

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MORE DIFFICULT COMPETENCY



GILLES CANTIN  
Teacher in the Department  
of Education and Pedagogy  
UQAM

## COMPETENCIES IN A PROGRAM OF STUDY: ARE THEY ALL ALIKE?

At the beginning of the new millennium, many programs of study have been revised taking a competency-based approach. As we know, for technical programs of study, the competencies corresponding to a specific training component in a program of study were determined following an analysis of the workplace situation. In all, a total of 22 competencies were retained for the Early Childhood Education Techniques program. Do some of these competencies require particular attention? Are they all similar in nature? Are some more difficult, or even impossible, for students to develop? Do any of them require specific pedagogical strategies?

### ▶ A COMPETENCY THAT IS DIFFICULT TO MASTER

These questions, along with many more, have been the focus of our professional preoccupation for some time. A few years ago, while conducting research subsidized by PAREA (*Programme d'aide à la recherche sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage*) at Cégep de Saint-Jérôme, we updated and validated the evaluation grids for students in the Early Childhood Education Techniques program (ECE) who were completing a work placement in day care centres (Delisle and Cantin, 1994). These evaluation grids had been created for all the professional competencies. Over the years, using these evaluation tools made teachers

realize that one competency was particularly difficult for students to demonstrate. The competency in question is that of *supporting parents in their children's education*. For various reasons (inexperience, ethical<sup>1</sup> considerations or a lack of practice in collaborating with parents in certain field experience placements), the students seemed to be unable to intervene directly with the parents. Consequently, developing this competency was at best a difficult task, almost utopian. Over the years, in an attempt to resolve this problem, content elements dealing with this issue have been added and practical skills have been worked into the training program of that period. It seems however that this is not enough. For several consecutive years, an in-house survey conducted among students graduating from the ECE program at Cégep de Saint-Jérôme consistently indicated that the competency they felt least prepared for was still *To support parents in their children's education*.

### ▶ AN ACKNOWLEDGED DIFFICULTY

This situation was not unique to Cégep de Saint-Jérôme students. Students in other educational institutions offering training programs for educators in daycare services also experienced similar difficulties. A number of authors in the United States believe that the knowledge and skills required to work effectively with parents have not been taught adequately in training programs for educators who work in daycare centres (Coffman, 1999; Lopez and Dorros, 1999; Powell, 1998). For his part, Kuhn (2001) maintains that training educators to work in partnership with the parents is often limited by several factors: few possibilities for engaging with parents during field work placements, difficulties observing parent-educator partnership models in daycares, and the attitudes of students who are primarily interested in working with children and not with their parents. He also claims that some training programs have basic design problems. This is the area we were able to explore thanks to a PAREA grant for a pedagogical research project. At the same time, implementing the new Early Childhood Education Techniques program provided a unique occasion to find solutions to this problem. Indeed, this program of study was the first to introduce in a formal way<sup>2</sup> the competency *To establish a partnership between parents and resource personnel*. It was an ideal opportunity to implement an educational strategy to target a competency that seems to present major and recurring difficulties to students.

### ▶ ANALYZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE COMPETENCY

Initially, in order to develop an appropriate educational strategy, it was necessary to make sure that we correctly understood the nature of the difficulties that students were experiencing with this competency. To accomplish this, the students' points of view were gathered using various types of tools: a questionnaire distributed to

<sup>1</sup> It is in fact difficult to entrust to a student-in-training the responsibility of discussing with a parent certain delicate subjects such as behavioural problems, etc.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, it is no longer a simple matter of evaluating a particular component in the context of a work placement but rather of evaluating a specific competency for which one or more learning activities must be developed.





all the students in the program of study (n=492) in two CEGEPs (Sherbrooke and Saint-Jérôme), as well as semi-structured interviews individual (n=12) and group (n=3). Several research angles emerged from these data and helped define the strategy and determine which content elements needed to be prioritized in order to properly equip the students. For example, the data collected clearly showed that students feel particularly unprepared and stressed when they have to work with parents whose child is experiencing problems. The students worried about facing such a situation and raised many questions. How should they approach the parents? How should they communicate their observations? How should they handle parents' reactions (disappointment, aggressiveness, etc.)? The answers to these questions helped to provide a better definition for the competency and brought out which elements of the competency required special attention.

In an effort to better define the competency, it seemed important to us<sup>3</sup> to verify the conditions for exercising this competency in the workplace. On the one hand, all the teachers in Cégep de Saint-Jérôme's ECE Department were consulted in particular by using the self-analysis tool for a program of study centred on the family (Coffman, 1999). On the other hand, a consulting committee comprised of experienced professionals from daycares enabled us to ensure that the components comprising the competency actually correspond to what daycare educators face on a daily basis. And finally, given that the goal was to establish a partnership between parents and resource people, we met with psycho-social interveners from CLSCs and other community groups who could be called on to intervene as resource people in daycare services. These consultations were used to identify properly the nature of the partnership required for this competency.

