COUNSELLING IN TIMES OF THE CORONAVIRUS AND BEYOND

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Abstract

The current corona pandemic is changing everything – how we live, how we work and also how we learn. The field of career guidance has also been strongly impacted by restrictions in face-to-face counselling. These surrounding influences have promoted digitisation in this professional field. However, it is questionable whether the extrinsic coercion of COVID-19 alone and the need for economic survival will make digitisation trends in the counselling sector sustainable. Studies such as the "ICF Global Coaching Study" (2016), carried out before the pandemic, show that digital tools are still rarely used in counselling scenarios. Therefore, this article deals with the key question of how a target group specific e-learning theory can support the intrinsic motivation of counsellors to utilise digital content and methods. To answer this question, a situation and needs analysis of counsellors is presented, which was carried out as part of the Erasmus+ project ACCEnT (Accelerating coaching and counselling through e-Tools and innovative training). The project developed an innovative online course, focused in particular on the phenomenon of "hard-to-reach groups" within career guidance and previously underutilised digital tools to support them. A total of 84 career guidance counsellors in Germany, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Finland were surveyed by means of an online questionnaire and 19 career guidance counsellors by means of a personal (face-to-face) interview. The situation and needs highlighted a professional profile of counsellors that is particularly characterised by their own experience as a success factor in their professional work. The e-learning course takes up this aspect with the help of David Kolb's experience-oriented approach and thus attempts to legitimise a pedagogical framework that reflects the intrinsic motivation of counsellors and provides impulses for the perpetuation of digitisation tendencies.

Keywords: Coronavirus pandemic; Counselling; e-Learning; Experience-oriented learning; Erasmus+

Introduction

In complex modern societies, the importance of counselling, coaching and guidance as a provider of orientation is increasing. Digitisation offers new tools and methods in counselling situations to help people enter the labour market. In particular, there is still unused potential for vulnerable communities, so-called "hard-to-reach groups".

The term "hard-to-reach" is used to designate certain groups of people who are very difficult to reach with existing educational and counselling services because either no services are available for these groups or they cannot access available services (Shaghaghi, Bhopal, & Sheikh, 2011). In most cases, it refers to underserved minorities in the population, whose needs and views may differ from the mainstream and who, therefore, may fall through the social safety net. These may be for example early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, NEETs or migrants, refugees or asylum seekers.

Hard-to-reach groups are represented in all countries of the European Union (Kasi & Saha 2019). By addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, guidance aims to support social inclusion and strengthen the European labour market by providing the workforce needed. Erasmus+ projects have recognised this important role of guidance in the European labour market. For this reason, they are given special consideration in key actions (e.g. European Commission, 2020).

Particular attention is being paid to the digitisation of guidance, as it has hidden potential to integrate hard-to-reach target groups into the labour market. E-Tools can provide significant support to these target groups in particular, by helping with professional orientation, the creation of competence profiles, the job application process and the strengthening of soft skills and mental health.

These opportunities were highlighted in the pandemic. Instead of face-to-face meetings, digital tools and online counselling increasingly had to be used in order to reach clients. However, it is questionable whether a pandemic alone will be sufficient to support digitisation trends in the long term.

This becomes particularly apparent in the pre-corona discourse of guidance, which can be characterised primarily by a sceptical attitude towards digital tools and online counselling. The results of the "ICF Global Coaching Study" (2016), a global survey conducted by the International Coach Federation (ICF), confirm that the use of digital methods in coaching has so far been rather restrained and that a face-to-face setting is the standard. Weighing up advantages against the disadvantages is at the forefront of the discussion (e.g. Menovshikov, 2010; Speyer & Zack, 2003). It is often neglected that digitisation has become an integral part of society and the everyday life of clients. This increasing digitalisation

cannot, therefore, be ignored by counselling services if they want to reach clients effectively on a permanent basis – especially when it comes to hard-to-reach groups.

The corona crisis and the increasing digitalisation of clients' lives as well as the untapped potential of digital tools form the foundation of the ACCEnT project. The Erasmus+ project wants to motivate counsellors to deal with new digital methods in their professional work. The project focused on the key factor of the counsellors themselves and the development of an innovative online offer. At the centre of the project is how innovative knowledge about hard-to-reach target groups and the use of e-Tools can be communicated to counselling professionals in a didactically appropriate way by means of an e-learning offer. It makes clear that the digitisation of counselling should not only be based on the extrinsic pressure of the corona crisis but also on increasing the effectiveness of counselling for clients - especially if they are classified as hard-to-reach. The key to digital sustainability must therefore, be found in a pedagogical approach that takes into account the needs and learning preferences of counsellors in order to intrinsically motivate them to engage with digital settings, both now as well as in post- COVID-19 times.

