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Students Social Skills of Learning in Groups at University Education

The paper explores theoretical assumptions of social skills while learning in group with the view to constructivist learning theory. Fundamental basis of social constructivism is social interaction, stressing importance of social exchanges for cognitive growth and/or impact of cultural and historic context on learning. Assumptions of social constructivism reflect integration of information literacy to educational curriculum. Information literacy is transformation of information to perceived and meaningful knowledge. Social interaction is created in group learning, passing through group development stages, such as group formation, differentiation, integration, maturity and group finalizing.

Straipsnyje, remiantis konstruktyvistine mokymosi teorija, analizuojamos teorinės socialinių gebėjimų ugdymo prielaidos mokantis grupėse. Fundamentalus socialinio konstruktyvizmo pagrindas yra socialinė sąveika, pabrėžianti socialinių mainų svarbą kognityviniam augimui ir kultūrinio bei istorinio konteksto poveikį mokymuisi. Socialinio konstruktyvizmo nuostatos išreiškia informacinio raštingumo integravimą į mokymo turinį. Informacinis raštingumas yra informacijos transformavimas į suprastas ir įprasmintas žinias. Socialinė sąveika yra kuriama mokantis grupėje, pereinant grupės vystymosi etapus: formavimąsi, diferenciaciją, integraciją, brandą ir grupės užbaigimą.

Introduction

Relevance of the problem. Globalization and modernization is creating a diverse world interconnected by a variety of networks. People have to master rapidly changing technologies and a huge amount of accessible information. In this context competencies necessary for individuals seeking their personal aims are becoming more complex, demanding new knowledge and abilities compared to mastering just narrowly defined skills.

The concept "ability" indicates that a particular aptitude is developed in learning process: a particular action, activity and behaviour[1] (Laužackas, 2005, 13). Social skills as abilities to listen to other opinion, reveal one's own, solve naturally rising conflicts in a constructive way are developed while learning in groups. The concept of commonness which emerges from Christian revelation and considers God to be one and tripersonal elevated paragon, is neither uniform nor forced homogenization or assimilation; commonness is actually the confluence of multi-layered diversity into one; therefore, being a sign of sub-

stantiality and promise of expansion[2] II. 66.

They are developed when social aims are raised for group work – being able to tell events in detail and clearly for a small group joined by common interests; being able to explain the accomplishment of a task or resolution of a problem; participate actively in a small group discussion and react to other participants' viewpoint; learning together (in group) to accomplish tasks, listening, to each other, motivating and encouraging to be in agreement with each other.

Learning in groups within university education is a specific form of active learning posing the aim not only to train students' potential to work in groups but also encourage them for group discussion enabling them to adjust interpretation of their complex learning tasks, find their personal problems solving methods and systematize them according to their individual understanding.

The object of the research – students' social skills of learning in groups.

The aim of the research – to reveal learning groups' social skills theoretical assumptions by validating students' attitude towards their acquisition at university education.

The following tasks of the research were defined to achieve the aim of the research:

- to analyze learning within social constructivist conception;
- to discuss interaction between social skills and information literacy;
- to overview the stages of decision making in learning groups;
- to examine students' attitude in assessing the acquisition of social skills during group learning.

The methods applied for the research: 1) analysis of research literature, 2) a quantitative research was conducted by administering a questionnaire survey, which aimed at revealing students' social skills acquired within group learning.

1.   Learning in social constructivist conception

Constructivism has been in the focus of education scientists and practitioners in the following last decades. Modern learning theory discusses constructivist theory assumptions that stress knowledge construction process created by learners. In Lithuania theoretical basics of teaching and learning are in the process of development and where theoretical basis of education science is counting only several decades, therefore Lithuanian researchers and practitioners refer to theoretical basis and practice of western countries. As Bitinas (2006, 7) states "education science researchers are not satisfied with existing practice in education research, its theoretical and methodological level"[3]. This situation is conditioned by development of geopolitical, historical events that took place in our country.