There is no doubt that the data collected from students and professionals were highly instrumental in helping to define this competency in a very precise manner. These data were also used for contextualizing, or rather redefining, the competency taking into account the characteristics of the field of ECE as well as student concerns.

#### ► FINE-TUNING THE EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY

From the beginning of this research we decided to work using an educational perspective that seemed particularly well-adapted for developing competencies. To quote Altet's expression, we opted for a: "learning-based educational trend". In this approach, "the educational activity is defined from the learner's point of view" (Altet, 1997, p. 20). The teacher's essential role is to create learning conditions that favour student success. This educational trend is based on various theories on the nature of learning and it calls for different ways of supporting it. Among these theories we find cognitivism and socio-constructivism, on which we based our two learning activities designed to develop the competency, *To establish a partnership between parents and resource people*. This twofold educational strategy was intended for third-year students in the ECE (Early Childhood Education) program.

<sup>3</sup> We would like to mention the valuable collaboration of Claire Vallée, teacher in the ECE Department at Cégep de Saint-Jérôme, throughout the various stages of developing and testing the educational strategy.

#### LEARNING ACTIVITY — PARTNERSHIP

According to Perrenoud:

[...] we can only lead students to build competencies by confronting them regularly and intensely with relatively complex problem situations that activate different types of cognitive processes. (Perrenoud, 1997, p. 6)

Many authors (Barbeau, Montini and Roy, 1997; Désilets and Tardif, 1993; Meirieu, 1989; Perrenoud, 1998; Tardif, Désilets, Paradis and Lachiver, 1992; Tremblay, 1999) agree on this point and they clearly underline the need to use these types of problem situations in order to create a framework that is conducive to the development of competencies. In an initial learning activity we opted for problem-based learning (PBL) that essentially uses these types of problem-situations to help students develop a competency.

*The teacher's essential role is to create learning conditions that favour student success.*

This method allows for students to learn the required knowledge in context. The problem situations were developed with the help of resource people from the daycare field in order to ensure that they were an accurate representation of what educators face on a daily basis.

The PBL method was adapted (PBLa) by adding a fourth phase (see Table 1) in which students must find some way to implement the solutions that have been found. This fourth stage consists of role-playing in which students simulate the appropriate interaction between a parent and a daycare educator. This addition seemed to be a necessary step given that students repeatedly stated that they did not have the opportunity to interact with parents during their



fieldwork placement and consequently they were unable to develop their competence in this regard.

The overall analysis process for a problem (tutorial) was repeated for four separate problems during the session.

### SECOND LEARNING ACTIVITY — IMMERSION

The next learning activity we selected to develop the competency in question was more specifically inspired by socio-constructivism. Without denying students' active role in constructing their own learning, socio-constructivism also recognizes the need for interactions between students and other people in order to support their own construction of knowledge.

[...] a state of cognitive imbalance in individuals resulting from social interactions that confront them with a concept or construction that is different or even incompatible with their own. (Lafortune and Deaudelin, 2001, p. 201)

This imbalance has a strong influence on students, motivating them to review their own interpretations when they seem to be inappropriate. This seemed to be an interesting way to proceed given that we suspected that one reason behind the difficulties in developing the competency *To establish a partnership between parents and resource people* was specifically the students' perceptions of the parents and of the educators' roles towards them.

In order to promote contact with the parents and thereby with resource people working with the parents, students were immersed in a work placement situation (observation) and spent some 20 hours in a community organization that offers family support.

**Table 1: PHASES OF A TUTORIAL EN APP<sup>a</sup>**

PHASES OF A TUTORIAL IN PARTNERSHIP 322-443-JR		APPROXIMATE TIME
PHASE I	STUDY OF THE PROBLEM IN SMALL GROUPS	90 MINUTES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify clues and clarify terms</li> <li>Define the problem and prepare a list of phenomena to be explained</li> <li>Analyze the problem and propose hypotheses</li> <li>Organize and determine priority hypotheses</li> <li>Clarify study objectives</li> </ul>	
PHASE II	PERSONAL WORK	5 TO 7 HOURS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual study and creation of an integrative diagram</li> </ul>	
PHASE III	KNOWLEDGE VALIDATION	60 MINUTES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Synthesize and validate hypotheses (small group)</li> <li>Evaluate the tutorial (small group)</li> </ul>	
PHASE IV	PRESENTING SOLUTIONS	3 HOURS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simulate the recommended intervention (role-play – large group)</li> <li>Evaluate the interventions (large groupe)</li> <li>Make a personal assessment (individual work)</li> </ul>	

Note: The small groups mentioned here were comprised of 10 to 12 people. The large groups correspond to class groups (approximately 24 students).

This enabled them to meet and talk to parents while at the same time observing the recommended intervention methods used by the resource people in order to support the parents. Throughout the work placement, supervisory meetings were held at the college. The students were invited to share their observations in small groups and to reflect on these situations together. Teachers took advantage of these meetings to introduce a few theoretical concepts which would be helpful in guiding the students' observations. In order to stimulate reflection during their work placements, the students were required to keep a reflective journal. At the end of the work placement, during a final synthesis, each student had to present to the student group the main characteristics of the organization they had been observing.

