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The intricacies of academic personal mastery and systems thinking in the reflections of university staff involved in teaching

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the results of research on the reflections of academic teachers and administrative staff involved in teaching on their experiences of participating in an employee competence development project. The research was conducted based on Peter Senge's theoretical approach. Selected assumptions of his philosophy of organisational change and the model of a learning organisation formed the basis for distinguishing research categories. The analysis and interpretation of the research material obtained from 14 semi-open-ended in-depth individual interviews and their contexts led to the following conclusions: programmes that provide space for in-depth reflection on individual and collective professional functioning were perceived as contributing to increased motivation for improving professional skills, strengthening the sense of identity of organisation members and the willingness to engage in university-wide goals.

Keywords: learning organisation, academic teaching, personal mastery, systems thinking

Introduction

The article presents how it is possible to effectively implement the mechanisms of a learning organisation in the field of teaching at a university – in

an environment of employees involved in academic teaching – and to achieve organisational learning goals related to improving the skills of individual members of the organisation, increasing their proactivity and openness to change, and ensuring the coherence of individual and institutional goals. For the purposes of this article, the definition of a learning organisation, in particular that of Peter Senge (Senge, 2012; Senge et al., 2013), and the assumptions of an implementation project aimed at developing professional competences are presented. The aim of the presented research project was to find out whether the implementation of the Peer Learning and Peer Tutoring programmes (original professional competence development programmes dedicated to employees involved in academic teaching and implemented in the university environment of the respondents) in a team/ pair in the area of teaching would influence declarations regarding improvement changes (personal mastery) and the perception of oneself as a member of the institution (systems thinking). The analysis and qualitative interpretation of the participants' statements and their contexts revealed the dimensions of the implementation of the attributes of a learning organisation, including establishing and nurturing relationships between employees, cooperation, exchange of experiences and peer evaluation, a sense of belonging to the academic community, decisions to introduce improving changes in methods of working with students and attitudes towards other employees, declarations of increased well-being in the workplace and involvement in university life.

Academic educators as a learning community

Contemporary academic teaching faces, on the one hand, changes in higher education under the influence of new challenges related to the need to adapt educational offerings to the dynamically changing requirements of the labour market (cf. Jedlińska, 2021), and, on the other hand, the need for continuous transformation of teaching methods resulting from rapid changes in the identity of generational communities (cf. Igoa-Iraola et al., 2023). Both those directly involved in the educational processes at higher education institutions and those who manage and administer academic teaching are exposed to situations in which the existing methods of operation prove insufficient to meet the expectations of high-quality education. This situation is not helped by the atomisation of academic life and the resulting sense of loneliness among staff (cf. Ortega-Jiménez et al., 2021).

In 2022, as a result of a grassroots employee initiative, a unit responsible for supporting academic teaching was established within the framework of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education's programme 'Teaching Excellence at Uni-

versities' (measure 3.4. Management in higher education institutions). One of its objectives was the implementation of a project based on the assumptions of the learning organisation model (cf. Fullan, 2007), in particular on the mechanisms of functioning indicated by Senge.

The idea of a learning organisation and organisational learning is the result of the adaptation in organisational management sciences of the so-called systemic approach, which views the world as dynamically interdependent activities. (cf. Mirvis, 1996). The traditional management system adopted a mechanistic model of work, in which the criteria for organisational success and the objectives of employee activities are set top-down by management, and the role of the employee – motivated by competition and 'management by fear' (Senge, 2012, p. 12) is to perform the maximum number of tasks assigned to them.

The pressure resulting from global competition, the flattening of organisational structures and rapid communication transfer have increased the importance of organisational learning. Responding to this need, among others, researchers from the Institute of Social Research and the Tavistock Institute applied a systemic approach to the study of organisations (cf. Emery & Trist, 1965; Miller & Rice, 1967). As a result of the popularisation of this approach, the mechanistic model gave way to viewing organisations as organisms whose components engage in dialogue, inquiry, joint definition of situations and testing of possible solutions in order to enable learning, improvement of organisation members and the development of effective ways of operating (cf. Argyris & Schon, 1995). In line with this perspective, Senge defines a learning organisation as a place 'where people are constantly discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it' (Senge, 2012, p. 29).