Constructivist theory analyses nature of human learning and circumstances that best encourage learning. Educational psychologists (Vygotsky, 1978) whose theoretical assumptions are based on education philosopher John Dewey, consider that knowledge construction occurs in a social context[4]. Therefore, scholars interested in innovations in teaching and learning claim that learning activities must be presented in an authentic con-

text through social collaboration and interaction. Constructivist learning environment is particularly favourable for activities directed towards a learner that emphasize problem-based learning, students' interaction, reflection and collaboration[5] (Applefield, Huber, 2001). From constructivist perspective creative approach towards meaning creation is a learner's specific feature where he or she uses social and cognitive circumstances, sharing of ideas, problems and interests. L. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that learners are capable of performing at higher intellectual levels when they are asked to work in group situations rather than when they work individually[6].

Fundamental basis of social constructivism is social interaction which is in contrast to individual learning in cognitive constructivism. Social constructivism stresses the importance of social exchanges for cognitive growth and/or impact of cultural and historic context on learning. Therefore, thinking and construction of knowledge is linked immediately to social and physical context of learning experience. Constructivism as epistemological knowledge acquisition theory approaches learning as creation.

Scientific discourse on issues of constructivist learning theory and practice is attracting increasingly scholars' attention in Lithuania. Constructivist learning strategies were investigated by M. Teresevičienė and G. Gedvilienė (2003) in research conducted in 1994–1995 that revealed that such learning directed learners to more intensive learning changed their social attitudes[7].

In discussion about learning and its quality learning environment and learning context are disputed about as an integral part that conditions the quality of learning and studies. Learning environment is a complex concept including learning process, syllabus, resources, teacher's personality, and application of learning/teaching strategies, methods, technologies, means and group members' interaction (M. Teresevičienė, G. Gedvilienė, V. Zuzevičiūtė, 2006). Chang and Fisher (2003) stress students' perceptions in learning environment, which are of great importance for researchers involved in investigation of learning. Such learning model allows designing learner-focused activities, problem-based assignments, use creativity, interaction, reflection and collaboration[8]. Constructivist learning environment is particularly favourable for the application of the Internet and ICT for learning purposes. Assumptions of social constructivism correspond well to integration of information literacy in university curriculum inasmuch information literacy is understood as transformation of information into understood and meaningful knowledge. Information literacy skills constitute an integral criterion of a modern university student's level of learning and education.

2. Social skills in groups

Life changes condition transformations in thinking about education, search for new and effective learning theories and methods. The object of modern didactics is not just teaching, but learning also that is approached as interactive, dynamic and individual process. Learning involves learners' thinking and feelings. Circulation of knowledge and abilities takes place at individual, group and organizational levels. Therefore when acting together is mastered, more power to solve encountered problems is acquired.

According to (Teresevičienė, Gedvilienė, 2003) one of the key aspects of developing social skills in learning groups is learning with others and learning from each other. During group collaboration a much attention is focused on generic and interpersonal skills, such as listening to others, collaboration, reflection and formation of agreement[9].

Teaching is easier when social interaction – eliminating disregarding of unworthy roles – occurs acknowledging the uniqueness of each person's dignity equally. This way it is possible to develop personalities able to possess their own point of view to life and capable of justifying their self-decision making[10]. Learning in groups implies organization of learning process during which students are divided into small learning groups that discuss topics assigned by a teacher or chosen by learners. Learning in groups may become a value itself, which has a goal to develop students social skills and also creative and critical thinking. Students may learn and conceive what is the most important from observation of other learners' learning strategies and way of thinking. During discussion of their aims, strategies, processes students may compare their viewpoint, ideas with others and thus acquire new abilities to act in new learning situations.

