

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE XXITH CENTURY SKILLS ON TEENAGERS

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the concept of experiential learning and its relevance in the context of developing 21st century skills. The first part of the article offers conceptual clarifications, highlights the latest education initiatives for development and examples of best practices of experiential learning, according to the visions of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Carl Rogers and David Kolb. Also, the key skills of the 21st century are clarified, in the light of the 2011 National Education Law, the Council of the European Union and the World Economic Forum. The online study presented at the end of the article shows that there is a lively interest in Romanian research on the teenage development through experiential learning methods and a need for youth development projects to be launched throughout the country. This paper was developed with the aim of supporting educational agents to initiate and develop initiatives based on experiential learning, which will lead to the development of 21st century skills among teenagers, with beneficial effects throughout life.

Key words: *experiential learning, teenagers, XXIth century skills, good practices for trainers.*

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Introduction

Anticipating the future is a necessity within the educational management, which must come with continuous solutions to the problems of the present and to the demands of the future. Educating the individual to be prepared to respond to market demands is a development function that is closely related to educational agents within the social and organizational environment.

It is necessary to identify the demands of the future, the skills demanded by the employers, the needs of the students and the ideas of the teachers and parents in order to improve the quality level of the education. In the absence of a related initiative that unifies agents at the educational, social, political and administrative level, it is necessary to design reliable and flexible educational programs, such as those in schools and development centers, non-governmental organizations and associations. They provide training programs for the personal and social development of teenagers, so that the needs of the future are met while teenagers contribute to their own development.

According to the university professor Klaus Schwab, founder and executive director of the World Economic Forum, the fourth industrial revolution blurs the boundaries between the physical, digital and biological fields (Schwab, 2016). Some examples would be: ubiquitous commerce, intelligent robots, self-driving cars, genetic reconstruction, artificial intelligence, nanotechnologies. These progressive changes happen under exponential speed, all over the world, in every moment (Schwab, 2016).

Therefore, the need to include simple and customizable initiatives, based on the experiential learning, could increase the access to technology and education, leading to the development of 21st century skills.

It is noticeable that, currently, there is a rich variety of global educational systems and programs from which we can learn and from which teachers and trainers can take effective methods to ensure a better adaptation of contemporary pedagogy to the society's needs and real needs for training and development of young people. We present below three research projects applied in the field of education, based on which our study is theoretically and methodologically based.

Educational innovations identified by Brookings Institute

Through a local initiative, at the Brookings Institute's Center for Universal Education, a global catalog of educational innovations was completed in 2018, as part of their new work, "Leapfrogging Inequality: Remarking Education to Help Young People Thrive." (Winthrop, Barton, McGivney, 2018). The catalog documents nearly 3000 educational innovations from 166 countries worldwide. The ideas come from both developing and developed countries, are implemented by a variety of educational agents and range from new, untested and unvalidated innovations to others already certified and supported by evidence.

According to Brookings Institute, to create innovations in education it is necessary not only to understand how new generations are learning, but to rely on collaborating with teenagers in order to introduce innovations in schools with which their teachers are not yet familiar (Penido, 2018). The education needs, identified by the Brookings Institute, for the moment, are:

1. Curricula focused on 21st century skills that involve active pedagogical techniques and the involvement of students in developing critical, creative and purpose-based thinking that would allow them to remain proactive throughout adulthood;
2. Increasing the participation of students to the educational process by ensuring equal opportunities within an inclusive environment;
3. Involving students in the decision-making processes related to the school and the educational environment;
4. Developing relationships based on openness, dialogue, understanding and cooperation between teachers / trainers and students and the arrangement of spaces and infrastructures better connected with the reality of today's generations;
5. Customized learning taking into account the individual features of the students, which can lead to autonomy and flexibility related to the choice of study programs;
6. Including new technologies in the educational process, in order to support autonomy and free choice;
7. Accreditation and co-authoring: creation of projects, products and publication of materials developed by students;