In Senge's proposal, the full learning potential of an organisation can be realised on the assumption that teams, rather than individuals, are the basic units of learning. For this reason, the project in which the respondents participated involved the creation of teams of several academic teachers and administrative staff involved in academic teaching, which operated within the framework of development programmes based on mechanisms for activating team learning: Peer Learning and Peer Tutoring. According to Senge, team learning should cover five so-called disciplines – areas that constitute collective intelligence and at the same time have a fundamental impact on the effectiveness of the organisation and the development of three key team learning skills: inspiring aspirations, conducting insightful conversations and understanding complexity. This gives employee activities a teleological and eudaimonistic aspect (cf. Senge, 2012, pp. 19-21). The disciplines identified by Senge and included in the project activities are: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking.

In the processes implemented as part of the project, participants, in various ways, using coaching tools that open them up to self-analysis (cf. Szewczak et

al., 2020) in confrontation with the ways of thinking of other team members, in relation to various aspects of their work, had space to reflect on hidden personal mental models and a shared vision during friendly, non-judgmental dialogue. Thanks to the exchange of reflections and sharing of experiences, insight into the patterns of interaction occurring in teams, there was space for team learning.

The attributes of a learning community, i.e. personal mastery and systems thinking – categories that form the foundation of Senge's model – only had a chance to fully reveal themselves after six months of workshop activities and became key to the content presented in the article. Senge defines personal mastery as a type of proficiency gained through 'deepening one's vision of life, focusing energy, practising patience, and perceiving reality objectively.' (Senge, 2012, p. 23; cf. Senge et al., 2013, pp. 231-278). These are formal professional skills and moral dispositions that form the basis for effectively setting personal development goals and thus fulfilling life aspirations in integration with professional goals. The discipline of systems thinking is related to acquiring the ability to understand an organisation in a holistic way, taking into account its individual elements, including the individual situation of the employee, and identifying important connections between them. According to Senge, the existence of systems thinking is essential for organisational success and the uninterrupted further development of organisational learning (Senge, 2012, p. 23; Senge et al., 2013, pp. 111-228).

Research methodology and procedure

Research objectives

The aim of the original Peer Learning and Peer Tutoring programme at the university was to initiate change at the individual level in the professional practice of the project beneficiaries. The analysis and interpretation of the statements of the study participants and their contexts, carried out as part of the research presented here, aimed to:
— reveal whether, in the opinion of the study participants – project beneficiaries – the selected attributes of the learning community became their real experience individually and collectively, and
— in accordance with the adopted theoretical perspective, whether, in the light of the participants' statements, they could be the cause of changes in the employee-organisational system relationship, as well as
— to understand the ways in which the study participants/project beneficiaries conceptualise these changes in order to find out whether universal experiences have emerged, as well as to identify individual ways of perceiving the changes.

Research sample

Fourteen people employed full-time at the university covered by the study participated in the study. The participants were recruited from among those who, in response to an email inviting them to participate in the study, voluntarily signed up to participate and completed the employee competence development programme – Peer Learning or Peer Tutoring. The volunteers were familiarised with the objectives and conditions of the study and gave their informed consent to participate.

The sample selection was purposeful and stratified. This means that participants representing various characteristics relevant to the objectives of the study were deliberately selected from among the beneficiaries of the programme, such as type of position (teaching or administrative), length of service (short 0-10, medium 10-15, long . 15), affiliation to different organisational units (anonymised), gender (proportional to the gender structure of employees in the study population) and age (specified by a range for anonymisation purposes). The aim of this selection was to ensure the widest possible diversity of individual perspectives and to check whether, despite these differences, it would be possible to identify common, universal experiences.

Table 1
Demographic data of study participants

Pseudonym	Type of position	Length of service	Organisational unit	Gender	Age
1	Teaching	medium	Institute X	Female	40 – 45
2	Administrative	medium	Biblioteka	Female	45 – 50
3	Teaching	long	Institute Y	Female	50 --55
4	Teaching	long	Institute Z	Male	35 – 40
5	Teaching	medium	Institute Z	Male	40 – 45
6	Teaching	long	Institute V	Female	50 – 55
7	Teaching	short	Institute Z	Female	50 – 55
8	Administrative	long	Education Planning Office	Female	40 – 45
9	Administrative	short	Dean's Office	Female	50 – 55
10	Administrative	long	Dean's Office	Female	35 – 40
11	Teaching	long	Institute Y	Female	45 – 50
12	Administrative	long	Education Centre	Female	40 – 45
13	Teaching	long	Institute X	Female	40 – 45
14	Teaching	short	Institute X	Female	30 – 35

Source: own research

Research procedure

The study was conducted using the individual semi-structured in-depth interview technique (cf. Ruslin et al., 2022; Magadi & Berler, 2020). The interviews took place at the university between 3 and 6 months after the end of the project. The interview scenario was developed in advance based on the theoretical assumptions of the project. All interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed in full. The transcripts were anonymised and the data was coded to ensure confidentiality.

