

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE ASPECT OF LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the number of important issues: how to become a professional, able to carry out ones functions competently, and seek for autonomy; what conditions the professionalism; how to improve professionalism in practice and everything. An overview of a professional, the conceptions of the concept of professionalism, the essence of the development of professionalism in practice are examined, the interrelationship between the learning from experience, practice and professional development is reasoned. Key empirical research findings are presented: the approaches of teachers / andragogues who upgrade qualifications at Klaipėda University Institute of Continuing Studies, Lithuania, to professional development in practice on the aspect of learning from experience.

## KEY WORDS:

*professional, becoming a professional, professionalism, professional development, learning from experience, learning through action*

## INTRODUCTION

Professional development becomes one of the key objectives of promoting change when living in a permanent change, depending on the specific job requirements and professional activities. This can be achieved through practical activities – continuing learning situation, the resulting experience, a valuable source of improvement. Therefore, professional training and practical operation, and reflecting experience are relevant

in this development. The importance of reflection reveals itself through the evaluation of constant practice, acquired through professional practice. This is the means of creating new knowledge, the analysis of action and decision, the anticipation of the perspective of potential development of performance that leads to becoming a professional, and the latter – to the competent performance of operational functions. The result achieved in the process of experience reflection is the change of behaviour or perception. Therefore, experience reflections, conditioned by activity situations, related to cognition, emotion and behaviour, play important role in the pursue of professionalism. However, one turns into a professional when one becomes the researcher of own activity and thereby experience through learning from activity experiences, observations, reflections, conceptualization and activities. Thus, the understanding of the development of professionalism in this article is comprehended as a continuous process, inseparable from learning through activity and experience, because a higher level of experience is acquired in this way, which makes you become a professional, provide professional development techniques and apply them in practice.

After the theoretical analysis, various scientists (Le Boterf, 2010; Jatkauskienė et al., 2012, 2013, Juozaitis 2008; Guskey, 2004; Pollard, 2002; Tight, 2007; Jovaiša, 2007, et al.) left significant clues in their works. However, more comprehensive researches that would demonstrate the essential aspects of becoming a professional and the development of professionalism in practice are missing. One of them – learning from experience is more analysed. However, the researchers (Strazdienė et al., 2007; Stanikūnienė et al., 2004; Jarvis, 2001; Jucevičienė, 2010; Kondratavičienė et al. 2007; Juozaitis, 2008; Bacevičiūtė, 2010; Stasiulienė, 2010; Lukošūnienė 2014, et al.) pay a particular attention to the learning from experience for models, goals, course and the cyclical nature, the importance of reflection. Seeing that there is a lack of a deeper approach to this problem, therefore **the object of the study** is the development of professionalism in practice on the aspect of learning from experience.

**The aim** – analyse theoretically and reason empirically the development of professionalism on aspect of the learning from experience.

**Objectives:** 1) identify the conceptions and interrelation of professional development and learning from experience; 2) examine the approaches of teachers/andragogues who upgrade qualifications, to professional development in practice on the aspect of learning from experience.

## **THE SUBSTANCE OF CONCEPTS AND THE INTER-RELATION BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE**

The concept of a professional represents a high level of activity and a certain exclusivity (Tight, 2007). Thus, the aspect of quality is underlined in defining of a professional. G. Le Boterf (2010) notes that a professional knows how to act, in other words, to realise the useful practice. One succeeds well in everything one takes, knows how to mobilize the necessary sources in practice: knowledge, abilities, skills and personal qualities, attitudes, values, and so on. Achieves much more in the field of ones profession, because is able to manage a variety of activities or situations, to mobilize the necessary resources, to build effective relationships between sources and practices, to achieve useful goals. One is not confined to a single, identically repetitive task performance, ability to replicate, is able to act not only in the usual, repetitive, but also complex, newly occurring situations them. Thus, a professional distinguishes oneself in complex competences and the capacity to accomodate. His knowledge reflects in the actions that become automatically developed in professional field situations. Jovaiša L. (2007) describes a professional person who is very familiar with his work and is able to perform it very well. Thus, a professional unfolds in practice. A.M. Juozaitis (2008) asserts that a professional is a practitioner who has accumulated operational experience. Becoming a professional begins when the acquired knowledge and skills during professional training begin to be applied in practice. Another way to become a professional is experiential, ie when in the absence of the basic readiness, professional competencies are acquired through practical operation and the analysis of the experience. It means, a professional becomes learning from experience through activities. Experience is a key source of learning for a professional. Therefore, it can be said that learning from experience is significant in the development of professionalism, above all, the application of the reflection skills and learning by action. For this purpose, the aim is for positive changes in both professional activities and personal context.

