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Modern Benchmarks in Continuous Teacher Training in the European Context

Doinița Popa¹

Abstract: This article shows some aspects of the concept of *on-the-job training*, which is a current trend in adult vocational training, driven by the need for human resource development that is increasingly recognized by employing institutions and by the rapid changes imposed by social dynamics. This new trend is justified by the fact that on-the-job training offers employees opportunities to put into practice the skills acquired through other forms of further training. Through on-the-job training, the employee has the advantage of “working, learning and gaining experience at the same time”. Thus internal continuous training offers the possibility of faster training of skills and ensures the transfer of knowledge acquired through learning.

Keywords: lifelong learning; on-the-job training; action learning; mentoring; coaching

1. Conceptual Delimitations and Levels of Analysis

The theory and practice of vocational education and training is a field that is undergoing a continuous transformation at the European level through attempts to promote the principle of unity in diversity of education systems, bringing to the fore the component of teacher training.

From this perspective, there is increasing talk of the ‘*European teacher*’, who must validate his teaching professionalism through a new set of competencies, to

¹ Senior Lecturer, PhD, Danubius University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., 800654 Galati, Romania, Corresponding author: doinitapopa@univ-danubius.ro.

become the teacher: *technician, reflective practitioner*, holder of fundamental knowledge, agent of change, actor, and creator or innovator of curricular content.

These competencies are acquired, developed, and improved through the teacher training process, an essential process within the education system that is continuous and cumulative and comprises two fundamental components: **initial training and continuous training**.

In the current context of the reform of Romanian education, teacher training is an important objective, which focuses on two components: a formal component established by the current legislative framework and an informal component that takes into account the need to adapt to the rapid changes that Romanian education is undergoing about the European context.

Education reform is “*a dynamic, open, interactive, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and international process, a continuous process that ensures the cultivation and application of creativity, the development of knowledge, the path to performance, competition and excellence in education and scientific research*”¹.

Successful reform requires a unified approach to the components of the education system which, by establishing interdependent relationships between curricular reform, institutional reform, evaluation system reform, educational management reform, and teacher training reform, responds to the need for change.

Human resource management is a particular component of general organizational management in which the training and professional development of teachers, implemented in an integrative, global, interdisciplinary, and professional vision, becomes a tool for institutional modernization and development.

In recent years, there has been a trend to promote lifelong learning, with lifelong learning being an area of education that is gaining ground through the strategies proposed by the Council of Europe and “*beginning to be conceived as a long-term, lifelong learning process*” with two *general functions*:

- a) *the improvement and renewal of professional practices by updating the knowledge acquired during initial training;*
- b) *to complement initial training, including by possibly changing the professional orientation with new skills.*

¹ Academic education reform as a continuous process - Education Tribune-2010, Prof. Dr. Iosif R. Urs

At the level of education policy, different types of organization of continuous training: in-service training, advanced training, training for (re)qualification, self-training, direct training, assisted training, on-the-job training, etc., are aimed at improving the skills of teaching staff.

Thus, lifelong learning becomes a priority action of educational policies in line with the demands of today's society, allowing a stronger connection between initial training activities and professional development activities.

Lifelong learning has three important characteristics (Paul Ryan, 2003): *universality, innovation in the content and methods of the training process, and the primacy of individual learning.*

Universality is a characteristic of the training process that relates to two aspects: necessity and continuity. Innovation in the content and methods of the training process implies new learning technologies and methods and the adaptation of training to market requirements, and the primacy of individual learning refers to the fact that the involvement and realization of learning processes is an individual responsibility.

2. Current Practices and Modern Perspectives in Human Resources Development

Lifelong learning involves learning activities informal or non-formal contexts that enable adults to develop professional skills.

Thus, training activities and processes take many forms, ranging from content, techniques used, locations, voluntary or compulsory, practical or theoretical.

In the literature there are several types of continuing training, classified according to several categories which are differentiated according to each country's specific training system:

Depending on where it is carried out, continuing training can be: *on the job training and off-the-job training*, whereby continuing training is either carried out within the organization, by internal or external trainers, or is supported outside the organization by another training provider.

1. Training based on formal learning: training that provides basic technical information; face-to-face training; assisted training; self-training; E-learning; blended learning; flexible distance training programs;

2. Semi-formal training: coaching; job shadowing; temporary staff rotation.
3. Informal continuous training: carried out involuntarily, taking the form of acquiring professional skills, based on work experience which is not perceived as a training process.