3. Decisions making in a learning group

Quality of interaction in any learning group is the most relevant factor, determining success of group work and decision-making. Effective communication between the group members encourages development of their interpersonal and social skills. Interaction within the group could be defined as active participation of group members. If a group member will observe group work as if from the outside, neither his/her critical thinking nor knowledge will possess value will be valuable. Every group member's active participation in exchange of information creates for successful group work preconditions. It is evident that success of social skills development within a group *firstly* will depend on members' capability and willingness to share necessary for work information. Secondly each group member's transferred information has to be appropriately analyzed and evaluated by group members. It is worth mentioning that most often information is not implicitly accepted, therefore, group members' preparedness for constructive criticism is stressed.

And *thirdly*, effective listening to that encourages every group member's efforts to understand and evaluate other persons' conveyed ideas. Thus it can be stated that the most essential condition for social skills development within a group is open and sincere communication between group members.

While learning in group decision – making is implemented that is very important for group activity in pursuit of a common goal. As R. D. Robinson (1994) puts it groups make more effective decisions than individual persons because group members collect more comprehensive information, knowledge and grater variety of opinions prevails[11]. Successful group decision making and its implementation is determined by consistent and well-shaped stages (Fig.1).

Orientation. In many groups orientation stage is rather short; their members do not
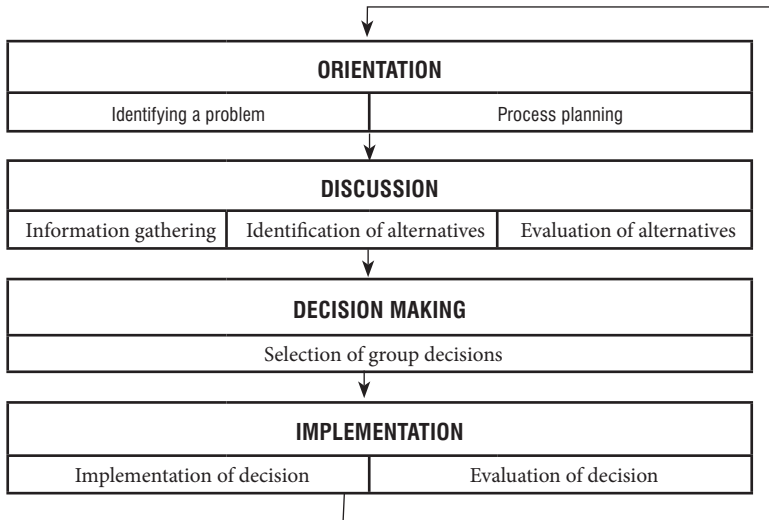
ORIENTATION	
Identifying a problem	Process planning

DISCUSSION		
Information gathering	Identification of alternatives	Evaluation of alternatives

DECISION MAKING
Selection of group decisions

IMPLEMENTATION	
Implementation of decision	Evaluation of decision

Fig. 1. The most important stages of decision-making

demonstrate their interest in planning. However, the groups who devote more time for orientation, their decisions are better. Better atmosphere in a group is created while planning a process, interpersonal communication improves, satisfaction in management increases and assignments are accomplished in a more flexible manner.

Discussion. In the stage of discussion a group processes information related to the decision. Basing on the acquired information a group determines possible sequences of actions and begins to search for new information to evaluate their choice. Effectively working group predicts positive and negative consequences of their choices and again considers opportunities that have been rejected at the beginning. A group should plan its decision and design strategies to observe its impact.

Shortcomings of failed discussions: delay to make a decision; bias (unwillingness to take into consideration possible negative consequences); dispersion of responsibility; ignoring alternatives; satisfaction that decision satisfies minimal requirements; simplification (avoidance to look broader).

Decision making. At a certain point when group members feel they obtained enough information to make a decision, a particular social decision schemes should be used to join individual opinions into a collective decision. Such schemes could be strictly defined: assessment commission, committee or similar can be elected and voting could be announced. Other decision-making schemes are informal (managed without voting); members negotiate until they reach a consensus. There should be balance between a method and scope of decision, seriousness, and input. The most effective decision making method is consensus (unanimous agreement). It encourages distribution of roles, high-scoring contradictions, participation and determination to contribute.