Hence, this article investigates the following research question:

- Which e-learning theory can support the intrinsic motivation of counsellors to deal with digital content and methods?

Method and Sample

In order to evaluate the training needs and situation of career guidance counsellors working with the target groups described above, the ACCEnT project carried out a cross-sectional analysis based on quantitative and qualitative methods in the initial stage in 2019. A total of 84 career guidance counsellors in Germany, Portugal, the UK, Ireland and Finland were surveyed by means of an online questionnaire and 19 career guidance counsellors by means of a personal (face-to-face) semi-structured interview. A total of 103 counsellors participated in the research.

Table 1: Sample size of guidance practitioners who participated in the ACCEnT research, per country (number and %)

Country	Surveyed		Interviewed	
	n	%	n	%
Germany	11	13.1	4	21.1
Portugal	13	15.5	4	21.1
U.K.	14	16.7	4	21.1
Ireland	26	31.0	4	21.1
Finland	20	23.8	3	15.6
Total	84	100.0	19	100.0

The survey focused on an analysis of the counsellors' situation, i.e. socio-demographic data (age and gender), professional background, qualifications, further training, current work situation, institutional and professional profile. The next step was to collect the training needs: working difficulties and challenges, training needs and professionals' motivation regarding work with hard-to-reach target groups (long-term unemployed, early school leavers, NEETs, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers). The final step was to determine the learning content and preferred learning environment for the online training to take place.

The semi-structured interview focused on perceived key characteristics and challenges with hard-to-reach target groups, strategies and digital tools used, and skills and competencies needed in everyday work.

Each project partner from Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal and the UK applied both methods while conducting the study during two months at a national level. The quantitative data was collected through the ILIAS platform in February 2019, followed by the collection, audio-recording and partial transcription of the qualitative data which was gathered either in person, over the phone or via Skype during March 2019. All data was later subject to a country-specific analysis by each partner, and then all five national reports were integrated into a transnational report to expand the knowledge about the present situation and needs of European guidance practitioners working with hard-to-reach groups.

Results

Most of the guidance practitioners surveyed in the five European countries were female (77%), having only 19% of the respondents declared to be male, and 4% chose not to disclose their gender. Regarding the age groups of the ACCEnT survey almost two thirds of the people surveyed (64.3%) were over 40 years old. 27.4% of the participants were 50 years or older. The survey results indicate that the majority of guidance practitioners working with hard-to-reach groups in the five European countries have Master's degrees (39%) in a wide range of subjects and areas such as Counselling and Guidance, Educational Guidance, Cultural Studies, Pedagogy and Social Pedagogy, among others. In general, counsellors are very well qualified and have completed a variety of further training courses.
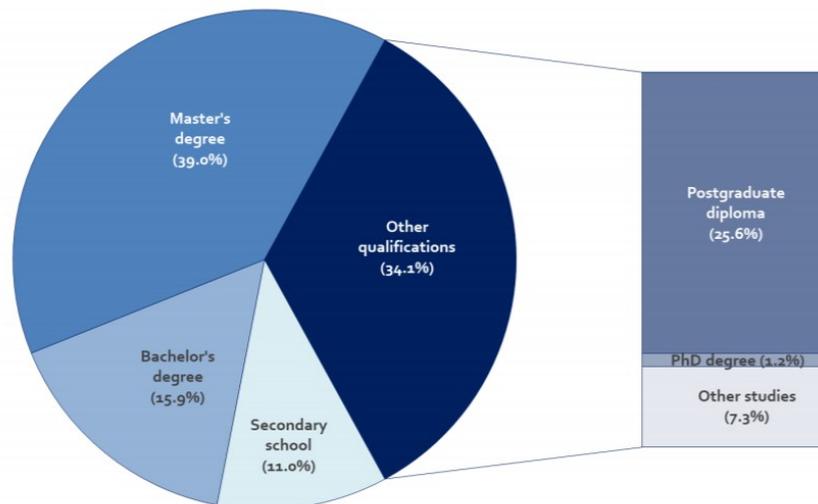
Figure 1. Education levels of guidance practitioners (%)

In addition to their own training and further education, respondents considered their own wealth of experience as a success factor in their professional work, and possible exchange of experience with colleagues as a motivator for participation in an online course in the interviews conducted. This informally acquired knowledge was also defined as a success factor for effectively placing hard-to-reach target groups in the labour market. The findings correspond to the results of the "2016 ICF Global Coaching Study", where the average age of the coaches surveyed was 54.4 years (men) and 51.7 years (women). The target group is therefore characterized by a high level of life and work experience.

