COMMUNITY BUILDING ACTIVITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING EARLY TIMES OF COVID-19 – A CASE STUDY FROM HUNGARY

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Abstract

After the challenges and experiences of the first semester of home education during Covid-19 pandemic, the Szombathely Institute of Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Education and Psychology has developed a new initiative, which serves both to prepare BA students of community coordination for their professional career as well as the joint operation and strengthening of the student-teacher community in digital education via extra-curricular activities.

This is how the *Community Assembly Workshop* programme series has been created at the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology including eight-eight programmes in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years with the involvement of students on the basis of learning by doing principle. All phases of the work were carried out by the students, with background information, professional support and guidance provided by the instructor.

The paper is based on the results of a survey and SPSS analysis conducted in May 2021. All students of the two grades participating in the project implementation answered the questions. The aim of the research was to assess the development of students 'professional competence, motivation, and ideas about professional perspectives in the future. The results are relevant for the year 2020/2021 academic year which can be described as early times of Covid-19 with restrictions in all segments of life.

The results show that, in addition to the predominance of individual work as a starting point, students lack significant trust in both themselves and their peers, commitment to the profession is also weak. The organizational and implementation tasks of the *Community Assembly Workshop* programmes have developed students 'competencies in several areas. According to the results, the work carried out during the project is suitable for increasing skills in terms of teamwork, trust in peers, commitment to peers, responsibility, stress tolerance and creativity as well as precision. Critical thinking is reinforced by the review of university rules and the role of moderators taken in conversations. Creativity can be strengthened along with logically expected graphic and playful tasks with process design as well as writing articles. All the subtasks done individually (moderator) or where the feedback from peers brought the result of satisfaction: e.g. writing articles, taking and publishing photos and videos can be considered as a self-confidence booster. The change in the commitment to the profession cannot be tied to a subtask significantly, as it is visibly strengthened by planning the processes and the work carried out during the whole semester. In terms of the development of the BA programme of community coordination, the result of the initiative is that after only half a year of work, the students' commitment to the profession has increased by 70%.

The work continues in 2021/2022 academic year.

Keywords: *Digital community coordination, learning by doing, extra-curricular activities, Covid-19.*

1. Introduction

'*Közművelődés*' [cultural education of the public] as a profession is a *Hungarikum*,[1] and the content of the basic course in community organisation differs from area of community development in the Anglo-Saxon world. Community coordination concerns the cultural education of the public, dealing with cultural and youth groups in local communities (Velics, 2021), encouraging volunteering (Velics, 2008), preserving tradition, as well as economic community development. It aims to strengthen local communities.

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[1]Hungarikum is a collective term indicating a value worthy of distinction and highlighting within a unified system of qualification, classification, and registry and which represents the high performance of Hungarian people thanks to its typically Hungarian attributes, uniqueness, specialty and quality. http://www.hungarikum.hu/en/content/what-hungarikum

After the challenges and experiences of the first semester of home education during Covid-19 pandemic, the Szombathely Institute of Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Education and Psychology has developed a new initiative, which serves both to prepare BA students of community coordination for their professional career as well as the joint operation and strengthening of the student-teacher community in digital education via extra-curricular activities.

The Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology at the Faculty of Education and Psychology at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE PPK) has been teaching community organisation to BA students since 2017. While the small classes do create a "cosy" atmosphere for participants, the experience of being a community has not yet become a reality. The lecture series "*Közösségszerelő Műhely*" (Community Assembly Workshop) started in the autumn semester of 2020 and is currently in its fourth semester. The initiative serves both preparation for careers, as well as creating cohesion and strength in the student-teacher community in the era of digital education, the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

This paper provides a case study-like analytical account of the experience gained through implementing this innovative idea. The lessons learned and the conclusions drawn from the process can be used to design activities beyond the higher education curriculum and provide inspiration for the renewal of the professional digital toolkit for cultural education of the public in the 21st century. Similar initiatives were described only in few cases (Ardeni et al. 2021) (Hast, 2021).

2. Overview of project

This is how the *Community Assembly Workshop* programme series has been created at the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology including eight-eight programmes in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years with the involvement of students.

Each semester, the series of programmes is linked to a course (*Mechanisms of Communities and Theory and Practice of Communication I-II*), partly completing its practical tasks, for which students receive a partial credit (25%). All phases of the work were carried out by the students on the basis of learning by doing principle (Bradshaw, 2017) (Samy – Savic, 2019); with background information, professional support and guidance provided by the instructor.