Implementation. When decision is made two important things must be done. Firstly, decision should be implemented. Secondly, its quality should be assessed. After a group

assesses its decision decision-making process acquires a shape of a cycle, not a linear sequence. Most often further decisions should be accepted, if changes do not bring anticipated results, a process is repeated.

  Thus, efficient decision-making depends upon acquisition of social skills: agreement among group members, teacher's interaction with smaller groups, the right teacher's position, and learners' participation in group work.

4. Interaction of social skills and information literacy

Under the influence of rapid development of modern technologies and appearance of variety of information sources and formats the relevance of information literacy is explored as students' empowering factor that impacts their learning quality and changes university education culture and consequently conditions formation of this culture. Social skills such as collaboration, team work, communication constitute an integral component of information literacy. Therefore, development of information literacy is interrelated with social skills training.

  Information search and its location are defined as communicative acts that occur in a social context where communication of information and its transformation into personal knowledge takes place (Nahl, 2001). Therefore social skills acquire a value status and should be discussed in learning context that is specifically relevant looking at changes in learning, searching for effective teaching and learning methods. Therefore information user's behaviour, possessed value attitudes require deep and consistent analysis.

  Newest technologies and opportunities for communication among learners and learners and teachers and opportunities for presenting a wide scope of material offered by them create preconditions for deep learning. In virtual, technology rich learning environment social skills are emphasized as such environments oblige learners to communicate while learning, create one's own knowledge and share it with others. Even Catholic Church views this new means of communication realistically and with confidence, perceiving means of communication as a means not as an end in itself..[12] Perspective of integration of technologies is an important, influential and sometimes decisive factor from cultural, social and value attitudes. A. Loveless (2005) stresses a set of favourable features of ICT use in learning: cooperation, students' autonomy, creativity, critical approach, expression[13]. Jones (2004) indicates that modern discussion is transferred from interaction with a computer to interaction via computer[14]. This author analyses problems of the networked society and context of networked leaning. The use of technologies in learning is meaningful in case it is socially constructed, motivating for reflexive dialogue within a learning community. Information literacy models in the area of higher education (Australian and New Zealand, 2004) stress the importance of generic skills including social skills, thus expanding understanding of information literacy and contributing to holistic character of information literacy conception. Information literacy becomes a relevant aspect of adult learning. It is understood an integral component of independent learning and respectively independent learning is understood as an integral component of lifelong learning[15]. Hence the importance of information literacy skills as citizens becoming lifelong learners is one of the most vital preconditions for economic independence of the country and quality of life.

5. Students attitude to social skills acquired while learning in groups

Seeking to identify students' attitude to social skills and their acquisition eighty six Vytautas Magnus University students were surveyed.

The respondents' opinion was surveyed on the following questions: a) Are collaboration skills important for teaching/learning process? b) Are you able to work in group and collaborate with partners? c) How do you assess interpersonal relations within a learning group? d) What social skills do you acquire while learning in group?

Importance of social skills was examined in three-rank scale: 1) collaboration skills help to learn more effectively; 2) sometimes, to perform a group assignment; 3) no, they are not necessary. More than a half of the surveyed students (67,4%, n – 58) replied, that these skills help to learn more efficiently; one fourth of the respondents (25,6%, n – 22) claim that they are necessary for group assignment. Only few surveyed students (7,0%, n – 6) expressed opinion that such skills are not necessary in learning. Hence, the majority of the students (93%) assess positively collaboration skills, envisaging their necessity seeking effectiveness in studies (see. Fig. 2).
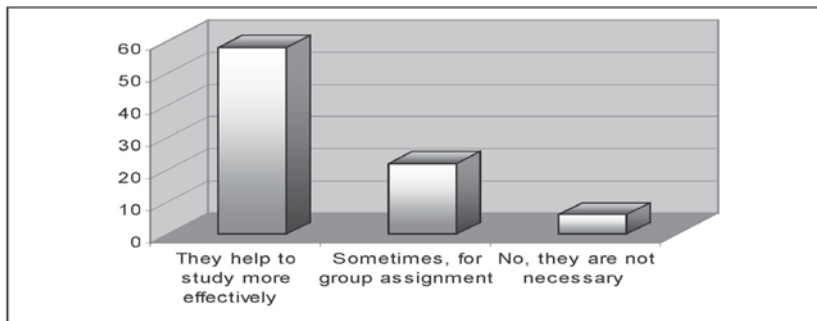