G. Le Boterf (2010) discovers that the more often one encounters different and difficult situations, the more enriched is a professional's scheme library. A professional has own activities technique, understanding of activity strategies, thus, it is better for oneself to develop own practice, is more convenient to understand own strengths and correct the weaknesses.

A professional in practice, plunged in activities, can invent original ways in pursue of the set goals and gradually to improve the technique of personal performance pattern, even to develop it. Consequently, one can develop professionalism only through continuous operation when using the unique practical situations new knowledge and skills are created to give a fresh look at ones activity and substantiate it. In other words, in such a way not only activity performance skills are developed, but also conceptual knowledge.

Professional development is inseparable from the application field, and to be a professional means constantly and effectively act and react to similar type situations. A professional distinguishes not only because he has a bigger library of operating constructs, but also is able to recognize the constructs due to experience that can be used in a new situation (Le Boterf, 2010). Thus, it can be said that no one becomes a professional by absorbing theoretical knowledge, but also learning from the experiences and through activities, ie through regular tests, gradually absorbing the set of success rules, combined with the available experiences. Each practice situation potentially provides new experiences from which you can learn. Therefore, professionalism is born from experience and from its stipulated learning, because a professional is the one who has learned from the experience and knows how to perform an action that will give the desired result. Each new experience (both positive and negative) is relevant in professional development.

Professional development is inseparable from the specific activity, problems addressed, individual cases. Any change in the context creates new opportunities to develop professionalism. Therefore, every situation that provides experience is helpful in this process. Experience is not what happens to a man, but what he does with it (Le Boterf, 2010). Consequently, in the accumulation of experience is not enough in professional development. In order to make the experience more meaningful, it is necessary to „work“, ie, not only to rethink, not only to provide a way how to adapt it, but also to integrate into the memory to adjust for extended use. Experience is not only the knowledge, skills, acquired through work, but also attitudes, beliefs, feelings, emotions and other human qualities. Experience is one of the most important components of becoming a professional. Such which does not simplify the time spent on operating situation or at the workplace, but is based on the received lessons from the experienced. G. Le Boterf (2010) asserts that the practical lessons are acquired through experience in recurring problems of professional practice,

through the recurrence of similar or threatening situations, through systematic reflection of experience. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that you do not become a professional only after your action in professional environment. It is a long process, defined by the existing knowledge and the acquired experience and their use in practice.

Jarvis, P. (2001) emphasizes that any learning or development begins by practice: direct (practical), acquired through operation and understanding of senses, or indirect (theoretical), which is acquired through a mediator in communication (speaking, the transmission of information, etc.). All experiences are relevant: directly or indirectly experienced, random or unintentional, etc. However, practical experience that is a direct relationship to the operation and the effect of impact on the performance is the most relevant in becoming a professional and the development of professionalism. Bacevičiūtė D. (2010) describes such experience as a test, extension of purview, assumption or acquisition of a new, different thing.

Experience an integral part of the subject, understanding, interpretation. But any experience perceived retrospectively is overviewed, based on previous experiences, which have been learned and have become part of the biography. None of experience exists apart from the previous ones, their entirety influences the perception of new situations and responses. Each time, whenever you are under a new experience, you use the available knowledge to understand and transform it into new knowledge, skills or attitudes. This phenomenon is becoming of becoming a professional. The strategies inoculated by the professionals often stem from experience and adapt to the changing requirements, use of higher-order structure of thinking is used to understand, analyze, evaluate and improve.

Professional development covers a whole range of various situations which one enters, activities pursued on a daily basis, problems permanently solved, and on the basis of learning from experience, every time experiencing something while learning. Learning from the experience reflecting it the depth is revealed when there is nonconformity between a person's experience and the empathized new situation. When there is a belief that nonconformity will be overcome, such process is successful. P. Juzevičienė (2010) asserts that a person who accumulates experience the whole lifetime, learns concretely from episodes. Thus, the person fixing experience, conditioned by a particular episode, learns from it, based on the total life experiences, ie his experience as an entirety. Reconceptualizes it through reflection, changes the available conceptions, by transformation creates the new one, which one implements in practice to verify its effectiveness.