8. Respect for their own forms of expression, organization and contribution;

9. Inclusion of practical activities where to find art, culture, digital media and nature (Penido, 2018).

GlocalTour Program regarding education for development

Due to the growing interest of educational agents, education for development has become one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, a development plan established by the United Nations for the period 2000-2015 (Gliga, 2015). In order to support the achievement of the goal, the GlocalTour program was created, carried out in four European Union countries, including Romania, for three years. A notable aspect was that Romania is in an early stage of implementing the experiential education, for development, not having a platform, a school program and efficient working procedures. Despite these shortcomings, the interest of the teachers regarding the education for personal development and its support, has climbed Romania in the top. Due to the attendance to trainings, the ideas proposed and the feedback provided, it was possible to identify a high level of readiness of teachers, students and NGOs to be actively involved in the education for development (Gliga, 2015).

Also, it was found that there is a high interest from the Romanian partners to generate materials with topics related to the education for development. When the opportunity existed, through the GlocalTour project, the educational agents from Romania showed themselves involved and interested in taking part to such an initiative.

“Litteris et virtuti. Education through teenagers’ eyes”

In 2012 was carried out the study “*Litteris et virtuti. Education through the teenagers’ eyes*”, which aimed to identify the perceptions of young people related to the current education system in Romania. The research was carried out on a sample of 410 respondents, representative at national level for young people between the ages of 14 and 26 years,

and showed that over 80% of young people from Romania perceive the education system as predominantly theoretical, with few practical inclinations. 79% of the respondents consider the practical activities to be “useful” or “very useful”, as a result of their involvement into volunteering activities. This shows that young people are eager to complete their formal education by engaging in non-formal education programs, which have the effect of developing their personality and social skills. This is the seventh study carried out by the SMARK Research service, which helps to identify relevant market needs and trends and provides solutions in the form of research reports developed in collaboration with the most important research companies from Romania (SMARK, 2012). In this context, experiential learning is presented as the solution that encompasses most of the best practices of the initiatives mentioned above, becoming a useful tool for trainers everywhere.

Best practices of the experiential learning – examples for trainers

Starting from the nineteenth century, the concepts of experimentation and experiential learning have increasingly emerged as a form of complementary learning to traditional, formal learning, developed with the industrial revolution.

The theories of experiential learning of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Carl Rogers and David Kolb, considered the parents of experiential education, emphasize both the significance of the environment and the merits of practical experience, valuing both individuality and personal experience as well as learning groups, group training and free activity. Learning is achieved through experimentation and discovery and skills, seen as learning purposes, are acquired as a means of achieving goals related to each individual’s life.

John Dewey (1859 - 1952), author of the cognitive development theory, valued individuality and free activity, manual work, experimentation, discovery and development of knowledge and skills of the child in order to find its meaning, fulfillment and role in the world where he lives (Dewey, 1966). In Dewey’s vision, the trainer should prepare

strategies, resources and equipment related to the appropriate learning methods with each type of experience, should provide clear and effective instructions to the participant, designing the steps that must be initiated and carried out and not last, to verify and to assess whether they were received correctly by the participants to the experience (Dewey, 1992).

Kurt Lewin (1890 - 1947) developed Dewey's work, focusing on the social environment, group dynamics and group learning where, through team-building methods, one can achieve not only the development of the individual, but implicitly the development of the organization of which he is a part. In Lewin's view, individuals act and react to changing circumstances, having the ability to influence themselves positively or negatively when they are part of a group (Lewin, 1959). This notion, that a group is more than the sum of its individual members, has quickly gained the support of sociologists and psychologists, remaining relevant in the current research (Forsyth, 2009) and a relevant method for trainers to develop skills.

Carl Ransom Rogers (1902 – 1987) through the non-directive therapy provided an optimistic view on the human ability of self-development in positive and healthy ways (Rogers 1942). He brings to the attention of trainers the student-centered pedagogy, where the emphasis is placed on creating an appropriate framework for the learning process. Carl Rogers emphasizes the need for learning to be a desired act by the student, where the teacher turns from an emitter into a trainer who creates the learning context and context (Rogers, 1942). Rogers also noted that when students have tools and methods available with which they can learn a specific topic, they can then measure their performance, thus training skills that will allow them to be autonomous throughout their life (Rogers, 1983).

