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on Adult Learning and Continuing Education



**Competencies and Abilities:  
Innovative Learning Environments and Life Skills**

edited by Vanna Boffo and Mauro Palumbo

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Rete Universitaria Italiana per  
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# Editorial

The idea of the EPALE Journal originates from the collaboration between INDIRE, the Italian National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research – which hosts the EPALE Italian national unit - and RUIAP, the network of Italian Universities for Lifelong Learning.

The European Union recognises lifelong learning and skills development as key factors to improve individual talents and job prospects, with a view to favouring social inclusion, active citizenship and personal growth.

INDIRE, besides its research activities aimed at sustaining and monitoring adult education at national level, is also very active on a European scale, in order to develop the full potential of lifelong learning in synergy with EPALE. Since 2014, such activities have intensified, along with the availability of research resources, case studies and news that are being exchanged internationally. Currently, INDIRE and EPALE are engaged in broadening the educational horizon, to better adapt to the needs of a diverse population and to search for answers to the rapidly changing and evolving scenarios that characterise our times.

For this reason, we came to the conclusion that contributions from scientific research in this field, as well as the attempts of educators to respond to complex social phenomena with appropriate methods and viable solutions, should not remain restricted to an audience of “experts”.

The idea of disseminating this precious material to a wider audience, along with a sense that amplifying and stimulating the debate on this topic is of great significance, was the stimulus that pushed the European Commission to launch the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE). This initiative is intended to share ideas, to create a community of experts, to exchange perspectives and to stimulate collaboration in the vast field of adult education. From this shared impetus of ideas and intentions, the synergy with RUIAP was born. That EPALE and the network of universities which shares, develops, implements and promotes curricula in the area of lifelong learning in Italy would collaborate appeared to be only a natural consequence, since these two institutions act on the same wavelength.

Starting with this very first issue on ‘Competencies and Abilities’, the aim of this Journal is to spark collaboration on priority issues, conjugating research and field work from universities. Future issues will deal with other themes deemed relevant at the national and European levels - such as Prison Education, Entrepreneurship and others - all with the intended goal to make the debate on lifelong learning more profound and fertile, and more focussed on relevant and strategic issues, in order to improve educational opportunities internationally. This will contribute, hopefully, to raising the profile of adult education and to giving it a breath of European fresh air.

*Flaminio Galli, General Director Indire*

# Foreword

The idea of a Journal dedicated to lifelong learning was welcomed with unanimous consent by the RUIAP network, an organisation stemming from the EUCEN (European University Continuing Education Network), with the intended goal of underlining and collecting the efforts of higher education in Italy in this field, as well as of constructing a solid basis for spreading learning and education continuing over the entire course of life.

The main objectives are the following: to develop a shared discourse on lifelong education/learning for and with adults; to encourage the dissemination of good practices for both teachers and scholars; and to provide a bridge between practice/educational needs and the theoretical dimension to which university research contributes. The work ahead is substantial. Especially so in Italy where widespread adult education culture is absent and where the potential economic growth that results from improving the level of knowledge, understanding, and learning in our adult population is not always recognised.

We have decided to keep our tone informal, but at the same time we aim to present scientifically relevant articles. We decided to publish in English in order to remain accessible throughout Europe and beyond, to welcome both Italian and European ideas, to speak to all those who wish to read and listen.

We intend to maintain our mission of providing readers with a reference anthology on common topics that will open spaces for innovative dialogue and exchange - given that they have until now not circulated widely - through a look “from afar,” a research vision that can cast ideas beyond the current moment.

This first selection of articles has been arranged around the concept of ‘competence’. It will be seen how higher education still reflects too little on the centrality of the use and application of knowledge; it will be possible to become familiar with the practical/experiential range of ideas already in development, precisely because they have focused on the notion of competence/ability. Beyond offering techniques, the end is none other than the dissemination of continuing education for life.

*Buona lettura,*

*Vanna Boffo e Mauro Palumbo, Editors-in-Chief, Ruiap*

# How does the university consider competencies?

Mauro Palumbo and Sonia Startari <sup>1</sup>

## Key Words

Competence, Learning, Validation of Competencies, Adult Learning

### *Abstract*

*The article deals with the central theme of competencies in university education. What is the origin and what are the motivations behind the category of competence when it comes to the teaching and learning of knowledge in Italian University courses? It seems likely that this category is no longer the one that inspired the first studies in the 1980s. New horizons for innovative ways of learning have transformed the concept, and starting precisely from these perspectives a rethink is necessary along with a relocation within higher education courses.*

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, the University has neglected the issue of recognizing competencies, also because it has focused chiefly on teaching rather than learning, in the sense of transforming people, and even when it has done so, it has preferred to “update” the presentation of its courses rather than redesign them.

It is true that up to the “3+2” reform in the labour market, it was assumed that the university was primarily the centre that provided a body of knowledge for various professional figures and, through research, continuously redefined and updated this. Not all organizations demanded actual experience, but a solid preparation on which to build the necessary competencies once inside the company. Until the 1980s, competence belonged to the culture of enterprise, but concerned managerial positions, where “excellent performance” was being sought, and at these levels, very complex selection and evaluation systems were used, such as Assessment Centre Techniques. At lower levels, competence remained a set of attributes associated with the workplace, which the worker had to adapt to; primarily through experience and on-the-job training.

Needless to say, everything has changed, today professional competence is seen as an attribute of people, and concerns all positions at all levels; the speed of change makes a perspective of lifelong learning for all necessary, hence the challenge for the university to also think of the “post-degree” situation, seeing that in the meantime companies’ expectations have changed towards graduates, whose “title” no longer provides sufficient information and guarantees for recruitment.

Likewise, the flexibility and speed of adaptation demanded of companies by the markets have increased the need for workers (at various levels) capable of understanding or anticipating changing needs and of adapting to different contexts, wrongfooting the academic knowledge that was once perfectly adequate in relation to defined and stable tasks. Self-reliance is sought in the management of certain informal aspects of the professional role, which increasingly overlaps with the person, while transversal competencies often become key.



## 2. Competencies in advanced post-Fordism

In a context in which progress is no longer “driven forward”, but is rather an “attempt to survive” (Bauman, 2007), both for organizations and for individuals, the content of the performance and the role of the professional are increasingly called into question. The imperatives are: novelty, change of skills, complexity, and continuous innovation; (Tidd, Bessant & Pavitt, 1999) inside uncertain systems with endless opportunities but missing coordinates.

High-differentiation systems require individuals who are self-reliant and equipped with both formal potential (detectable and certifiable) and reflective potential (linked to the capacity to reformulate problems in relation to the available resources) (Weizmann & Weizmann, 2001).

The formulas acquired during their university studies no longer apply, and coping with challenges often takes improvisation learned in daily practice. As already observed by Schön in 1983, university preparation is not in tune with “the changing nature of the situations that characterise the exercise of the profession ... the complexity, uncertainty and instability, uniqueness and conflicts of value, perceived to an increasing extent as foundations in the context of professional practice”. Capacity for judgement, to correctly set a problem and place it in the appropriate context, are daughters of the reflection matured during actions, or “theories-in-use”.

The keywords, Ability, Knowledge, Performance, Attitudes, Roles, etc., make competence an intrinsic characteristic that for Levati (back in 1998) consists in ways of behaving or thinking that are repeated in diverse situations; it is therefore an integral part and a lasting solution to the personality of a person, and allows the performance to become repeatable while constantly maintaining its quality, “an attribute of the personality, understood as the stable central core of the subject”, and is therefore causally linked to performance.

More than 25 years ago, in 1990, Le Boterf considered competency “a recognized and proven set of representations, knowledge, abilities and attitudes pertinently mobilized and combined within a given context. Representations, knowledge, abilities and attitudes can be summarized with the term resources, leading us to assert that competence is a specific quality of the subject: that of knowing how to combine different resources to manage or deal effectively with situations in a given context”.

