GAMING TECHNOLOGIES IN THE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the role and significance of the educational gaming technologies in the Social Work students training process within the context of developing important personal qualities related with their successful career in future, as well as supporting this process with acquiring new knowledge and practical skills.

Keywords: educational gaming technologies, Social Work, new knowledge, practical skills.

The socio-economic processes which are taking place in our country, are changing radically the social sphere. These include the adverse demographic situation, the still high levels of poverty, unemployment and the refugee problem, etc.

This complicated environment inevitably results in higher requirements towards the university training of the future Social Workers with a view to their further professional interaction with the society, aiming most of all at creating favorable conditions for the realization of the vital activity of the client, groups or communities as part of this society. Within this meaning, among the most important requirements towards the quality of the educational process, is training of students with a high level of professional competence, wide scientific interests and high level of social creativity.

Among the methods and forms facilitating fulfillment of this requirement to the fullest extent possible, are the gaming technologies. Their inclusion in the educational process leads to activation of the cognitive activity, communication skills development and formation of important professional personal qualities such as self-control, stress resistance, adaptability skills, autonomy and tolerance.

Y. Krasovski makes an attempt to track down the development periods of the gaming technologies during the 20th c.

The first period the author refers to the beginning of the 70's when the business game was starting to be more widely used as a training method, mainly as part of the university programmes.

The second period the author refers to the beginning of the 80's when the gaming technologies were used mostly for training of specialists in the sector of economic science.

The third period covers the end of the 80's when the gaming technologies were included on a mass scale in all university student training programmes.

The fourth period the author refers to the end of the 20th century when on a mass scale games were made a part of all spheres of education [1].

According to the Federation of the American Scientists, educational gaming technologies are fundamentally different from the dominating teaching methods since through them knowledge is acquired by performing a gameplay to achieve the goal set, unlike the communicative and test methods used by traditional teaching methods [2].

D. Dimitrov proposes a definition of the gaming technology as "a systemically built procedural and structural integrity of interconnected procedures for focused creation of the activities and pedagogical varieties of the game" [3, p.23]. He believes that the parameters of gaming technologies are pre-determined by three models: /the target, conceptual and organizational-functional model/, by the supporting invariant (structuring algorithm) and its unfolding programme.

The same author also draws the attention to the concept of "standard gaming technology" which, in his opinion, "is based on and aims at the activity or pedagogical form of a given type /kind /of game". It is focused on the answers of the questions "how" to develop the relevant variation of the game and "what for" and "how" it should be used [3, p.23].

The French Pedagogue L. Legrand [4, p.20-32] points out the following advantages of the gaming technologies as part of the innovative pedagogical technologies

- they contribute to increasing learning motivation;
- they appear to be a source of information, they encourage self-education and build habits for independence;
- they increase learning intensity and performance;
- they promote training diversification and the use of game-based and speed learning

The specifics of the gaming technology are determined to a large extent also by the available game environment: we differ among object games, tabletop games, room games, street games, open-air games, computer games, etc.

The effectiveness resulting from the use of the gaming technology significantly depends on the creation and maintenance of the interest in gaming during the entire duration of the gaming activities. Y. V. Geronimus points out the following more important conditions which help to create and maintain the interest in gaming:

1) pleasure from being in contact with one's game partners; 2) pleasure from demonstrating one's own gaming skills to the others; 3) pleasure from anticipation unpredictable game situations; 4) the need of decision-making in a complex and unsure environment; 5) quick result from the decisions made; 6) satisfaction with one's own success [5].

T. Selevko makes an effort to classify the gaming technologies on the basis of the following classification parameters:

1. By level of application: at all levels;
2. By philosophical basis: adaptable;
3. By the main developmental factor: psychogenic;
4. By the concept for acquiring experience: associative-reflective;
5. By the nature of their content: all types;
6. By the type of management: all types - from the consultation system to the programming system;
7. By their organizational form: all forms;
8. By the pedagogical approach to the child: unrestricted education;
9. By the predominant methods in them: developing and creative;
10. By direction of the pedagogical innovation: activation;
11. By category of the trainees: mass, all categories [1].

Taking into consideration the aspect related to the content of the training based on gaming technologies, I. Belonovskaya points out its most important pedagogical possibilities:

(a) it encourages the interest in learning activities as a whole and also in those socio-economic problems that are modelled or designed with the help of gaming technologies;

(b) it encourages the cognitive activity of the students in the learning process, allowing them to acquire and perceive a larger amount of information based on examples of the specific reality modelled in the game.

