Navigating Leadership in Virtual Education: Challenges and Opportunities for University Educators' Self-Realization in Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to the activities of higher education teachers, the state policy of accumulating future specialists' intellectual, creative and spiritual potential, as well as the development of modern science, engineering, and technology, is being implemented. In this light, the problem of professional self-realisation of future higher education teachers is of particular importance as one of the most important conditions for their personal and professional development. This article aims to study the ways of self-realisation and self-changing of a higher education teacher in the context of distance learning. The study is based on the empirical experience of teaching in higher education, as well as the theoretical analysis of the role of the teacher in the organisation and implementation of distance learning in higher education institutions of Ukraine. The study was conducted based on empirical experience of teaching in higher education, analysis of educational programmes of higher education institutions in Ukraine and a survey of medical teachers. It has been determined that distance learning, by its very nature, can help the teacher's self-realisation due to certain features of this educational process, which should be analysed through the prism of the main aspects of self-realisation: autonomy, self-reflection, transgression and creative activity. Using a survey of higher education teachers based on E. Shostrom's personality self-actualisation test, it was found that the age of the teacher, their teaching experience and professional experience are of fundamental importance and quite specific significance for assessing the possibilities of self-development in distance learning. The ranking of qualities that ensure a high level of self-realisation of teachers in professional activities showed the highest indicators of competence in time and quality of self-respect, creativity, understanding of human nature and cognitive needs.

Distance learning is relevant in Ukraine today for many reasons. Firstly, some universities cannot provide a safe educational environment due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, so distance learning allows them to conduct the educational process without any risks. Secondly, although most universities operate face-to-face, lectures are still online Tsybuliak et al. (2023). At its core, the modern educational model is student-centred, i.e. the student is at the centre of the educational process, and only a few educational concepts consider the educational process as a parity interaction between teacher and student. However, it should be borne in mind that the teacher is the engine, the main inspirer and transformational change in this process, so constant progress, self-development and self-improvement can be considered the engine of educational change Barry et al. (2008). There is no denying the fact that teachers who are self-actualised significantly improve students' learning achievements. Therefore, it is possible to agree with Rogers (1961) that the humanistic approach puts the teacher at the centre of the learning process as a facilitator who promotes active student engagement.

Personal self-development is a conscious process of personal formation with the aim of practical self-realisation based on significant internal aspirations and external influences. Scientists conditionally combine the mechanisms of the self-development process into four functional block-stages: self-knowledge, self-organisation, self-education and self-realisation with the justification of their sequence and integral-functional interaction (Żmudzka, 2021).

The effectiveness of a teacher's professional self-realisation directly depends on their competence and professionalism, teaching experience, life position, pedagogical skills and creativity (Compton, 2009). Thanks to the activities of higher education teachers, the state policy of accumulating and updating the intellectual, creative and spiritual potential of future

specialists, as well as the development of modern science, engineering, and technology, has been implemented. The problem of professional self-realisation of higher education teachers as one of the most important conditions for their personal and professional development is particularly relevant in this context (Żmudzka, 2021).

In turn, the practical professional self-realisation of a higher education teacher is ensured by an interconnected set of objective (social) conditions and subjective (individual and personal) factors. Over the past decades, modern society's socioeconomic, substantive, dynamic vector characteristics have changed significantly. In this regard, the problem of identifying the nature of the impact of new external conditions on the needs, interests, aspirations, and attitudes of the individual related to their readiness and ability for successful professional self-realisation has become more relevant.

This article explores the self-realisation and self-change of a higher education institution teacher in the context of distance learning. The study is based on the empirical experience of teaching in higher education and the theoretical analysis of the role of the teacher in the organisation and implementation of distance learning in higher education institutions of Ukraine.

The following research tasks were set in the course of the analysis:

- to outline the role of the teacher in organising and conducting the educational process in a distance format;

- to describe the main ways of self-realisation and self-change of a teacher of a higher education institution in the conditions of distance learning;

- to identify the main challenges and prospects for teacher self-realisation;

- to analyse the results of a survey of teachers of higher education institutions in Ukraine on improving the effectiveness of university teachers' professional self-realisation in online learning.