Bearing in mind that “competencies are not things” (Cepollaro, 2008), the passage of the concept of competencies from the corporate sphere to that of education is not so mechanical, bureaucratic and effortless. The European Union, to create a common grammar for both education and business, has developed the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), consisting of eight reference levels based on increasing degrees of knowledge and skill, differentiated in terms of self-reliance and responsibility. The aim is to bring the two worlds as close as possible, but account should be taken of the fact that between learning and competencies come individual peculiarities and working environments, all context factors that will never make the “black box” perfectly transparent, nor make the concept of competence fully superimposable with that of learning outcomes, which can only constitute indicators of competence (certified as it may be).

## 3. The university and the certification of competencies

How then should we define the role of the university in this context? Ultimately, it must not create competencies, but prepare students to be competent, and this delivers one part of professionalism, a part that serves only if the person who provides it knows in which context it must be inserted. This, in turn implies attention to a person’s disposition, attitudes and skills on the one hand and, on the other, to the competencies in action in relevant economic, professional, regional and national situations.

Within this framework, Italian Law no. 92 of 28 June 2012 constitutes an important challenge for the certification of competencies, and in it, for the role that universities will be required to play in this field.



It envisages the setting up of a system of national public certification, differentiated regionally, linked to “repertoires encoded at a national or regional level” (para. 67), regulated by Italian Legislative Decree 13/2013 and implemented by the Ministerial Decree of 30 June 2015. Above all, the regulations define lifelong learning as “any activity undertaken by persons in a formal, non-formal and informal way, in the various stages of life, to improve their knowledge, abilities and competencies from a personal, civic, social or occupational standpoint”. A standpoint therefore that is not limited to the field of work, but embraces the whole of life and the entire range of people’s life-worlds. Fundamentally, the most important characteristics of this extremely innovative measure consist in:

- a.** arranging to recognize competencies as an individual right, seeing that the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning constitute “services carried out at the request of the party concerned” under the auspices of a national system accessible to all, featuring essential performance levels;
- b.** envisaging that the recognition of competencies is carried out by networking existing subjects, to a substantial extent public, without in any way creating new national bodies or agencies. Regions, firms and educational establishments are asked to build repertoires of competencies for macro areas or professional families, which, in the future, will need to cover the entire range of qualifications issued by various education agencies;
- c.** envisaging specifically that Universities will contribute to the system, in full autonomy, (paragraph 56 letter A), foreseeing the possibility of recognizing non-formal and informal courses validated by ECTS points.

An interesting document was drawn up by the RUIAP (Italian University Network for Lifelong Learning) on the recognition of the “right to competence” by Law 92, a few essential points from which are worth recalling (see RUIAP, 2012, pp. 3-4); it stresses the importance of the “right to competence”, since:

- a.** it allows people to carry the professionalism acquired with them, even outside the workplace, and this is only possible by abstracting the competencies of a specific job role or profession;
- b.** identification and validation of skills is functional to job mobility in that it constitutes “spendable currency” on the labour market and therefore in all processes that characterize it: mobility inside and outside a company, retraining, relocation, etc.;
- c.** certification of competencies is a prerequisite for their valorization and conscious growth, since it allows an understanding of the distance that separates us from the goal we wish to (or must) achieve;
- d.** by now, also demands to build new professionalism are emerging, in which the non-stop need to rise to the occasion and take the plunge must become habitual, in line with a new conception of learning as change, the ability to constantly reprocess and strengthen/reaffirm one’s personal and professional identity;
- e.** at the same time, for businesses, the validation and certification of competencies constitute a way of valorizing their human capital; if it is people who make organizations, then only if both sides are aware of their value and only if they possess a recognized and shared mode of defining this value can they start to improve.

If the right to competence is recognized as an essential component of the right to work, says the document RUIAP, then it becomes vital to define recognition methods that are transparent and shared, as well as being ratified by a public authority, through procedures consensually defined by the main stakeholders in the labour market (companies, trade unions and professional organizations) and produced with the active contribution of these stakeholders.

The design effort of the universities in the first decade of the century seems to have been directed more to following the needs and ambitions of the lecturers than those of the students and the country (see the Agnelli





Foundation, 2012; Baron, 2012).

Recognition of learning that took place extramurally was often considered a surreptitious and far from transparent mode to lower the level of educational output, also because the recognition effected in the past on the basis of agreements with entire professional categories, without any individual assessment, led to more restrictive rules that reduced the number of credits recognized to 60, then 30, and finally to 12.

It can therefore be said that, at a regulatory level, until June 2012, in Italy, Lifelong Learning was basically ignored and there were no reference frameworks, principles or guidelines that could inspire the action of universities in this area, also considering that the “Gelmini Law” (240/2010) made no reference to Lifelong Learning. Thanks to this choice, the relevant amendments to the articles of association and regulations made over the course of 2011 and 2012 in all universities showed no particular awareness of Lifelong Learning, and it therefore remained on the margins of both the Statutes and the new operating rules of Italian universities (cf. Alberici & Di Rienzo, 2011).

Meanwhile, utterly contrary to the contents of the Gelmini Law, many universities devoted increasing attention to the theme of Lifelong Learning and this further mission of the University. Indeed, they decided to set up the Italian University Network for Lifelong Learning (RUIAP, [www.ruiap.it](http://www.ruiap.it)), as an instrument of coordination and lobbying finalized to the recognition of this important function of the University.

This network, founded on 16 November 2011 in Genoa, on the initiative of certain universities belonging to the similar European Network EUCEN, today boasts more than thirty Universities as members, and includes some key contents of Law 92 in its Constitution. For example, Paragraph 56 of Article 4 speaks of the need for universities to include Lifelong Learning in their institutional strategies (as does Article 2, Paragraph 1, Point 1 of the Network’s Constitution), a “diversified student population” (idem, point 2 of the Constitution), the need to promote suitable guidance and counselling services (idem, point 3 of the Constitution), while in other parts, the Law refers to other contents of the RUIAP Constitution, such as the need to promote services and skills for the recognition and certification of prior learning, to further the culture of quality and develop e-learning, to uphold an environment that is flexible and creative for all students, while the recommendations of the Constitution regarding the establishment of networks between stakeholders are the backbone of the law itself.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

What challenges does Law 92 bring to Universities, therefore? The most relevant, in our opinion, consists in the ability to constitute the prerequisites for the recognition and “accreditation” of competencies, i.e. the ability to differentiate educational output in terms of sets of core skills and related professional figures. The second challenge, connected to the first, concerns the capacity of the University to dialogue with the various stakeholders at both national and regional levels, to build the references of competence of the various figures educated.

The accreditation of competencies is nothing but the culmination of a lengthy process that ought to lead to the university being able to describe outgoing professional figures in terms of core skills and to describe the contributions that the various teachings have made to the building of these competencies. Plainly, this is a major challenge, which in truth has not been completely won even in countries such as France, where the VAE has existed for a very long time and many universities are equipped with specific offices and professional figures to tackle it (based on individual dossiers and at the request of the prospective beneficiary, as is also expected now by Italian regulations). However, even if the educational objectives of courses use the Dublin descriptors in combination with the European Qualifications Framework, they are not always arranged in a way that is consistent with employment opportunities, they often display a certain vagueness and are typically totally lacking in tools to ensure coordination of the educational content of the teachings with the acquisition



of core skills.