At the beginning of the semester, the students fix the dates and content of the programme and divide the typical tasks among themselves: writing and sending invitations, making posters, preparing General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) declarations, working out the details of the programme elements, inviting contributors, running the programme, moderation or game master tasks, writing articles, taking photos, etc. The teacher facilitates the process, but the aim is to reinforce shared decision-making and commitment, and to provide experience of workflow in a real-life situation. The programmes were implemented using MS Teams and other digital platforms and tools. In the first and second semesters, programmes were organised for students and teachers, providing a means to connect during periods of online education (See Figure 1.). In the third semester, education was onsite; the programmes were relocated from the digital space, and also from Szombathely, we joined university events such as the Researchers' Night, and we held a joint evening with the University of Sopron, the student groups from the two universities cooperated to bring the event into being. In the spring semester of 2022, the Community Assembly Workshop will enter the cultural space in Szombathely with the implementation of programmes in cooperation with the Agora-Savaria - Szombathely Cultural Centre.

This series of programmes is still experimental in its content and design. During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, part of its novelty was that it served curricular purposes as an extra-curricular activity.

Figure 1. Game masters at work: they sat together for only photo shooting, while the typical working condition can be seen at the right. Social distancing rules and other safety instructions were carried out strictly.
(Photo: Velics, G. 2020.)
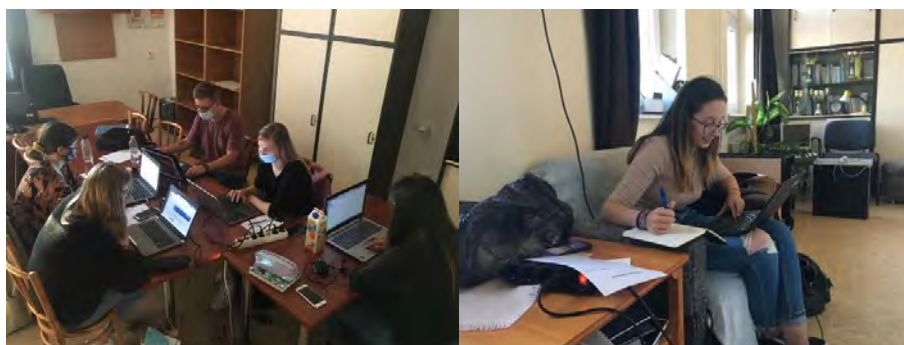
3. Methods and results

The general impression became quickly apparent that the students enjoyed the Community Assembly Workshop programmes, but it was also worth exploring what precisely had engendered that satisfaction, as well as what group and personal changes had taken place during the process. Knowledge of what is going on in the minds of the organising students and what the activity means in terms of the digital renewal of the profession of community organisation, is valuable, partly as feedback for the course teachers, partly for pedagogical reasons and also with regard to the planning of future semesters (Fleener – Barcinas, 2019) (Johnson, 2013).

To record the experience gained in the first semester, I collected feedback by email in January 2021 with eleven open-ended questions that provided an opportunity for a longer reflection in writing. Subsequently, a questionnaire survey authorised under no. ELTE PPK KEB 2021/216, and SPSS data processing was carried out in May 2021. The two classes that organised and delivered the programmes for the two semesters were fully represented in the survey: 16 Year II students and 10 Year I students completed the online questionnaire.

In a broader context, the survey focused on the use value, applicability and potential for improvement of the digital solutions for community organisation used during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the results of the research, this paper presents the section on the impact on professional and personal competence development.

The research hypotheses for this area are:

The biggest positive change in students' professional competences is in their perception of teamwork and commitment to the profession.

Main research questions in this section are:

What characteristics did the student self-report before and after the programme?

In which direction have these characteristics changed?

What sub-tasks did each student volunteer to do?

Which feature did these tasks change?

In order to assess the developmental impact of participation in the organisation and implementation of the Community Assembly Workshop, it was necessary to assess the characteristics of the students before they commenced the tasks. I made an assessment of 18 attributes on an ordinal scale, based on the respondents' answers to the following question: "Please, think about how true the following characteristics were of you prior to the Community Assembly Workshop? (1 - least, 5 - most)". The response rate was 100% and painted a picture of students having a significant deficit of trust in themselves and their peers. Commitment to the profession is also weak, with a majority showing at most average scores. Positive attributes include good work ethic, independent work and creativity. The predominance of independent work is a feature brought from secondary school. Students prefer to rely on their own strengths and creativity to solve problems, with less than half of students having had prior experience of teamwork. Perhaps contrary to the general experience of teachers, respondents consider themselves to be good at spelling and meeting deadlines, and see themselves as responsible and precise.