Literature Review

The concept of the process of self-realisation was introduced by Jung (1968), becoming a precursor to the idea of self-directed development. Self-actualisation is a transgressive process that goes beyond the mind, feelings, human sensations, and the ego. According to Rogers (1961), the tendency towards self-actualisation (self-realisation) is the expansion of the capabilities and potentials of a developing individual. Representatives of phenomenological and existential psychology have significantly expanded the issue of self-actualisation to include the individual's relationship with the environment and their functioning in society. According to Frankl (2006), self-actualisation, i.e. the realisation of internal values, should be an integral part of self-transcendence (values that exist outside the subject).

Self-actualisation of a teacher of a modern higher education institution can significantly affect the solution of modern educational problems and compensation for educational losses, especially in times of crisis. The concept of "self-realisation" has not yet been clearly defined in modern science. Representatives of the humanistic direction in psychology interpret the concept of self-realisation based on its philosophical understanding and argue that people create their life path, set goals and choose the best ways to achieve them. In philosophy, self-realisation is viewed, on the one hand, as an explanatory principle that reflects the universal basis of human existence in the world that they create and, on the other hand, as a subject of

specific research aimed at forming the image of a "whole person". We are impressed by the point of view of Birsel et al. (2023), who define "self-realisation" as the highest stage of development of a mature personality. By self-realisation, we mean the process of realising a person's potential through the manifestation of their individuality and interaction with other people. Given this, a higher education teacher's self-realisation involves implementing plans, aspirations, abilities and potential opportunities to further develop their personality and the surrounding reality. Analysing the phenomenon of "professional self-realisation", we note that Mansilla (2017) proposes to consider professional self-realisation as a set of manifestations of a teacher's individual professional and personal qualities, as a result of which he reproduces himself in multidimensional pedagogical and social activities.

The problem of teacher self-realisation in the process of distance learning has become the subject of recent didactic research in recent years; in particular, the impetus for such research has been the global epidemic (Hasan & Bao, 2020; Kentnor, 2015; Ratten, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Abras and Sunshine (2008) studied the evolution of educational approaches to distance learning, and Żmudzka (2021) investigated the impact of e-learning on teacher self-efficacy.

Rapanta et al. (2020) propose organising learning activities in distance learning according to specific characteristics, including a combination of three types of presence (social, cognitive and facilitative). Responding to challenges such as the pandemic can help improve teaching and learning practices in the post-digital era. As Ernest and Hopkins (2006) noted, the challenges of the digital era require a fundamental restructuring of professional development frameworks to effectively integrate educational technologies into various educational spaces (classroom and extracurricular activities, independent research). Al-Salman and Haider (2021) focus on the challenges posed by distance learning, including significant inequalities in students' access to technology, which directly affected their level of engagement in the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Crawford et al. (2020) explored the challenges of organising the educational process in higher education in a distance format. Popławska (2021) studied the integrative features of distance learning, as the integration of hybrid education requires more attention to self-efficacy and the adoption of technological innovations in teacher education programmes.

In their article "Impact of "e-Learning crack-up" perception on psychological distress among college students during COVID-19 pandemic: A mediating role of "fear of academic year loss"", they investigated the psychological and physiological features of e-learning for both teachers and students. According to Haines (2015), the distance learning environment has provided both opportunities for self-realisation and significant stressors that have affected the well-being of university teachers. Olaimat et al. (2020) and Cadloff (2020) emphasised the importance of developing new teacher competences in moderating the educational process in a distance format.

Method

The following methods were used in the study:

- analysis method and synthesis method – when analysing critical sources of scientific literature and the degree of study of the issue in the global context, when analysing the survey results;

- descriptive method – when describing the ways and means of self-realisation and self-changing of a teacher of a higher education institution in the conditions of distance learning;

- empirical method (survey) based on the Personality Orientation Questionnaire methodology. Shostrom (Self-Actualisation Test (SAT) measures self-actualisation as a multidimensional value and assesses a person's self-actualisation level based on the concept of A. Maslow;

- the method of statistical analysis - in analysing the results of a survey among higher education teachers on the main challenges of teacher self-realisation in the process of distance learning;

- generalisation method - to form scientific and theoretical conclusions of the study.