Analysis of research material

The data analysis was based on classical content analysis (cf. Kubinowski, 2011). The entire content of 14 interviews was analysed. A deductive-inductive approach was used, whereby the initial analytical categories were derived from previously accepted theoretical assumptions (cf. Gibbs, 2011) – in this case, from Peter Senge's concept – and then enriched and modified based on empirical data, in accordance with what appeared in the participants' statements. In the first phase of coding, a code grid based on areas related to personal mastery and systems thinking was used. In the area related to personal mastery, statements were identified that referred to: deepening one's own reflectiveness in the sphere of professional functioning; gaining distance from previous beliefs about oneself as an employee or about colleagues or institutions; giving new meaning to one's own professional activities; new personal development goals; greater personal integrity in the professional sphere; improving one's professional competences. In the area of systemic thinking, statements were selected relating to: a systemic perspective in thinking about oneself as an employee and the institution; awareness of one's own impact on the overall functioning of the institution; a greater sense of agency in improving the institution as a whole; awareness of complex systemic interdependencies within the institution – and hence the interdependencies between colleagues. In the course of further analysis, new codes were added – especially where significant themes emerged that were not included in the original structure. This made it possible to maintain a balance between theory-based analysis and openness to the participants' voices. The presentation of the results used quotations illustrating representative or contrasting statements by participants, embedded in a broader semantic analysis.

Results

This section of the article presents the results of content analysis based on transcripts of individual interviews. The main thematic categories that were

identified in the course of deductive-inductive coding are presented, taking into account both the theoretical areas defined by Peter Senge's concept (personal mastery, systems thinking) and the content that appeared spontaneously in the participants' statements. Each category was illustrated with quotations from the statements of the respondents. The analysis covered not only individual statements, but also the contexts in which they appeared, which allowed conclusions to be drawn about ways of conceptualising changes in one's own professional functioning, including personal mastery and systems thinking.

Personal mastery

The statements of the study participants indicate a growing willingness to critically reflect on their own professional practice. This is particularly evident in relation to their relationships with students and the way they conduct their classes. As part of the development process, respondents confronted their existing strategies with the perspectives of others or with new experiences, which led them to question their existing beliefs and seek new solutions. Personal mastery, as defined by Peter Senge, assumes a willingness to continuously learn, develop and deepen self-awareness – and these attitudes were observed in the narratives of the respondents.

One of the participants admits outright that participating in the training process triggered a sense of uncertainty in her, which prompted her to rethink her own patterns of behaviour:

> It really made me think and feel uncertain. Because is what I have believed so far definitely good and only good, or can it be assessed so unequivocally? This feeling of ambiguity, of uncertainty. (3)

This statement illustrates a moment of critical reflection on one's own behaviour and questioning of previously accepted assumptions.

Compare this with the statement of another participant in the study:

> For me, it made me more open to change, (…) to expanding the teaching arsenal of what one does. Our situation is specific because we have a narrow category of subjects that we deal with, but this does not rule out our activity, because I believe that (…) I am also able to work effectively with students in other fields, using my subject knowledge. (11)

shows that there is now an openness to exploring new ways and areas of teaching activity, and that confidence in one's own abilities and, hence, opportunities for development in the field of teaching has increased.

For other participants, participation in the project gave rise to reflection on their personal difficulties in effectively educating students and an awareness that these difficulties stem from the generational characteristics of contempo-

rary students. As a result, they recognised the need to change their own attitudes and revise their existing teaching methods to take into account the specific needs of new generations. In their opinion, therefore, this change should not concern the attitudes of students, but the methods used by teachers. One of these individuals even considered the specific nature of how contemporary young people function to be an area of their own ignorance:

> I changed what I do (...) in relation to what I did last year with students (...) because students are different every year, and I even feel that I am already a different generation. I can see that they grew up in a different reality, and I don't really understand it. Certain things need to be solved in such a way that I adapt more to them. (13)

This statement points to a solution shared by many respondents in the context of difficult issues concerning the effectiveness of teaching methods, which was considered to be greater openness to following students' expectations. It can be assumed that the students' voice was thus recognised as a possible inspiration for teaching.