Fig. 2. Importance of social skills in learning

Self-assessment of students' social skills was examined gathering data about their acquired experience in three-rank scale: 1) Yes; 2) Do not know as have no experience; 3) No, working in group disturbs my learning. The majority of the research sample (75,3%, n – 63) are capable of collaboration with partners and they suggest that these skills help them to learn. 14% (n –12) of the research participants did not express their opinion on this question as they have no collaboration and group work experience. A similar number of the research sample (12,8%, n – 11) claim that group work disturbs their learning (see Fig. 3). This survey let us assume that students bring different experience to university which dictates their learning style and different strategies. Therefore, seeking effectiveness at university education, designing teaching and constructing learning process these important factors should be taken into consideration. Development of particular competencies and skills (in this case social) should be integrated into design of individual as-
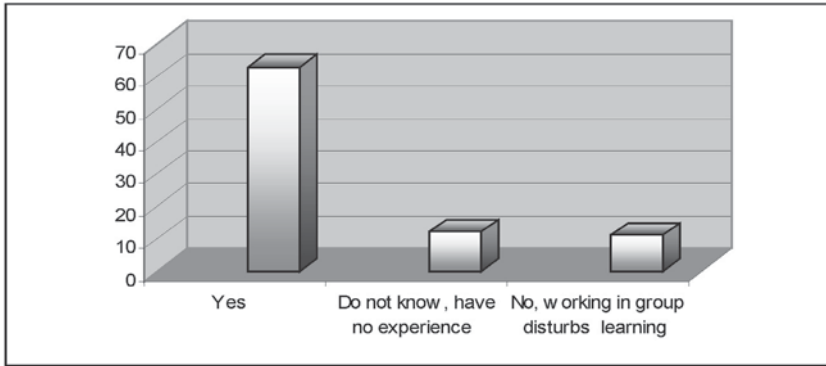
Fig. 3. **Self-assessment of social skills**

signments and classroom work content and also encouraged and emphasized in practice where it could be efficient from the viewpoint of students' performance as personalities and their learning outcomes.

Summarizing this part of the research we claim that students' positive approach towards collaboration in learning process at university was identified and these findings should encourage construct group activities, design constructivist learning environment with its characteristic creative approach to learning. However, a considerable attention should be paid to students' prior experience and construct assignments according to already possessed abilities, integrating gradually collaborative and interactive learning ac-
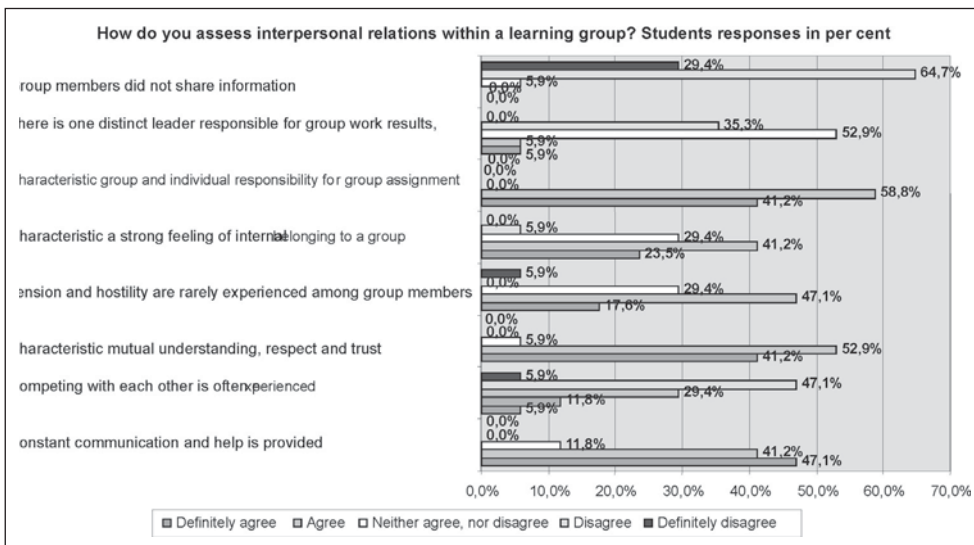

