

Abstracts

The Development of Student Employability in Higher Education: a comparative perspective on university approaches at European level

by Vanna Boffo, Gaia Gioli, Carlo Terzaroli

In recent years the problem of graduates' transitions from higher education to the labour market has become increasingly relevant for the field of adult education. The transition to work represents not just the beginning of a professional career, but involves the entrance into adulthood as well (Eurofound, 2014). Higher education systems have started to discuss this topic, focusing on the most effective educational pathways and tools to support transitions to work. The category of employability (Yorke, 2006; Harvey, 2003; Sumanasiri, Yajid & Khatibi, 2015) has been developed in order to deal with this challenge, with its aim to support the development of capabilities (Stephenson & Yorke, 1998; Nussbaum, 2011) for careers, and for the whole of life, in order to deal with the multiple transformations that may also occur. In this framework, universities have implemented different approaches to supporting students' employability as part of curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (Yorke & Knight, 2006; AHECS, 2014). The paper intends to analyse the state of the art of a comparative research project (Bereday, 1972; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014) about the strategies used by universities in Italy and Ireland to develop young adults' employability skills and capabilities. The results of the project could provide an overview of a broad spectrum of solutions for the development of students' employability in higher education.

Early Childhood Services: Improving the relational and emotional skills of educators to ensure inclusiveness *by Elena Bortolotti, Caterina Bembich*

The paper describes a training course conducted in the city of Trieste with a large group of educators, who work in Early Childhood Services, with the aim of promoting the process of inclusiveness. We worked for three year with practitioners using a data collection tool (the Index for Inclusion created by Ainscow and Booth,

2006), that provided the opportunity to the staff to discuss and reflect on many issues regarding the ability to create a welcoming work environment for all.

As the project progressed, it became evident that the teachers and aides involved were using the Index for Inclusion not only to evaluate the progress regarding relation among the children, but also as a tool of self-evaluation and reflection. It became obvious that there was a lack of good practices in the dynamics between the adult professionals and this lack created significant obstacles to inclusion.

The data collected highlighted the need to create strategies and practices to help staff to improve soft skills like the ability to collaborate and negotiate, to be diplomatic and respectful even in the face of disagreements, to feel good in a team, and to share some common goals.

On the basis on these results, it appeared crucial during the third year of training, to work with the staff in small groups. The topics of discussion selected by the groups refer to the analysis of some experiences which were considered significant to examine, related to relationship problems that create difficulties and problems for interactions between practitioners.

Each discussion was concluded with the drafting of a final proposal and a shared document that further explained some thoughts expressed by the community, describing the principles governing the organization and membership of a community. The introduction of the Index was a revelation of sorts. The topics the Index touched upon were those areas in need of improvement and were reflective of the actual, daily situations found in schools as work places.

Reflection and the “telling brain”: a research with university students, by *Giuseppa Cappuccio and Giuseppa Compagno*

Research on cognition, meta cognitive skills and on how the brain works do not cease to arouse great interest among the scientific community of educational disciplines, especially in relation to the need to integrate, at any educational or training level, the essential component of reflexivity about themselves and about the way to cope with knowledge.

Brain-based approaches - with regard to the Brain-gym - and storytelling activities – in particular, Digital Storytelling - brought up the axes of the research here described and conducted with 205 students attending the degree course in Primary Education Sciences at the University of Palermo during the academic year 2015-2016. The validity of the brain-based model was checked thanks to the research process and in order to reinforce students’ reflective skills, narrative competence and critical revision, thus supported by the use of ICT.

Styles and spaces of youth participation in Europe: an educational challenge, by *Morena Cuconato and Federico Zannoni*

The increasing electoral abstention and the crisis of the identification with traditional political parties are a clear sign of youth participation's decline in the conventional forms of politics. Nevertheless, alternative styles of engagement are growing among the younger generations in the European countries. These new forms of participation, which could be located on the border between the public and private space, express anyway the desire of a more direct democracy. This article, based on the intermediate findings of the European project Spaces and Styles of Participation, aims to analyze the different ways in which young people (15-30 years old) participate in the decisions concerning them and the life of their communities in eight countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom with a special focus on the educational debate on this topic.

Learntwist, the art and science to facilitate on-line learning in higher education: a case study, by *Mario Giampaolo, Susan Isenberg*

Learntwist is a web-based software that aims to facilitate learning in adults. Developed by Susan Isenberg, the software is an electronic version of an apprenticeship contract. The article introduces the framework of andragogy and self-directed learning, presents the methodology of learning contracts, focuses on the principles of adult education applied to internet learning and describes a research conducted at the University of Siena. The research illustrates how students validated and used the Italian version of Learntwist. Participants have been engaged in a cognitive walkthrough to assess the usability of the software and in the planning of a personalized learning plan. Students evaluated that the learning experience can be improved by working on the different steps, the customization and the graphic interface of the software. The activities planned by the students are characterized by arguments and subjects related to students' passions and interests, strategies based on research, collaboration with experts, learning evidence and methods of assessment. Limits of the experience and hypothesis for further researches are also discussed.