These difficulties are combined with a need to link the set of core skills to regional and national demands and those of the main stakeholders, a need that has a local nature and mainly concerns three-year degree courses. However, the attention to market demands is often unidirectional, since many university teachers take for granted the relationship between teaching, learning and the competencies expected from students, but are often reluctant to take the reverse path, i.e. the recognition of credits for those who already possess these competencies. In other words, the bi-univocal nature of the paths that lead from learning to competencies and vice versa represents the real challenge of Lifelong Learning, which will only be won nationally and in terms of the networks the university must be a member of.

This means a repositioning of universities as education agencies. They must provide the right components for the building of outgoing competencies, and therefore deal carefully with the knowledge that constitutes their base, but also bear in mind its connections with the conditions for the application of this knowledge, considering it not only as an end in itself but as a means. The real challenge is to maintain the distinctiveness of the teachings, valorizing their connection with competencies, without squandering them. In this perspective, a partial recognition of credits for certified competencies can highlight the need to either acquire or consolidate the theoretical bases of candidates' "know-how", and to develop their ability to reflect critically on their own personal and work experience. A significant side effect in a more substantial commitment of Universities in recognizing prior learning for students with certified competencies, can be the ability to rethink the theoretical bases of university courses, taking greater account of the links with their practical uses for a mutual exchange of learning between the formal, non-formal and informal worlds.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mauro Palumbo is Professor of Sociology at the University of Genoa and is Delegate of the Rector for Lifelong Learning. Sonia Startari has a Doctorate in Sociology, is a research fellow at the University of Genoa, and has long dealt with the issue of recognizing and evaluating competencies. This article is the fruit of a joint effort, but for the purposes of attribution Mauro Palumbo wrote paragraph 1, Sonia Startari paragraphs 2 and 3, while the conclusions (paragraph 4) are by both authors. This article is the result of a transformation of an original text by Palumbo, M. & Startari, S. (2017). *L'università e la sfida del riconoscimento delle competenze*. In Reggio, P. & Righetti, E. (Eds.). *L'esperienza valida. Teorie e pratiche per riconoscere e valutare le competenze* (pp. 57-70). Rome: Carocci.

<sup>2</sup> To turn again to Levati: "the stable element intrinsically linked to the individual is ability, personal skill that allows him or her to successfully provide a certain performance, therefore the possibility of success in the execution of a task or in the wider terms of a working performance..." and also, "capacity is therefore an expression of an attitude that has found external conditions (contextual) and internal ones (motivational) favourable to its manifestation in behaviour or performance." In Italy, the theme of competencies has been the centre of scientific debate for some time: see, among others, Ajello & Meghnagi, 1998; Sarchielli, 1998; Auteri & Di Francesco, 2000; Catarsi, 2001; Rey, 2003; Di Francesco, 2004; Meghnagi, 2005; Caltabiano & Sassu, 2007; Lodigiani, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The SUA form sets out the educational goals in Knowledge and Understanding and the Ability to apply knowledge and understanding; it therefore approaches the construct of competence, without superimposing itself on it.

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# Towards an “education standard” for university MOOCs. The RUIAP proposal for their integration with Master’s programmes in a strategy of Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education

Luciano Galliani <sup>1</sup>

## Key Words

RUIAP, Master, Higher Education,  
MOOC, Continuing Education

## Abstract

*The Abstract presents the original experience of a cMOOC of the University Network for Lifelong Learning (RUIAP) in association with a national Master’s programme to support the recognition of competencies, outlining a “pedagogical model” suitable for Higher Education and strategic for Continuing Education policies in universities.*

## 1. Introduction

The New York Times declared 2012 “The Year of the MOOC”, which from the outset in 2008 were born as cMOOCs, with the well-defined connectivist pedagogical approach of Siemens (2004, 2008), to later develop as xMOOCs, starting from courses at MIT, Harvard and Stanford, and then those of the private companies Udacity, EdX and Coursera, with a transmissive pedagogical approach. In January 2014, an informed and reasoned report by the EUA – The European University Association – on MOOCs ended by deeming this the greatest challenge for the transformation of teaching and learning in Higher Education, with specific reference to the costs of university education, the flexibility of the study courses, the quality of the materials, the preparation of the teachers, the use of technologies, collaboration between universities, international exchanges, and the social and economic development of Europe.

The recent document from the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) on “MOOCs – prospects and opportunities for the Italian university”, in offering an international and national framework of the experiences conducted so far, argues that “through the instrument of MOOCs” (including this one) it is possible to “allow Italian citizens unlimited and free access to a basic or specialist university education that is innovative and of quality” thereby producing “a great return in terms of image and trust for the social and economic usefulness of the Italian university system”. This outlook seems illusory to us, since “basic or specialized university education” in Italy is offered by ordinary degrees and master’s programmes, which are certainly not free of charge, but involve enrolment fees and laboratory contributions! Then a generic designation is made of “many workers of all ages wishing to improve their preparation and enhance their curriculum, to search for new employment or for career advancement” who “could become interested in MOOCs and recognition of credits as a valuable instrument to make higher education compatible with their working times”. They neglected to say that in this case it is necessary to sit final exams. Then it is added that: “All of this applies equally to students (not workers) who live in decentralized areas of the country and who do not have sufficient economic resources to study away from home”. This still seems to us a muddled outlook, which runs the risk of clashing with the programming of post-degree Master’s programmes, Advanced and Professional Refresher Courses, and above all ignores the generalized persistence of traditional education in our universities, while there ought to be a systematic use on all degree courses of enhanced and blended web technologies, especially for “worker students” and “student workers”, according to the classifications of AlmaLaurea, who go to swell the Italian



army of those who are behind with their exams!

However, in the CRUI document no option on the pedagogical and didactic quality of MOOCs is to be found. Choosing the first pedagogical approach (connectivist), even without totally concurring with Siemens' position (Galliani 2012), or the second (transmissive), is instead a central issue for universities, which involves not only following the road to innovation by integrating ICT and OER – Open Educational Resources (Ghislandi, 2014) in the educational practice of all study courses (Galliani, 2002), but also interpreting the "Third Mission" with a consistent educational and cultural policy. It is certainly necessary to freely inform the public at large of processes/conquests of the sciences of man and nature, but above all to encourage, on the one hand, access to a degree for young people leaving secondary school (only 3 out of 10 nineteen-year-olds enrol at University and of these 1 out of 6 drops out after the first year), and on the other, the participation of graduates in master's programmes/higher education/refresher courses when starting or during work to develop/upgrade their professional skills. This means linking cMOOCs, with a coherent strategic design, both to pre-degree guidance activities and those of post-degree specialization and continuing education, in close connection with the world of work.

## 2. The RUIAP choice

The RUIAP choice for the first pedagogical approach to MOOCs was fully in line with its founding objectives (Alberici, 2008, 2011) and with the actions taken on the institutional and national political front, to ensure that lifelong learning becomes also in Italy that inspirational principle of reform processes and political guidelines defined at a European level while being taken on as a commitment and responsibility by European universities through the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Learning can constitute a cultural perspective for university education and organization, especially after the Italian Law 92/2012 proclaiming it the "right of every person" to see their long-term experiences and competencies recognized, wherever and however acquired, from a social and occupational standpoint. The Law and Decree 13/2013 implementing it, in which are defined the general rules for the identification and validation of informal and non-formal learning and minimum standards of service of the national competence certification system, in themselves will not be sufficient". Universities are among the "entities licensed" to recognize, validate and certify competencies, with their accreditation via ECTS points in their study courses, but they also contribute, according to the law, to creating and developing "national networks...through the inclusion of lifelong learning in their institutional strategies".