This way a new experience is formed, but it becomes significant when it is reflected with the incurred and the future context. It can be asserted that the experience of conceptualization, reflection and action dimension makes the essence of the development of professionalism. Effectively, this process is possible in a professional environment which initiates action based on the valid information, offering a free and reasoned choice, and promoting a sense of responsibility for what is done.

Learning from experience is beneficial for the development of professionalism when the acquired experience and the resulting new knowledge are applicable. The process of reflection is essential in terms of the development of professionalism, because the relationship with the new experience is realized and assessed through it. However, an equally important thing is the integration of new knowledge into action, and the sequence of action. Not only perception is important in the development of professionalism, but actions as well, ie decisiveness, expedient and purposeful activity. It can be said that learning from experience substantiates the importance of experience and its systemization, reflective and abstract, in the development of professionalism. This process integrates learning, performance and development. G. Le Boterf (2010) asserts that in order to improve the professionalism many complex operations, processes need to be performed: problem solving, sharing of practice for mutual assistance and thus accumulating the previous proficiencies, the development of experiential learning process, the organisation of case studies in such a way that they become professionalizing, learning to learn, technologies, management of processes, actualization of activity and complex skills, which no longer require to operate in a linear, step by step, but iterative actions. It is also important not to take decisions spontaneously and not to rush to act, contemplate everything carefully and then take an action, when you you are confident in what you are doing. This is the essence of learning from experience when the process of reflection is important, that not only transforms the intuitive knowledge into skills, but also links the contexts of knowledge, and enables the conversion of theoretical experience into practical. Encounters with unforeseen problems or situations with the element of surprise, push to improvise by devising right here the solution of a problem, experiment by choosing the solutions, developing and verifying anew various reactions. ,Invisible' knowledge and skills, enabling the selection of appropriate activity strategies, to take adequate decisions, to support innovation are gained under the influence of reflection.

Reflexive practice is based on professional activity analysis. B. Jatkaskienė et al., (2013) argue that reflective practice consists of several stages: raising the problem in a different situation; identification of the problem due to the available experience; perception of elements of the problem and knowledge of the decision. It can be stated that reflective practice helps to become professionals. Those who are not only able to learn constructively from own experience, but also have a deep insight into ones activity, make an in-depth review of every past, present and future stage, use many sources and invoke them become professionals. As professionals are able to control their operating area, so they may reflect in action and learn from this process. In order to improve professionalism, it is important to see practical activity as an incentive, be open to its possibilities.

Reflective practice, the dynamic foundation of becoming a professional, reveals through a continuous monitoring and control, evaluating and improving performance. Obviously, those will develop faster and more efficient, who tend to reflect and summarize their experience. Experience reflection is important in the development of professionalism, as its result is new skills, new knowledge, new understanding, new meaning. The adaptation of this new learning to change the existing understanding and attitude guarantees superior performance. Reflection is the process through which experience „moves“ to learning, learning to the development, development to fruitful activity. Reflection encourages to understand the meaning of the object (customize) to find relationships between theory and application, between learning and performance, to understand the specific circumstances related matters, identify problems and resolve them; critically examine (analyze and verify), relate thoughts, predict the future course of action (Stasiulienė, 2010). It can, therefore, be argued that reflective practice is a framework for professional development.

One can see things in a holistic approach, see new aspects, more meanings during the reflection of experience. During reflection it is possible to gain more insight and direction skills to realize the change. Feelings and rise of their causes become aware when reflecting. It is possible to identify the existential relationship with the situation at reflection: What does this situation mean to me? What can I learn from it? What can I learn?, etc. The situation reflection can be seen in a broader context: How does this situation relate to the past experience? Have I similar experience? How did behave in a similar situation?, etc.. It can be argued that the skill or the technique of experience reflection is important because it names

a powerful mechanism for the activity systematic practice: analysis and synthesis, ie basic methods, enabling to improve professionalism.