In a similar context, another participant, also critically reflecting on their previous teaching methods and declaring an awareness of the need for change in their attitude as a teacher, noticed, thanks to discussions with other people in the project, the prevalence of one of the typical behaviours of contemporary students:

> (...) it is very difficult to conduct classes in a good way that would interest the other side and draw them out of their comfort zone, i.e. their phones. And I also confirmed that I am not the only one who has this problem nowadays. And most likely, I now have to change something in myself, not continue teaching as I have done so far (...) so that they lift their heads up and listen to something else. (14)

Community discussions about teaching thus provided an opportunity to confront the experiences of other teachers, which, as this quote shows, had a motivating effect on teachers' attitudes and their decisions to implement new solutions. In this case, it was assumed that this could be achieved by finding forms of teaching that were attractive to students.

In many interviews, there were statements about giving new meaning to one's professional activities thanks to participation in the project, in particular the modern, activating teaching methods used in it. The participants expressed, above all, a change in their own understanding of the role of the student, and hence also of the teacher, in the teaching process. In the case of students, they pointed to the emergence of openness to giving them more space to actively co-create the teaching process and express themselves. In the case of teachers, they pointed to a change in teaching style from controlling and authoritative to more involved in building a deeper, less formal relationship with students and appreciating their active contribution to the development of their fellow participants:

> For years, I was used to a teaching model in which feedback, controlling the student and their progress were important (…) and now I've changed a bit (…) and I think that the feedback that the participants give each other can be just as valuable, that it can be (…) even more important than what the teacher says. (6)

> I now see more clearly that I have to make an effort to reach the students. Because until now, when difficulties arose, I would try to deal with them by saying that it's difficult, I have to teach these classes, you have an obligation to attend them, and that's that. (…) However, my mission will change here, as I will want to reach them and have real contact with them, even if only for a moment. (5)

It is also worth noting here that in the first statement, the participant reports an increase in confidence in engaging peer learning methods among participants in teaching activities, which means a shift towards perceiving the student as a person who is jointly responsible and personally involved in the education process. The second participant, on the other hand, points to the emergence of motivation for greater involvement on his part – the teacher's part – which is to result in a real understanding between him and his students.

Most respondents expressed a clear link between participation in project activities and the emergence or planning of new personal teaching development goals. These new goals were most often associated with increasing their own awareness of students' needs or moving away from various forms of teaching effectiveness control in favour of student self-control:

> In general, it is a transition from a controlling teacher who accounts for every little activity of the student … to a more spontaneous management of the process with the justification that it is equally valuable (…) that students themselves, if the process is properly manager. (6)

> (…) I am more motivated to prepare better for classes, it motivates me more to try to be more effective. In my case, when I got tired, I became less attentive during classes. I already know that I have to stay attentive. (…) and I hope that this will help me next year.(5)

These examples also illustrate the fact that participation in the project has stimulated proactivity among teachers and led to the discovery of new values that can enhance the effectiveness of the teaching process, whether through more flexible, open to creative student participation in classes, or paying more attention to one's own condition and minimising its possible negative impact on maintaining teacher alertness.

Numerous reflections by participants concerned the teaching innovations they initiated after participating in the project, recognising them as beneficial for improving the quality of their teaching:

> Stimulating reflection – the questions that were asked, the methods that were demonstrated, they stimulated reflection. This is something that requires you to stop in your tracks and be provoked. So there were stimuli here that provoked thinking. (…) I try to maintain this reflection in my teaching classes. (3)

I try to use the techniques that were presented there. There are times during the academic year when stress-relieving techniques come in handy. (14)

Although the respondents pointed to various inspirations, the context of their statements allows us to identify certain universals: the respondents emphasised that their first-hand experience of the effectiveness of the techniques demonstrated in the project was the motivation for adapting them in their own teaching.