It will take a joint effort from the Ministry, the CUN (Italian University Council) and the CRUI to draw up and approve strict "Guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning and certification of competencies at university", following the good practice of the French VAE-Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience and the British APEL-Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning. And above all, it will take a "guidance and counselling service" in universities, identified at the 2007 MIUR conference in Naples in the Centre for Lifelong Learning, that can support workers, students and worker students on their Bachelor and Master's programmes, recognizing their skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning, but also to enter the university in an integrated system of education-training-work, as an indispensable partner for a network of cultural, economic, and social forces (Galliani, Zaggia & Serbati, 2011). A university finally concerned with the use of lifelong learning to increase, improve, develop, innovate, and certify professional competencies, making them "spendable currency" not only on their courses, but for the whole of a working life, and in the processes of flexibility that characterize it (Frignani, 2014).

In this sense, in a changing society, whose possibility of transformation is closely linked to its ability to provide answers to continuous and unprecedented education needs, in particular among adults, the development



of lifelong learning through a strategic use of cMOOCs and Master’s programmes in continuing education, could become an institutional role of the University, and a criterion by which to rethink its overall function, describing its “Third Mission” in a very specific way (Serbati, 2014).

### 3. The RUIAP cMOOC

In choosing the pedagogical approach of cMOOCs we are fully aware that different design models and organizational and evaluative systems may emerge (Conole, 2013; Clark 2013; Downes 2014; Wells & Conole 2014) strategically directed to specific educational and cultural policies.

In our case, the cMOOC “Recognition of competencies and validation of prior learning”, presented on 6 June 2014 in Padua at the RUIAP National Conference and implemented in 2014-15 with over 650 attendees, while having a life of its own, was conceived as a general initial part of a Master’s programme entitled “Expert in Recognizing Competencies and the Validation of Prior Learning”, activated in 2015-16 in agreement with the RUIAP by the Universities of Padua and Roma Tre, with a joint programme that includes live and online workshops, internships in workplaces, and project work to be discussed during the final exam.

An integrated design is pursued from the outset between the two educational offerings, in order to explore national education needs at a general level in a decidedly niche area through cMOOCs, to be able to consciously offer the Master’s programme to interested participants as a path of vocational qualifications to perform specific functions of supporting people in the “process of identifying and validating competencies acquired in non-formal and informal learning”, and further support in the creation of the “Transparency Document” of acquired skills necessary to begin the “Procedures for the certification of competencies”. A scheme of the two educational events that wished to respond, then, not only to a need highlighted by the new national policies on Lifelong Learning, but also to a prospect of innovating the University, called to build synergistic partnerships for a quality cultural and scientific offer in its relationship with the world of work. In fact, in this scenario, the horizon of the educational strategies of Higher Education and Lifelong Learning changes, and there is the need for a true “education standard” for university cMOOCs, as a tool to regulate understanding and guidance for a new compositional balance between design, communication and evaluation of adult learning events (Galliani, Zaggia & Serbati, 2011a).

The themes of the five cMOOC modules – as well as the related Workshops, Internships and Project Work for the Master – were set by the Governing Council of the RUIAP. The contents were developed jointly by 16 teachers and 12 experts from several scientific areas involved in continuing education, from universities and organizations such as ISFOL, belonging to the RUIAP and the EUCEN – European Universities Continuing Education Network. This procedure to build and share not only the scientific content specific to each teaching, but also the methods for constructing teaching materials, self-assessment and final assessment tests, or of interactions with participants and tutors, has led to a shared design responsibility and an across-the-board pedagogical quality of an international level, unquestionably original in the face of the individualistic experiences and habits of MOOCs and in part also of Master’s programmes, that were not only Italian. To conclude the path there is the possibility of taking a final exam for the acquisition of 20 ECTS points and a certificate, recognizable by a specific agreement of the universities participating in the RUIAP and spendable for participation in Master’s programmes. The Master’s programme includes 10 credits for the realization of an internship with structures in which to validate prior learning, namely, Vocational Training Bodies, Provincial Adult Education Centres, Employment Agencies and Services, University Job Placement Centres and Career Services, Public and Private Companies in the World of Work, Technical and Professional Schools, Specialized International Centres, etc. The final test to close the course consists in producing and discussing a project during a final exam, possibly connected to the internship experience, to which are assigned a total of 10 credits.



The sustainability of the cMOOC “education standard” is provided by evidence from technological-organizational systems, ensured by multi-annual teaching practices at the University of Ferrara’s Centre for Research, Educational Innovation and Distance Learning, which produced the multimedia materials and, using MOODLE, managed all activities in agreement with the RUIAP, as summarized below:

1. free access to the course, with the requirement of a Degree for those who wish to attend the Master’s programme;
2. open educational resources reusable and re-contextualizable for other courses;
3. production of original video lessons, supported by slides or other learning objects by every teacher, with free modification of the contents accompanied by a bibliography and sitography;
4. communication between participants through forums galvanized by tutors and reflective collaboration through wikis with moderators of the community;
5. interaction between the participants and individual teachers through specific webinars and with tutors through personal desks;
6. the division of the course into five modules provided monthly, in turn split into four weekly lessons followed by specific forums, wikis, webinars and self-assessment tests;
7. autonomy, regulated using badges, in the progressive fruition of the course modules and the possibility of repeating specific teachings and modules;
8. quality control, by RUIAP experts, on production and delivery through quantitative reporting with Learning Analytics tools regarding pre-enrolment, enrolment, attendance and participation in the various activities (process evaluation) and qualitative investigations (system evaluation) on perception/judgement of the educational offer, expressed by all those involved (students, lecturers, tutors, and technicians);
9. product evaluation and attestation on two levels: attendance (fruition of video lessons + compilation of self-assessment tests); certification (passing the final exam at an authorized centre and the earning of 20 ECTS points).

The evaluation process, heightened by research in the context of social and economic sciences (Palumbo, 2001), has been tackled in the teaching context with reference to a world view that consists of three interpretative paradigms (positivist, pragmatic and constructivist,) combined with closely connected processes of teaching, communication, knowledge, learning, and evaluation (Galliani, 2014). When, in later years, the instruction was organized as “distance” and then “e-learning” programmes/training courses using ICT, methods and tools were developed that were adapted to the evaluation of new teaching methods (web-enhanced, blended, online) and corresponding learning conditions at universities and in adult education (Galliani, 2002a; Galliani & Costa, 2003; Trincherò, 2006). In the case of cMOOCs, during the stages of providing video-lessons an expositive method is used along with certificative evaluation of the learning that has taken place. In the phase of communication between participants through forums moderated by tutors an interactive dialogue predominates, which, by invoking first-hand experiences leads to an interpretation of knowledge in its procedural/applicative aspects while the evaluation is of a diagnostic-orientative nature. In the phase of teaching-cooperative learning through wikis and webinars, assessment is formative or “authentic”. For each of the phases of the cMOOC it is evident therefore that the use of different types of tools is envisaged, but first the areas of investigation which connect them are defined, identified thus: a. educational needs in the proposed theme and motivation for participation (initial questionnaire on the profile of participants and data analysis of the difference between pre-enrolment and inscriptions); b. participation in programmed educational activities through Analytic Learning techniques with the recording in MOODLE of all phases of supply and fruition of video lessons and interactions with the materials, compilation of self-assessment tests and understanding of their contents, participation in forums, wikis and webinars and interaction of the students with





one another, with the tutors and teachers, drop-outs and delays with justifications and requests for changes and flexibility; c. evaluation on the part of the students, the tutors and lecturers on the perceived quality of the entire course (questionnaires with indicators/descriptors and a Likert scale of intensity and a final open judgement). Compare the results in an extensive summary of research.

As emerges clearly from this scenario, the evaluation of the cMOOC is multi-referential (several objects) and multi-dimensional (several methods and statistical and hermeneutical techniques) and will certainly have consequences in the Master's programme, where it will be completed with the contribution of tools suitable for the diverse educational contexts, characterized by specific design and operational methods, as well as different teaching and tutoring for each University.