The test of self-actualisation of personality used in the study by Shostrom (1963) was used for group diagnostics of university teachers who have been actively working in the format of distance learning for the last four years. This methodology is still the most common methodology for determining the level of self-actualisation (in fact, self-realisation) of a person (Canals & Al-Rawashdeh, 2019; Fogarty, 1994; Liashch et al., 2020; Mansilla et al., 2016; Pawlak, 2009; Prior et al., 2016) and assumes the presence of respondents with higher education and a high level of awareness of the psychological aspects of personality, and the teaching environment is precisely that. The self-actualisation test by E. Shostrom Self-Actualisation Test (SAT) aims to quantify a person's self-actualisation level. It consists of one hundred and twenty-six pairs of opposing statements filled with behavioural or value judgements. The technique helps to measure the level of self-actualisation using two essential scales (time competence and support) and several additional scales (synergy, contact, aggression, creativity).

The test took 35–40 minutes to complete. The survey was conducted among 56 academic staff of the Flight Academy of the National Aviation University academic year 2023–2024. The respondents' age range was 27–64.

Results

By its very nature, teaching is multidimensional and multifunctional. Therefore, the professional self-realisation of a higher education teacher can be fully developed in a multidimensional educational space. Designing a professional and activity field is primarily the task of a higher education teacher who seeks practical professional self-realisation. The professional self-realisation of a higher education teacher differs from the self-realisation of any other professional by specific activities:

- educational (lectures, seminars and workshops, exams, tests, consultations);

- methodological (development of class notes, curricula, collection of methodological material, drafting of methodological recommendations);

- educational (organisation of extracurricular activities with students);

- reflective and creative (self-assessment, evaluation of the results of one's pedagogical activity, pedagogical design and planning, understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, a view of an event or phenomenon from the other person's point of view; creative attitude to another person; creative attitude to pedagogical activity, creativity);

- communication (interaction with students and their parents, colleagues, and management);

- research (conducting scientific and pedagogical research, implementing research results in pedagogical science and practice, supervising students' research activities, participating in scientific conferences, symposia, panel discussions, forums, and round tables);

- innovative (participation in innovative developments and projects, development and application of innovative methods in the field of taught disciplines, search for new, more effective teaching methods and techniques).

All activities of a higher education teacher require considerable effort and energy. This is primarily due to the need to simultaneously use relevant knowledge and skills in a complex and dynamic educational process. And it is worth emphasising that this process's effectiveness depends on the teacher's personality. Distance learning, by its very nature, can help the teacher's self-realisation due to certain features of this educational process, which should be analysed through the prism of the main aspects of self-realisation:

1) autonomy, which is a fundamental aspect of self-realisation. Distance learning can fully ensure this autonomy, manage the timing of the educational process, and provide opportunities for independent decision-making;

2) self-reflection, which results in self-awareness and promotes self-knowledge. Self-reflection is primarily a source of knowledge about oneself, an analysis of one's achievements and self-assessment. Self-reflection can be spontaneous, most often when analysing one's own mistakes, as well as systematic (Emerson & MacKay, 2011), which leads to self-esteem and the acquisition of one's own identity;

3) transgression (a person's tendency to go beyond the current state and constantly expand the scope of their experience). Distance learning poses new challenges for the teacher to master new programmes and new tools for interaction with students, which encourages the teacher to acquire new skills and often generates dissatisfaction with "who you are and the movement towards who you want to become in the future" (Abras & Sunshine, 2008). In other words, transgression should be seen as going beyond the current state of the teacher's skills.

4) creativity or creative activity has a concrete embodiment in new concepts, ideas or views. In distance learning, a teacher can create new learning rules, modify previous learning concepts, and create new values with students. In this context, it is worth talking about the teacher's self-change (in the existential dimension) as a creative activity in which the subject tries to change themselves due to the subject's creative cognition of their biography (Selim, 2007).