Fig. 4. **Assessment of the students' interpersonal relations in learning groups**
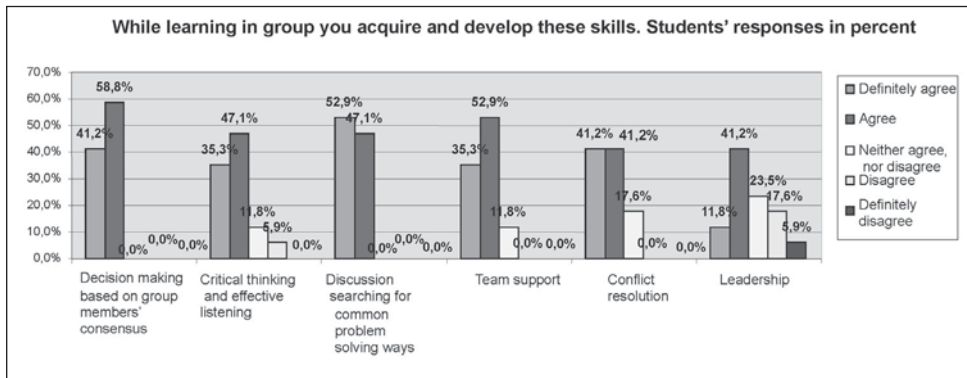
Fig 5. Social skills acquired while learning in groups

tivities. Such learning would be acceptable even for those students who do not have group work experience and would not cause their resistance. In such a way students' learning process would be enriched, learning would become more diverse and interesting.

It is observed that students assess favourably interpersonal relations in learning group (see Fig. 4). Slightly less than a half of the students (47,1%) „definitely agree" that students constantly communicate within a learning group and provide help to each other. More than a half of the students „agree" that in a learning group individual and group responsibility is typical for all outcomes and mutual respect, trust and understanding. Slightly less than a half of the research sample also "*agree*" that a strong feeling of internal belonging to a group is characteristic for group learning; tension and hostility among group members occur rarely, but 5,9% of the respondents respectively do not support these statements. 47,1% of the students disagree with the statement „we often compete with each other , however, 11,8% and 5,9% of the sample „definitely agree" or „agree" with the presented statement . More than one third of the surveyed sample (35,3%) „disagree" that there is one distinct leader among the group, responsible for all work results. It is worth mentioning that more than a half of the students (52,9%) did not express their opinion on the question.

In conclusion we claim that students positively asses interpersonal relation within a learning group.

It can be noticed that students agree with the assumption that while learning in groups various social skills are acquired and enhanced (see Fig. 5). More than a half of the students "definitely agree" or "agree" that while learning in groups decision making skills based on consensus, group support and conflict resolution and discussion are acquired searching for common ways of problem solving. Slightly less than a half of the respondents (47,1%) also "agree" that critical thinking and effective listening to and managerial skills in learning groups (41,2%) are also improved.

Summing up, we state that students agree with the statement that they acquire and develop such social skills as decision making base don all group members consent discussion while searching common problems solving ways group support and conflict resolution critical thinking, effective listening to and leadership.