#### 4. Conclusions

We are convinced that a joint assessment before cMOOC subsequently integrated with University Master's programmes could produce design and operational guidelines, based on empirical evidence, not only for future improvements of the same offer or other similar ones, but perhaps also of suitable educational strategies to maintain quality. Without once again ending uncritically on the lists of ANVUR (Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research Systems) which, within the new instructions for evaluating Third Mission activities, does not distinguish between Lifelong Learning, and marks all of people's contexts and life experiences and Continuing Education linked to the world of professions and jobs (worthy of its own area according to the EUCEN), as well as risks in the second area, with the misleading Production of public goods of a social, educational and cultural nature, further confusing university activities of Public Engagement with those of Social Engagement.



## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Document approved by the AGM of the RUIAP, Florence 2012, and presented to the MIUR and the CRUI.

<sup>3</sup> As stated in Annex 5 to the Draft Interministerial Decree, consequent to the agreement of 22 January 2015 between the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Permanent Conference for Relations between the State, the Regions and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano.

<sup>4</sup> A special edition of the 5 MOOCs has been provided since September 2016 through EduOpen, a network of 14 Italian Universities, with over 300 attendance certificates issued in December.

<sup>5</sup> Galliani L., Frignani P., De Waal P. & Maniero S. (2015). Per un "canone pedagogico" dei MOOCs universitari. La proposta della RUIAP-Rete Universitaria Italiana per l'Apprendimento Permanente per l'integrazione tra cMOOC e Master nella formazione degli adulti. *Formazione & Insegnamento, European Journal of Research on Education and Teaching*, XIII, 3, 169-193.

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# Educational contexts and biographical learning methods for skills analysis

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## Key Words

Biographical Methods, Experiential Learning, Competence

### Abstract

*This contribution presents a reflection on educational experience gained during workshops on qualitative methods in the building and recognition of learning acquired in non-formal contexts, named Educational Biography Workshop.*

## 1. Introduction

Experience presents itself as a fundamental characteristic of learning and education (Dewey, 1949), referring to the relationship, in a dialectic dimension, between theory and practice in the processes of knowledge and learning (Alberici, 2008), to the importance of socio-professional contexts (Pontecorvo, 1995) and participation (Lave & Wenger, 2006) which contribute to characterizing learning processes. This background allows us to conceive competence in its generative (Schön, 2006), procedural (Ajello & Meghnagi, 1998), metacognitive (Pellerey, 2002), proactive and strategic values.

In its purely experiential dimension, learning, based on the knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience, has an unstated dimension devoid of certification and empirical evidence (Evans, 2007): there is, then, an unstated sphere that needs to be verbalized in order to underscore the knowledge mobilized to carry out certain activities.

On these bases, also of empirical evidence, it is necessary to define educational contexts and appropriate methods to provide tools suitable to allow the non-formal and informal dimensions of the cultural, cognitive and competence profile of each person to be reconstructed, analysed and valorized.

In this way, the settings of an intervention can be defined, with workshops that borrow activities from biographical practices. Narration and reflection on reconstructions of experiences of educational and professional life allow us to recognize and verbalize this knowledge, even of the tacit kind, which, although not recognized by a formal title, is part and parcel of a person's knowledge and can thus be spent within the current university system.

In the light of the experiments carried out, biographical methods can favour the process of recognizing prior learning, and at the same time acquire greater self-awareness. This involves strengthening the motivation to become involved in a project for professional development and optimizing study programmes through customization and individualization of the educational offering.

## 2. Biography Workshop theories and reference methods

The Educational Biography Workshop is a context in which learning acquired through experience takes shape in a reflective manner (Mortari, 2003).

The action in practical contexts incorporates a cognitive process of creation and cognitive construction, which remain in the shade with respect to the threshold of awareness of the subject acting. It therefore becomes necessary to question oneself on the premises of the action and reflect on the experience to reveal the pre-



conceptions and basic assumptions as well as the cognitive elements incorporated in the practice, to build, in short, an epistemology of practice (Schön, 2006). This learning reflectively from experience is typical of the transformational approach of education since it promotes a questioning stance not only on the contents of a task or a practice but especially on the prospects of meaning that filter our actions, therefore on the conditions that govern our undertaking (Mezirow, 2003) in a large dimension of an ecological type that does not separate, but puts the constituent parts in contact with the contexts of liaison and relationships (Bateson, 1984). From the point of view of the project, then, the workshop is set up as an educational system that promotes the acquisition of qualitative methodologies of a biographical-narrative type and the reconstruction of previous experiences in a possible interpretation of the building and recognition of acquired knowledge.

This is technically, speaking out, in the form of a biographical narration and critical reflection by the subjects who recognize themselves as actors in the process of meaning making in a psycho- and socio-constructivist sense (Telfener & Casadio, 2003).

Reality is the result of constructive processes, both individual and collective, and represents one of the many possible worlds populated by experiences and the interpretations of these experiences. From this point of view, knowledge is conceived as the point never definitively acquired of the repeated process of developing developments. In the cognitive organization of experience, a process of exchange, negotiation, and the social sharing of meanings also come into play.

For these reasons, the terrain on which reflective-transformative education moves (Striano, 2001) is that of the creation of learning contexts suitable for the dynamics of the recursive relations of the building of meanings and which are characterized by an interest in the epistemology of “living systems”, for the attention of social networks. This is a fundamental attitude of the educational system/context that concerns the change in “syntax” (epistemology) of the questions and answers: from “what it is” to the “how”; from the absolutist objectification of the product to the recursive dynamic of the process.

Educational processes of a transformative type do not take place by simple induction or through automatic transfer of new scientific constructs, but are constituted because someone is willing to question the reference assumptions, to carry out an exercise of meta-epistemology, as Gregory Bateson would say.

In a social constructivism context, the qualitative methodology provides devices of a reflective, biographical and narrative type (Cambi, 2002; Demetrio, 1996; Dominicé, 2000), which focus on a subject’s ability to bring meaning to what they do in the contexts they act in, and that valorize the action of individuals well beyond mere effectiveness and efficiency. The exercising of cognitive, metacognitive and biographical reflection allows the construction of mental models, the modification and replacement of conceptual structures, the recognition of areas of attention, the definition of cultural and competency profiles.

The educational project focuses attention on approaches that rely on qualitative methodologies of a narrative type, wherein the biography of the subject fully enters the communicative process, constituting the tool and the terrain to create the pattern of meanings that regulate the relationship. This is a dynamic process in which all the parties become involved, firstly, the individual, the educator, and then the group, with the aim of allowing the subjects to carry out that work of critical reflection to repossess their own competencies.

### 3. Workshop courses

The reference framework is given by the importance attributed to the valorization of competencies and the recognition of individual learning in the different forms and locations in which it is acquired. In fact, the possibility to link together and give value to the whole complex of multiple learning experiences represents the necessary condition for the recognition of the educational and constitutive role of continuing education as a life experience.



The purpose of the instruction concerns the development of qualitative methods of self-analysis of competencies, and involves many planes, from the cognitive to that of the motivational and relational type. In this way, we can identify first-level learning objectives relating to content, in terms of knowledge, methods and tools for the biographical analysis of competencies in adulthood; and second-level objectives, designed in the same way as deuterio-learning (Bateson, 1984) amending the learning conditions with a transformative significance on the premises of subjects' meaning (Mezirow, 2003).

The Workshop takes place on a double plane: the narrative work on the reconstruction of educational experiences supports reflection on the assumptions of knowledge, which it initiates in some ways, since it is propaedeutic to the responsible and constructive disposition of the subjects involved.

The course lasts three months and is organized in a blended form, including both classroom work and distance activities on a special e-learning platform. Study materials are supplied to participants that constitute the basis to inspire reflection and comparison on the themes treated in the classroom, thanks to the use of communication tools (forums, chatlines, messages). Network environments can allow development of circular communication and the growth of shared knowledge in the working group.