The analyses presented above mainly concern the group of teachers. This does not mean that the respondents, representatives of the administration department related to teaching, did not reveal experiences related to deepening their own reflectiveness, increasing awareness of the need and desire for improvements in their own professional practice, or declarations of such changes. However, it can be said that teachers more often related their experiences to working with students, while in the group of administrative staff this occurred only occasionally. An interesting and unexpected result from the perspective of the original theoretical assumptions of the study was the reflections shared by both professional groups on various aspects of employee co-functioning. Thus, when reflecting on their own professional situation, it turned out that regardless of their length of service and position, many of the respondents stated that joint project activities allowed them to get rid of the feeling of anonymity of themselves and others. For example, the participants stated:

This person is more human, they are not some Ms Master's, Ms Doctor, Ms Something, but an ordinary person, with their own thoughts, feelings and emotions, who is sometimes tired. I have a better understanding of this. (2)

I never thought so deeply about the relationships between different people, those we know and those we don't know, and about their emotional and private sphere in general, so personally about emotions and things that happen behind the facade of our professional attitude at work. I started to think that it is important to take care of what is behind that façade. (1)

These statements show that the project made it possible to gain greater awareness of the multidimensionality of colleagues, allowed for the experience of the significant value of a holistic view of these people, and also broke down a kind of 'rigid' perception of people in their professional roles. Other participants came to similar conclusions and also appreciated the importance of getting to know their colleagues better, which the project made possible:

I think it could be a nice, close-knit group of scientists if we integrated more, which was evident in some classes (…) where we have the opportunity to get to know each other and our interests, because suddenly during the training (…) Wow! You do that? We don't know what people do, we just don't know each other. (11)

Many people ceased to be anonymous. To my surprise, I even became closer to people from my institute, because we used to pass each other by, and working together in a training course, you know, completely changes relationships. (13)

This points to the personal benefits that resulted from the change in the quality of relationships: a broader potential was seen in integrative activities, e.g. the opportunity to learn about the competences of colleagues, which can become an opportunity for self-improvement. A new quality was discovered in old relationships, resulting from breaking anonymity in favour of deeper relationships.

Other respondents explicitly revealed the emergence of a new and, from their perspective, beneficial standard of employee coexistence:

> The whole course gave me the feeling (…) that I am a member of a larger community, because I simply got to know these people and we say hello to each other in the corridor, sometimes we talk. I think that if I needed to talk about what was bothering me, if there was time for it, I'm sure there would be someone willing to listen and offer support (…).(13)

> A different view of an administrative or teaching staff member. A more sympathetic approach, I suppose. When you get to know someone better, you also see them differently. Both from the administration and from the teaching staff. (8)

These statements indicate that, in the respondents' opinion, this new standard is a direct result of their participation in the project and has brought specific personal benefits: gaining a sense of being part of a real community that is open to each other and willing to help when needed, and hence the emergence of the courage to seek support if necessary, or the observation of a new interpersonal attitude and the activation of greater reserves of kindness towards others.

In a similar context, participants declared that they had begun to reflect on their own interpersonal behaviour and intended to change it to be more sensitive to the needs of others:

> I will try to look at the needs of someone other than myself (…) these meetings (…) allowed me to take a step back, look at myself and say: wait, there are different people, everyone perceives what you say differently, so give them a chance to understand what you want in the way you want. (1)

It is worth mentioning here that the project activities were carried out in such a way that each participant had the opportunity to speak, listen carefully, express doubts, etc. It can therefore be concluded that it was thanks to their personal experience of the diversity of human points of view that the participants were motivated to continue this attitude in their everyday lives.

The participants' statements also revealed their belief that the well-being resulting from having and maintaining relationships with others translated into their professional competences: it created an opportunity to draw inspiration from the experience of others, as well as to share their own expertise, and brought a sense of security, increased self-confidence and a willingness to act:

> For me, it was a discovery that when (…) we talked about teaching, there were a lot of people interested and a lot of people who thought similarly to me (…) I noticed that there

are many people who want to talk about it, share these experiences in a way that suits me, i.e. non-judgmental and cooperative. (3)

We saw each other in a different light, I personally felt more settled (…) the fact that we went through several training sessions made it feel more like my institution. (14)

The above opinions illustrate how participants gained a new perspective on themselves and others in the workplace, fostering genuine cooperation in a spirit of camaraderie, support and values derived from a community of people who actually know each other and therefore trust each other.

