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Reflexivity in Higher Education

Research and Models of Intervention for Underachieving Students

edited by

Maria Francesca Freda

Contributors

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PART I

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE: OPEN ISSUES ABOUT REFLEXIVITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION
Fostering reflexivity in higher education: 

Transformative functions of narration

MARIA FRANCESCA FREDÁ, GIOVANNA ESPÍSITO, MARIA LUISA MARTINO, PAOLO VALERIO

Abstract

This work aims at contributing to the debate on the human psychic reflexive process as well as on the role that narrative devices can play to foster it. We present a reflexive process model and draw a distinction between reflection and reflexivity. Specifically, we discuss the role of narrative modes and media in promoting reflection, and the role of a narrative group in promoting reflexivity. We assume that whereas human reflexivity is always characterized by a relational dimension, in order to reflect, a relationship is always necessary. Finally, we present a novel formative method based on a qualitative multimodal approach including a narrative group and various narrative modes and media. This narrative method, that we named Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), has been devised and tested in INSTALL Project and it addresses to underachieving university students lagging behind in their studies.

Keywords: reflection/reflexivity; narrative modes/media; multimodal approaches; narrative group; underachieving university students.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there is a rapidly increasing demand to implement formative methods in university contexts to promote reflexive competence. This competence is considered central to methodological thinking (Seale, 1999) and it is also reputed to be conducive to job acquisition and productivity (Levett–Jones, 2006; Esposito & Fredá, submitted).

1. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained there.in.
Underachieving students in particular often show a bias in their signification of university experience while under stress. They evince reflexive impairments when dealing with specific university–related events and relationships, or specific developmental milestones (transition to university, fundamental exams, etc.). Fostering reflexivity can be conducive for them to finding a balance between cognitive and affective dimensions (Christie et al, 2008).

Nevertheless, reflexive competence is a controversial subject in psychology, pedagogy, and philosophy. Various definitions have been proposed (e.g., Moore, 2011). For instance, some psychological models have conceptualized the reflexive process as one characterized by increasing levels of complexity; however, these are conceived of as the outcome of a context–free, subjective operation.

This work aims at contributing to the debate on the human psychic reflexive process as well as on the role that narrative devices can play to foster it. According with a multimodality approach (Pink, 2011), we expound our own model of reflexive process and we discuss the role of narrative modes and media in promoting reflection, and the role of a narrative group in promoting reflexivity. To do so, we present the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), i.e. a narrative formative method devised and tested with underachieving university students lagging behind their studies.

2. A reflexive model: Reflection and Reflexivity

*Reflexivity and reflection* share a Latin root, from the verb *re–flectere* (=bending back), referring to the mental ability of a thinking subject to gain knowledge of herself by redirecting her thinking ability back on itself. We assume the two terms bear a different meaning: reflection is a stepping stone for attaining reflexivity, since by it the subject can become aware of his being the subjective agent of semiotic production (to reflect oneself), while by reflexivity the subject can think of the relational and inter–subjective processes he is involved in.

In order to explain this difference, we refer to the physics phenomenon of “reflection”. In physics, the word “reflection” refers to the phenomenon that makes a light wave change the direction of its route, once it crashes into an obstacle. The obstacle, in regards to
the propagation, represents a change in the propagation’s medium interface.

When the crash between the light wave and the obstacle takes place, part of the energy of the waves is returned, whilst the remaining part penetrates into the medium, then gets deflected and propagates into the shape of refracted waves (Figure n. 1).

**Figure 1.**

The term reflection intended as “re–folding” seems to clearly define the specificity of such a phenomenon: a change of direction that effects the front wave’s propagation.

The word “reflection” (as it is used in philosophy, in psychology, in pedagogy, etc.) designates the activity and the psychic process through which a thinking subject can achieve self–knowledge.

We find it very interesting to observe how, once again, the meaning of refolding returns even in the use of the term made in such disciplines. The thought process is divided up into observer and observed through a return on the self.

Comparing the two concepts we notice that in physics the deflection of the wave due to its crashing into a reflecting surface is highlighted, while in philosophy, as well as in psychology, the emphasis is on the return of the thinking on activity itself.

At this point we propose a leap of abstraction in order to make a juxtaposition possible between the physical phenomenon and the psychological one: we can define with the term “reflection” the gen-
eral process that makes information (conveyed through any medium), emitted by a source in some direction, bounce back due to the crash into an obstacle.

It is interesting to note that a thinking subject when engaged in a cognitive activity addressed to himself, must first have submitted the information in its environment, in order to grasp the returned part that has “met/clashed” with something afterwards.

The reflection intended as a psychological process relays upon the possibility for the subject to recognize himself in a sign structure built by means of his life experiences. The reflection is intended as an important stage to reach reflexivity, since through the reflection the subject can recognize himself as a subjective seal of the semiotic production (he reflects himself) whilst through reflexivity he is enabled to think about the inter-subjective and relational processes in which he is involved.

We hypothesize that in order to achieve the reflexivity it is necessary that the phenomenon of reflection recursively interacts with the deflection and refraction generated by the impact of the light wave with something external. The refraction — we can think of a bundle of light that when hitting a prism gets absorbed and then distorted, divided and returned through several chromatic frequencies — is intended as an absorption of signs and further informations of return to relational networks. The reflexivity is the process that allows to hold together the semiotic production (the reification of a relation through signs), the reflection and the refraction (in the metaphoric field that we are exploring), or rather to have a perspective from which it is possible to comprehend the processuality of the relationships over time, that is made of constant returns and re-elaborations (Freda, De Luca Picione & Esposito, in press).

3. The role of narrative devices in promoting reflection and reflexivity

Condicio sine qua non of every activity which can be considered as basically reflexive is through the possibility to set up a semiotic process.

The psychological phenomenon of reflection is peculiar in regards to its necessity, to become effective, to be presented with returned in-
formation in the shape of a representation\(^2\). We underline that it is the representation that enables the psychological reflection. The narrative device, in this sense, has to be intended as a discursive process aimed at building and re–elaborating one’s experiences by means of the representations developed to symbolize them. Specifically, our model of reflexive competence, in agreement with other works in the literature (e.g., Hallway & Jefferson, 2000), assigns a central role to narrative devices in promoting representation and re–signification of events in one’s own life. Indeed, narration is a “conjunctive representation of reality” (Bruner, 1990), a conventional categorization device acting within an analog–type logical framework. It allows one to manage the objects of reality according to their individual relationship to the whole, and to organize them into configurations whose meaning is attributed according to a principle of verisimilitude, not truth. As a configurational process, narration activates representational modalities of an experience in order to understand its reasons (but not its causes), and lay the foundations for reflexive thought (Freda, 2008; Salvatore & Freda, 2011).

When a subject narrates an experience, the produced account brings back some self–knowledge. We will try to define how narration activates a reflexive process:

1. firstly, it is necessary to represent the experience by means of signs, “something one can perceive and think of”. In narrative terms, this is what we define as the story (Freda, 2008);
2. through such an initial semiotic action the subject is able to recognize himself in the story, considering its role of account (ibid.); the subject is able to reflect–himself in his own account, as he knows that it tells something about him, speaking on his behalf;
3. when the subject operates an interconnection between his own account and the relational–contextual system within which it has been plotted, his textual production can get the value of discourse (Ibid.). In this third passage, we believe the process of reflexivity emerges.

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2. The etymology of the term representation has its origin in the Latin phrase “re–ad–presentare” literally meaning “to make something present (once again)”. 
We will go further into the passages trying to simplify them by means of an artificial linearization of the process:

— the moment the signal is emitted by a source. The subject produces a narration in terms of story (account of “facts”);
— the moment the signal strikes the reflecting surface, getting flexed in its corner of direction. One’s own story is “shot” to the world and then it “crashes into” other people. At a subsequent stage, the deflected (returned) part of the signal is re–propagated. The subject can see the story as an expression of himself, by saying “this is my story”. Thus, he recognizes his own subjective seal in the narrative production; he recognizes his own constructive function of creating the account. We might state that such a recognition takes place thanks to the reflection of the image in one’s own text. The subject considers the story as a reflection of himself;
— to achieve reflexivity an integration between the process of reflection and the activities of elaboration and transformation of signs is necessary, and consists in a process of refraction, involving both the dimensions of subjectivity and inter–subjectivity. So an elaboration of the role played by the subjective modality within an inter–subjective direction of development takes place. This is the level of production of the discourse.

To recognize himself as an active narrative constructor of his own experience, implies for the subject the passage to a stage in which he is narrated to a further one, achieving an active position of narrator. The reflecting/refracting return of the semiotic structure enables the individual to see–himself as agens and as agendum at the same time. The subject perceives himself, with regards to his actions as both an active and a passive agent. The subjects narrates and is narrated. When such a gap finds a new semiotic synthesis the narrator/agent has by his disposal some potential signs that can extend the time of an eventual choice before it is made. The reflexive process has the

3. Latin. Present active participle of agō (“do, make”), meaning “One who exerts power, or has the power to act: an actor.”
4. Latin. Substantive use of the neuter singular of agendus (“which ought to be done”), future passive participle (gerundive) of agō (“I do, act, make”).
effect of suspending some of the individual’s actions, to re-design their direction according to the context, to change the perspective through a repositioning (Freda, 2011).

4. The Narrative Mediation Path: a novel and multimodal formative method to foster reflection and reflexivity

Multimodality is «a new multi-semiotic form in which meaning is produced through the inter-relationships between and among different media and modes» (Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey, 2006: 78). Using multiple media makes it possible to create new realities of meaning and knowledge; it also fosters understanding about the complexity of experiences, and enables an in-depth analysis which would not be available otherwise. Specifically, multimodality methods are effective tools to promote reflexive processes; these can be fostered and amplified by using multiple modes and media, each associated with specific sensory channels (Pink, 2011).

According to multimodality paradigm, we devised and tested the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) within the European project entitled INSTALL (INnovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn). It is addressed to the University students enrolled in the second year of the Bachelor’s course of study and lagging behind with their studies. These students are defined as “underachievers”, depending on the gap they present between their good personal skills and their insufficient academic performances.