Considering the main typologies of pedagogical competences, the basis of self-realisation and self-changing of a teacher is professional competences such as systemic interpretation, self-creation, and effective action. Under the systemic interpretation of the teacher, we mean such specific skills as the ability to cognitive evaluation (self-analysis, an outside view of one's role in the organisation of distance learning), awareness of the results of one's actions, the ability to indicant analysis, the ability to experience motivation).

New learning standards are emerging in distance learning, so the ability to implement new standards becomes an important ability of the teacher, in particular, the ability to formulate tasks for online learning, the ability to achieve operational goals, check the results of student achievements, as well as their actions, making the necessary adjustments, the ability to determine the degree of compliance with the self-standard (self-criticism), the ability to assess the consequences and the possibility of educational losses in the process of distance learning, the ability to decide on the need to repeat.

The teacher's personality in the process of teaching, research, and creative activity goes through a complex path of self-construction self-creation, starting from the cognitive-evaluative phase, passing through the stage of "conceptualisation of their professional self", ending with the

implementation of intentions and their evaluation. In this process, the teacher relies on his or her own experience, so we have to talk about the priority of the so-called "biographical thinking" (Lasocińska, 2014), which can implement the following principal strategies:

1) adaptive strategy, i.e. outlining ways to adapt to the digitalisation of the educational process (mastering distance learning programmes such as Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, electronic timetable, electronic journal)

2) an innovative strategy that involves a proactive position of the teacher and their influence on the further transformation of the educational system;

3) an integrated strategy (a symbiosis of adaptive, standard (national) and innovative).

The starting point of all these strategies is the creative need, which is the engine of educational change, including in the online learning format, and ensures the dynamism of teacher-student interaction.

The educational environment is dynamic; it is intensively transforming and modernising in the context of digitalisation of the entire educational space while significantly impacting the possibilities of professional self-realisation of teachers of educational institutions. The survey aimed to determine the structure of modalities of professional self-realisation of teachers, taking into account their semantic meaning in the context of distance learning and the digital educational environment. The study involved 56 teachers from pedagogical universities in Ukraine. The survey was conducted through the Google Forms programme, and the data obtained were then generalised and systematised. Based on the understanding of self-realisation as a form of self-actualisation of the individual, the level of self-realisation was determined by the results of the Self-Actualisation Test (SAT) by E. Shostrom (1963).

The first criterion was the quantitative indicator for each scale of the SAT. According to Shostrom (1963), most self-actualised people demonstrate results in 50–65 T-scores. The second criterion was the number of scales falling within the range of indicators that we define as "average".

For the convenience of analysis, the boundaries of indicators of conditionally high (above 50 points of the SAT), medium (from 40-49 points) and low (below 40 points) levels of self-actualisation were determined. Thus, a low level of self-actualisation is characterised by indicators of 0–4 scales of the SAT falling into this interval; an average level of self-actualisation implies that indicators of 5–9 scales will fall into this interval; a high level – 10 or more scales. This criterion is necessary to take into account all 14 scales of the test. The results were processed using mathematical methods. The percentage composition of the groups by levels of self-realisation was compared, a comparative analysis of the averaged profiles of teachers' self-realisation was carried out, and a factor analysis was performed. Indicators of teachers' self-realisation according to the SAT are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Number of Teachers (in %) by Level of Self-realisation (Blood Pressure Indicators)*

Level of self-realisation	Number of lecturers, in %
High	43
Medium	32
Low	25

Table 1 shows that teachers mostly have high and medium levels of meaningfulness in life, which confirms the previous conclusion that they perceive themselves as self-realised individuals.