### PROMISING RESULTS

This educational strategy was tested for the first time in the fall of 2003 and, at the end of the trial, the students were given a questionnaire to evaluate the two learning activities. On the whole, the students were satisfied with both activities. They confirmed that these activities enabled them to develop the various elements of the competency. They stated that they felt well-prepared to work with the parents, something which had not been the case in previous years. The results for the questions dealing with their feeling of preparedness for working in partnership with parents were significantly higher than in previous years. Furthermore, the students concluded that each of the learning activities contributed in a different way to developing the competency.



On the one hand, the Partnership activity based on adapted problem-based learning (PBLa) allowed students to acquire the knowledge required, both declarative and procedural. In addition, students were able to develop problem-solving skills during their interactions with parents. Moreover, the simulation of interviews with parents was generally welcomed by the students who confirmed that the activity had not only helped them learn but also increased their confidence in their abilities in this area.

On the other hand, the immersion work placement in organizations that offer family support seemed to provide many students with opportunities to review how they perceived parents and to find ways of providing adequate support. Half of the students specifically mentioned in their reviews of their immersion work placements that the experience had helped to change their perception of parents in a positive way. Over 70% of students mentioned coming to the realization that parents need someone to listen to them, to reassure them. Almost a third of the students (34%) also specifically mentioned the importance of being non-judgemental when working with parents.

Several students noted the parents' needs to feel valued, and many were surprised by this observation because they initially believed that all parents were sure of themselves. These few examples illustrate the transformation in students' thinking. For the most part, students also gained new personal insights such as a new awareness of both their preconceived notions about parents and of their own personal abilities to relate to them. In the end, the work placement helped develop certain attitudes needed for working in partnership: being open to others, recognizing other people's strengths, personal confidence, empathy and ultimately a collaborative attitude.

*At the end of the work placement, during a final synthesis activity in the form of a poster session, each student had to present to the other students the main characteristics of the organization they had been observing.*

To verify the impact of this educational strategy, interviews were conducted with some of the students (n=15) a few months after the learning activities. The students were in fact contacted in the middle of the following session, after returning from work placements that integrated them into daycares. In this end-of-session work placement, students are responsible for groups of children and they have better opportunities to interact with parents.

While analyzing the data collected during the interviews, we were able to observe that the students clearly had a positive attitude towards the parents. When faced with a problem, they generally demonstrated a very good ability to analyze it and to propose appropriate solutions based on the circumstances. They demonstrated a good ability to adapt to the setting and to the parents in order to implement diverse ways of communicating with the families. Moreover, we noticed that a large majority of the students expressed having had a gratifying experience with the parents during this work placement, something which has not always been the case in the past. It also turns out that the learning acquired through this educational strategy is maintained over time.

## CONCLUSION

This educational strategy greatly helped students master the competency *To establish a partnership between parents and resource people*.

Since the initial trial, this strategy has been implemented on three other occasions and each time the results observed have been similar: that is, both learning activities contribute in a complementary manner to the development of this complex competency. The work placement immersion in organizations that offer support for families provides the students with an opportunity to reflect on the conceptions they have of parents and on how best to offer them support. The socio-cognitive conflict resulting from the meeting between students and parents (and others working in a similar setting) had a strong motivating effect which encouraged students to review their own preconceptions. This work on their own mental interpretations is necessary to enable students to integrate new concepts and skills that they will need in order to work effectively with families.

As for the Partnership learning activity, it favoured the acquisition not only of new knowledge but also of problem-solving skills. The students particularly appreciated the role-playing phase which was added to the PBL method because it allowed them to engage in professional practices (conducting an interview with the parents, for example) that are difficult to carry out in the usual work placement context.

One reason for this student success lies in the fact that both learning activities place the student at the centre of the learning process. The students are truly the main actors in their own learning. Whether it be analyzing problems submitted, listening to the parents' points of view



or observing others interacting with parents, in each case the student is above all engaged in the task. During an activity, teachers essentially act as guides. Obviously a large part of their work will come later during the task of designing educational activities that promote real student commitment. This has been confirmed in our experience.

However, fine-tuning an appropriate educational strategy depends largely on the quality of the analysis of the competency. For various reasons, some competencies in a program of study require special attention. In this sense, we must say that the careful analysis of competencies that present recurring problems in a program of study seems to constitute the fundamental starting point for any and all attempts to improve learning activities. ●

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Gilles CANTIN has a Ph.D. in psycho-pedagogy and a Master's degree in secondary and college teaching, both of which were completed at the Université de Montréal. He has taught in the Early Childhood Education Techniques Department at Cégep de St-Jérôme for over twenty years and he is now pursuing his career as a professeur au Département d'éducation et pédagogie at Université du Québec à Montréal. His research work deals primarily with training educators who work in daycares and with relationships between parents and educators.

cantin.gilles@uqam.ca