Conclusions

• Seeking to achieve modern learning aims it is highly important to create a favourable learning environment where learners could actively participate with others as interaction leads to processing of knowledge and its acquisition process during which new understandings are created and skills developed. Positive students' interaction is created within a learning group; they work and collaborate together in pursuit of a common aim. They are also encouraged to trust and feel personal and group responsibility.

• Successful group activity depends on group members attempts covering all group development stages, their abilities to distribute roles and harmonious interaction. The stages of group development such as formation, differentiation, integration, maturity and finalizing are distinguished. Each stage is characterized by its different activity and behavioural processes. Being aware of them it is possible to influence group members and thus achieve better learning and work outcomes. Group members can learn successfully, provided all of them apply communication, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution skills. Similarly, learning groups are specified by learners' distribution of roles, as taking a suitable role they contribute more into common team work and feel satisfaction. Besides, open and sincere communication among group members is necessary, as the quality of interaction is an essential factor conditioning success of group work, decision making and its result.

• The respondents assess positively learning in groups as they acknowledge that while learning gin groups and interacting with each other they communicate constantly, provide help, participate actively in group activity and do not avoid taking responsibility for group work. The respondents also agree that while learning in groups they acquire and develop their social, organizational and verbal skills.

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Genutė GEDVILIENĖ, Vilhelmina VAIČIŪNIENĖ

STUDENTŲ MOKYMOSI GRUPĖSE SOCIALINIAI GEBĖJIMAI UNIVERSITETINĖSE STUDIJOSE
S a n t r a u k a

Globalizacija ir modernizacija kuria įvairialypį ir informaciniais tinklais tarpusavyje susietą pasaulį. Žmonės turi įvaldyti kintančias technologijas ir įsisavinti didelį prieinamos informacijos kiekį. Informacinis raštingumas yra suprantamas kaip integralus nepriklausomo mokymosi komponentas, nepriklausomas mokyma-

sis atitinkamai yra integralus mokymosi visą gyvenimą komponentas. Katalikų Bažnyčia moko, kad taip pat svarbu, jog krikščionių bendruomenė, naudodama šiuolaikines komunikavimo priemones, ieškotų praktinių būdų iš virtualaus kibernetinės erdvės pasaulio pereiti į realų krikščioniškosios bendruomenės pasaulį. Šiame kontekste kompetencijos, kurių reikia žmonėms, siekiantiems savų tikslų, yra vis sudėtingesnės, todėl nebeužtenka siaurai apibrėžtų įgūdžių, bet reikia įgyti vis daugiau žinių ir gebėjimų. Socialiniai gebėjimai, pvz., mokėjimas išklausyti kito nuomonę, aiškiai išsakyti savąją, konstruktyviai spręsti natūraliai kylančius konfliktus, yra ugdomi mokantis grupėse. Jie tobulinami keliant grupės darbui socialinius tikslus – kaip sugebėti aiškiai, smulkiai papasakoti įvykius mažai bendrų interesų jungiamai grupelei; mokyti paaiškinti, kaip buvo atliekama užduotis arba sprendžiama kokia nors problema; aktyviai dalyvauti mažos grupelės diskusijoje ir reaguoti į kitų dalyvių nuomonę; mokytis drauge (grupėje) atlikti užduotis, išklausant, padrąsinant vienas kitą, skatinant sutarti tarpusavyje.