Both in the classroom and at a distance, by adopting a methodological approach characterized by recursive references between theory and practice, the communication emphasizes the competencies distributed throughout the learning community, which is oriented towards the community of practice model (Alessandrini, 2007), including alternation between experiential moments and moments of conceptualization and systematization of the knowledge built up. Of importance is the ability to facilitate collaboration between individuals or groups to achieve shared objectives, as well as the building of social skills aimed at problem-solving and conflict management.

Consistent with the considerations and objectives referred to above, the educational project focuses on two areas:

- a. the building and sharing of meanings, relevant to the problem of learning how to learn and unlearn, in order to understand the assumptions on which the cognitive process is based and to modify the reference patterns;
- b. biographical reflection on educational experiences relevant to the problem of analysis and self-analysis of competencies to rebuild and recognize the learning result of non-formalized experience.
- c. The course is divided into two distinct but mutually complementary phases that refer to the thematic areas indicated above.

#### A) *Cognitive filters and the building of meanings*

The activities developed in the first phase of the Workshop pursue the objective of facilitating reflection on the personal approach to knowledge, to understand the usual strategies of learning processes and foster a constructivist interpretation.

#### B) *Self-analysis and recognition of tacit knowledge*

The analysis of knowledge acquired and developed in many contexts of life through non-formalized educational experiences, cannot overlook a reflective, dynamic social process, open to potential and proactive, which lets the subject speak out (Alberici & Di Rienzo, 2010) and that relates to an area of complex formative communication.

The biographical method foreshadows a context of formative action that favours, based on individual and group communication in oral and written forms, self-observation and the interrogation of the subjects on the



meaning of their practices, their destination, the possibility that unexpected effects may arise from them and, ultimately, on identification of useful experience to compile a learning dossier.

The narrative interview is therefore identified as a tool to start and facilitate biographical reflection: the themes identified to conduct the interview do not concern explicit and objective behavioural responses, but knowledge linked to the overall biography of the subject, the ways of acquiring knowledge, the contexts of use.

In the next step, the educational carrying out of the reflective processes aims to reconstruct the experiences and verbalization of learning they involved, through a learning table.

Based on the interpretation made by adults during their path of biographically reconstructing educational experiences, the learning table serves as a formalized summary of various kinds of knowledge acquired in a variety of situations. The structured nature of the table itself, based on predefined criteria such as, amongst others, chronological order and a distinction between learning contexts, represents the need to give shape to the learning, making it describable and to a certain extent in line with a typical logic of institutionalized educational contexts.

To promote the final reflective summary, participants must draw up a description of personal theories that represent the practice of a reflective rationality, the product emerging from the overall path drawn up in a critical and transformative form. Ultimately, these are explanatory models of the phenomenon observed and analysed.

The personal theories retrieve local logic and let it speak, logic relating to intra- and inter-subjective contexts in narrating experiences. This is a reflective, critical non-harmonizing rationality, in a divergent word: a local humanistic logic of a reflective/transformational type, empowering/enabling (Di Rienzo, 2012), aimed at the development of individuals as social actors, and human development as a whole.



## Notes

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# Learning self-care: Life skills to educate how to learn

Vanna Boffo<sup>1</sup>

## Key Words

Life Skills, Empathy, Learning, Teaching, Self Care

### *Abstract*

*This article discusses the theme of competencies for living from the point of view of the teacher. Teaching self-care as a moment of self-education means being educated to others, educating oneself. In particular, the process of empathy is considered a key Life Skill for care of oneself, care of others, and care of the world.*

## 1. Introduction. Self-care in learning environments

In teaching and learning contexts, a pivotal and decisive aspect of environmental wellbeing is the care of educational relations among adults, between teachers and learners, and among students. And care of educational relations should be the main aspect to orientate the education of the teaching profession and in-service education, as well as personal education throughout one's life (Hadot, 2002).

What does it mean paying attention to care in the educational relationship? In every educational-formative context, interpersonal relations are at the heart of the processes learnt, since the very act of teaching, like education, is supported by the relationship and the bond created between those who learn and those who teach. The interpersonal relationship between oneself and another is also always an intrapersonal relationship, between the self and oneself. There is a circular relationship, supported by the intra- and interpersonal relationship that allows us to understand how the relationship dimension addresses, tailors, and models every teacher-pupil relationship. If this relationship is supported by educational intentionality, by a mutual and invariable exchange, then it turns into an educational bond expressed through the many languages of communication – verbal, non-verbal, emotional, affective and corporeal.

How can we translate all of this into a practice that constantly creates the best conditions for the teaching of lecturers and the learning of students? The question is not insignificant, since we know how necessary it is to pass from the theoretical dimensions to the empirical ones, where saying is transformed into a substantial "doing" at the service of environmental and human health. So that the educational relationship can become practice in a daily life that is respectful of diversity and creates conditions of social equality, a vehicle of mature and convivial learning, it is necessary to care for one's own professionalism, as lecturers, as professionals of education, as adults who are capable of continuously pondered intentionality. Too often we think about the context, the disciplines and the techniques, much less about the emotions and affections, absent communication, reflectivity obscured by mechanical and established actions. Therefore, self-care, for the care of the professional world, for the care of growth in ability, beyond competencies and knowledge, is precisely the tool, the means, to achieve the fundamental passage from interpersonal relationship to educational relationship in every context of teaching and learning, among adults who teach and educate.

The emotional and affective dimension of learning is the more important; the more we wish to build solid and deeply-rooted educational processes. Instead, the inner, internal aspect of learning, consciously experien-



ced, is left on the margins, even if every adult knows how important feeling is to be able to understand.

## 2. Care as a system for self-learning

Caring is a human condition, but also a collection of educational activities, according to Tronto (2006), it comprises and recomprises everything that serves to make the world we live in better.

Caring, indeed the practice of care, is needed to build environments tailored to human needs of all those who, for assorted reasons, find themselves and/or find themselves again in an educational context, it is essential to pay attention to the vital and educational requirements of adults to create healthy conditions for the most stimulating growth of learning conditions. There is no care without the action being practised, constantly, to achieve it, adapt it, improve it, and continue to exercise it. First and foremost, care is attention to the self. Professional education maintains a profound relationship with the self, but is not educated, in turn, to feel its own self, to imagine it as another part, since, even today, education in affections and emotions is not included within teaching profession courses or for any other educational profession.

In fact, teachers and educators have the professional necessity to feel and think, indeed to learn to feel what they think and think what they feel (Boella, 2006). In this way, we enter a model of care pondered and reflected upon, where it is possible to understand that it is important to learn to know, to recognize and guide one's emotions to allow effective communication, an understanding of actions, a management of inner conflicts, fears, and worries that we mirror in our interlocutors and in our classes.

To learn how to feel it is necessary to be able to remember, and to know how to go back in time, to recall, store, and recollect. This is a journey back into our interior and narrative time. Increasing our ability to come closer to the world of our students means travelling back in time, our autobiographical time, to try to remember what we experienced, what we felt, which palpable and hidden fears blocked us, which worries and disgusts made us experience repulsion or only attraction. We become adults when we can clearly remember emotions experienced, what made us rejoice or what caused sorrow, what saddened us or marked us forever. Knowing how to remember our own self helps us come closer to others, above all, remembering tells of us and our education.

No one teaches a teacher to remember, but when we do, it is like finding help, support, an energetic and powerful prop for uncertainties and false reasons. If we remember, also our mind benefits and our relationships are more intense, they become more intimate and better. The art of memory, so important before the advent of electronic and digital devices, can help us approach people and learning processes which, in reality, are also memory processes. Recollection and our recollections bind lives together and relaunch the sense of "us" to be shared with all those we enter into an educational and formative relationship with in the contexts of adult learning (Siegel, 2005, 2007).