PISA's Weakness: Why Teacher Experience Matters, by *Vasco d'Agnese*

The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of the ways in which PISA (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment) impacts learning

and education by analysing teacher feedback. Central to this study is the belief that teachers' knowledge and experience are legitimate resources for assessing, correcting, and updating a) educational policies and b) curriculum and educational practices.

The research involved 39 secondary school teachers who taught 15-year-olds in three urban schools. Each of the teachers had been in service for between 8 and 35 years. The research was conducted in southern Italy in three high schools chosen from the PISA sample. The research design combines semi-structured interviews, group interviews, and group discussions conducted with teachers involved in PISA, either as references or as teachers of classrooms involved in the PISA survey. Based on the data, PISA raises five problems: a) a learning problem: students learn to respond to a pre-specified problem rather than to develop their own inquiries, and they are not stimulated to develop meta-awareness about their own learning processes; b) a relational problem: the relationship between teachers and students is established externally and framed by the test; c) an educational problem: the role of education in helping students face the unforeseen is denied by PISA; d) an assessment problem: one tool is not sufficient to undertake a complex task such as student assessment; and e) a problem concerning the role of schools, teachers and democracy.

The concept of self-determination within a *simplex* perspective: possible implications for teachers' action, by Diana Carmela Di Gennaro, Paola Aiello, Iolanda Zollo, Maurizio Sibilio

The article aims at offering a possible transdisciplinary interpretation of the concept of self-determination, which can be considered a category in Special Pedagogy and which has interesting implications in relation to the cognitive self-regulating mechanisms underlying the teachers' actions. Starting from the meanings of the concept within the different research fields, the work proposes an analysis of self-determination within the *Causal Agency Theory* by highlighting its possible implications in the teaching-learning process. This, indeed, could be considered a *cognitive possibility* ruled by the principles and the properties of simplicity within an ecological-systemic view that links teaching action with students' academic achievement.

Creativity: a training need of health workers, by Francesca Marone, Marianna Capo e Maria Navarra

Creativity has a transversal value; it is a process that in an unpredictable and original unifies a subject and a context, a form and an idea. It concerns to transformative, innovative and associative actions (Mezirow, 2003). It is not represented as the ability to create out of nothing but rather as the ability to transform the existing

in an innovative way, by manipulating a function of a real or practical goal by identifying the elements that go beyond its immediate appearances or meanings.

The aim of this study was to study creativity with regard to the professional adult education. Furthermore, the research focuses on the relationship between reflexivity and creativity. The variety of educational situations in which adult individuals may find themselves and which involve, to be such, some “change”, are inherently creative and into adulthood many growth experiences are accomplished “in self-managed forms.” In this sense the multiplicity of the notion of creativity, intersects with the complexity of the notion of change in adulthood. So creativity does not imply the necessary presence of intentional paths but are sufficient experiences that, together with a reflection in the course and on the course of action (Schon, 1987), give rise to creative and transformative situations.

Specifically, here we present the results of a study that had the aim of identifying, through a questionnaire, the needs of trainers in health care throughout Italy. The exploratory study involved 179 trainers, who works and lives in two geographic areas (North Italy / South Italy); the data were analyzed by SPSS software for counting the frequencies and the calculation of the chi-square. The following research question was explored: “what are the teaching methods which would deepen or consider relevant to own background?”. The analysis showed that the training methods, as part of continuing medical education, are deemed inadequate to learning needs of individuals;

An adult training can enable the restructuring of a perspective of meaning, understood as creative inversion process, through which we become critically aware of what influences the way we perceive and interpret the world, takes place where the educational planning assumes a not rigidly structured configuration. The aim is to reach a new andragogical methodology that, starting from needs and desires, intercepts the training of professionals (Knowles, 1985, 1989).

What skills and training meet the needs of elected governing boards of volunteer associations?, by Maria Paola Mostarda

This article addresses the subject of training for democratically elected volunteers (and therefore not the paid managers or directors) who administer and manage associations. It identifies certain traits of these individuals and proposes educational guidelines for their training in light of Italian and international studies. In a field short on data and systematic research, this analysis acknowledges certain features of administrators: volunteerism, partial availability, freedom, support and auditing, vision; each one has specific pros and cons. Based on these characteristics, the following educational approaches are proposed: *pedagogical* training, which can be helpful in identifying areas to include in the managers’ individual programs, recognizing the skills they possess and those upon which they can improve; *sustainable* training, in keeping with a volunteer who donates his or her time, reconciling it with his or her other commitments; *specific* training, in order to occupy this strategic role shifting between state, profit, and nonprofit with a full-fledged identity;

multidisciplinary training, to support the array of skills needed in this role; *cooperative* training aiming at providing the management with the skills to interact with paid and non paid staff, with different nonprofit organizations and institutions; *continuous and reflective* training, to craft the ability to interpret change and redirect associations by viewing reality through new eyes. Training shortcuts focused on managing for profit or institutional bureaucracy do not appear to contribute in volunteerism. This reshaped training offered for the governing boards opens the door to collaborative training opportunities among a wide range of training agencies committed to supporting volunteerism and to fully fulfilling this role, which is fundamental to democratic life and helps bind society together.