NMP is a formative narrative method which integrates group and individual narrative levels, as well as four narrative modes: Metaphorical, Iconographic, Writing, Bodily. Each mode uses its own medium: the metaphorical mode involves expressions and proverbs, and a student is asked to choose one that represents her university experience (e.g., “He who makes his bed must lie in it”, “Yes, we can!”). In the iconographic mode, six vignettes are shown, each featuring a character engaged in a typical situation of university life (e.g., enrollment, home study, etc.), and a student is asked to choose one and write a balloon with the character’s thoughts or feelings. In the writing mode, three narrative assignments are given (writing about a low point, high point and decisional turning point of one’s university experience), in
accordance with McAdams’s narrative model (McAdams, 1993). Finally, in the bodily mode, students are asked to create a sculpture about their future at the university using the bodies of all the participants.

The training is organized in seven group meetings. Over the seven meetings, NMP prompts a horizontal transition between the four modes, which promotes an alternation between different levels of relationship with the object by engaging different sensory channels. Furthermore, during each meeting, NMP supports a vertical transition based on shifts back and forth between individual and group narration.

These two transitions are effected during each meeting, independently of the mode, by a common methodological sequence: first, a narrative medium is presented; second, each group member partakes in the narrative construction of the experience; third, a group–level narrative meta–discourse is elaborated from each member’s narration; four, each participant re–constructs the narrative experience.

Each medium takes on the role of a “reflecting mirror” and lays down the setting conditions to gain access to a representational function of experience. The media offer variously–angled mirrors where a student can look at himself, and gain access to a representation of himself as an agent of the semiotic construction of his experience, as well as someone affected by it. Nevertheless, media can only induce reflexivity within an inter–subjective context. Narrations are relational acts: every subject narrates to a potential listener, and narrations are always linked to those produced by others, and are shared and co–constructed inter–subjectively (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Reissman, 1993). Mental reflexive processes are always relational ones and a reflexive process can be thought of as a movement back and forth (bending back) of semiotic production between the various people involved, i.e. a “semiotization of relations”.

5. Conclusions

In this work we have proposed a model of reflexive process and a methodical device connected to it, indicating a possible use and experimentation in the field of Higher Education. We underlined the importance of fostering reflexive competences within formative settings. This competence, in fact, is considered capable of sustaining
the complex process of learning (Taylor, 2011) and it may also provide a scaffolding to sustain learning (Freda, 2013), which, in turn, can direct one’s conduct at university in a responsible, independent, and goal-oriented manner.

We believe it is important to reaffirm that narration is a functional methodical device to activate reflective processes within formative settings. The proposal to activate different narrative media and modes gives not only the opportunity to use more reflective mirrors, but to avail of different modes that work together on digital and analogical levels synchronous and diachronous, explicit and implicit. However, in our opinion, narration is an instrument whose reflective potentiality can be realized only in an inter-subjective contest. The reflective competence, in fact, develops in relationships, and is possible the moment in which an interlocutor, can “think”, direct and reply significantly to what is being narrated: without the other, no subject could recognize his own role in orientating relational processes that he is immersed in. A reflexive process is the outcome of simultaneous reflection and refraction between multiple subjects: every node of the relationship not only reflects itself, but also refracts, i.e. it takes up, elaborates, and relays signs; in so doing, it allows a person to conceive of herself as both agens and agendum of her actions (Freda De Luca Picione & Esposito, in press). In this sense the group setting amplifies this process offering a variety of reflective and refractive mirrors, meaning possible interlocutors potentially able to think, absorb and redirect the narrative flow in a reflective sense.

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Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz

Some philosophical-educational misgivings about Learnification in higher education

Stefano Oliverio

Abstract

The paper engages with the question of the sense in which the cultivation of a reflexive meta-competence in underachieving students can be interpreted according to the category of “compensation”, the latter being referred less to the usual discourse of inclusive education than to the tradition of the German philosophical anthropology, which allows us to discover the existential density of this notion. It is argued, moreover, that rather than being read within the “learning to learn” paradigm, the reflexive meta-competence should be interpreted in the wake of Gert Biesta’s objections to “learnification”, and within the horizon of a recovery of the experience of being taught by.

Keywords: Inclusion, Compensation, Learning to Learn competence, Incompetence, Higher Education.

1. Homo compensator and the (inclusive) support for study

In order to contribute to the exploration of the import of promoting the competence of learning to learn (as a reflexive competence) to support students’ studying in higher education (mainly the support for those who are at risk of dropping out), I will take my cue from a most general question, namely: within what framework should we situate the meaning of such a competence?

Raising this question should not appear a trifling move or a triviality. Indeed, what is questioned is not so much the meaning of ‘learning to learn’ as a key competence — as a matter of fact, a fairly dispensable task due to what has been stated and elaborated in official documents and scientific literature since the Recommendation 2006/962/EC...
of the European Parliament and of the Council of the December 18th 2008 — but its meaning as an “inclusive education oriented” competence, that is a competence which should prevent students from dropping out or underachieving.

One of the most cherished (if not most entrenched) categories of inclusive education — even when it is not explicitly spelled out — is that of “compensation”: whenever we have to do with a situation (whatever it is) which could expose a person to a risk of exclusion, because it represents a lack/deficit/gap, we as educators endeavour to develop strategies/interventions/actions/tools which aim at “compensating” for this potential factor of exclusion. Even the learning to learn competence taken as a reflexive competence could be construed in these terms if we insist on it as a way of promoting inclusion: it would act as something which helps the student to ‘bridge the gap’ and to catch up on his/her studies.

But in what sense, if any, is the compensation-framework that most suitable for an interpretation of the meaning of this competence? No simple answer is available; better, the simpler the answers we indulge to, the less we manage to delve into the implications of what the compensation-framework brings with it. Indeed, the idea of compensation has an anthropological significance which is often overlooked and has, instead, to be fully recognized, elaborated on and preserved if we want to live up to the challenge of inclusion in higher education through the promotion of a reflective competence.

By “anthropological significance” I mean something very specific, namely that we can fully understand “compensation” only if we draw upon the most important trends of philosophical anthropology in the 20th century. One of the pivotal notions of this (predominantly German) tradition is precisely that of compensation, to the extent that the human being is seen as constitutively a “deficient being”, an idea that dates back to Herder (1966[1772]). In this theoretical constellation compensation stands for a fundamental characteristic of the human being who, due to his/her lack of instincts in comparison with the other animals, would be doomed to extinction, were it not for his/her ability to intervene in nature, to transform it through culture and make it an environment fit for its survival.

This train of thought, which clearly has its primary source in the great myth of Plato’s Protagora (320d–323a), allows us to establish some
important points. First, compensation is not something which sometimes supervenes upon human beings (e.g., in the case of particular deficits) but it is rooted in our very nature. We are by nature *hominis compensatores* (Marquard, 2000b). This entails draining the notion of “compensation” of any patronizing meaning. The compensatory measures, which we as educators help a person to adopt, are not the mark of any inferiority on the part of the subject to which they are addressed, but refer to a broader feature of the human condition. It is not enough to take leave of the personal tragedy theory (to draw upon a beautiful notion of Michel Oliver (1990), one of the leading scholars in disability studies) and to recognize the role of the contexts in (the risk of) exclusion; rather, we must fully capture the constitutive “deficiency” of our condition and, consequently, take any compensation, which we can deploy, as a specimen of a much wider phenomenon deep–seated in the human being–in–the–world.

As far as inclusive education related to disability is concerned, the advantage of such an approach is patent: as Odo Marquard (2000b, pp. 22 ff.) has magnificently stated, this anthropological view of what compensation means allows us to overcome any idea of human beings as *triumphierende Lebewesen*, triumphing living beings, by recognizing, instead, the constitutive “compensating” dimension of our being–in–the–world. This way, insofar as human being is not *die Krone der Schöpfung*, the crowning glory of creation, the very idea of a ladder which distinguishes different rungs (and therefore ranks) of humanity is done away with: disability comes to be seen not as a “shortcoming” in humanity but as one the possible manifestations of our general condition.

Three short qualifying remarks are appropriate: first, to lay a stress on this view of disability does not mean gainsaying the specificity of the disabled condition (from this point of view the objections of Tom Shakespeare (2006, pp. 50–51; see also Oliverio, 2013, pp. 335 ff.) to the social model, which risks dissolving the *proprium* of disability, by considering it as just another form of embodiment, are definitive). It means only providing a better philosophical framework within which we can situate and valorise the insights of the bio–psycho–social model that meritoriously tends to show that disability is a possibility of our existence. This entails — I am passing to the second qualifying remark — a re–consideration of human vulnerability as a form of
our non–triumphing but compensating nature. It would demand a lengthy argumentation to illustrate how welcome the full recognition of human vulnerability is in order to overcome the bottleneck of the modern idea of wo/man, marked by what the German psychoanalyst Horst–Eberhard Richter (1979) engrossingly called the Gottes Komplex. What I am here interested in is only to underscore how re–interpreting vulnerability in the sense of ‘compensation’ allows us better to see the former not as a sign of failure but as an exposure to the world that is the very condition of our development through constantly being affected by that which is re–appropriated and gone through and beyond: to put it in a nutshell, it means grounding our possibility to progress not in an alleged omnipotence but rather in our finitude. The third remark is more methodological: reading the notion of compensation through the philosophical–anthropological lens allows us to avoid any form of moralizing. As Marquard (2000b, pp. 18) notes, compensation is no longer seen as a Vergeltung (and, therefore, in the perspective of ‘punishment’) but as an Entschädigung (and, therefore, as something which prevents us from lapsing into possible damage). De–moralizing inclusive education is something more than simply a requirement in order to avoid patronizing attitudes (important though this is); it entails equipping ourselves with a panoply of conceptual tools which are not “mortgaged” by crypto–assumptions that in a concealed way risk perpetuating approaches unable to take into account the individual–context dynamics which is at the very basis of inclusion. Compensating is not something “given” to the individual, to fix something wrong in him/her; rather, it means re–shaping the entire constellation of which the individual and the context are the two poles. The philosophical–anthropological view I have been advocating helps us to see things in this perspective.