Systems thinking

In Peter Senge's concept, the discipline of systems thinking means the ability to understand an organisation in a holistic and sensitive way, taking into account its constituent elements, e.g. the individual situation of an employee, as well as the important relationships between them. As part of the development process, respondents shared the secrets of their own work with others, sought out what they had in common and what made them different, and reflected on their personal involvement in the university's mission, which was shared by all employees. The narratives of the study participants revealed that, thanks to their participation in the project, they gained a broader awareness of their role in the overall functioning of the university and became more sensitive to the complexity of the processes taking place there and their own role and that of their colleagues. In particular, it turned out that both teaching administration staff and teachers declared that they had a greater sense of influence on the overall university system and greater motivation to work for the organisation.

Some of the respondents' statements indicate that they have acquired a systems perspective in thinking about themselves and others as creating a shared work environment. One of the respondents declared that participation in the project opened her up to the aspect of interpersonal relationships in the work environment:

In our project, it was like opening a door so that people would dare to share their inner experiences related to emotions, home and everything else, not just work, and I feel that, first of all, it brings people closer and shows them that others also have different and similar problems, and I started to think more (…) in terms of emotions, relationships and looking deeper, beyond what constitutes the performance of a task, more towards the emotional, human, humanistic aspect. (1)

This statement shows that the project activities were a turning point for the participants in their approach to themselves and their colleagues. They allowed them to meet outside the purely task-oriented system and the associated narrowing of access to other people, and gave them a chance to see others and

show themselves in a full, human dimension, including emotionality, personality and the private sphere. What is more, it is mentioned that this has an impact on their personal attitude towards their colleagues in the future.

The importance of sharing one's personal perception of one's work in a collaborative environment was also echoed by another participant, who recognised the role of community dialogue in gaining a deeper understanding of one's own and others' professional situations, which are often fraught with various difficulties resulting from the shortcomings of the work system and thus causing dissatisfaction:

> I began to see my colleagues (…) as people who share similar experiences to mine related to the profession and also certain frustrations associated with it, such as having to work at weekends (…) However, I realised that I am not the only one struggling with these difficulties, but that I am part of a larger community of people with similar experiences. (3)

This narrative illustrates the perception of one's own work in terms of an experience shared with other people who are part of the same institutional system and therefore share both its upsides and downsides. It can therefore be concluded that seeing oneself in a network of systems relationships – although in difficult situations this does not completely change the status quo – removes the stigma of uniqueness from one's own situation and thus has the potential to minimise the emotional costs.

The systems thinking present in the respondents' statements includes statements about the participants acquiring a sense of agency, influence and significance within the university and outside the work environment as a result of their participation in the project. The university system is beginning to be perceived as susceptible to change on the part of employees, and the employee himself as a creative and active element of it. For example, one respondent states:

> It is a living organism, it evolves, it changes, we can shape it, and how we want, i.e. we must also want to change it, and if we want to, we can also modify it more to our needs, because every such organisation is a system. And every system is rigid, it's like a robot, something soulless. But no system is such that it cannot be changed… after all, we can also have ideas from the bottom up and improve the quality of our work, our presence here. (2)

This narrative highlights a change in the perception of the university structure from a purely mechanical and therefore unresponsive to individual initiatives to a dynamic and empowered vision, where the contribution and needs of each person have a chance to be taken into account. It is worth mentioning here that the project itself was the result of a grassroots employee initiative, which was a precedent in this environment within the framework of university-wide projects. Its success and the broad, voluntary participation of 143 people certainly highlighted new opportunities for co-shaping the work environment.

The importance of empowering the university system by supporting the development needs of employees is also reinforced by this statement:

> I have a huge dilemma with the fact that (the university – change for anonymisation) … has this social mission towards the environment, has a mission of scientific development, has a teaching mission, and we are so focused on fulfilling our various tasks, but what I missed a little was this concern for the lecturers, for ourselves. And for me, the fact that we had the opportunity to work together, to participate in activities, was such a moment for me that I thought to myself, it's a pity that it's now, at this stage of my work here, and not twenty years earlier. (14)

On the one hand, this voice represents the emergence of critical reflection on employee well-being in a standard university system and the related value dilemmas. On the other hand, it points to the emergence, as a result of participation in the project, of a way to meet the needs of employees by providing them with real opportunities for personal development. Importantly, this support – genuinely focused on building a community in the full sense of the word, as it is filled with activities that allow the richness of human complexity and its creative, synergistic result to emerge – allows for greater consistency between oneself and the literal mission of the university. The value of empowering the relationships that make up the university system also emerges in the following statement:

> A sense of integration, a sense of being part of a group, a sense that I am not anonymous, that I am not just a cog in this whole organisation, but that I can go and talk to another person, whether about science or the proverbial weather, I have someone with whom I feel comfortable, for example. (11)

This narrative also shows a moment of change in the participant's vision of the organisation, in particular changing her perception of herself as part of the system from seeing herself as limited to performing tasks assigned by those with the relevant competences to a fully personal image of herself. It can be assumed that this is a transition from the position of 'me for the system' to 'the system for me and with me', in which the employee has the opportunity and the right to draw on the resources they need as a human being.