David Kolb (1939) founder and president of the Institute for Experiential Learning (1981), developed the of Experiential Learning Cycle Model in 1984. Kolb promotes the notion that learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts, which could be used in a wider range of everyday life situations. But to get there, you need valuable learning experiences. According to D. Kolb, the Experiential Learning Cycle Model requires the participant to go through four different phases of the learning process, shown in Figure 1:

1. **concrete experience** - living a real or simulated experience through which new information is discovered;
2. **reflective observation** - analysis and reflection on the lived experience;
3. **abstract conceptualization** - interpretation and creation of generalizations or principles that integrate observations related to experience in theories; these theories will be used as a reference for future actions;
4. **active experimentation** - ensures the transfer of lessons learned into subsequent experiences (Kolb, 1984).



Fig. 1. Experiential learning Cycle Model (according to David Kolb)

Starting from the Experiential Learning Cycle Model, David Kolb proposed four learning styles: the active style, the reflective style, the theoretical style and the pragmatic style (Kolb, 1984). In order to determine the learning style, the trainers can use dedicated questionnaires or use observation and certain games to highlight the predominant

learning styles of those they work with. The knowledge of the learning style of the working group is useful and decisive for selecting the activities and methods that the trainer applies to a certain group, in order to make the activities more efficient and to achieve the goals proposed.

In support of the trainers, there was also created the online platform Experience Based Learning Systems (EBLS) dedicated to experiential learning, where the researchers, practitioners and students can join in to share their research and practice. The mission of EBLS is to create an exchange of ideas and best practices with which supporters of experiential learning support each other, promote the theory and practice of experiential learning (<https://learningfromexperience.com/about/>).

As Ken Robinson, emeritus professor within Warwick University, author and international advisor on education and education, points out, the most appropriate approach for this era is the agricultural one (Robinson, 2015). In other words, it is necessary for the young person to be regarded as a young plant, who is provided the environment and the conditions favorable for growth and development, so that in time, he will also provide lifetime contributions.

XXIth century skills – reference and educational purpose

Skill represents “the ability of a person or group to interpret a phenomenon, to solve a problem, to take a decision or to take an action; resulting from his knowledge, skills, aptitudes and temperamental-characterological traits that the individual has.” In the curriculum, defining the goals in terms of skills imposes a formative education, focused not so much on “what to know”, but especially on what we “must know to do” (Răduț-Taciu, Aștilean, 2011, p. 96).

The building of different skills (and capacities) is approached in the pedagogy of J. Piaget which links the formation of a skill to an action scheme (Ardelean, Mândruț, 2012).

In the context of skills development, the training represents the “training activity” (Răduț-Taciu, Aștilean, 2011, p. 98) and can be facilitated by a provider, namely an “organization, which can be a company, corporation, enterprise, institution, agency, service, etc. which provides a product to a potential beneficiary or customer” (Răduț-Taciu, Aștilean, 2011, p. 98).

The trainer “has the role to form autonomous socially integrated personalities, with the capacity for critical and creative thinking, with an authentic moral profile and a high professionalism” (Răduț-Taciu, Aștilean, 2011, p. 27).

Skills-based education brings to the attention the modern paradigm on learning by emphasizing the assessment of how to achieve the goals undertaken at the end of the school year, of the educational cycle and at the end of the formal education period, to give a new meaning to the learning process and to certify the results of the training.

In this context, the education of the future evolves from the pedagogy for knowledge, to the pedagogy for skills (Chiș, 2005) and from the pedagogy through goals, to the pedagogy of “lifelong learning” and the pedagogy centered on skills.

Currently, there are three dimensions of the skills approach (Ardelean, Mândruț, 2012):

1. a dimension that originates in the strictly scientific meaning of skills. In this case, school learning has a profound inductive character (starting from well-defined elementary skills, to more general skills).