Competent teachers for a music made school: observations and reflective readings, by Gianni Nuti

The study investigates experimental inclusion, in Italy, of instrumental teaching in primary schools of the second degree, the organizational arrangements, the teaching strategies adopted but above all on the forms of relationship / partnership between teachers of different types of schools, with different cultural approaches and equally diverse methodologies. Through a case study in which the researcher on one side adopts a systematic monitoring system, the other takes part in the social game by moving questions to various stakeholders surveyed in individual and group situations favors the emergence of a number of nodes critics on which to graft a corpus of improvement actions. The finding of the intervention scheme is just so this fruit of a process in which the reflective practices not only help to gain awareness of the teaching profession in specific contexts, but also facilitate the sharing of evolutionary perspectives, the co-construction of an educational setting and training more complete and integrated in a still too marginalized area such as the performing arts and music in particular.

The challenge of the assessment of processes and outcomes of transformative learning, by Alessandra Romano

The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) asserts that the way we see the world is the result of perceptions of our experiences. According to Mezirow (1991), we develop habitual expectations based on past experiences. We expect things to be as they were before, or we used to uncritically assimilate prospects of our social, community and culture. These perspectives are distortions, stereotypes and prejudices. They guide our decisions and our actions until we come across a situation that is not consistent with our expectations. At that point, we can reject the discrepant perspectives or enter into a process that could lead to a transformation. It creates a transformative learning when people have a reshaping, a change in the meaning perspective with which we relate to life, to experience, to

ourselves and to the world, and this change leads to new ways of thinking and above all new ways of acting. However, how can we evaluate the process and the outcomes of this change, so deep as to involve the frames of meaning rooted in us? The article offers a review of the main instruments and surveys (see Stuckey, Taylor, Cranton, 2013) for the evaluation of the process and of the outcomes of learning activities and experiences that may be conceptualized as transformative learning experiences. To be included in the present survey review, the questionnaire would need to (a) build on Mezirow's transformative learning definition, (b) represent the instrument of an empirical study with a methodology section, (c) be written in English language.

Particularly, based on these requirements, four instruments are analyzed and compared: the first is Kembers' Critical Reflection Questionnaire, a 16-question, four-scale questionnaire, the Reflection Questionnaire, to measure "the extent to which students engage in reflective thinking in professional preparation courses" (Kember et al., 2000, p. 392).

The second is the LAS (Learning Activities Survey, King, 2009) questionnaire. The multiple choice and open answers questionnaire developed by the research group of Professor King, University of South Florida is based on the theory of the ten steps precursors to transformative learning (King, 2009).

The third questionnaire is the Transformative Learning Survey (Stuckey, Taylor, Cranton, 2014), a 112-item survey that assesses the outcomes and processes of engaging in transformative learning in any context. There are four scales that describe the outcomes of transformative learning and 15 scales that describe the various ways in which transformative learning can occur.

The fourth is the VALUE rubric (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) (AACU, 2013), whose variation Student Transformative Learning Record (Barthell et al., 2010) has been created by the Association of American Universities and Colleges for the assessment of students' own authentic work, produced across their diverse learning progressions and institutions, to determine whether and how well students are meeting graduation level achievement in learning outcomes that both employers and faculty consider essential. The VALUE rubric may be useful for the assessment of formal and informal learning by students: its utility can be highlighted considering the theory of transformative learning as a methodological framework for teaching and learning processes, not as theoretical concept. The instruments discussed have relevant features and limits: they represent the effort of going beyond the qualitative retrospective approach and to find indicators for the evaluation of transformative process and the critical reflection engaged by people (students or professionals) in their learning experiences. However, it must be paid thoughtful attention in affirming during a class, a course, a program that a real authentic transformative learning process happens.

The adoption of mixed-methods approach may overcome the limits of exclusively quantitative or qualitative approaches.

Beyond eurocentrism. Reflections and perspectives on critical pedagogy and adult education in the Mediterranean context, by Paolo Vittoria, Peter Mayo

This article is intended to provide an understanding of the role of adult education and critical pedagogy in the Mediterranean context. It starts off with a brief reflection on the history and present situation in this region. Embracing a perspective that is not eurocentric but anti-colonialist and grounded in participatory democracy, the article is organised around three areas: Northern Mediterranean, East Mediterranean and Southern Mediterranean. These categories are used for simply heuristic purposes; we acknowledge that these are also eurocentric constructs. The article therefore maps out, in an introductory manner, a specific terrain of experiences. It is also one that comprises authors/practitioners connected to the area of adult education. Both initiatives and the authors to whom we refer provide a significant contribution to the area, specifically from a critical pedagogical perspective.

It sheds deeper light on these experiences and theoretical proposals in light of the social and historical complexities in the Mediterranean, throwing into relief the lack of suitability of EU 'one shoe fits all policies' that are often at odds with the specific realities in communities ensconced in different parts of the world. Grounded in a historical and critical analysis, this article argues for a Mediterranean adult education perspective predicated on critical, dialogical and anti-colonial thinking and practices.