What connects the statements of the programme participants is the emergence of a real experience of affinity at the level of understanding the meaning and goals of their work, especially among those who were beneficiaries of the project. This affinity was associated with similar attitudes towards teaching-related work, primarily a sense of its importance for academic activities as a whole and a desire to develop in this area. One of the respondents stated that:

> It was a revelation to me that we are similar in that (university – change to anonymise) attracts like-minded people. And that was cool, I really liked that in our meetings, we all care and, in fact, we are here for a reason and we see a deeper meaning in why we are here. Not only does it give us money, but also something like a meaning in life. (1)

This statement illustrates the moment of discovering the meaningful dimension of one's own work and that of colleagues, which changes the image of the system from a formally viewed institution to a place where people actually fulfil their calling. In yet another voice, there is once again a reflection on the standard coexistence of employees, related to its task-oriented and often highly formalised nature, mutual unfamiliarity, and the discovery during the project that the university system is made up of people who share common values:

> I met people who, first of all, revealed themselves to be teachers and were also able to open up to this teaching space. (…) People drew attention to something that, as a matter of course, is pushed aside due to general requirements. And here was a group of people who said – teaching is important. (5)

This narrative also shows that the existence of the university system in the form enabled by the project fills an important niche in the functioning of the university as a working environment. It complemented the formal systemic conditions with areas of activity that are important to employees and also require care.

Many participants expressed confidence about their increased personal involvement in the area of shared spaces or, more broadly, university life in general, which, according to Senge, is a sign of acquiring the discipline of systems thinking. This can be seen, for example, in the following narrative:

> However, if someone is less oriented towards this mission, it may be difficult for them to accept various difficulties here, they may not be so involved, but it requires 100% commitment to create something not only for themselves, but also for the development of the institution, their workplace. (1)

This statement demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between the various elements of the university system, in particular the activities of the employee and the mission of the university, and an increased awareness of the complexity of these relationships. It exemplifies the recognition of the link between identification with the mission and the level of commitment to work. It is worth recalling here that the project created a space for discussion about the university's mission, personal visions of its greater embodiment in university reality, and its modification. It can reasonably be assumed that these activities became the basis for the reflection also visible in the following narrative, where the respondent noted that she had become more willing to take action at the university:

> Now that I know that a number of people are working in this direction, it is easier and more willing for me to do something, to propose something, to participate in something. For example, when there was a proposal for a group photo, I felt like going down there, whereas before I would not have gone. (…) If something interesting happened that I could get involved in, I would be more likely to get involved than before. (2)

This voice expresses a feeling shared by other participants in the study, namely that joint employee activities, which in the form of a project proved to be effective and of high value to the beneficiaries, make more sense. The experience of this value has instilled a belief in the need to co-create various works and a desire to make one's own creative contribution to them.

Another aspect of employee agency was highlighted by the respondent in the following statement:

> I felt so 'off the hook'(…) because I'm working at least two additional jobs. However, the fact that (the university – change for anonymity) was interested in my development, made such an offer, thought it would be worthwhile to take care of the teaching side, I thought to myself that… this is a bit of employee care. I somehow sensed it – okay, you're giving me an offer, I can take advantage of it, and now I can be more grateful and committed – such a small thing, and yet he did so much! (11)

This illustrates both the perception of one's own working condition in the context of their current functioning at the university, diagnosing a low level of identification with it, and the change in attitude towards the workplace, influenced by project activities. Once again, the issue of the importance of moving away from viewing the employee as a performer of tasks and towards viewing them as an integral part of the university system, worthy of investment in its development, resonated here. Moreover, it also demonstrates the connection between the level of genuine employee engagement and the subjective treatment of employees in systemic solutions.