I have dwelt upon the case of disability but the array of notions just displayed can be profitably extended, with the appropriate qualifications, to other possible addressees of actions of inclusive education. Against this backdrop I want to show some lines along which the “anthropology of compensation” could be deployed to read the rationale of the INSTALL project. What I will do is just offer some suggestions from a philosophical–educational point of view, without any insistence
that I have fully captured the meaning of the project\(^1\). In my opinion, the recourse to a multi-modal modes, which should “consolidate the Learning to learn competence” (http://www.installproject.eu/; see also Freda et al., 2012; González Monteagudo et al., 2012; Rainone et al., 2012; Martino et al., 2012; Esposito, 2013) could be interpreted in the light of a peculiar way of construing compensation. As Marquard (2000b, p. 19) pointed out, we could translate the idea of “compensation” into that of “symbol”. The starting point of this seemingly weird translation is merely linguistic: first, if we break down the word compensation into its etymological components we have *cum–pensare*; second, if we move from the Latin to the Greek we can replace *cum–* with *syn – and *–pensare* (understood as “to throw in the scales”) with *–ballein*. Compensating would be then a form of symbolizing. Along with this linguistic suggestion there are, however, more substantial theoretical reasons to view compensation as a form of symbolization. In German philosophical anthropology, the human being as a deficient being principally compensates through culture. The entire realm of cultural production (in its broadest meaning as any domain of the symbolic activity which comes to form a second nature permitting the human being to cope with his/her situation of inferiority in comparison with the other animal species which are equipped with defined instinctual apparatuses) is therefore a way for the human being to respond to a constitutive condition of deficiency. *Homo compensator* and *animal symbolicum* are two ways of seeing and naming the same phenomenon.

But this has an interesting implication in this present reflection: one of the chief merits and one of the most ingenious insights of the INSTALL–project as a project of inclusion could be that by working on the symbolic dimensions of the human experience (of the students involved) it is able to engage with the issue of compensation at its very root and to fully embrace the existential and conceptual density which clusters around the question of the inclusion of students in their studies.

Indeed, if the disciplines (= the academic studies) as a part of

\(^1\) As I am not directly familiar with the activities carried out, I am compelled to mention aspects as I have understood them by looking up the presentation on the official website and by reading some articles and papers of the scholars involved in the project.
culture are themselves a form of “compensation” — according to the anthropological perspective I am idiosyncratically drawing upon — the question is not only how to usher students into the disciplines through “didactic” compensatory measures (important as it surely is) but how to introduce students into that anthropological dynamics of compensation/symbolization which gives rise to culture.

In this sense workshops which operate on the student’s symbolizing powers at different levels can have a far–reaching impact: they can enable students to become aware of their being symbolic beings and, therefore, constructors of culture. The world of culture as it is embodied in the disciplines could, then, be experienced as something which operates — possibly at a more sophisticated level — according to a dynamics analogous to that which they experience in the workshops (that this would require, however, also an effort on the part of the professors to present the disciplines as “symbolic” — and therefore “compensating” — constructions, and not as taken for granted bodies of knowledge, can not be passed over in silence).

The strength of the INSTALL–project as I suggest interpreting it in the light of philosophical anthropology resides in its radicalism. It does not confine itself to providing some helpful tools, strategies and methodological devices for inclusion but allows us to think of inclusion, as far as it is constitutively linked with the question of compensation, at one of the most fundamental levels: it allows us to understand and operationalize the idea that “compensation as symbolization” is not external to academic studies (in the sense that it intervenes only when students fail) but it represents the very core of the studies understood as the human endeavour to cope with human finitude and deficiency.

In this sense it is not far–fetched to think of the INSTALL–methodology as a possible introduction to the academic studies generaliter, for all students, bar none. One of the chief principles of inclusive education would be borne out once again, namely that what is originally devised for disadvantaged ‘categories’ is actually, insofar it is genuinely inclusive, something from which each and every one can

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2. It is hardly necessary to point out that my interpretation does not take into account the psychological dynamics of mentalization as it is promoted within the project. It is rather an attempt to consider the project from a different (but hopefully fruitful and convergent) perspective.
take advantage (Valerio et al., 2013). Which is another way to say that we are all compensating beings.

If I have attempt to provide a (first and provisional) answer to the question from I have started (what is the framework within which to situate the learning to learn competence as a reflective competence?), one thornier question emerges: is the idea of “learning to learn” the most adequate to capture what is at stake in the mission of including underachieving/disadvantaged students through the mobilization of reflectivity? Or are some possible misgivings in order, as far as the embracing of the perspective presiding the EU documents about the key–competences is concerned? To answer these questions we will be compelled to start again our theoretical navigation and even re–construct some parts of the conceptual platform thus far arranged.

2. Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz and learnification

By investigating what the role of philosophy can still be in an epoch when the sciences are steadily progressing and “snatching” from it that competence in most areas of knowledge that previously belonged to philosophy, Odo Marquard coined the engaging, tongue–twister sounding expression Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz. I am not interested in exploring Marquard’s meta–reflection on philosophy nor will I take the word in its genuine meaning (according to which “Kompetenz” has rather a juridical meaning and refers to “jurisdiction”, “responsibility” etc.). I will, instead, translate it literally — the competence in compensating the incompetence — and understand “competence” in the educational sense. Is not such a competence that which we appeal to whenever we insist on reflectivity as a way of supporting underachieving students? In a nutshell (and, therefore, with a grain of simplification): students show an incompetence (in learning subject–matters) which should be compensated through reflectivity by means of which they are enabled to become competent in learning because they become competent in learning to learn. Put this way the depiction of what happens risks being objectionable: how (or in what sense) can someone, who is incompetent to enter a knowledge domain through learning, turn into an effective learner only because s/he reflectively acquires a competence in learning to learn, that is,
because s/he develops « the ability to pursue and organise one’s own learning, either individually or in groups, in accordance with one’s own needs, and awareness of methods and opportunities » (European Parliament, 2006)? Is this competence sufficient when we have to do with complex cultural constructions — such as the disciplines — which require a familiarization with new lexica, procedures, concepts etc.? And, if it is not sufficient, in what sense could it be preparatory?

The last question has already been answered earlier when I pointed to what seems to me a peculiarly radical strength of the INSTALL project, namely installing the student into the fundamentally compensating, that is, symbolizing dynamics which gives rise to cultural production as a way of overcoming human deficiencies. The problem I would like to raise is whether the framework of the “learning to learn” paradigm is that most adequate to understand this work of the installing into the cultural dynamics of compensation as symbolization.

In order to engage with this issue I want to refer to Gert Biesta (2006; 2010) and to his attack on learnification. In his view over the last few years,

the language of education has largely been replaced by a language of learning. Although this “new language of learning” has made it possible to express ideas and insights that were rather difficult to articulate by means of the language of education, other aspects of our understanding of what education is or should be about have become far more difficult to articulate (Biesta, 2006, p. 14).

This is the process he calls learnification. According to him there are

two problematic aspects of the new language of learning. One issue concerns the fact that “learning” is basically an individualistic concept. It refers to what people, as individuals, do — even if it is couched in such notions as collaborative and cooperative learning. This stands in stark contrast to the concept of “education” that always implies a relationship [...] The second problem is that “learning” is basically a process term. It denotes processes and activities but it is open — if not empty — with regard to content and direction (Biesta, 2010, p. 18).

I am going to re-orient Biesta’s insightful remarks (by submitting them to a hermeneutical bending) on the basis of the interests of
In this paper. Insisting on the limits of the individualistic and process character of the notion of learning can be interpreted as a healthy admonishment against any attempt to imprison the dynamics of the compensation as symbolization in a horizon that risks defusing its potential. Without any specific reference to the INSTALL project (as aforementioned, I have not attended any of the workshops), but speaking in general, we can state that any educational action which confines itself to helping people become aware of their own individualistic mental processes risks being ineffective, if referred to the support for study, to the extent that in studying, in accessing the disciplines as bodies of knowledge, we have to do with a form of transcendence. Indeed, the idea of transcendence is inscribed into the very notion of compensation as symbolization. Culture as the set of “symbolic compensations” which human beings create to come to terms with their deficient condition is at the same time something which closely belong to subjects and which goes beyond them. Installing students into the compensating–symbolizing dynamics should mean also making them aware of this transcendence. This entails preparing them for the experience of being taught by rather than (or at least along with) equipping them with the “learning to learn” competence. Biesta nicely remarks on the peculiarity of that experience:

The experience of “being taught by” is radically different from the experience of “learning from”. When students learn from their teacher, we could say that they use their teachers as a resource, just like a book or like the internet. Moreover, when they learn from their teachers, they bring their teachers and what their teachers do or say within their own circle of understanding, within their own construction. […] My point here is not to suggest that there is no place for such learning from teachers […]. My point rather is, that to learn from someone is a radically different experience from the experience of being taught by someone. When we think, just at the level of “everyday phenomenology”, of experiences where we were taught something — where we would say, always in hindsight, that “this person has really taught me something” — we more often than not refer to experiences where someone showed us something or made us realise something that really entered our being from the outside (Biesta, 2013, pp. 456–457. Emphasis added).

The being taught by implies a kind of exposure (to use again a concept I have deployed in the previous paragraph), a being affected by something which transcends the “egoic” insularity of one’s own learn-
ing processes. It is important not be misled: what is fundamental is the recognition of this event of transcendence occurring in every act of education (insofar as it is distinguished from learning) and not the fact that “the position of transcendence” is occupied by the teacher (ibidem). In other words, what is pivotal is the valorisation of an encounter with a “transcendence” (which can be also that of the disciplines and does not need to be that of a teacher/professor). And this is also the encounter with a resistance:

From the perspective of the student teaching thus brings something that is strange, something that is not a projection of the student’s own mind, but something that is radically and fundamentally other. The encounter with something that is other and strange — that is not of one’s own making — is an encounter with something that offers resistance (and we could even say that it is an encounter with the very experience of resistance). Such an encounter, so I wish to suggest, is of crucial educational significance if it is granted that education is not a process of development of what is already “inside” nor a process of adaptation to what comes from the “outside”, but is an ongoing dialogue between “self” and “other” (in the widest sense of the word “other”) in which both are formed and transformed — a process through which we come “into the world” […] and the world comes into us (Biesta, 2012, pp. 42–43).