The organization of training takes various forms which are specific to the type of training used (after Niculescu, R., M., 2000):

- a) **cours** - the basic method being the expository one;
- b) **training period**: this is carried out outside the service for a limited period and involves the trainees' real involvement in the work carried out; it is intended to develop professional skills;
- c) **individualization**: this is a possible formula for facilitating training in "resource centers", personalized teaching workshops, teachers' houses, methodological offices, etc. This form covers certain economic reasons and is used because of the need to bring the training process as close as possible to the specific requirements of each individual. This type of training is carried out through distance training and individualized training in a resource center.
- d) **alternate**: involves theoretical training alternating with practical training, directly at the trainee's place of work, and presupposes the existence of two poles: the training center and the place of work. The theoretical knowledge is acquired in the training center and applied in the institution, with evaluation based on the quality of the teaching activity.
- e) **mentoring**: this involves having an adviser or supervisor for the training process of a new teacher. This type of training is a component of the alternate system since it takes place both at the level of the training institution (self-training) and in the workplace, where an experienced mentor will guide the designated person.

On-the-job training is a current trend in adult vocational training, driven by the need for human resource development, which is increasingly recognized by employing institutions, and by the rapid changes imposed by social dynamics.

This trend is justified by the fact that on-the-job training offers employees opportunities to put into practice the skills acquired through other forms of further training.

Through on-the-job training, the employee has the advantage of "*working, learning and gaining experience at the same time*" (Armstrong, 2005, p. 504). Internal

continuous training thus offers the possibility of faster training of skills and ensures the transfer of knowledge acquired through learning.

In the literature, there are views that this type of training does not fully contribute to performance because the structuring of content is relative and specific learning objectives are not always predetermined.

However, these limitations can be overcome by designing and planning in-house training activities based on human resource management principles, following specific stages: diagnosis, prediction, design, planning, implementation, performance, evaluation.

Such a deployment model is proposed by professors G. Pânișoară and O. Pânișoară (2005, p. 106), apud Milkovich, Boudreau, 1991 (Milkovich & Boudreau, 1991):

The preliminary stage:

- setting objectives to achieve the desired efficiency;
- providing the necessary work equipment and arranging the workplace;

Stage 1- preparation

- identification of the degree of mastery of the skills required for the work in question;
- awakening the learner's interest and enthusiasm for learning;

Stage 2- assimilation of knowledge and practical operations

- the learner is informed theoretically about the operations to be carried out;
- the learner is motivated to ask questions to clarify doubts and to understand the overall information and operations to be assimilated;
- the trainer must provide sufficient time for this stage so that the training program allows for self-paced learning;
- repeat until the skill is formed; if any inadequacies are found, the information must be re-quantified and presented in another way;
- the trainer ensures that the employee has understood each operation before presenting the next piece of information;
- at the end of the training, retention is ensured;

Stage 3- performance review

- the theoretical level knowledge is tested;
- questions are asked and discussions take place to motivate the employee;
- at the practical level, performance is observed, errors are corrected;
- this stage is continued until the knowledge and skills are acquired;

Stage 4- evaluation session

- check that instructions are followed;
- possible improvements to the training program are determined.

The most commonly used in-house training methods are: *mentoring, coaching, and action learning*.

Mentoring and coaching are individualized forms of training in which assistance and support are provided by a mentor or trainer. They are carried out through effective involvement and are the opposite of other types of continuous training as a form of organization.

Coaching is also referred to in the literature as ‘remedial training’ because it can be carried out after training sessions if it is found that the knowledge acquired is not being applied in the job. This method can also be used when new skills need to be trained in response to changes in a particular area of work.

There are differences and similarities between the two types of internal training. Coaching is usually used for operational tasks, while mentoring is applied in more complex situations, the mentor being an experienced person who will act over a longer period.

Mentoring is considered as a method that involves two dimensions - occupational and psychosocial, while coaching is focused on the formation of skills and competencies necessary to carry out the activity with the provision of permanent feedback on performance (Paloş, R. 2007).

Action learning is defined as learning from and through experience by going through all four phases of learning (doing, observing, reflecting, and designing). The realities of the workplace are analyzed and researched to identify solutions that are then implemented. The group is designed to facilitate learning for each member through the nature and variety of stimulating questions and intellectual challenges (Stone, 2005).

Professional training is promoted and used in many European countries (Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, etc.) which value this type of training for several reasons: it meets the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness, it meets the interests of the school organization and the real professional development needs of teachers, it helps to increase the motivation of teachers involved in their in-service training process, it increases the degree of flexibility and adaptability to the specific needs and expectations of the target group to which it is addressed.

The flexibility of training programs, in general, relates to several aspects:

- *individual flexibility* - training programs respond to the specific needs of teachers and enable them to apply new learning in their teaching;
- *flexibility over time* - this refers to updating knowledge, skills, and abilities in line with the changes required by educational reforms.
- *flexibility in space* - adapting to school conditions
- *flexibility of the teaching process* - offers the possibility of alternating training strategies, adapted to the specific content.

Continuous training also implies the existence of secondary effects, more difficult to manage, related to the monitoring and evaluation system. These are usually identified and overcome by providing a strategic framework specific to each school. An example of good practice is the organization of in-service training at the school level in the Netherlands which provides a model of strategies to overcome these drawbacks (Janecke, B, 2007).