In light of Senge's views, an indispensable element that determines employees' acquisition of systems thinking skills is a shared vision, meaning that the employee team must develop a vision and directions for the work environment that are acceptable to all and relevant to individual initiatives. Project activities created space for numerous discussions on this topic within both employee groups. They led – in line with the interpretation proposed above – both to a deeper identification with the university's mission and, interestingly and unexpectedly from the perspective of the initial research assumptions, to various critical reflections on it, resulting from the decision to change one's own employee attitudes influenced by participation in the project, for example:

> I think that in our mission – from the perspective of these training experiences – (…) there is too much emphasis on molding people, shaping them, molding them, and there is too little room for the student themselves… in this mission, there is a provision that we are to mold enlightened and so on, these professionals. So we will mold these people, we will put them into some kind of mold, and we will squeeze them into these shapes. (6)

This statement represents a focus on critical reflection on systems conditions, in this case related to the perception of the mission, the formulation of which is beginning to be perceived as inadequate to the actual goals of educating young generations requiring solutions tailored to their specific needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article demonstrates that participation in a professional competence development project led study participants to embody Peter Senge's fundamental attributes of a learning community: personal mastery and systems thinking, as well as skill development, initiative, and openness to change, and a sense of coherence between individual actions and the institution's mission. Analysis and interpretation of the statements of beneficiaries of Peer Learning and Peer Tutoring programs and their contexts revealed multiple dimensions of the implementation of these attributes. The research results led to the following conclusions:

— shared responsibility of the university and genuine support for employee development contributes both to professional development and to greater employee identification and engagement in professional activities;

— everyday academic life does not foster genuine understanding of colleagues, including their professional potential. However, experiences that create opportunities to gain a holistic picture of others increase the sense of security, belonging, initiative, and willingness to collaborate;

— in standard academic settings, there is little room for reflective reference to one's own professional practice, especially with the opportunity to confront the experiences of others. Creating conditions for non-judgmental discussion and shared reflection on this area allows for a deeper understanding of the causes of experienced difficulties, acceptance of their inevitable nature due to the perception that such experiences are shared by others, and, ultimately, making improvements inspired by good and proven practices;

— academic teaching, although it forms the foundation of university functioning in an environment of growing academic competition, is often an area that receives little systemic support, leaving practitioners involved in teaching to fend for themselves. However, its support, by providing opportunities for competence development, contributes to the improvement of employees' professional skills;

— long periods of service contribute to the routine nature of professional activities and a reduced sensitivity to changing needs of their recipients. Community reflection on these needs and first-person experience of the effectiveness of teaching methods that address these needs encourages a change in attitudes and builds motivation for new teaching activities;

— functioning as a "performer of tasks resulting from the system" can lead to employee demotivation, frustration, and a sense of loneliness. When the system treats employees subjectively by meeting their real needs and providing them with the space to co-create solutions, it increases their openness to being an active part of the system and leads to an increased sense of agency and self-efficacy.

In light of the above conclusions and research results, it can be reasonably argued that participation in development programs is of high and significant value to university employees, providing space for in-depth reflection on individual and collective professional functioning and providing new knowledge and competencies that allow for more effective coping with the challenges of contemporary teaching. Cyclical initiation of similar events has the potential to strengthen the academic community, which will build better solutions with a sense of collegial support and identification with the organization as a creative community.

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Meandry akademickiego mistrzostwa osobistego i myślenia systemowego w refleksji pracowników uniwersytetu związanych z dydaktyką

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest prezentacja wyników badań nad refleksjami nauczycieli akademickich oraz pracowników administracji związanych z dydaktyką wokół ich doświadczeń z udziału w projekcie rozwoju kompetencji pracowniczych. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w oparciu o podejście teoretyczne Petera Senge'a. Wybrane założenia jego filozofii zmiany organizacyjnej i model organizacji uczącej się stanowił podstawę dla wyróżnienia kategorii badawczych. Analiza i interpretacja uzyskanego materiału badawczego pochodzącego z 14 wywiadów indywidualnych, pogłębionych o strukturze półotwartej i ich kontekstów doprowadziła do następujących wniosków: programy, które dają przestrzeń na pogłębioną refleksję nad indywidualnym i zbiorowym funkcjonowaniem zawodowym, postrzegane były jako przyczyniające się do wzrostu motywacji do doskonalących zmian w umiejętnościach profesjonalnych, wzmacniające poczucie tożsamości członków organizacji oraz chęć zaangażowania w cele ogólnouczelniane.

Słowa klucze: organizacja ucząca się, dydaktyka akademicka, myślenie systemowe, mistrzostwo osobiste.