The ongoing dialogue to which Biesta refers is the very core of any process of inclusion, which consists in a co-evolution of the individual and the “other” (that could also be a context). If we stick to the learning to learn paradigm with its individualistic overtones, everything risks happening only within the individual, while what we as educators should aspire to is to equip the individual with the resources to enter the dialogue with what potentially excludes her/him.

Leaving the stratosphere of philosophical reflection and approaching the level of praxis, it can be stated that the “loosening” (if not the abandonment) of the learning to learn paradigm and its replacement by (or at least integration with) the learning to be taught by (= to be receptively open to the experience of a transcendence and resistance and able to enter a dialogue which can trigger off an evolution also of what in the beginning is experienced as an “outside”) would imply that the work on the compensating–symbolizing dynamics such as it can be developed in workshops with students is but one side of a coin, the other being a work with the professors as the experts of the disci-
Disciplines who should be helped to escape from the ‘disciplinary slumber’ to which they very often seem to succumb and should be enabled to re-invent their teaching methods in order to enter that dialogue which inclusion constitutively is. It is in this triangular relationship, which involves students, professors and mediators (Canevaro, 2006; 2008), that is, educationalists and psychologists who support the installing of both students and professors into the compensating–symbolizing dynamics, that inclusion in academic studies can be actualized in the contexts of higher education.

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Learning difficulties students, educational border challenges. Beyond violence and nearer a perfect peace in Colombia

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Abstract

When thinking about social violence is to convene harrowing images, in fact, violence affects the development of community life, life expectations, future options, institutional trustiness and formative proposals; which rigors disturb the academic performance with a probable scholar dropout and a painful disbelief of what the educational act and the humanity itself brought.

In the case of Colombia, armed violence and the presence of subversive groups, right-wing paramilitaries, criminal gangs, drug cartels and the state security forces themselves, generate a high threat. This manifests itself in kidnappings, extortion, murders, people being wounded and disabled, and other oppression and destruction dynamics. As if internal atrocities were not enough, terrorist acts or individual actions in many parts of the world, which kill unsuspecting visitors in malls, theaters, universities, military sites, and airports, are also witnessed. That is to say, a global violence that is even homogenized in its aims, and ends up having an impact on Colombian education.

These extreme conditions that are displayed on a daily basis — either by the media or through direct contact — undoubtedly affects all educational actors, where many possibilities of school and university students are violated.

Much intelligence, patience and ability are required to generate languages for these young people to overcome their academic processes with good performances and not dropout their training stage, despite the violence and the virtual impossibility of a perfect or perpetual peace.

From the voices of some teachers in Manizales, Colombia, — innovative teachers who manage to keep their students interested in the pursuit of knowledge and

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have enhanced their academic performance — it will be shown in the present investigation — that despite the violence, it is possible to build pedagogical strategies and special moments in the classroom to counteract the stigmas of violence and equip students with a better understanding of reality. An ethical commitment to teach for life, going beyond teaching a seminar. Despite violence in Colombia, there are special border pedagogical strategies from which we can continue to learn.

Keywords: Social violence, academic performance, language, principle of hope, fear, life training, life stories.

1. Introduction. Violence is human, all too human

There are advertisers who convert the superfluous in need; there are teachers who advance in the opposite operation.

Julián Serna (2013, p. 62)

It is powerful that advertising make things we do not need as something necessary, things such as goods or services that might hinder us to the extent that, in many pedagogical acts, what is important becomes superfluous. What is important in the training exercise, no doubt cannot be knowledge, it must be the subject, the human constellation with his strength and weaknesses, his dignity and irresolution, with his utopias and dystopias.

Knowledge will be the means to a long conversation, for a human interrelation, to imagine and build futures, but it will never be the end. However, this values disruption where there is a cultural, social, intellectual, and knowledge capital; which are expressions where the human being stops being an end and starts becoming the means for the capitalists to keep on accumulating and carrying humans through their defeatist and segregating paths. For sure, we have not reached the limit of capitalism’s pornography when it has to do with expressions, the following are to be “mind capital and neuronal capital”.

Wars are the biggest capital generators, as those accumulating wealth and money collectors do not care about suffering, where

1. Life stories of Luz Helena Patiño, Juan Carlos Rodríguez, Diego Villada, Jaime González, Germán Guarín, Guillermo Orlando Sierra, teachers and researchers in universities of Manizales, 2013.
Colombia is a good example. A country with a deep violence that has come to unleash 30,000 murders a year, 14,746 in 2012\(^2\), which causes are multiple, those ones such as drug trafficking, intolerance, social inequality, endemic poverty, widespread guerrilla violence, paramilitary violence and State violence, the latter not being called explicitly as war so that it does not call international attention. This expression lead us to understand ourselves as a violent and mean society, which is also close to those tyrannical rituals of those Latin American, Asian and African dictators. Ospina (2012a, p. 69) specifies: « The case of Colombian society during the last 50 years is the case of a criminal State that criminalized the country », that is, a State looking for criminals where it already knows will ever find them, and taking for granted that most of us are criminals. From this asymmetry, the State itself becomes a criminal, as shown through political arrests, tortures, disappearances, murders, telephone and electronic epinionages, political corruption and the so-called “false positives” discovered in 2008\(^3\), where the army massacred innocent people and falsely reported them as if they were subversives or criminals; and which began happening since around 2002. However, the government has never accomplished to take the authentic criminals who have enriched themselves by means of war; even warmongering ministers and presidents have managed to keep the war on, and whose children would never go to a combat zone; instead, they use intermediaries for the big war commerce. Thus, that we are a nation that historically and yet in 2014, invests more money in war than on education or health services.

All this ratifies us how criminal Colombian State has been — and still is? —. It is under these irregularities that Colombian education has had to move during the last 100 years — and not going further — without wanting to ignore the influence other violent movements around the world and people who decide to immolate themselves and killing people around has also had. What about the education, which decides to be interested in the disciplinary knowledge and forgets about these violent daily happenings? A question to be issued to the academic


reality edition which Jaeger or Socrates would stress from the humanity formative ideal. In the case of Colombia, armed violence has been present through subversive groups, ultra-right-winged paramilitaries, criminal bands, drug trafficker cartels, and the State security forces themselves; generating a high threat which is manifested as kidnappings, extortions, homicides, wounded and crippled people, and other oppression and destruction dynamics. Besides, and not being enough with these inner fierceness; terrorists acts are presented in many places of the world, as well as individual actions where unaware visitors in shopping malls, theaters, universities, military precincts or airports are murdered; i.e., a globalized and homogenized violence whose aim finishes impacting Colombian formation.

Colombian violence has made pedagogical processes very particular and that the training border challenges constitute a daily basis exercise. Nonetheless, despite the violence, economic hardship and corruption, education remains the place where the unthinkable is possible. How to teach for life, for a utopia with so many didactics of death? Which didactics are the ones to confront such pain, corruption, violence and learnt hopelessness?

Diego Villada, one of the interviewed teachers indicates, « Colombian violence has several components, the necessary violence as a way of living », as if it were a manifest destiny, a vital need of the existence of violence, or maybe deep inside, it indicates we are too limited that we cannot understand ourselves out of the death and destruction machines. From the latter, Ospina (2013, p. 7) directs, « Since half of century ago, Colombia has lived one of the most dramatic political conflicts in the Western Hemisphere, with hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of internal refugees and victims, millions of immigrants to other countries and an increasing deterioration of the institutional order ». Colombia a peaceless territory, a nation that since its Cry of Independence in 1810 has not known peace, because of vengeance, internal hatred and polarization, has made citizens to move from violence to war, from social confidence to the contempt of their own people.

Diego insists, « The America concealment has made us violent » he decides to call “concealment” instead of “discovery” of America. Is that a discovery? Didn’t we ever exist in America right before European disembarked? Diego also explains that « history of violence is
taken to the psychic structure » i.e., « it is not only a social historical issue, but it is also loaded in the mental system, it is rationalized and even inherited », he also states that, « Any act of domination on one culture, breeds real or symbolic violence reactions ». Colombia and Latin America have been dominated, and almost submitted either by the former Spanish, English, and Portuguese colonizers; or by the modern economic colonizers. In addition, as familiar as it seems or does not to us, every colonizer breeds violence; impose its rigors and logics, which tend to ignore its colonized ones.

Somehow, local violence is based on the boundless social violence, which as Germán states, « Colombian violence is part of the global violence, of the universal violence as a product of the Western civilizing barbarism ». All this violence, local–universal, and civilization–barbarism has not left education well situated, says González (2011, p. 27):

A journey through the history of American education could give us a picture of what has been becoming; low economic investment, illiteracy of the so-called triad, i.e., to read, to write and to perform mathematical operations; emerging technological illiteracy; compelling desire to impose a dubious nationalism heroes, endemic violence; problems for accessing to basic and university education; teacher demotivation; student demotivation and scholar dropout.

You can tour encyclopedias, history books from the last and recent centuries where there is no doubt about Colombian violence and its impact on educational processes, and whether you like it or not; it turns education into a fort and a challenge for teachers, because students have higher risks of not understanding their training chores and, they will always be encouraged to defect from their educational institutions, to flee or join violent actors. As confirmed by Guillermo Sierra, who is the “Universidad de Manizales” principal, « We, today’s Colombians are the sons of the war; hence we have war tactics and didactics ». This is not minor, because beginning to recognize our war has not been easy. Only until 2013, the President of the Republic Juan Manuel Santos decided to apologize for the crimes of State and for all the consequences of this war that no government before wanted to accept. At least, we are clearer, we have and we are participating in a war that affects living beings and their natural environment and,
therefore, requires a lot of intelligence to overcome, learning to say words from the heart. That role of thinking in a Colombia for the peace, after having suffered an extensive war, is a challenge that any teacher committed to humanity must assume.