## 3. From memory to listening

Learning how to use our memory and the recollections of our childhood, our adolescence, and our family, is a founding act for the building of interpersonal relationships that can become a vehicle of learning and teaching. The exercise of memory reminds us, as adults, of the sense of affections experienced or emotions felt. Without memory, we cannot experience empathy. In fact, it is through the ability to assemble recollections in a logical order, not only narrative, that we can come to the sense of a shared "us". In this way, it is possible to recognize the anger, joy, sorrow, disgust and sadness in the faces and actions of so many men and women who are asking for deeper and more heart-felt recognition. The memory and recollection summon up the meaning of our identity, which traces our story through the autobiographical dimension.



Building the professional-self means knowing how to listen to our deepest thoughts, but listening is also what puts us in contact with ourselves and with others.

Listening to learners is a form of self-care and care of the other as well as care of the class and educational situations. Listening means paying attention to our students' details, to their most implicit communications as well as more obscure ones. We listen observing the manifestation of emotions on the face or expressed through behaviour, we listen by "feeling" the sound of the voices and the silence of those who do not speak out of fear, respect, or because they lack the words. We listen by tuning in to the thoughts of our students, learning to suspend our own. Listening is an attitude towards humanity, an exercise of supervision, an ability to subtract our own ideas to make room for others (Hadot, 2002). We listen accepting diversity, making room for divergent thinking, having no fear to show our own failings, but facing pupils with renewed joy. Listening is the first step towards the empathy that puts us in deep communication with those around us. Then will come the techniques of teaching and learning, teaching how to learn, knowing the disciplines; then will come the organization of the lesson and the teaching methods. At the heart of each teacher's education, each course for the educators that teachers are, we must achieve knowledge of our inner self.

Care over our education originates from self-care, from the awareness that emotions, memory and listening can always open us up more and better to the worlds of education and educational and learning organizations. Too infrequently, with adults in every condition of learning, we reflect on these profound aspects. Learning a new language, like learning a new job, has very cogent links with our deep emotional and affective conditions (Mortari, 2015).

#### 4. A special life skill: Empathy

The relational climate is decisive for the growth of learning and is too fundamental to be left to chance. And this climate of wellbeing is linked to the care with which teachers think about, build, and model it. Much depends on the adult we are, on how we know ourselves, on how we can respond to changing attitudes, but also opposition created by situations of conflict or relational malaise. Empathy is the means to feel what others feel, and is a complex medium difficult to understand and reflect on, but it is a term, a perspective, and a goal to which the teacher can look to prepare their relational work.

Can we learn empathy? Can we practise to become empathetic? There are various positions in this regard among developmental psychologists, neuropsychiatrists and psychoanalysts. The most interesting stance on the meaning of what empathy is, is still that of Stein who described it in 1917, and rereading it today it seems dense with promise. What Stein described so skilfully in her book *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917) concerns the answer to the question: "What does it mean to feel what the other feels?" or "What does it mean to realize what the other feels?". In response to these questions, we can recognize certain dispositions for competencies in the communicative-relational area: 1) the ability to understand the mind of others, also called mentalization, 2) self-knowledge that evokes the sense of memory and of recollection in the sense of self-awareness, 3) flexibility of response and 4) the executive function, i.e. the ability to plan, but also to organize, as well as to shape answers. It can be seen from this brief description regarding the outcomes of an empathic act, that the psychic structures involved in the definition of empathy are of an emotional/affective nature, but also of a cognitive kind. Thus, empathy is a way of communication-human relations, but is also a process that retains ethical provisions. We could say that in learning how to teach, and consequently in learning how to learn, empathy is a fundamental exercise of adult living. We might also ask ourselves whether building a basically empathetic environment can facilitate learning contexts in adulthood. Is there any evidence that can support us in these assertions? We certainly know that interpersonal relations which are rich, appropriate, emotionally strong and dense, non-stressful, but consistent with a high rate of emotionality and positive affections, permit



every human subject to grow, also physically, to avoid being exposed and predisposed to psychic discomfort, consequently, to become a person who can experience the most intense conflicts with an appropriate and secure sense of self. Mentalization, memory of oneself, and the executive function are processes that allow each student to act intentionally: is it possible to educate how to act and think intentionally? Can we teach the empathic attitude that involves mentalization, self-awareness and the ability to be flexible? These “ways of being” are an integral part of a teacher’s professionalism, and are communicated to learners both as skills to learn, and as ethical-moral skills also known as dispositions.

Mentalization is the ability to understand the mind, it allows us to “see” the mind of another person. Adults should be equipped with these capabilities, but they are not always able to exercise them. The mentalizing faculty is learned during infancy, is a function of the maternal relationship. Mentalization is a natural function and allows us to learn self-recognition. We might say that through the mind of the other, the mother, the child learns to be. From this comes the awareness that one learns by imitation and through mirroring. These two processes are in fact precisely those at the heart of the discovery of our relational mind.

However, mentalization can also be practised in educational-learning contexts, and its exercise involves an increase in the levels of reflectivity towards people and actions. “When we can see the mind of another, we can understand what this person is thinking and feeling; we can respond empathetically, [...]. This form of empathetic imagination helps us understand the intentions of others and to take flexible decisions on behaviour that we deem appropriate in a specific social situation. The ability to see the mind also enables us, beyond that of understanding others, to have a better understanding of ourselves.” (Siegel, 2005, p. 209) Mentalization and the reflective function are two aspects of the same metacognitive capacity.

Empathy is a process of understanding the internal states of another-from-oneself, it lies at the highest level of mentalization and demands an investment in both emotional and cognitive planes. According to Stein, three movements can be considered within the process of empathy (Boella, 2006): the first, during which the subject who feels the experience of others becomes aware of the physical signs that the emotion manifests in someone else, the second, during which the subject processes the memory of that same perception felt coming from the experience of the other, and finally the third movement during which the subject can make an act of understanding of the experience of others precisely on the basis of the previous two movements, and on an enriching opening with respect to emotional perception experienced before the empathic movement. If we were to speak of an experience of empathy, we could say that initially we feel the emotion at the physical level and then it is recognized at the cognitive level. The joy of a learner who achieves a good result can be empathized by the teacher, but also by the class. Teachers can teach their students the empathic act through analysis of the three movements, but also by being empathetic as a professional attitude.

First and foremost, it is important to watch the students, knowing how to observe them, to pay attention to them. This is the first level of the process of empathy, as recounted and described by Stein. This first movement already implies a whole series of awarenesses that are by no means trivial: noticing emotion on the face and body of another person or beginning to perceive the other as another, is not at all easy, even if at the heart of the initial process lie involuntary and automatic acts. We now know that we perceive emotional expression through imitation, and we also know that there is a close tie between imitation and empathy (Iacoboni, 2008, pp. 100-102). In this sense, when Stein stated that the movement of emotional recognition was at the basis of the empathetic act, she had grasped the main point that would not be confirmed until a century later; in fact, imitation and reflection are at the heart of the empathy process.

According to Stein, the second movement of empathy is of a cognitive character, and engages the awareness of feeling, or the approach to feeling what the other feels, through activation of the autobiographical memory process. In a certain sense, this second movement represents the aspect of full awareness that is granted



only by the ability to guide one's own internal processes, which is given in turn by the ability to know how to recognize them as part of our experience. Empathy is an emotion recognition process which, by imitative and reflecting perceptions becomes a path of awareness towards others' emotions. Empathy can be learnt and assimilated. Research on it is advanced with some very substantial empirical evidence. The third of Stein's movement corresponds to the empathetic action that allows us to draw near to those who are suffering or rejoicing, since we can perceive a similar emotion. Not "putting ourselves in the shoes of", but "approaching", knowing that this is possible and that the empathetic act assimilates us to others, allows us to recognize them as our fellows, allows us to feel the sorrow and experience the disgust of those looking at us and who are close to us. Empathy is the process by which we recognize people as being like ourselves. Teaching empathy is possible, only by beginning from ourselves, from a self-care that embraces self-knowledge and self-awareness.