2. a dimension resulting from the key skills provided at European level. In this case, the main element is the cross-sectional nature of the skills and their orientation towards lifelong learning.

3. a dimension of achieving general skills and specific skills described in the school curriculum. In this case, it is about applying the skills to concrete situations of learning and taking as such the skills from the school programs. In this situation, a special emphasis is placed on building learning situations that will lead to performance.

These three ways of perceiving the skills are completed by the defining elements coming from each side. Their meeting into an articulated theoretical structure represents a purpose of didactics of the training of skills. Apart from this reference of the didactics regarding the predominant purpose pursued, there are also possibilities to outline different didactics, based on other criteria (Ardelean, Mândruț, 2012).

From the perspective of the didactics of skills, the essential mutation constitutes the type of purpose pursued, skills instead of goals (Frumos, 2008). Through its aims, education has the role to incorporate the evolutions, the dynamics of the society and to contribute to solving the problems that the world faces (Chiș, 2014).

From this point of view, experiential learning is concerned with organizing and coordinating different learning experiences, starting from real challenges, supported with the help of appropriate supports, into a safe and proper environment, which will facilitate the formation of skills.

The introduction of skills, as educational purposes, is a wish supported by national, European and global authorities (Edu.ro, EUR-Lex.europa.eu, WeForum.org).

Table 1. Key skills of the 21st century - National, European and Global vision

KEY SKILLS – COMPARATIVE APPROACH		
Law on National Education	European Union Council	Global Economic Forum
National context 2011	European context 2018	Global context 2020
1. Communication skills in Romanian and mother tongue, in the case of national minorities; 2. Communication skills in foreign languages; 3. Basic skills of mathematics, science and technology; 4. Digital skills for the use of information technology as a learning and knowledge tool; 5. Social and civic skills; 6. Entrepreneurial skills; 7. Cultural awareness and expression skills; 8. The skill of learning to learn.	1. Literacy skills; 2. Multilingual skills; 3. Skills in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics; 4. Digital skills; 5. Personal, social and skills of learning to learn; 6. Citizen skills; 7. Entrepreneurial skills; 8. Cultural awareness and expression skills.	1. Complex problem solving; 2. Critical thinking; 3. Creativity; 4. People management; 5. Coordination with others; 6. Emotional intelligence; 7. Analysis and decision making; 8. Service orientation; 9. Negotiation; 10. Thinking flexibility.

In all three approaches presented above, one can observe the importance of social skills to be acquired, which are related to social and personal well-being, and require an understanding of how individuals can ensure optimal mental and physical health, including resources for themselves, for the family, and for society, but also knowledge about their role in shaping a healthy lifestyle (Ardelean, Mândruț, 2012).

For a successful social participation and interpersonal relationships, it is essential to understand the codes of conduct and good manners generally accepted in different societies and environments (e.g. at the workplace). Also, learning the basic concepts regarding individuals, groups, work organizations, gender equality, non-discrimination, society and culture is equally important. Essential are the perception of diversity, socio-economic and multicultural dimensions of European societies and how national cultural identity interacts with the European ones.

The social skills needed for teenagers include the ability to communicate constructively in different environments, to prove tolerance and understanding towards different points of view, the ability to negotiate with confidence and empathy. The ability to handle stressful and frustrating situations, which must be solved promptly, in a constructive way and delimiting the personal spheres of interest from the professional ones are other valuable skills (Ardelean, Mândruț, 2012).

Research questions

Working with teenagers but also with adults, I noticed that in some contexts, some of them lack essential skills, such as: teamwork, critical and creative thinking, problem-solving analysis, communication, initiative and making the right decisions. The lack of basic skills, of complex skills but also of character traits essential for achieving personal, social and professional development generates not only the inability to adapt to different life situations, but also negative effects at the individual level, at the group and organization level and can even lead to negative effects on the social and natural environment.

These personal findings have turned into research questions and hypotheses, in my desire to contribute to the development of tomorrow's adults. The first questions were:

1. What skills need to be developed into a teenager in order to help him / her prepare for an unknown future?
2. How can experiential learning support the teenager's development?
3. What examples of good practices and methods of experiential learning can teachers and trainers who wish to develop the teenagers use in formal, non-formal and informal learning environments?