2. Critical path (method). Thinking of learning difficulties.

As critical path, the voices of teachers who have created teaching strategies in difficult contexts are attended. In addition, their life experiences and life stories are attended, where they explain their pedagogical and learning practices.

An interpretation under the quadrant, text, context, actors and authors is made. The reported experiences, relationships with violence and implications in the process of confronting the difficulties of learning are reconsidered.

— Text: it has to do with life stories. Those stories made by some academics in Manizales and the texts that emerge from reality itself;
— *Context*: it corresponds to the conjunctions, places and times, for this case; the Coffee Triangle in Colombia, from the life experiences of teachers in the last ten years.

Colombia is a country in South America with 45 million inhabitants and which has 32 departments. For our case, it is Manizales city with about 432,000 inhabitants, which is also the capital city of Caldas Department, and from where this teaching duties perspectives are made when violence settles them towards training border experiences⁴.

— *Actors*: these are teachers and students. Those teachers that from their pedagogic relation undertake small classroom and life variations that allowed them to take big leaps of thought in their students and themselves as sensible–thinking beings.

— *Authors*: it refers to the relation with theorists, with the greatest humanity writers, with the thinkers who have researched and suggested alternatives to the problem addressed.

— *Contours*: they are distinguished as those scenarios surrounding the context. It does not imply geographical or cultural limitation because they are quite heterodox in its origins and demonstrations. In the contours regions and thoughts borders appear, as the Greeks used to call, the Hyperboreans. Every hyperborean thinker goes beyond its culture, its context, the known limits, that kind of thinker that does not feel well by living in homogenous standards.

— *Researcher*: it is identified as the person responsible for addressing the problem, immersed in the reality that surrounds the subject, but rather attracted by the Hyperborean world. As it can be seen,

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the researcher has his own semantic, political, aesthetic and linguistic burdens, but with the idea of not giving any concessions to the ethical world, and sensing a little that humanity has been obsessed with aesthetics not understood as creation, but as beauty, and in this respect having forgotten about ethics.

Through these scenarios, this current research is moving as it is always looking or realizing educational dynamics that allow students with learning difficulties, go beyond violence or closer to a perfect peace.

2.1. We are what we are, “I am who I am”

We are who we are, is the pluralistic of the biblical sentence “I am who I am”, we reveal with some divinity, some mortality, some evil, some hope, some salvation, some erotic, we reveal all wish to be better, superior and even unworthy.

Learning difficulties and scholar dropouts interpenetrate and even confuse between them. The fact is that both make students to abandon their training process. It happens that some subjects contrast with the environment, do not adapt to the tribe, which suggests Bacon, determines a marginalization. There are differences that we cannot read, Germán explains, « There are certain individuals who don’t fit the conditional forms of knowledge, don’t fit to the same social experiences ». Just in that limbo, in that space, is where socially committed teacher are inserted to avoid scholar dropouts.

In the case of Colombia exists SPADIES (System for preventing the desertion of higher education in Colombia) studying the problem, does not mean that fixed. The university dropout in Colombia from first to tenth semester is 45% as shown in the chart.

In the case of Colombia exists SPADIES (System for preventing the desertion of higher education in Colombia) studying the problem, does not mean that fixed. The university dropout in Colombia from first to tenth semester is 45% as shown in the chart.
A 45% of university students dropout is a number that in itself scares us, it is also a perplexing number. What is happening to these young people lives? Who can provide them with a decent employment? How many of them are integrating violent groups? What expectations, what sort of future in the country can we have with these alarming rates? Dropouts are influenced by multiple aspects, such as the economic situation, the violence (forced displacement, murder, drug trafficking, armed pressure groups), the urgency of working, professional unemployment and the same disregard from universities to address the problem.

Then, from this reality, from life stories, text, context and actors, we deal with authors and reality to interpret and signify these experiences. An interpretation is a new perspective on the same, implies another place of enunciation. To do this, we rely on Ricoeur (2006, p. 103) when he states, « The interpretation updates the meaning of the text for a reader of the present. The continued appropriation being the concept to update the meaning when this is aimed at someone ». We are interested in updating the meaning of these teaching experiences and their status today, their present, a present that moves among violence, political war and hopes for Colombian peace talks, but understanding that these training bets delivered by teachers mobilize us, and are beyond violence and nearer an innocent idea of a perfect peace.

3. Results. Low and high peaks of the crisis

There are high and low peaks of crises or learning difficulties, upper and lower limits that show no comparable levels, but are important references to the life stories of teachers. Germán explains « local and universal violence influences on academic performance », this difficulty is stressed by Guillermo when he says, « It is necessary to recognize ourselves as sons of the war », he suggests then, that this is a way to recognize ourselves and concrete teaching and learning processes, perhaps, because by denying the adverse records as a society, we become less viable to correct them.

We cannot confuse education for pure society idea, the humanity has been and is violent in many of its forms of existence, hence an educator must know that humanity passes mud to the ragweed with
disconcerting ease.

Education has been a tool for large destroyers of humanity, paradox, not to ignore, exist and have been existed perverse educational proposals, as Ospina remains (2008, p. 192) « Even the officials of the Inquisition had educational methods, Nazi Germany published booklets to teach anti-Semitism, there are schools of suicide bombers, there are educational models made to perpetuate racial discrimination, social exclusion », and even Hitler himself boasted of being a good father and giving good education to their children and the German people. Other examples in Latin American, European, Asian and African dictatorships have made education their flag of submission.

4. Learning difficulties

Little knowledge of oneself

“Know thyself” as Socratic flutter or as the Judeo–Christian response “I am who I am” implies to be aware of our surroundings, be aware of the problem, but primarily involves one of the biggest bets of the teachers interviewed, for them, Know thyself, both teacher and student, is to know that we cannot continue in conspiracy solitudes, and Know thyself lets us recognize what motivates the other to generate alternative pedagogies; know oneself is an act of love itself that leading to comprehend the other as an act of love and deep hope for humanity.

To avoid falling into the fear of violence, to inquire about the learning problems of students, it must be taken into account the following minimum conditions of pedagogical relationship that teachers give us: Know thyself, to have discipline, organize space, time appropriation, to read, taking problematizing questions, to have feelings and a necessity of world, to be known as an act and a potency, not justifying through violence, doubting on the perfect peace, to maintain alerted against conformism, recognizing us in freedom, to have and be a collectivized project, giving space to creativity, to see the error as a way of learning, and listening with love, among others.
Intellectual indiscipline

« Young people having learning problems have a low intellectual discipline », explains a teacher in Armenia. While, there is an agreement that learning difficulties mostly happen because of a low reading discipline, amorous or family tensions also affect and are often overlooked in the academic corners, even by knowing the trauma that can be left and the same intellectual indiscipline. Moreover, the notion of time is diluted in students with learning difficulties. Luz Helena\(^6\) indicates that students with low academic performance « don’t have clear concepts about time » and, as if it were insufficient, she adds, « Students don’t like to read what their teachers suggest, they don’t read enough and then, they believe they have learning problems ». Indiscipline is what promotes them to read, the lack of clarity on their times together with their many academic breaches. « Quite a few teachers teach their students to control their times, to order themselves on their times, sometimes, I make a pause in my seminars to ask them for their time misunderstanding and their answers are curious, e.g., “Teacher, time doesn’t exist” ». This Pereira’s teacher experience puts us towards a temporal indiscipline, which also affects the intellectual one.

Wars make us undisciplined and force us to find gaps, to move stealthily at the edge of the law, the very edge of the great ethical demands, because preserving life is what is first; the rest are just interstellar wanderings. « We are undisciplined because our politicians have never been wise to think and help us build a serious education », said a teacher from Manizales.

Of course, the discipline that have been questioned on students with learning disabilities is the same as what we have taught, because societies in war are societies in a hurry and having no time to be planned, very undisciplined societies; its discipline is the indiscipline.

Emotional enigmas

When it has to do with emotions, current humanities go forward through a stone pavement world, « emotions world is an enigma we do

\(^6\) Luz Helena Patiño and Juan Carlos Rodríguez integrated the Student Support Program at the Manizales University.
not comprehend in the academy, but that merchants know very well, just watch a TV commercial to get astonished on how they manipulate us» states a teacher in Pereira. Young people are interested in show business rather than studying, their emotional world has a wider connection with artists and sport players than with their teachers, who are rational in excess or smile-less stones, they do not give students respite, and accuse or disown them, or give any credit to the emotional world, what makes the relation student–teacher even more complex.

Students with low academic performance often have emotional problems, Luz Helena explains, «They have emotional voids that affect the academic process» within the emotional world recognizes Juan, «students suffer from family pressure demanding them not to fail any seminar which creates anxiety, fear and makes it difficult for them to learn», inside this context describes Luz Helena, «young people link family problems with academic difficulties and start thinking they don’t know how to study»; we are related, we depend on what others empower in us, on who loves us or damages us, hence «man needs to be accepted, to belong to a group, to love and be loved» (Feldman, 1998, p.296).

In the academy, there is no love for knowledge but an absolute tightness for being someone or something, «learning difficulty students I’ve had, want to be something, but wanting to get everything easily, they get upset emotionally in an unthinkable way, they turn themselves violent», as explained by teacher from Armenia.

Youth emotional enigmas are changeable, ambivalent. However, homogenizer elements turn emotionally complex for students, «I have a student (girl) with learning difficulties, one day she wants to be Madonna, the next day Mother Teresa, and then a TV show presenter, other ones want to be Barbies, as if she really existed in bone and flesh. They are emotionally fragile and that makes their learning process even more difficult» as referred by a teacher in Armenia.