In summary it can be said that experience and its reflection help to become a professional. However, to learn reflection at operation is not easy, because it requires preparation, performance and skills. Thus, learning from experience demands to combine operation and reflection, as operation is the basis of this learning, and reflection helps to move from awareness to action. Only the reflective practice leads to an effective learning from experience, and this to fruitful activities. In order to improve professionalism practice gains importance, personal sources and reflection. Thus, learning from experience, reflective practice and professional development are closely related processes.

### **THE ESSENTIAL RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH AND THEIR REVIEW**

In order to reveal professional development opportunities on the aspect for learning from experience, in January – March of 2014 a questionnaire survey was made during service training events held in Lithuania, Klaipėda University Institute of Continuing Studies. Totally, 124 teachers / andragogues, including 79.8 percent of women and 20.2 percent of men were surveyed. These data reveal a typical learning situation: women are learning more often and are more active, curious, more receptive to innovation and better prepared to development. The average age of the persons under survey was 40 years of age. The majority of participants (60 percent) was 35–50 years of age. It is likely that they have gained considerable experience in operation. It should be noted that experience, wisdom coming with age, can stimulate outstanding achievements and results, as mastery and skills arise. Summing up the survey demography, it can be said that the obtained data are specific for Lithuanian persons who upgrade qualifications.

Analysis of the results shows that practical professional knowledge (38.9 percent) is necessary for becoming a professional, but more of the respondents (61.1 percent) believe that this process is useful for both theoretical and practical knowledge. It can be argued that the optimization of the level of the use of this knowledge and quality assurance activities reveal professionalism. By the majority of the respondents (73.4 percent) experience gained in real professional environment reveals professionalism. Based on these results, we can say that professionalism is acquired through practical actions, functionally and informally adopting

and mastering performance standards. It is important for the development of professionalism to improve the convergence of performance and learning into one indivisible whole, achievable through learning from experience. Thus, learning from experience and practice are the main sources of professional development. Many respondents note that becoming a professional provides satisfaction in professional activities (68.2 percent), stimulate to seek a higher level of professionalism, the quality of performance (60.9 percent). Obviously, the higher the level of understanding, more insight, the gain additional skills and knowledge provide satisfaction. However, it is important to emphasize that under favourable circumstances for this process the realized knowledge slowly consolidate and strengthen intuitive perception, skills and professionalism. In order to deepen self-analysis, awareness r reflection is necessary (reflection in activities). Therefore, in order to become a professional in the field of expertise it is necessary to reflect experience, absorb and integrate new knowledge, because knowledge exists in activities, but not in theory. Readiness to reflect and the process of reflection itself is the basis for professional development.

Most respondents (57.9 percent) believe that professionalism is associated with the ability to operate effectively in practice. More than one-third (42.1 percent) consider special preparation, ability to perform activities competently, its in-depth knowledge as professionalism. It is obvious that without special knowledge or the basic preparation it is naive to expect professionalism at work. However, the obtained results not only orient toward special training activities, but also toward its quality. So professionalism is revealed in practice with integrating, deepening and developing the acquired knowledge and skills. The majority (61.8 percent) indicate that professionalism is the result of permanent learning in practice. This confirms that the professional becomes a continuous learning experience through activities. The respondents (87.9 percent) assume that the preparation, gained during studies is not enough, it is necessary to develop their professional competencies constantly to perform activity functions. Most respondents (59.4 percent) perceive professional development as activities and operational situations, devoted for the enriching of professional knowledge, the development of skills and the updating the provisions.

According to the respondents, competent performance of operational functions is professionalism (88.9 percent), mastering of typical activity situations (75.4 percent), innovations in practice (61.5 percent), the latest

technologies (64.2 percent), problem identification and creative solution (67.8 percent), learning from own experiences and the accumulation of experience lessons (54.6 percent), critical thinking and anticipating the consequences of ones actions (51.4 percent), adaptability to changing performance situations and withstanding the changes (57.3 percent), successful operation and fast response to new and unusual situations (71.6 percent), actualization and mobilization of skills required for the activity planning, organizing, implementation, evaluation (78.1 percent), constant analysis and improvement of performance (48.7 percent) and other things. In order to improve the professionalism, it is appropriate to apply the reflection activities (84.2 percent), reflect not only own but also the experience of others (63.3 percent), plan own activity perspective and provide further performance improvement techniques (74.9 percent), carry out operational changes (69.5 percent), adapt the gained experience to new situations (66.8 percent), perform not only own but also colleagues' activity monitoring and evaluation (52.7 percent) and other things. It is important to note that reflection (running also after action) is the main method of learning from experience. However, reflection helps to improve professionalism only when it is appropriate and when thinking and feelings participates in it.

