivate them to participate, as they are also part of the main characteristics of non-formal education.

In this sense, non-formal education is one of the most appropriate transfer chains in this process, having the following characteristics:

- It has the necessary dynamics needed by the new generation, who likes to participate more than to be a passive listener
- It retains the role model, but refocuses authority on mentoring, which is significantly more motivating for learners
- Meets the needs of education reform
- Focused on individuality rather than on collectivism

#### 4. Conclusion

Nowadays training and qualification opportunities are offered by a number of organizations and institutions beyond the traditional formal learning environment. They satisfy precisely these specific needs of the individual for learning, which, for one reason or another, formal education fails to satisfy. The opportunities for this kind of extra-institutional training structured in a way that provides a wide range of alternatives for further education are another prerequisite for the distancing of the learner from the educational institution.

The need for reform in higher education in Bulgaria has long been on the agenda of society. The effectiveness of such a system in which formal and non-formal education is successfully combined is to ensure a high quality of system performance, flexibility and adaptability to changes in personal and social needs as well as partnership relations between all actors and institutions.

The introduction of innovative approaches that non-formal education offers is a prerequisite for raising the quality and motivation of all stakeholders in the academic world. Undoubtedly, the process is long, but taking steps to implement it is key to raising the quality of higher education in the country.

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