*Physical appearance focusing, and not in the knowledge*

There is a devastating focus on physical appearance, to the extent of fitting the international runway physical measures, and having a body as the one from their favorite actor or singer is a priority for this learning difficulty students.
« When I talk to students having learning difficulties, they soon stop in their physical appearance and the lack of self-confidence it generates them. They are not interested in knowledge but in their look>, states a professor in Pereira.

Usually, the world of emotions implies a body shape for some people. Moreover, young people get stressed with their training process when they feel reflected and observed by others. Juan refers « Having doubts about their body shape, their aesthetic presentation, makes students vulnerable », in addition, the known peer difficulties would eventually affect their academic performance and trigger training process dropouts. Students tend to be more focused in their physical appearance, they are interested in looking attractive, reflecting towards the other as someone beautiful or handsome, and except for a few of them; knowledge goes to a second place.

*Low Self-esteem and radical shyness*

There is a language–like indicating us being happy or friendly–like, being willing and open to the outside, however, some real linguistic logics emerge by turning young people extremely shy and low Self-esteem. « It seems to be a lie but, when one see them chatting in–between them they seem to be more relaxed and very opened, but if they have to talk to a strange person or a teacher about precise points on the seminars, a low self–esteem and shyness are incredibly remarkable ».

Some students are insecure from what they are and even shy in the way they relate personal and intellectually, as Germán says, « Shyness, most difficulties when relating with others are part of the big learning problems in the classroom ».

Such manifestations becomes more critical because, as Juan says, « There is no transition from school to university ». Students reach a new training area without sufficient information; it is as if they went from the beach to the open sea without knowing much about swimming. They come from a more practical world to another with a more theoretical density.

The low Self-esteem and shyness is most notable among disadvantaged economic classes, explains Juan, « Young people with financial difficulties are more insecure and shy than their peers ». Shyness
makes them vulnerable to take risky decisions and even makes them turn violent and, many of them drop out of the education system.

*Insufficient linguistic notions to understand, interpret, analyze, argue and propose*

The so–called PISA test, which results have been just known in 2014, ranks Colombia in the last place. And as written in a famous Colombian magazine “Brutish among brutish”?, and as gross as the expression might sound, we can discern that it not only affects young people with learning difficulties, but also to the bulk of the student population. The case is that it has a major thoroughness, and it is more highlighted in some of them than in the others.

Students’ linguistic world having deficient academic processes is usually low. The levels of conversational scope are very efficient with their partners and less assertive with their teachers. « It is not that they neither comprehend, interpret, analyze, argue nor propose; they do of course. But they don’t want to research, they don’t want to endeavor in being better linguistically, since they’re easygoing », as exposed a teacher from Armenia.

There are difficulties for adapting from a transition between high schools to universities, and there isa quantum leap that students fail to resolve. Luz Helena exposes, « Students access universities with in interpretative, argumentative and purposeful skills flaws ». They were not taught in the basic levels, nor the Colombian educational system itself has made any emphasis in such process, hence the great accent has been the memorization, a sort of bank formation where it is expected that students retrieve knowledge in a way teachers are expected to receive, and that does not necessarily coincide with their surrounding reality.

Dictionaries, the linguistic world of these young people is low and easy to infringe, therefore their reads and listening are partial, decontextualized, with fewer possibilities to fully interpret, leading them not to argue fluently and providing an underprovided and provocative

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linguistic world.

Spatial disorganization and different mixed logics

Students with learning difficulties confuse cardinal points and lose interest in what is happening in the nearest context. Diego Clarifies, « young people have laterality and visual–spatial location problems and that affects the understanding », many of nowadays students do not distinguish north from south, they also confuse the continents and within these, the countries. Germán indicates: « When a student is having learning difficulties, it is because of not dominating his teacher logics, those linguistic and space logics ». Those temporary, spatial and communal teacher logics, may conflict with those students having disorganized and mixed logics.

Not because there are logics for organizing the disparate, different or unequal world indicates that there are mistakes, but they lead to imbalances that not all subjects are able to address and confront with assertive resolutions.

« They quickly forget where they leave things, their logics are continuously around defending from and attacking others, blaming their teachers, parents, partners and the institutions themselves of their inadequate processes », as a professor from Armenia refers. Not accepting their responsibilities or evading commitments are premises from those students with learning difficulties.

The spatial location, i.e., their place in the world is not clear for these type of students; hence, they always require powerful teachers enhancing their capabilities.

Shadows of violence

« Talking about violence in Colombia is as natural as discussing about football », describes a teacher from Pereira. Clearly, violence has been naturalized and we have come to believe that it little influences on school performance, this exclusive, irrational and irresponsible naturalization.

Violence spread sits shadows, Colombian violence has been very strong, and therefore, a physical or psychological violation does not have the importance and social connotation as in anywhere else. Diego
explains that phrases such as, “the rod and spoil” makes us violent in a classroom, « Isn’t there more violence than in inequity »; Diego insists that there are people where the more they have, the more they accumulate, and where the poorer are getting even poorer. This affects self–esteem and student learning interests themselves. Diego sets, « Learning difficulties are mostly from a social order », but he does not discard physical or neuronal problems, lastly, learning difficulties are given by social adaptation.

For Germán, « School dropouts and academic performance are a symptomatic problem of school failure, from the global violence », from a certain symbolic violence in the academic act itself.

Guillermo tells it directly, « Because of the Colombian war we have refined symbolic devices of violence in the classroom ». Not hiding and recognize that there are shades of violence that affect the learning process and affecting dropouts, has been one of the key steps of these teachers. The violent society becomes from his gut, which tells us acutely Guillermo « As we are in the street, in rural settings or in football stadiums, we are deployed in the classroom, in our case: violence ».

Much violence in Colombia, as Juan explains, « because of belonging or having belonged to an armed group, creates difficulties for students in their learning processes », the fact, is that he integrates an armed because there are few job opportunities or little prospect of further study; because education itself worries a little about war and much on expertise. As we were asked by Ospina (2012b, p. 31):

> How to overcome a time when education is at risk of being just a business, where excellence in education is designed to perpetuate inequality, where formation has a labor interest?

> Education as a business, not as s service, has drawn greater distances between economic classes, which is another form of violence, a symbolic abuse.

*Real and symbolic abuse*

In a two centuries of unrestrained violence country, where there are all kinds of abuses and which are pertaining to the agendas, and
therefore, academic population symbolic and physical abuse are less 
observed over and over, but not completely overcome, ending up by 
being accentuated in those young people with learning difficulties, and 
as usual, with those ones coming from depressed economic classes.

The symbol represents the object and replaces it in its absence, 
then; there is a symbol behind authoritarianism, an almost undeniable 
power that we cannot always determine. The symbolic power is a 
hidden power that is carried out with the complicity of those who do 
not want to know or may not know they are suffering it. When power 
is already known and a stepping aside was not made, it is because its 
ability to impose is superior to the desire itself of pulling it away, or 
discarding it.

No fear of murky waters as Guillermo indicates, « From teaching 
acts we can make symbolic kidnapping and other abuses, the problem 
is that we have naturalized it ». Kidnapping ideas and mistreating peo-
ple, involves hindering learning. However, it would not be recognized 
because of its naturalization, radicalizing even more those breaches 
because of not being identified. Bourdieu (1999, p. 224) insists:

Symbolic violence is that coercion which is instituted by a mediating ad-
hesion the dominated cannot avoid giving the dominant (and, therefore, 
the domination), when it is only disposed for thinking it and thinking in 
self or, better yet, to think of his relationship with him and, of knowledge 
instruments he shares with him and, not being more than an structure 
incorporated form of the domination relationship, making them seem as 
natural.

Thus, student is subject to the power of the teacher who as a 
symbol, executes a capacity of submission triggering in many cases, 
symbolic abuse and the dropping out of the training process.

Comfort excess and a few need of the world

« Young people with learning difficulties, I clarify not all of them but 
a vast majority, have no desire or need to serve society, they have 
some sort of comfort », says a professor from Armenia. One of the 
human assumptions is that we are an act and a potency for many 
deployments, but we also have the desire and necessity required. If 
we have no need of the world, a society urgency, we become less
communal and somewhat incomplete. « I usually insist students to make their life plan where they visualize the world they want, one better than the current », says another teacher from Pereira.

Despite the violence, there is too much comfort in the current youth that may hinder their own desire to learn, Diego indicates, « There is a comfort excess in students and, mostly, don’t want to make extra class efforts ». Comfort applies to students and teachers, Germán reminds us, « it is necessary to have a deep awareness of formation, and not of information ». That deep–consciousness counteracts, partly, the comfort of not wanting to commit.

4.1. instigating pedagogical deployments

Encourage more than sentencing, lead rather than imposing are pedagogical deployments conducted by the teachers interviewed. Despite the violence in Colombia, emerge educational incentives that don’t require great technologies, but if require much sensitivity of humanity.

Something has to happen and something happens. Present’s passion

It has been released from Marramao « passion for the present, a living present », even a nervousness present, times have already ceased to be what they were from the moment we intoxicated them, when we settled in with the chronos and forget the aion, the kairos, the dynamis, the physis, the lunar solar time, the stellar human.

From Bubber, we have learned that « every man and woman represent something new », something that has never existed, our singularities are not repeated in other being; this makes us think in someone whose something has to happen with, some inedited subjects that are to produce inedited sense and meanings.

For that something new that has to happen, for the benefit of the training process, it is necessary to focus on « listening and understanding young people », as referred by Luz and Juan. In our deafness lies an epoch problem, we know that, and we do not want to listen one another. From this Lenkersdorf (2008, p. 19) tells us, « Not listening to us can be found in politics, economy, culture and society ». Hence, the place of listening in the teaching act is, oddly enough, an innovative and subversive alternative. There is much deafness on the pain of
others, on the languages of power, on dictatorial pedagogies,

Latin America is a land ripe for deafness, but not deaf either, Latin America is an exquisite deaf, is a selective deaf, one understand what is deaf because sometimes does not listen to its communities, not listening to the experiences of the people... Then we have policies from outside, external education, teaching programs and technologies from the outside, in that sense, we are a colony of the deaf (Gonzalez, 2011, p. 5).