(c) the game participants are able to acquire habits for taking responsible decisions in complex life situations which are modelled as the game unfolds;

(d) it improves the relationship between game participants and their teachers;

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(e) better self-esteem for the game participants since they have the chance to put the words into practice and test their own skills;

(f) change of the attitude towards the surrounding reality, overcoming the fear of unknown. [6, p.63]

The gaming technologies included in the training process of the Social Work students require from the teacher a particular sequence of his/her actions upon their performance:

1. Suitable selection and elaboration of various types of professional-oriented games involving different aspects of the complex interaction in the "Social Worker – Client" system and aiming at solving various problem scenarios;
2. Encouraging and subsequent inclusion of the trainees in the actual game activity, whereas as it is unfolding, various actions and interactions from the social work sphere should be modelled;
3. Joint discussion of the game results, at the level of competence demonstrated by each participant;

One of the most important features of the gaming technology appears to be their ability to support the development or formation of important professional skills. In addition to this, they can be used to assess the degree of their development based on participation of the students in the game.

Characterizing the properties of the active gaming technologies used for developing the trainee's competence, A. Knyazev and I. Odintsova point out their features:

- they are psychologically attractive for the trainees;
- they suggest a learning environment which responds quickly to the trainees actions;
- they encourage the trainee's interest in the problems modelled or designed using the game technology;
- they contribute for improvement of the relations between the game participants;
- they contribute to raising the self-esteem of the game participants, i.e. game participants have the chance to put the words into practice and test their skills;
- they contribute for changing the attitude towards the surrounding reality, overcoming the fear of the unknown;
- they encourage activation of the trainees' cognitive activity which enables them to acquire and perceive a larger amount of information based on examples of the particular modulable reality;
- they allow multiple repetition of particular actions with the purpose of consolidating the habits needed for their performance;

- they allow acquiring of experience from the activity, similar to the experience which they would acquire in practice;
- they allow trainees themselves to solve the difficult problems and not only act as observers;
- they create possibilities for transfer of knowledge and experience from a training situation to a real one;
- they allow game participants to acquire habits for taking responsible decisions in in complex socio-professional situations, which are being an object of the game modelling. [7]

The business game is one of the most often used teaching methods for the Social Works students. This game features an active interaction between the participants in the course of the game and inclusion of models imitating the process studied.

In recent days on a world scale over 4000 business games are used all over the world. They are grouped in a number of classifications, most common of which are:

1. In accordance with the type of human activity modelled in the game and the goals which participants pursue in the game: learning games; research games; management games; testimonials games.
2. In accordance with the time the game take places: with no time limit; with a time limit; real-time games; short duration games;
3. In accordance with the game's ultimate goal: learning; finding out games; problem-solving games.
4. According to the method they use: role-playing games; group discussions; imitation games; organizational - activity games; innovation games; ensamble games;

In the interactive learning practice, five varieties of the business game are used with priority:

1. Imitation games: This game variety is a didactic form intended for reproduction /imitation/ of particular processes /e.g. decision-making process or resource redistribution process/ with the purpose of their studying and perceiving by the listeners.

   With their help, the Social Work professional develops social mobility, high adaptability to the constantly changing social environment, ability to analyze the particular life situations, their evaluation and making optimal decisions on this basis.

2. Operational games: They train performance of the operations specific for a particular professional activity, whereas, modelling of an overall work process is also possible. These games are conducted in an environment imitating to the reality in the fullest extent possible.

3. Role-playing games: In this game variety practiced are actions, patterns of behavior, means of fulfilling the functions and duties of particular officers.
4. Mocking method: participants in this game variety are expected to mock the image of a particular person in order to better understand his/her job, to try to assess it and, last but not least, to demonstrate a line of behavior based on this.
5. Psychodrama and sociodrama: for some authors, this game variety is a kind of "social and psychological theater" which practices and develops empathy, affects the other person's state by engaging that person in productive contacts.

The positive and negative consequences of the university training technologization through the inclusion of business games are the following: Positive consequences:

1. Better motivation and emotional tone of the participants in the training process;
2. Career preparation, development of skills which the students learn to use in practice;
3. During the game follow-up discussion, the acquired knowledge is consolidated;
4. Students acquire experience with professional functions on the basis of the personal example;
5. In the process of collective discussion of particular issues, criticism, restraint, communicative tolerance, self-control in communication, and positive communication attitude are formed, which corresponds directly to the objectives of the present study;
6. The verbal and non-verbal communication skills are improved and also the discussion skills. The speech etiquette is mastered.