Study aim

The online study presented in the paper was conducted between December 2018 - June 2019 and aimed to identify the types of environments from which high school teenagers come (age group 14-19), the environments they want to reach, the methods by which they learn and develop, the skills they want to develop and the education needs they have, related to their expectations and personal interests.

Design

The scientific research was based on quantitative and qualitative research methods. The participants were selected according to the purpose of the study, students between the eighth and twelfth grade, from urban and rural areas, coming from nuclear families and single parent families.

Participants

The research was carried out on a sample of 776 respondents from Suceava, Cluj, Maramureș, Bucharest, Iași and Brăila counties. The respondents were teenagers between 14 and 19 years old.

The study involved both urban and rural teenagers, 57% and 43%, which makes the data provide a balanced perspective on the needs, preferences and expectations of the teenagers questioned.

83% of the participants to this study come from families where parents are married and live together and 97% of them study within a state school. Of these, 56% learn in sciences profile, 28% in humanities profile, the difference coming from vocational schools, high schools with economic profile and professional schools.

Instruments

The research instrument consisted into an online questionnaire that was built, developed and validated in accordance with the study requirements.

The survey research provided a number of advantages: shorter execution time, the operability of providing information, the possibility of exercising a more rigorous control of the way of collecting and processing information, lower costs, efficiency and effectiveness of the questioning process.

Data analysis

In the following, I will present a summary of the results from three questions of the online questionnaire:

Question 1: “Where do you spend the most part of the free time?”

This question was part of a group of items that sought to identify the growth, study, development environment and one where the teenagers questioned would like to reach the future. Being able to choose multiple answers, 67% of respondents confirmed that they spend most of their time in school and 43% of them at home. Only 10% of the respondents mentioned that they spend their free time in nature.

Question 2: “Where do you see yourself in the future?”

This imbalance between time spent in closed spaces (home, school, meditation) and open spaces (social environment, nature) was further validated in the following question, where teenagers were able to choose among the options that best reflect their future. 45% of them want to

travel and explore the world, suggesting a need to spend more time in open spaces. One can draw from this the idea that today's teenagers are interested in consolidating their theoretical and practical education by traveling, exploring, observing and discovering the world. This preference leads to the development of the following skills of the XIIth century: analysis and decision making, problem solving, creativity, negotiation, but also social and communication skills in foreign languages. Exposure to various cultures, customs, nations, ethnicities, religions, beliefs, but also by discovering history and geographical environments in a practical way, can also develop the flexibility of thinking, cultural awareness and expression skills and skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. These skills are found both in the approach of the Law of National Education, and of the European Union Council and the World Economic Forum. In other words, teenagers' preference for travel can lead to the simultaneous development of at least eight 21st century skills.

Regarding their first option for the future, the answers collected highlight the respondents' desire to continue their university studies, an aspect confirmed by 71% of them. This can prove a general belief in the need for university education, which provides the prospect of a stable and successful future. Two other preferences of teenagers are employment, confirmed by 36% of respondents and volunteering, taken into account by 22% of them. The desire to get involved in volunteer activities shows, again, that young people are willing to strengthen their formal education through experiential learning, which has the effect of developing personal, social and learning skills, developing citizenship and entrepreneurial skills. Last but not least, volunteering provides the opportunity to accumulate work experience, useful on employment.

Question 3: *"If you could choose, what would you like to develop on yourself?"*

This question sought to identify which of the 21st century skills attract adolescents and which one they would be curious to develop.

Based on an ordinary scale, fourteen 21st century skills were classified, to which were added the options "health of one's body and mind" and "productivity (to plan, organize my time, check, finalize)".