We know more from the outside rather than from our logics to organize and get to the knowledge, than from our ways of relating. Germán reminds: « It’s amazing, we have a lot of information, we know about many books and many authors, about many concepts, but we know little about ourselves, about our daily happenings ».

_Do not confuse learning and performance._ Exposes Diego, « teachers and educational institutions confuse performance with learning difficulties », in datum, anyone can learn, but it does not mean having a good academic performance and being able to respond when the teacher wants it to, but when the student has matured the process within himself, which can take him years, and right in that moment he could approach the teacher and manifest him he finally understood, that what the teacher manifested in former years, has finally made sense. Is it possible to accept this temporary distance for the student and teacher get to understand each other?

_Helping students resolve complex situations from living._ Hence, the learning has to be in the world of life, in and with others, pervade and be pervaded, because « learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children enter the intellectual life of those around them » (Bruner, 2001, p. 83); there is an interaction in the learning that cannot be delegated and the teacher must collaborate for the students to solve the so many complex situations of our living world.

_Not pointing at anyone._ Jaime remembers a girl who had been raped, where it is established as a pedagogical patrimony « neither victimizing nor ridiculing, not pointing and boost their hopes, because when a teacher points at someone, he hurts really hard ». Classroom sarcasm can cause deep discomfort learning in the teacher–student relationship.
Listen with love. As hard as it is the case of violence or discouraged that the student is, listen, be kind, loving, mediating, understanding and dialogue are fundamental acts of academic process; explains López (2009, p. 39) good teachers are « friendly, active, loving, happy, responsible, mediators, demanding, clear and precise to expose ».

Learn and teach to observe the whole. Separate the facts, isolate the context is a cut should be done rather carefully, because we can be blind, unable to look. Kahneman (2013, p. 39) tells us « we can be blind to the obvious and blind for our blindness ». This blindness is to believe deeply in our emotions or reason and not make use of both and see with major elements de totality.

Bringing laughter and humor to the pedagogical process. Refer Bajtin:

Laughter discovered the world from a new point of view in its most lively and lucid facet. Its external privileges are inextricably linked to their inner strengths. Never laughter could be converted into an instrument of oppression, but it was always a weapon of liberation in the hands of the people (Bajtin, 1990, p. 89).

Science, many Gods and even war do not laugh, then, why is laughter excluded form the educational process? A teacher without laugh, without an enjoying capacity of his academic exercise, ends up by teasing and bothering students.

Allowing more gaming. Allow students to take classical and electronic games to the classroom, table games, field games, ICTs. « The classroom is serious, a smile-less stone. A person learns more when using a game, when laughing », recalls Julian Serna.

Weaken the truths, dogmas and overwhelm teacher’s authoritarianism. Germán indicates, « establish pedagogical relationships, not authoritarian, not the speech, the lesson and homework, the teacher has to weaken his world of truths, his authoritarianism ». All dogma and paradigm are authoritarian and exclusionary; they only reveal an own truth. In any case, a teacher cannot confused authoritarianism and discipline.

Show some discipline. « Those undisciplined students with their time and academic activities, often have learning difficulties », says Juan. Discipline means having options for the future and commit time to academic work. Discipline demands being a project, to always be
available and realize of the Kairos, of an appropriate time.

**Confronting spatial difficulties.** Teacher Jaime indicates, «I had a student with numerical and spatial disorganization, but with a lot of creativity». This has been confronted with classic walking exercises, by teaching laterality, i.e., learning how to position and move in his geographical location.

**Giving voice, allow students have their say.** «We the teachers talk much and listen little», says Jaime. The world is bespoken, but in the classroom, the word is often a teacher’s privilege as the silence a place students inhabit where he can only talk when the teacher tells them to.

**Dialoguing with the student.** Teachers are not democratic in the use of the word «there is a dictatorship in classroom», said Germán. When dialoguing, there is the other that enters in the realm of ideas, and from that linguistic interaction, learning difficulties can be overcome. When we converse, we are willing to listen, to add and not to defeat the other. When we discuss, we assume positions, abandon ideas, we use arguments as ammo, and in that warrior rigor—if anybody ever wins—someone is defeated, as opposed to a conversation.

**Enhancing skills.** «It is possible that instead of empowering individuals, teachers deprive the students skills», says Jaime. Sometimes, we do not know how to identify their skills, and because of any profissioal comprehension error, we privilege theoretical understanding, and undervalue the physical skills or other students’ talents.

**Draw up letters of agreement.** Guillermo explains: «Drawing up letters of agreement with students where they risk as maximum as possible, encouraging them to think and not to focus on minimum academic agreement». Letters of agreement locate student and motive them to do their best. It is a kind of social engagement, a social contract, and a student–teacher agreement, which determines a greater proximity promoting methods to verify the accomplishment or difficulties, so that they can jointly solve mishaps. «I don’t have students data who have dropped out because of their academic performance after having signed these agreements» as stated by Guillermo.

**Friendly and collective construction of knowledge.** Jaeger exposes (2012, p. 3) «Education is not a single property, but belongs by its nature, to the community». In Greek ideals, dignity and honor were the foundational basis of its expansion, where the subject must surrender its
commitment to communal duties, to the collective good. Collectivizing knowledge, and collectivizing the pedagogical relationship is a solitude and individuality time gift.

Validating arts for enhancing other options understanding. Paintings, music, dance, theater, poetry, stories, movies, architectures. «I recommended some painting and music to two students with learning difficulties. They were integrated into extra art classes, and by the end of the year, they were the best in the classroom and were noticeable more joyful in life», says Miguel.

Identifying the languages of power and the symbols through which they are imposed. Sánchez recaps (2002, p. 79): «The symbolic world is not a knowledge of things, words, etc., but of the memory of things or words». That memory of symbols is imposed, not only on students but also as a part of the teachers knowing world. We read and judge history, the present and the future from our symbolic worlds.

Make use of neuron tools for students to have better spatial location and laterality, as well as the understanding of the brain and body motor functioning. Diego indicates that in his formative processes he uses the called body planimetry, i.e., «Three wooden slats to explain the body and brain functioning». This has allowed him to see the real learning mobility and improvements to any area of education, «There is not a devoted time to neuroscience in the classroom, and if we don’t understand how our body from its brain center works, we will have more difficulties to recognize our learning schemes and the way of empowering us». The graph below shows three interlocking timbers that allow us to understand the body and the brain in their motor and control actions.

Validating this process is significant as it was found with some of his students, «We had no idea on how our thoughts operate. After these classes, it became easier for me to understand college seminars». Students recognize this as a stimulus and an option, which compared with other monolithic didactics, opens them some perspectives and dynamics that had not been thought before.

When this sequence of flat cuts is understood by students, it helps them identifying their spatial and fine motor difficulties, which is then supplemented by readings and group discussions, as explained Diego, no matter what the name of the seminar is, he has always decided to approach it from the neurosciences, noting with it a breakthrough
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Figure 1. Body planimetry

Body planimetry. The first two images are of the artifacts used by Diego Villada, the last snapshot shows the planes of sequences in brain body connection.

and ease in classroom exercises or in everyday practice itself.

Bet in the collectivization of knowledge. « Many learning problems are confronting by organize student groups to resolve the doubts collectively », as manifest by Guillermo. There is much individual action, which is not conjoined with a community spirit state. The known PAP, (Poor Academic Performance), also occurs by academic isolations. « Our academic solitudes impede the collective construction of knowledge », adds Germán. This hesitant present, this present in solitude, is usually solved with few variations; however, giving spaces for students to build collectively and rally behind a social contract that we have forgotten.

Board and confront personal, family, social and academic contexts. Do not confuse these planes, and do not busily make mixtures and insist that the student distinguishes and register them to find out where to work, and where to put the pedagogical accent (see Table No. 1). By knowing the location of the problem teacher can make decisions to help overcome learning difficulties, and then taking them through other sections until an exit is found together as teacher–student; because human being is fullness, not a territory of singularities. As Jaime insists in cases of Poor Academic Performance, it is necessary « to customize the process and ask the family for a more comprehensive
Understand technologies a possibility and not as an obstruction. Professor Jaime had a student with PAA «he has great skills to manage the computer and his thoughts were slow take from the pencil to paper not to the computer, hence, I adopted that he did everything in computer and was an academic success ». Do not demonize the computers world, neither delegate the whole process in these scenarios, it usually happens to emerge some motivations that only committed teachers can solve, his detail, his great strength is centered in the subject who does not learn through knowledge itself.

Teaching to build ideals and make students responsible on their own learning. Guillermo exposes, « we must give the student responsibility and control of their own learning, teach them to have an ideal and concrete actions for this. The students cannot be leaved drifting ». Each time it is found that young people have less ambitions of serving society, those certain 1960s romantic ideals have been forgotten or overcome. Today’s young people think first on their wishes and needs,
they solve then on their own, and except a few; are not interested in any major social problem. “a student with no ideals, without a life plan is more vulnerable in the academic exercise”, as manifested by a teacher from Armenia.

Teaching forgiveness, and not forgetting. Be fierce to forgive and not be meek to forget. « There is much pain that we have experienced through Colombian violence that makes learning difficult. Some forgiveness and reconciliation should go through a good act of teaching », recalls Diego, learning to forgive, learning to not generate revenge is one of the bets of these teachers, which often insist that we must never forget to avoid the repetition of unhinged facts, but do teach them to forgive.

Not having favorability. Somehow, we have all suffered violence. Indicates Jaime, « despite the violence that a student has suffered, it is best not to have favorability, not give a symptom of a social regret ». Favorability in the sense of pity or deciding to deliver outstanding ratings because of certain sympathy without having performed the own assumed understanding.

Support and provide future options from the Academy. Juan relates, « One student was stolen her computer and from there panicked. To confront her we had to calm her down and ask her to think about hers, her family, and the humanity future. After taking a few days to write it down, she reflects and decides not to victimize and restart her academic process, focusing on her future. Finally she overcame her difficulties by thinking in the future ». These actions not seem to be meaningful, help achieving to give a significant shift in how to operate and navigate the world.