Negative consequences:

1. Heavy workload related with the preparation of this teaching form /for the teacher/;
2. Heavy workload for the teacher also during the game itself, as the teacher is expected to play the role of both a director and an actor throughout the game.

The role –play games are becoming increasingly popular as part of the university training process, and especially that of the Social Work students.

They can be treated as a complex teaching method or technique in which a small group in the form of a game performance studies an issue of significance for this group, most often this being a social conflict. Participants take part in a model of a real life situation, performing particular game roles or some of their variations.

The didactic goal of role – playing games is focused on supporting the development of different competences and actions as well as justification of the possibility for performance of alternative actions. The methodical goal of role – playing games is to practice and experimentally test various strategies for solving a particular problem in a conflict situation, and also realizing and

analyzing participant's own game actions or the actions of the other participants. Most of all, the role-playing games encourage development of empathy skills, observation skills, collaborative skills and communication with other people, as well as solving of problems in order to achieve a particular learning goal.

The role-playing game structure comprises of the following elements: roles; starting situation; roleplay actions.

The roles played by game participants can be social or interpersonal. The first are determined by the individual's place in the system of objective social relations, including also the professional relations, which makes the role-playing game particularly suitable in modelling of real professional situations from the sphere of social work. The interpersonal roles are determined by the individual's place in the process of interpersonal relationships. Selection of roles should be done in such a way as to form in the trainees an active life position as well as positive personal qualities, including also qualities needed for successful communication. The second element of the role –playing game is the starting situation. Most of all, it appears to be its means of organization. In creating this situation, it is necessary to consider both the real life circumstances and the relations between the communicators. The third element of the role - playing game is the roleplay actions performed by the participants. They are organically linked with the role and represent the basic unit by the help of which the game unfolds.

Analyzed in the context of the training provided to the future Social Work professionals, and in particular seen as a method facilitating development of the students' personal skills for professional excellence in communication, the role-playing game can be highly useful given its below-mentioned features:

1. The role -playing game encourages student's speech activity by placing them in situations requiring them to update the need of putting together and making some professionally-directed statements.
2. The game makes it possible for the shy and unconfident students to communicate successfully with the others and therefore to overcome the barriers which exist in their communication. This is further facilitated by the fact that in the role – playing game each participant has a role and is expected to be an active partner in the process of group communication.
3. With the role-playing game the students master the elements of communication, they learn how to start and maintain a discussion, how to find the proper time to interrupt their interlocutor in order to express their agreement, make an objection or ask clarifying questions.

Reflexive Games

They are focused on re-consideration and transformation of one's personal and professional experience. The most significant requirement for achieving this result is the creation of appropriate conditions, suitable environment for reflection, in this particular case.

The main method in the performance of this game variety is the reflexive polylogue method, which takes place within the following stages:

1. Problemization of the scientific field, which appears to be the object of study, within which the thematic groups of participants in the reflexive game are established, each group being oriented towards studying of a particular essential aspect of the problem analyzed;

2. The second stage suggests realization of the process of generating ideas within the groups themselves, aimed at solving the problematic moments, coordination of these ideas and synthesizing them in comprehensive ideas for solving the problem;

3. During the third stage, a collective discussion and analysis take place, as well as exploration of any positive and negative consequences resulting from completion of the ideas discussed. Seen from the aspect of including this game variety in the educational process with the Social Work students, it is believed that increasing the tendency towards reflection is extremely important for the development of professional ethics, which in turn contributes to further improvement of the students' communicative tolerance.

On the basis of the above analysis of the role and functions of the gaming technologies included in the Social Work students training process, the following more important conclusions can be drawn:

1. Gaming technologies can be seen as an interactive teaching method which encourages the motivation for communication and respectively urging participants to an active speech activity;

2. The control as the game unfolds and the subsequent assessment of the results from the game activity are not carried out according to the formal parameters already known to us /the ability to reproduce knowledge already acquired, but by using much more significant parameters including the ability to use the acquired knowledge and practical skills by modelling the speech behavior in professionally significant communication situations.

3. Having the signs of an active teaching method, games contribute not only to the formation and development of language and communication skills but also to modification of the students' personal qualities depending on the result of their own actions;

4. With the help of the games, the teacher can achieve the following results: formation of psychological readiness for communication in the students; improvement of their speech behavior; formation of language and communication skills and habits.

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