The use of the ordinary scale allowed to order the skills of the 21st century selected for analysis, on five levels, according to the interest of the subjects regarding their development. Below are the results:

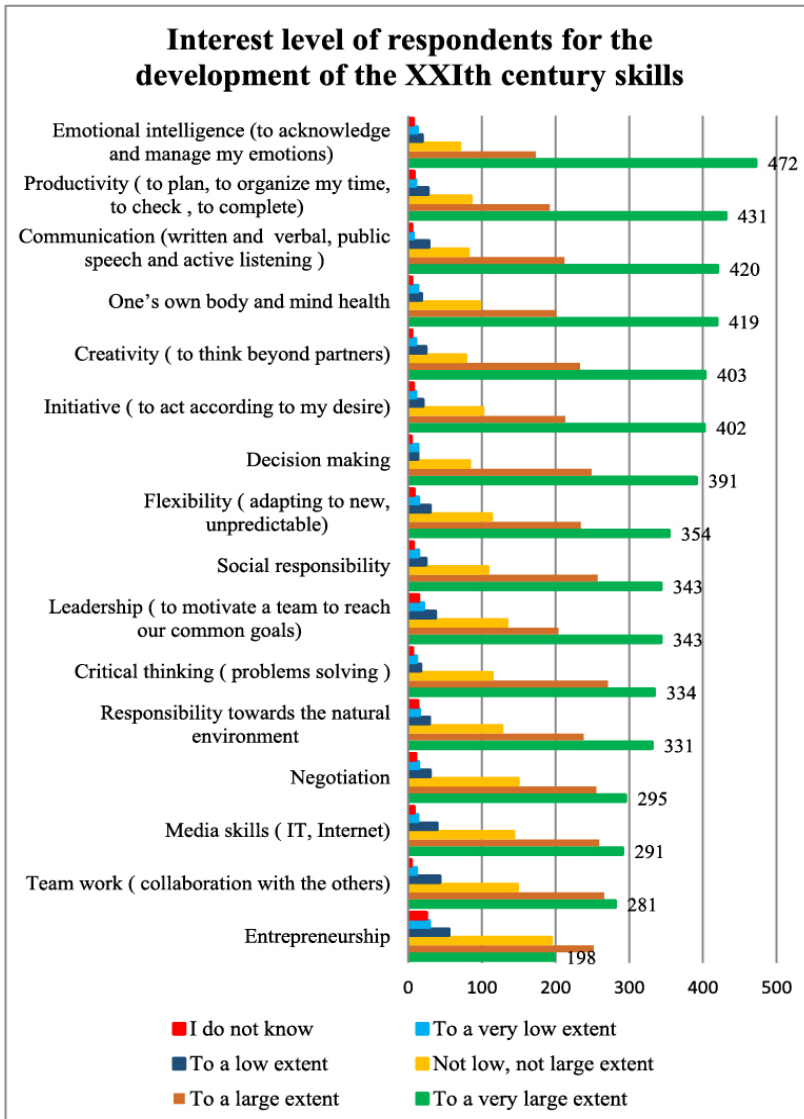


Fig. 2. Interest level of teenagers regarding the opportunity to develop their XXIth century skills

By analyzing the data presented in Figure 2, we note that a number of 472 respondents, representing a percentage of 60.8%, very much want to develop their “emotional intelligence”, considered the most important skill in their vision, followed by “productivity”, an option chosen by 55% of the respondents, “communication”, 54% and “the health of one’s own body and mind”, by 53% of the respondents.

The lowest scores were obtained by “Media skills (it, internet)”, “Teamwork (collaborating with others)” and “Entrepreneurship”, which was on the last place.

By analyzing the extremes, we can find the following outcomes:

- Regarding the respondents’ preference for the emotional intelligence skill, this can be interpreted as a need for development insufficiently satisfied by the formal, non-formal and informal learning environments. Teenagers surveyed confirm, through the answers provided, that the benefits of developing this skill are understood and desired.

- Entrepreneurship is on the last place in the interests of teenagers. The result can also be seen from the perspective of accumulating the highest number of answers with the “I don’t know” option, which can be found in 25 respondents. This indicates that 0.03% of the respondents are not familiar or interested in the concept of entrepreneurship.