The obtained data shows that the operating reflection is largely stimulated by the respondents' suffered failures, difficulties, mistakes, uncertainties (58.1 percent). Therefore, it is applicable ascertain their causes and possible ways of overcoming (76.2 percent), to reflect and evaluate experience gained in activity (65.4 percent), improve and ensure the quality (71.3 percent), to the achieve objectives and outcomes (53.5 percent) and other things. It can be argued that the benefits of reflection reveal in the expression through actions, which are given sense, the relationship with the professional environment, justifying actions which that lead toward a professional. It is also revealed that the reflection is practiced in order to solve activity situation problems (41.9 percent). It can be argued that problem solving is important in the development of professionalism mere to the fact that it encourages new experiences. However, the most important aspect of professional development is the ability to reflect on the activities by the transfer of skills or by avoiding the repetition of errors.

The study found that learning from experience is useful to improve professionalism: helps to identify their strengths and weaknesses (43.9 percent), to gain the experience required for professional changes (49.3 percent), encourages to reflect, to analyze, to evaluate the activity

and draw conclusions on the follow-up (68.2 percent), enables improvement activities (65.7 percent), and reflect on lessons learned from it (71.4 percent), to form new knowledge, skills, attitudes (74.3 per cent.), to become a professional in the field (62.5 percent), to realize professional practice of higher level (77.6 percent), more effective transforming of learning to activities (59.7 percent), increase the motivation to learn by operation (56.8 percent). In this context it is important to emphasize that professionalism improves learning by action. Learning by action, based on experience and reflection, learning from experience is the basis for the action, and reflection leads to the development of knowledge. Operation makes it possible to study, investigate their activities, and reflect on the experience and their actions. Reflection of the experience and learning from the process is an essential part of professional development, that guarantees superior performance. Thus, the results suggest that the learning experience is achieved through the improvement of professional personal experience, discovery and engagement, ie through learning and discovering, reflecting and integrating what has been understood. This method is important to develop professionalism, because it links perception, cognition and behaviour, experience, reflection, and new knowledge, the construction of meaning. However, in order to improve professionalism it is important not only to acquire knowledge by learning from experience through activities, but also be able to apply them in professional practice, in the new situation.

So after the research data analysis it becomes clear that a professional becomes while learning through operation by analyzing the activities of the accumulated experience of applying the acquired knowledge into practice. Professionalism, stipulated by personal sources, professional practice and the reflection of experience, reveals the competent performance of the functions and activities of fruitful practices. Learning from experience, enables to improve professionalism, if the acquired knowledge and skills are directly applicable in practice and provide performance improvement perspective. Professional development and learning from experience associates skills and knowledge the acquired through operational changes. The study confirmed that the professional improvement is a continuous process, which is inseparable from the learning experience: relentless reflection of experience and reconceptualization. Only the constructive experience reflection leads to effective learning in activity, which is not only a source of experience, but also provides ample opportunities to develop professionalism.

## CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of theoretical and empirical research results it can be said that professional development opportunities are related to the application of learning from experience in practice. Professional development and learning from experience are related directly: learning from experience creates new knowledge, necessary to develop professionalism, and to ensure the development professionalism it is necessary to be able to learn from experience. Experience reflection preconditions to develop performance and to construct further a higher quality activity. Previously acquired knowledge and experience meditation helps to organize efficiently professional development process. Andragogical experience shows that the reflection results of past and present activities have a direct impact on improving professionalism in the future, becomes the basis for raising professional development specific goals for the future and create preconditions for further qualitative activity.

On the aspect of becoming a professional it was ascertained that knowledge gained from experience has to be formalized, directly applied in practice and the expected performance development. Empirical data shows that professional practice, personal resources, operational experience and its reflection decide professionalism. The research results reveal that a professional becomes in practice, when one is able to use the necessary resources that emerge from the past and are acquired at action. Experience reflection is used to understand why and how it is acted. Theoretical insights and research data confirm learning from experience through activity importance in becoming a professional and professional development.

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