## 5. Conclusions

Empathy involves a path of deeply listening to oneself in order to listen to others. The ethical aspects that all of this entails are important, particularly in educational and formative contexts where the ethical problem is often forgotten or left on the margins of relational problems. Instead, ethical issues are an outcome and, at the same time, a prerequisite. Empathy is not an act without consequences. By consciously reflecting on others, I acknowledge them as my counterpart and in recognizing the emotions of sorrow, suffering, joy, anger and disgust it is impossible not to "humanly" share the condition of whoever is experiencing these emotions. We are programmed in a natural way to be empathetic, and perhaps we should be supporting this evolutionary condition culturally. What are the abilities, the skills to be conveyed, and what are those needing built to be able to live in the near future? Among these abilities, we find cooperation, teamwork, the ability to plan, design, and organize tasks with a high sense of reflectivity. Empathy is set as the pivot around which these abilities are aggregated. They should be regarded as transverse tools of human growth. Self-care, understood as self-knowledge/awareness/responsibility for others and for the world, is also a way to build a new professionalism for the future.

Perhaps teachers will disappear, and their place will be taken by trainers and organizers of knowledge, mentors and tutors, facilitators and conductors, figures already commonly found in adult education. We must prepare for these new frontiers of transforming the education of teachers. However, in this transformation of the teacher's function, the prospect of listening, like that of empathy, and those of acceptance and solidarity, will become central. Because, in truth, they should already be central and fundamental. Each learner should have the right to be heard, should have the right to experience their learning processes empathetically. Nor is this merely a question of ability, competencies and knowledge, this is citizenship, and of interest to others as the basis of democratic life.



## Notes

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## Book Reviews

### ***Adult and continuing education in Europe. Using public policy to secure a growth in skills.***

European Commission (2013)

Bruxelles: EU - European Commission Publication

**Gaia Gioli**<sup>1</sup>

Over the last 15 years, studies and research on the themes of Adult and Continuing Education have mushroomed, thanks also to the greater weight attributed to them within the international debate by supranational institutions such as Cedefop, Eurofound, Eurostat, the OECD, and the European Commission. Within this framework can be found the volume *Adult and Continuing Education in Europe. Using Public Policy to Secure a Growth in Skills* which was commissioned by the director-general for research and innovation of The European Commission from Paolo Federighi, a professor at the University of Florence and an international expert in Adult Education. Lifelong Learning has always played a fundamental role at the micro level in the processes of building subjects' employability, and at the macro level for economic growth and social cohesion: it is only by including these two levels in the political and pedagogical discourse that we can build lasting prosperity for citizens.

Europe needs to understand the dynamics that underpin the challenges it is preparing to tackle in the coming years, such as the still fragile economic recovery, the reception of immigrants and the integration of refugees, the reduction of inequalities in Europe and around the world. In addition to the objectives of innovation, the social inclusion process is also of fundamental importance in President Juncker's agenda and research must consistently provide support for this.

This volume by Paul Federighi contributes significantly to raising awareness in the community with respect to the development of employability, respect for ourselves and others and, through a survey of larger research projects under the 6th and 7th Framework Programme, offers an innovative point of

view on adult education policies, as well as a considerable number of points for reflection in the identification of measures and tools to achieve them (p.7).

In a certain way, the volume carries in itself a European added value that helps policy-makers understand how the study of economic and sociological research can guide them in a critical review of the reference context; at the same time, the methodology, i.e. the pedagogical approach of a comparative type and analysis of the various situations in the Member States, can help them to achieve the desired welfare and community objectives.

In its linearity and agility, the volume has the merit of dictating the lines that the political interventions should follow for the removal of social and economic obstacles that prevent the subject – not necessarily a worker – from making progress. In fact, in its attempts to address the political class it also indicates the anticipated optimal characteristics of contexts with high potential for learning that subjects should attend to guarantee a path of continuing education, whether these be places of work, training bodies, the education market or public institutions such as universities. At the same time, in the final pages, it directs its attention to all the experts and researchers who, within the circles of Adult Education, can encourage the propensity to invest in education and orient governments to adopt intelligent systems to support decisions (pp. 87-90) which, in the context of labour market policy 2.0 and smart working, can support them thanks to technological progress..

## Notes

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**Adult and Lifelong Learning in Europe and Beyond Comparative Perspectives from the 2015 Würzburg Winter School.**

Egetenmeyer, R. (Ed.) (2016)

Frankfurt: Peter Lang Publishers

**Carlo Terzaroli**<sup>1</sup>

The novelty of the volume edited by Regina Egetenmeyer is the process of intersection between teaching and research which defines its entire background. In fact, the essays presented here constitute the fruit of intensive work done within the International Winter School 'Comparative Studies in adult and Lifelong Learning' in which students and lecturers from six European countries, India, North America and Africa took a closer critical look at European strategies and international standards of lifelong learning. Through plenary debates and group work, many aspects were plumbed: in line with this, the book illustrates the result of the products of comparison, focusing on specific themes that involved researchers and students in a reciprocal exchange of approaches and languages.

The framework of the whole work accurately depicts the partnership of figures with diverse levels of university expertise, exemplified by the collaboration between senior and junior echelons in the drafting of the articles. At the same time, the comparative approach also allows a glimpse of the many plans for the development of adult education at an international level. This is precisely the experience which diffuses the end product, not only does it represent an attempt to explain the complexity of the international framework, it also outlines the aim of overcoming this fragmentation by proposing a look at adult education from multiple perspectives, also with a view to supporting policies and measures for lifelong learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. The orientation of the essays insists on various levels of analysis (mega, macro, meso and micro), providing the reader with an overview of the many issues and problems that currently concern adult education at a global level. They can be read both under the lens of the research product and from the point of

view of the outcomes of international and intercultural educational activities. The fundamental outcome that emerges, even sooner than evidence of the comparison between national states, can be seen in the attempt – as ambitious as it is strategic – to build a shared terminology for an academic community to adopt as a common language.

The volume provides a broad framework of the crucial issues that concern adult education today and tomorrow, through the various themes illustrated by a comparison of strategies and policies (mega and macro level), the themes of professionalization and quality management (meso level), ending with a focus on adult participation in educational activities (micro level). It is precisely this variety, analysed according to a comparative methodology, that defines one of the main points of the destination of the intense didactic and exploratory activity. Simultaneously, the construction of a scientific community at an international level stands out as the strategic starting point for the future of research.

In the face of the emergence of global challenges which – albeit in their own respective forms – involve all the countries concerned, the sharing of approaches and practices outlines the ability to respond to the needs of adults with a gaze that is open, intricate and multi-perspective.

Consequently, the comparison between states, here the fruit of teaching practice and joint research, presents itself as a tool for sharing reports, methodologies and critically constructive looks at adult education, as well as developments of society in the broadest sense.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carlo Terzaroli is taking a PhD in Educational Sciences at the University of Florence.

<sup>2</sup> The International Winter School "Comparative Studies in Adult and Lifelong Learning" was held at the Julius-Maximilians Universität Würzburg from 28 January to 6 February 2015. It saw the participation of 51 Master's and PhD students and 20 lecturers from Europe, Asia, Africa and North America.

[http://www.lifelonglearning.uni-wuerzburg.de/archive/winter\\_school\\_2015/](http://www.lifelonglearning.uni-wuerzburg.de/archive/winter_school_2015/) [12/2016].