Universitetinių studijų procese mokymasis grupėse yra specifinė aktyvaus mokymosi forma, kurios tikslas yra ne tik lavinti studentų gebėjimą dirbti grupėje, bet ir skatinti studentus diskutuoti grupėje, kad jie sugebėtų pakoreguoti savo kompleksinių mokymosi užduočių sprendimą, rastų savus problemų sprendimo būdus ir savaip, pagal savo individualų supratimą, juos susistemintų. Siekiant įgyvendinti šiuolaikinius mokymo tikslus, svarbu sukurti palankią mokymo(si) aplinką, kurioje studentai galėtų aktyviai veikti kartu su kitais, nes interaktyvi sąveika veda į žinių apdorojimo ir įsisavinimo procesą, kurio metu kuriamos naujos koncepcijos ir įgūdžiai. Mokantis grupėse sukuriama teigiama studentų tarpusavio sąveika, jie kartu dirba ir bendradarbiauja, siekdami bendro tikslo. Bendrystės samprata, kylanti iš krikščioniškojo apreiškimo, niekada nėra nei savęs suvienodinimas, nei priverstinė homogenizacija ar asimiliacija; bendrystė iš tikrųjų yra daugialypės įvairovės susiliejimas, dėl to tai – turtingumo ženklas. Grupėse taip pat skatinama pasitikėti ir jausti atsakomybę ne tik už save, bet ir kitus grupės narius.

Straipsnio t i k s l a s – atskleisti mokymosi grupėse socialinių gebėjimų teorines prielaidas, pagrindžiant jas studentų požiūriu apie šių gebėjimų įgijimą universitetinėse studijose.

Tikslui pasiekti keliami u ž d a v i n i a i :

1. išanalizuoti mokymąsi, esant socialinio konstruktyvizmo koncepcijai;

2. aptarti socialinių gebėjimų ir informacinio raštingumo sąveiką;

3. apžvelgti sprendimų priėmimo mokymosi grupėje etapus;

4. išsiaiškinti studentų požiūrį, vertinant socialinių gebėjimų įgijimą mokantis grupėje.

Taikyti šie tyrimo m e t o d a i : 1) literatūros analizė, 2) *kiekybinis* tyrimas – anketinė apklausa, kurios dėka siekiama išsiaiškinti socialinius gebėjimus, įgyjamus mokantis grupėse.

Atlikus tyrimą paaiškėjo, kad sėkminga mokymosi grupėse veikla priklauso nuo grupės narių sutelktumo pereinant vystymosi etapus, sugebėjimo pasiskirstyti vaidmenis bei darnios tarpusavio sąveikos. Išskiriami formavimosi, diferenciacijos, integracijos, brandos ir užbaigimo grupės vystymosi etapai. Kiekvienam iš jų būdingi skirtingi veiklos ir elgesio procesai. Juos žinant, įmanoma paveikti grupės narius ir taip pasiekti geresnių mokymosi bei darbo rezultatų. Mokytis sėkmingai grupės nariai gali tik tuo atveju, kai jie taiko bendravimo, vadovavimo, sprendimų priėmimo, konfliktų aiškinimosi gebėjimus. Sėkmingam mokymuisi grupėse taip pat svarbus besimokančiųjų vaidmenų pasiskirstymas, nes prisiimdami sau tinkamus vaidmenis jie įneša didesnį indėlį į bendrą grupės darbą ir jaučia pasitenkinimą. Be to, tarp grupės narių būtinas atviras ir nuoširdus bendravimas, nes interakcijos kokybė yra pagrindinis veiksnys, lemiantis grupės darbo, priimamų sprendimų ir rezultatų sėkmingumą. Bažnyčios dokumentuose pažymima, kad mokyti yra lengviau, kai socialinė sąveika – atmetant nederamą vaidmenų nepaisymą – vyksta visiškai pripažįstant vienodą kiekvieno žmogiškojo asmens orumą, ugdant asmenybes, gebančias turėti unikalų požiūrį į gyvenimą bei galinčias paaiškinti savo apsisprendimą.

Apklausoje dalyvavę respondentai teigiamai vertino mokymąsi grupėse, nes jie pripažįsta, jog mokydamiesi ir sąveikaudami su kitais jie nuolat bendrauja ir vienas kitam teikia pagalbą, aktyviai dalyvauja grupės veikloje ir nevengia prisiimti atsakomybės už bendrą darbą.

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