The European trend to bring in-service training as close as possible to schools so that it responds to the real needs and interests of participants is based on the following aspects:

- building on prior knowledge in the process of continuing training;
- setting individual professional development goals in line with institutional goals;
- identifying opportunities for continuing training.

In the literature there are a variety of strategies and frameworks for curriculum development of school-centered continuing education programs (Iosifescu, 2001; Betty & Burns, 1997; Ewel, 1997; Manges & Al., 1997; Stinson & Milter 1996):

- social contextual strategies that refer to the effort to empower the learning community;
- planning strategies - refer to the use of learning outcomes leading to the process of curriculum redesign;
- evaluation strategies - relate to the area of methods of assessing the outcomes of curriculum implementation;
- programming strategies - refers to the macro and microlearning experiences of participants who can acquire, integrate and apply knowledge in diverse contexts.

In the European area, the promotion of workplace learning brings in relevant connotations regarding lifelong learning models, as reflected in the European Commission documents, in which a decisive role was played by the European Council held in Lisbon (2000) which outlined the six key messages of the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000):

- *Ensuring universal and continuous access to learning to form and renew the skills needed for sustained participation in the knowledge society;*
- *Making better investments in human resources;*
- *Encouraging innovation in teaching and learning;*
- *Improving how participation and learning outcomes are understood and valued;*
- *Promoting learning at work and encouraging ways of validating learning outcomes ;*
- *Bringing educational provision closer to home, in proximity to the individual, developing it to be more attractive, more flexible by introducing alternative arrangements.*

Internal teacher training integrates training and skills development in a situational context and is called *contextualized training* (Iosifescu, 2001, p. 307) and offers learners opportunities to develop their professional and transversal competencies and to apply the acquired skills in their teaching activity.

A new concept of change in the reconsideration of human resource development, introduced by Peter Senge (Peter, 1990), is that of *the learning organization*, which has the following characteristics: focus on changes of a strategic nature; primary

type of intervention: strategic human resource development; highly mature organization in terms of human resource development (Simmonds, 2003).

In a *learning organization*, it is top management that links the organization's internal development environment with the external environment, ensuring that human resource development strategies and plans are in place, and trainers assume the role of consultants in organizational change. In other words, a *learning organization* is one in which learning and training become an integral part of the organizational culture, more than just a job for the training department, and where top-level managers, line managers, department heads, and individual employees are all involved in the learning process.

Thus, we are talking about a new model of approach to lifelong learning, based on the personal development needs of the employee and towards the strategic development needs of the organization leading, through a problem-solving rather than solution-providing process, through a sustained and concerted effort of all educational service providers - formal and informal - towards a *knowledge-based society*.

The involvement of the formal system should therefore be seen in two aspects:

1. *provision of basic knowledge and skills;*
2. *identifying general knowledge that can be transformed into the specific context of work, leading to the integration of the individual into the knowledge-based society.*

Strategic human resource development implies both a change in the role of the trainer in an organization and a shift towards a management development system.

This model proposes a set of general competencies that reflect the integration of the development strategy at the human resources level by progressively building competencies and aligning them to specific tasks.

The process proceeds through six successive steps (Noel & Dennehy, 1991, cited by Simmonds, 2003):

1. *developing a focused strategic approach;*
2. *involvement of top management;*
3. *re-focusing course content;*
4. *development of 'impactful' learning methods (e.g. active learning);*

5. ensuring the participation of those employees who can make a significant difference;

6. creating a working atmosphere.

3. Conclusions

Human resource development is an area that is undergoing a paradigm shift to lead to the achievement of the performance requirements of the learning organization, with traditional training being replaced by the modernist approach, where learning processes are workplace focused, participant-centered, education, and learning, outcome, and process focused.

Thus, by initiating and implementing lifelong learning activities from this perspective, the questions could be answered: How do we teach, how do we learn, how do we evaluate, and therefore the needs of teachers for updating, reconsidering, and optimizing the skills needed to design the teaching approach from the perspective of modern strategies, developing individualized education, adopting specific methods to stimulate autonomy in learning and the possibilities of adapting to the learning process, developing creative, innovative and critical thinking skills (Popa, 2020).

The process is also important because it has an additional, extremely important role in shaping strategy in direct correlation with the way the concept of organizational learning and human resource development evolves, as well as the evolution of the trainer's work (Sawdon, 1999 cited by Simmonds, 2003):

1. from training to consulting;
2. from training to learning;
3. from individual change to organizational change.

European Union documents and analysis reports conclude that there is a direct relationship between societal change and the quality of education which is closely linked to the process of professional development of human resources.

Continuous training is thus becoming a priority action of education policies in line with the demands of today's society, enabling a closer link to be established between initial training activities and professional development activities.

As mentioned above, the continuous training of human resources is a priority issue at the level of education policies at the European level and implicitly at the national level, and contemporary challenges bring to the fore the importance and need for professional development of human resources as the main actors of education in the context of reform and modernization of the education system.

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