It is crucial to analyse in more detail which scales and how many teachers have high rates of self-realisation in order to understand what personal properties are key to its success (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Number of Teachers (in %) with High SAT Scores in the Group with a High Level of Self-Realisation
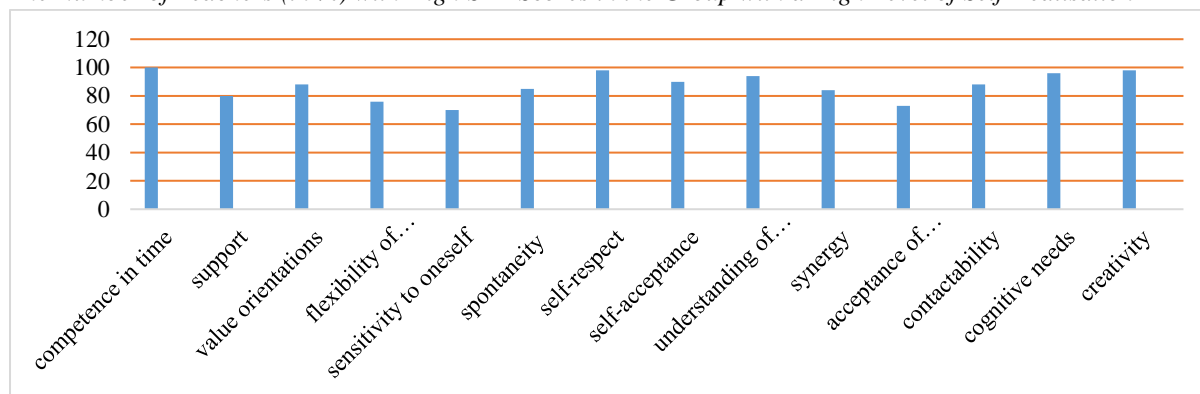

The motivational component of the potential for professional self-development is significantly higher for teachers with high SAT scores. The self-realisation of the potential of a pedagogical university teacher in the online communication educational environment depends on their motives for self-development. However, the age of the teacher, their teaching experience and professional experience are of fundamental importance and quite specific for assessing the possibilities of their self-development in the context of distance learning. The ranking of qualities that ensure a high level of self-realisation of teachers in professional activities showed the highest indicators of competence in time and quality of self-respect, creativity, understanding of human nature and cognitive needs.

To compare the levels of self-actualisation of higher education teachers, we will turn to the group of teachers with a low level of self-actualisation to establish what personality qualities prevent them from achieving higher indicators (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Number of Teachers (in %) with High SAT Scores in the Group with Low Self-Realisation
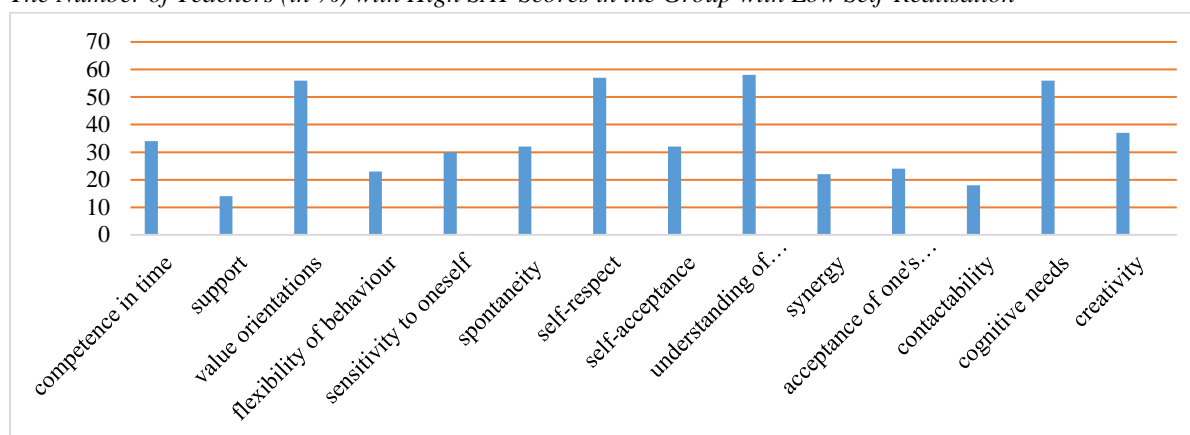
The diagram shows that even in the subgroup with low levels of self-organisation, teachers have high SAT scores, primarily on the scale of value orientations, ideas about human nature, self-esteem, and cognitive needs. However, a small number of respondents have high scores on the basic support scale, which reflects the degree of responsibility for one's own life, contact, synergy, acceptance of aggression, and self-acceptance, indicating that social intelligence (one of the basic qualities of a teacher) is underdeveloped. We assume that the low level of social intelligence is one of the probable reasons for the low level of teachers' self-realisation. Indicators of behavioural flexibility and acceptance of aggression determine the importance of social intelligence of the respondents of this professional group. Social intelligence provides emotional comfort and adaptation to a person. Meaningfulness of life and work is another significant factor in teachers' self-realisation. The meanings of activity are the main determinants of teachers' self-realisation in the complicated conditions of the distance learning format. The priority is the role of teachers' value orientations in achieving self-realisation, emphasising the axiological component of teaching.