- The correlation between the need to develop emotional intelligence and the “health of one’s own body and mind”, which has been added outside the classification of 21st century skills, should be mentioned. In essence, it can be observed that the level of health of the respondents, seen from the point of view of their ability to take care of themselves, turns them from beneficiaries into contributors to the welfare of the society. The results achieved show that education plays an overwhelming role in the formation of healthy behaviors, by involving teenagers in forming habits that will ensure a sustainable and self-sufficient lifestyle, an aspect also reflected by the theory of learning through experience.

Results

From this analysis we can highlight the following needs expressed by teenagers:

1. Emotional intelligence is the main skill of the 21st century that teenagers want to develop, regardless of the development environment;
2. Care for one's own physical and mental health is in the best interests of teenagers, an option confirmed by 53% of the respondents;
3. The continuation of the university studies is the main option of the teenagers, after graduation of the secondary studies, an option confirmed by 71% of the respondents;
4. 45% of respondents would like to travel and discover the world, a decision that would lead to the development of at least eight of the 21st century skills;
5. 22% of respondents want to get involved into volunteering activities, a decision that would lead to the development of three other skills of the 21st century;
6. Three of the skills of the 21st century, which are not considered a priority for development, at this moment by the respondents are: media skills (it, internet), teamwork (collaborating with others) and entrepreneurship;
7. In all stages of research, it was confirmed that teenagers are willing to complete their formal education through non-formal education programs, which have the effect of developing the skills of the 21st century.

Conclusions

The experiential learning emerged once with the emergence of mankind, due to our need to adapt to environmental conditions and to survive. The individual experience gained was passed on to the next generations, thus accelerating the pace and speed of human evolution. Examples of good practices of experiential learning have been mentioned since ancient times, by Socrates (469 - 399 BC), Plato (428 - 348 BC), Aristotle (384 - 322 BC), then developed by John Amos Comenius (1592 - 1670), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) to the parents of experiential education, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Carl Rogers and David Kolb, who continue to be inspirational for contemporary educators.

Today, education through experience can be found in a variety of institutions from educational and academic ones, state or private, to non-profit organizations, foundations and companies, in order to increase the level in human development.

The modern paradigm of learning, oriented towards educable, brings the teenager in front of us as the main source for identifying the development needs and on the didactics in the position of trainer and facilitator of learning, which emphasizes how to learn, constantly adapting the methods and teaching styles, to the learning needs of teenagers.

“The school, the family as well as the means of mass information are meant to place in front of teenager’s mirrors in which they recognize each other, to propose life paths worthy to be followed by the man of today’s society. The most effective psycho-pedagogical strategy is not to indicate the right path, but to assist in the discovery that the teenager must make”. (Ionescu, 1998, p. 49).

Through experiential learning teenagers can be helped to find this path through identifying, developing and clarifying their aims. Therefore, in order to create the right tools and strategies for transforming these young people, it is essential that we continue the study of identifying the needs, expectations and requirements that young people have from the future.

Personally, I will continue to involve and support young people in non-formal activities, based on the experiential learning.

Regarding the usefulness of the results above, it is worth mentioning that the information collected from the research undertaken can be useful to the following categories of educational agents, interested in introducing experiential learning into the learning and development activities of adolescents and not only:

- ✓ educational institutions, which were involved in the online study;
- ✓ national and international learning communities (educational establishments, non-governmental organizations, companies, associations);
- ✓ trainers and teaching staff concerned with the introduction of these ideas in the programs they design and implement, and in the learning activities they coordinate;

- ✓ infrastructures connected to the reality of today's generations (social networks, dedicated sites, trainers, workshops and cultural and educational events);
- ✓ authorities, specialists from research and development institutes, from knowledge-based organizations;
- ✓ experts from various fields of the business environment;
- ✓ parents and family members.

Based on the results achieved, educational projects can be designed and implemented and materials that will become useful for the education and development activities of teenagers can be developed. The educational agents mentioned above can decide whether they prefer to work in groups or individually.

It is essential to generate educational approaches that lead to the creation of value, through each individual, forming desirable social skills and behaviors, with future projections.

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