Thus Strasser's thesis (2006) that counselling is created between the application of knowledge and the experience-based reconstruction of theoretical concepts can be supported. Apart from a multitude of findings, the results of the survey were decisive for the design of the e-learning course and the theoretical foundation of the didactical approach.

On the basis of the needs assessment, a pedagogical framework and a set of flexible competences could be defined, which can be considered essential for counsellors working with hard-to-reach groups. The e-learning course is focused on the transfer of knowledge about hard-to-reach target groups, coaching techniques, increasing intercultural competence and the use of e-Tools in the counselling and communication processes. The methodological approaches, the course model, the requirements for the e-learning environment and the competence-based curriculum were designed according to the identified situation and the needs of the counsellors. The analysis phase enabled learning objectives to be set and the learning environment to be adapted to the learners' existing knowledge, skills and interests.

Discussion

Due to the emphasis on one's own experience, the theory of David Kolb – leading advocate and promoter of the practice of experiential learning – was chosen as the basis of the pedagogical framework. Kolb's theory can be seen as an important approach to how counsellors learn. Kolb (1984) assumes that experiential learning follows a cycle of four steps.

Figure 2. Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Kolb defines learning as "a process in which knowledge is built through the transformation of experience" (1984; p.38). For Kolb, learning is not so much about the acquisition or mediation of content, but rather about the interaction between content and experience, which are mutually transforming. In his opinion, the task of the educator is not to impart knowledge or "implant" new ideas, but to change old ideas that might prevent new ones.

Experience-based learning is particularly interesting for guidance practitioners because it includes formal learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, lifelong learning, incidental learning and learning at work. It is based on a number of assumptions about learning from experience. These were identified by Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993) as:

- Experience is the basis and incentive for learning.
- The learners actively construct their own experience.
- Learning is a holistic process.
- Learning is socially and culturally constructed.
- Learning is influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it takes place.

The online format of the ACCEnT course takes up these basics in several places with the support of videos and multimedia units in the learning materials which illustrate typical problem situations, case studies and examples from the daily work of counsellors.

In a first step, the counsellors existing problem-solving skills and wealth of experience are activated by means of reflective questions/questioning. This enables them to actively and consciously look back and reflect on their experiences and consider what is working or failing. The daily work routine thus becomes a space of experience, which is observed and analysed by means of self-reflective questions. According to Dewey (1938), only reflection, i.e. the intensive thinking about problematic situations arising in everyday life, leads to instructive experiences and thus to the expansion of a person's knowledge. Only after this activation follows the presentation of the concrete learning unit with new methods, theories and tools. Finally, a second process of reflection takes place in which old assumptions can be replaced by the newly acquired knowledge, which should lead to lasting change and improvement of everyday counselling.

A key element of experience-based learning is therefore that counsellors proactively analyse their experiences by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing them (partly individually, partly collectively with the help of a "Community of Practice ") in order to draw meaning from them in comparison with previous experiences. This review of experience can lead to further action and an improvement in daily work. The e-learning environment therefore supports this process of reflection and self-evaluation in the sense Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Conclusion

Attractive and modern learning materials for career counsellors are needed for high-quality and up-to-date further training – especially with regard to the integration of hard-to-reach target groups into the labour market. A choice that corresponds to learning preferences can be crucial in motivating learners of specific professions. The suitable theoretical basis can thus promote the intrinsic motivation of counsellors to deal with new theories and digital tools in their work. These impulses are therefore not determined by "necessity" due to the corona pandemic, but by "volition" due to the added value of the learning material design. In this way, permanent and sustainable changes can be anchored in certain professional areas such as counselling and lead to the establishment of successful digital methods. While the choice of Kolb's learning theory takes into account motivational aspects of the learning materials, the classification of the materials as an Open Educational Resource (OER) supports their widest possible dissemination.

The provision of the course as a free OER is intended to make knowledge on this topic available to as broad an audience as possible and to expand the portfolio of – currently still few – learning materials. According to UNESO (2019), OER learning materials have the potential to improve the quality of education and to promote dialogue, knowledge dissemination and capacity building. They are intended to promote inclusive, equal

opportunity and high quality education and guarantee opportunities for lifelong learning worldwide. In this way, knowledge can be made available more quickly, more up-to-date and with greater equality of opportunity, and can be disseminated in an innovative way using new formats and technologies.

OER courses such as the Erasmus+-funded ACCEnT project can therefore be a long-term tool for training counselling staff in the effective placement of hard-to-reach groups in the labour market and, especially with regard to the European context, for generating a common quality standard – not only for Germany, but also for the participating countries Finland, Portugal, the UK and Ireland.

The viability of the approach will only prove itself in post-corona times. Here, not only cross-sectional studies but also longitudinal studies can determine whether the motivation of counsellors towards digitisation can be stabilised with the right pedagogical approach.

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