Discussion

Distance learning has led to a change in the professional identity of the teacher, forcing teachers to rethink their pedagogical practices and role in the learning process, which can, in turn, cause loss of professional identity and adaptation stress. The transition to online learning has required teachers to adapt to new teaching methods, which has increased stress levels due to limited training and inequality in access to technology Godwin-Jones (2015). In addition, the difference in the speed of mastering new skills in the online format became a big challenge for teachers in the context of distance learning because, as noted by scientists (Comas-Quinn, 2011), the difference between generations of teachers affects adaptation to distance learning: younger teachers learn new technologies more easily.

Self-fulfilment and self-change among teachers are closely intertwined with the problem of motivation for professional development. In distance learning, teachers face overload and, as a result, emotional burnout. After all, the transition to distance education has created the conditions for forming new strategies for engaging students, where it is important to focus on their professional goals and learning needs" (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Interactive technologies and digitalisation of the educational process, combined with the teacher's intense, charismatic

personality, can effectively maintain student interest and motivation (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). All of this increases the time teachers spend preparing for classes and poses new challenges, such as keeping students' attention and increasing their motivation to learn through mediated communication.

Given this, teachers face the challenge of technological literacy, as insufficient training of teachers in using digital tools significantly affects the quality of distance learning. Therefore, we can support the position of some scholars (Boling et al., 2012) that the technical unpreparedness of teachers remains a significant obstacle, as only a part of them have sufficient digital skills to use educational technologies effectively. According to Hillier (2018), the main challenges for teachers include technical gaps, increasing workloads, and the need to adapt quickly to new learning environments.

The teacher's self-realisation also directly depends on the effectiveness of interaction with the audience. It is difficult for teachers to maintain active interaction with students in online education and compensate for the lack of personal contact, which makes it difficult to create a sense of community among students (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). The lack of social interactions in online education also makes it difficult to build relationships between teachers and students, which affects learning effectiveness (Haider & Al-Salman, 2020).

One way to stimulate teacher self-realisation is to create virtual communities for teachers, which will facilitate the exchange of experience and the development of new online learning strategies (Liaw et al., 2007). Such communities can also become a platform for accumulating the experience of teachers of different specialisations and a virtual discussion panel.

Conclusion

Thus, the formation of readiness for professional self-realisation of higher education teachers is successful if the competence support of the process of professional self-realisation; motivational and value support of the process of professional self-realisation; technological support (qualitative characteristics of self-knowledge, self-improvement, self-affirmation); satisfaction with self-realisation (at the level of social, physical and psychological state, characterised by high self-esteem of professional achievements) are implemented. Modern education involves a continuous teacher learning, including informational education, self-education, and teacher participation in conferences, advanced training courses. A teacher who can manage their own life and be responsible for their choices can inspire and motivate students. All competences related to self-knowledge and self-actualisation (self-realisation) of the individual allow the teacher to increase the area of their autonomy. That is why it is crucial to include modules in in-service training courses to develop skills in self-reflection, self-presentation, conflict resolution strategies, self-analysis, self-regulation, and self-development.

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