To assess progress, I used the same 18 characteristics and measured the direction of change on a three-point scale: "For each of the following factors, please rate how they have changed as a result of your involvement in the organisation and work of the Community Assembly Workshop (weakened, remained the same, strengthened)". Weakening changes were only found for a few traits and in a few sporadic cases: the ability to tolerate stress, patience and commitment to or trust in peers. The weakening of these shows that the organisational work of the Community Assembly Workshop series, which involved considerable stress in many areas (meeting deadlines, accuracy and precision), was a challenge beyond the comfort level of some students. In the future, it will also be worth bearing in mind that in teamwork, not everyone takes an equal share of the tasks or fails to perform them properly, and this can also be a burden for the others. Spelling, independent work, creativity and precision were the most stable qualities, with three quarters of students indicating these. Commitment to peers, teamwork, trust in peers and commitment to the profession were reported to have strengthened in most instances.

Figure 2. Competences: direction of change. N=26 (100%).

Competences	weakened (%)	N	remained the same (%)	N	strengthened (%)	N
good work ethic	3.85	1	57.69	15	38.46	10
precision			73.08	19	26.92	7
time management			53.85	14	46.15	12
efficiency			46.15	12	53.85	14
responsibility			46.15	12	53.85	14
critical thinking	3.85	1	61.54	16	34.62	9
commitment to the profession			30.77	8	69.23	18
commitment to peers	3.85	1	3.85	1	92.31	24
creativity			73.08	19	26.92	7
use of IT			50.00	13	50.00	13
meeting deadlines			69.23	18	30.77	8
spelling			88.46	23	11.54	3
patience	3.85	1	65.38	17	30.77	8
trust in peers	7.69	2	19.23	5	73.08	19
team work			23.08	6	76.92	20
independent work			76.92	20	23.08	6
self-confidence	3.85	1	61.54	16	34.62	9
ability to tolerate stress	7.69	2	53.85	14	38.46	10

Finally, the students had to choose which task(s) they had carried out and indicate in which area it developed or strengthened them only in terms of the selected task(s): "Please, indicate in the codes the areas the work developed and strengthened you only for the Community Assembly Workshop sub-task in which you participated." The questionnaire allowed respondents to skip this task if they felt that providing an answer would reveal their identity, thus data from 19 respondents was assessed. In reporting the results, I focus on the weakest initial properties. In terms of confidence building, time management and meeting deadlines, tasks related to the moderation of discussions and those of the game master for quizzes proved to be particularly useful. Both required preparation, there was something at stake, and students were required to deal with sudden and unexpected, technical or human situations alone online, and were provided with immediate feedback. The playful exercises tested at the department's digital events will also strengthen teamwork, use of IT and creativity.

As qualities worthy of special attention and further development, the strengthening of trust in and commitment to peers, as well as commitment to the profession resulted from the work carried out throughout the semester. There are some areas in which the sub-task in itself determines the competences in which strengthening can be anticipated. Critical thinking is reinforced by reviewing university rules and moderating discussions. Creativity is enhanced by tasks involving graphics and playfulness, process design and article writing. Self-confidence was boosted by any sub-task that demanded independent work or where peer feedback demonstrated satisfaction: e.g., writing articles, taking and publishing photos and videos.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the organisation and implementation of the Community Assembly Workshop have improved the students' competences in several areas. Results reflecting commitment to peers and trust in peers are qualities that show a picture of a community in the making. Progress in teamwork is encouraging as it is an essential attribute for 21st-century workers. The increase in commitment to the profession experienced by 70% of the students is promising in terms of reinforcing the value of the BA in community organisation. The first hypothesis of the research was partially confirmed: a shift towards

professional commitment and teamwork was observed; while the preliminary expectation was complemented by the fact that almost all students reported an increase in the categories of commitment to and trust in peers. This unexpected but positive result can be the basis for social capital that can be used as a resource in later work.

The aim of the study, which was linked to the Community Assembly Workshop set up within the framework of the ELTE PPK Institute of Education and Psychology, was to assess changes in the professional competences of students. As a starting condition, besides the predominance of individual work, the first and second year students on the BA programme in community organisation in Szombathely exhibit a significant deficit of trust in themselves and their peers. Their commitment to the profession is weak at entry, and students are confronted with career elements during their training. The tasks related to the organisation and implementation of the Community Assembly Workshop programme developed the competences of students in several areas. The results show that the work done on the project seems to increase teamwork, trust in peers, commitment to peers, responsibility, the ability to tolerate stress, creativity and precision.

Extra-curricular community activities in higher education provide students not only with a useful way of spending their free time that serve recreational purposes, but also with the opportunity to experience professional collaboration, to strengthen their skills and employability through the experience of teamwork while laying the foundations of their future professional resources by increasing their commitment to each other as a network. Investing energy into these and thus giving back to the community is an activity that does not have an immediate impact, but which will build and develop future generations, as it would in any field.

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