Move to special needs education. Jaime insists,« There are special needs of education but not on learning. It is necessary for teachers to deliver a personal and very human touch in their teaching ». Blocking in learning is a language tension unresolved between teacher and student, « If the student does not understand, the teacher has done little to be related to », insist Diego and Guillermo.

Subject–subject relating. There is a consensus where the subject has become an object, Guillermo recalls, « It is necessary to empower individuals in their ability to be authors of their future ». Do not see student as a minimum subject ora bonsai subject; says Zemelman
(1998, p. 73): “The subject is a subject who challenges himself as the central character known as incomplete”. The one who must first feel incomplete is the teacher, then when dialoguing with student, they both will look for alternative solutions, in a together meeting from subject to subject.

Focus on the subject of knowledge and not in the knowledge where the student is treated as an object. That is why it is urgent; Guillermo demands, «Focus on subject rather than the knowledge himself». Because of an incidental academic neglect, classroom congestion, the increasing of students in the classroom. They are increasingly, a kind of robots that dictate conferences and exhibit their knowledge, fill in formats deliberately with all those missions and filled classrooms with people that end up being seen as objects.

Do not make the student subject a study and intervention object. Don’t give in to the classical duality civilization/barbarism; as in “I am civilized for change the barbarian”. Not making the school a prisoner game of dichotomous, as establish by De la Vega (2010, p. 27): «In the asylum, in prison, in school occurs a subject division — normal/abnormal, offender/good citizen, minor/child, etc. — allowing to objectify, and make him an object of study and intervention ». The student as a guinea pig, is a subject to the institutional and professorial caprices, and who ends up leaving the training process.

Learning from failure. Guillermo insists us, « forming subjects who know that failure is a success ». The modernity teaches that the only humane option is the triumph and has led to the educational process as an immovable truth. Hence, it is valid to see Astolfi (2003, p.14): « Your mistakes interested me », they interesting because we learn differently, because there is neither ultimate success nor failure; « What if learning were losing and not winning? » Ospina asks. We teach success as the only north to follow; it is possible to teach the South, south of love, hope, of reason and the south of being lost.

Teaching for life. Diego refers, « in general, current education aims to failure, not to success, despite the manuals say the opposite ». Despite education insists in forming leader women and men, what this empowers is a rivalry, individuality and isolation. In that sense, we are globalized idiots. A leader validates the other to the extent that his provisions are folded. Forming leaders may be one of the great–lost
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Western bets.

Enhancing semantics for comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, arguing and proposing. This task is usually delegated; we blame former teachers and the institutions when students are showing difficulties. This requires us to enable other dictionaries, lexicons reinvention that allows us to understand that « a deeper understanding of judgments and decisions also requires a deeper vocabulary of judgments and decisions » (Kahneman, 2013, p. 13). The world rushes, and gives us little time to take an interest in understandings, interpretations, analysis, arguments and innovation practices. Hence, it also corresponds to us.

Teaching to think slowly. Diego reminds us that « speed, brevity and lightness leads to failure » because we are required to learn fast, in short spaces and with a certain lightness, i.e., without a social component, without community projects, almost blind to the future. Diego refers, « the province has less speed and they often find it difficult to access learning ». Perhaps, among many bets, we can learn that from the provinces, from those rural areas where the cities and their speed and savagery media, have not been able to impose, and where an afternoon hangout is a gift to the soul and not a commercial.

A more human, closer, and less humiliating with his knowledge teacher. Germán says: « The teacher should weaken his truths, his dogmas, and his world views. I became better when I stopped teaching, giving lessons or requesting homework. Then I started to talk with students and build knowledge with them ». As teachers are interested in other modernity demands, we know little of the quotidian of our students.

The autobiography as a teaching revolution. Inviting students to write their autobiographies. Germán Provides, « Autobiography is the most revolutionary thing that can exist in the classroom... it enters confidence to know each other, and recognizing ourselves ». We know much from the outside, from the things, from the objects, from the greatest people of the history, from sports, showbiz and sometimes too little of ourselves. Our students, in general, turn into being none-of-them, anybody and nobody.
5. Conclusions. Among none–of–them, anybody and nobody

The Colombia violence is not the same for all. Who suffer it the most, are indigenous peoples, Afro–Colombians, farmers and communities living on the margins of cities in poverty, misery and inequitable distribution of wealth. Violence is higher in deprived areas and in any case, affects the academic. Juan reiterates, « good students when suffer direct violence or feel threatened reduce their academic performance or leave the education system ».

Education in Colombia is like any other, the most sacrificed, i.e., more money for the war, fewer teachers, fewer libraries, computers, fewer areas for sport and fewer appropriate places for the schooling event. While in Colombia there is a system where inequality and violence are not addressed with the seriousness it requires, education will be the one of the great slaughter.

The pedagogical process compels affectation, direct teacher–student relationship, more talks and less cathedra, as insisted by Germán, « Talking to the student privately and to know how he relates. Knowing about their emotional and social conditions helps us to enhance formative processes ». So, as in a vital engagement, the teacher can collaborate and team with the school to confront the difficulties of learning in the most sensitive end up by reducing the vicissitudes of daily living and making everyday existence more friendly.

It is important to realize that education can suffer dynamics to convert the subject into object and the object in the center of desire, Sánchez warns (2002, p. 256) « And so objects become symbolic when a motivation is applied: current publicity transformed advertising items into symbols ». Emotionality focus on the subject who learns, is an injury that we have not learned yet in a full extent. However, these "fierce and courageous" circumvent teachers do know how to sort out.

Therefore, moving from the grammars of poor school performance, from a calculator school map to surprising and amazing educational territories, is one of the quotidian that interviewed teachers regularly put in the classrooms with all their experience, all of their enigmatic charisma and above complaints and fears from violence. Hence, as indicated by Luz and Juan « The teacher who knows population and the subjects who he is interacting with, gain a successful
educational process, and rarely registers students with learning difficulties.

A lot of intelligence, patience and ability to generate languages for these young scholars to overcome their processes with a good performance and not decide to abandon their formative stage is required. Despite the registered violence, and the almost impossibility of a perpetual and perfect peace.

Of course, we have learned to be someone and something to forget about the none–of–them, the anybody and the nobody. Education today is a mad rush to success for turning those with learning difficulties in none of them, anybody and nobody. Hence, its already known outcome: scholar dropouts. Tell the truth is easy, living the truth is almost impossible in these societies devoted to success, intellectual tourism, and the training of fruitful professionals, but little committed to humanity, neglected and distressed of losers.

In such ethical restricted societies, with such variable life–worlds, violent and schizophrenic is a truth that we leave abandoned to the losers, the nobodies, the none–of–them, and the anybody. We forget to be that, and it is also true that because of these paradoxes we know talking about war is easy, but being alive and full of hope is almost impossible.

As we see, there are many sources, many aspects that ultimately affect school performance and force the abandonment of the educational processes. Among many reasons already mentioned, we were left in deep shadows of violence, from where we can deduce, and not because of the causes of human conflict overcome, in our case, Colombian war, where learning difficulties will be conquered; since the future is a construct and not a donation.

In a beautiful nostalgic of the future, a noble longing for the past and an extreme neglect of the present, we will always go beyond the violence and closer to perfect peace. Therefore, when deepen in those poisoned seas, those vamps forms humans have to solve problems, is a responsibility that cannot be delegated from the educational world. Hence, the need to continue learning from error and enhance the capabilities we have to insert ourselves into the human soul when we have a desire and need of the world.

You have to be affectionate in teaching–learning interaction, to weaken the not–learning bending. This requires to de–colic the af-
fections related to the western tradition which is always extremely interested and utilitarian, and where affection demands attention and submissions, that revealing and rebelling challenging us to think of human diversity with plasticity and its wandering of learning. Meaning multiculturalism as a sign of resistance and not as a cognitive style committed to homogenize to collect money and for subduing people.

Luckily, between cause and coincidence, some alternatives emerge to confront becoming and sustained learning difficulties into violence. After the illusion remaining from university as certain humanity reservation, ethics booking, and utopia reservation if you will.

So, if violence has been endemic in Colombia, and if it has generated corruption, drug trafficking, raping, murder, disappearances, learning difficulties and school dropouts. It has also forged daring teachers eager to be resolved in solidarity and betting friendship between the wars, amid the dead and massacres and that despite the deep pain suffered for all mankind, these Colombian teachers smile and emerge proud and happy for what they do, because of what they donate to humanity, because even in war and school failure, no matter how much is in question or doubted, there is also happiness.

Even there, next to the chimneys had been, including torture, in the intervals of torture something that resembled happiness... Of course, that, of happiness in the concentration camps should speak next time somebody ask me. Imre Kertesz (203, p. 173)

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Development of key competences in Polish tertiary education

A success story or a challenge?

Jolanta Maćkowicz, Ewa Pająk–Ważna

Abstract

During last few years Polish higher institutions underwent some changes due to the process of introducing European (EQF) and National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This process has brought many formal questions in Poland but also some first conclusions and good practice examples can be given. Some remarks on Polish Qualifications Framework will also be presented. Moreover, Poland is a leader in the European Union and, as regards to the rate of early school leavers, and the rate of university graduates aged 30–34.

In the article we will present some results of research on the key changes in the Polish educational system, including the current reform of tertiary education system. An important element of these changes was the adoption of an approach based on learning outcomes. Such an approach is consistent with the idea of learning throughout life, and at the same time is a fundamental principle of the integrated current national qualifications system, e.g., a clear and consistent national system of qualifications is one of the objectives which was set out in the strategic document “The prospect of learning throughout life” and adopted by the Polish government in September 2013. We will also discuss the most important problems as regards to the key competences in Polish tertiary education system.

How flexible the Polish tertiary system can be in the circumstances of students’ needs? The answer to this question will be based on some reports analyses and some interviews with academic teachers as well with university staff from two universities in Cracow.

Polish Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning effect are presented in terms of the European Qualifications Framework in the last reference report. This fact has been recognized by the Commission’s Advisory Group on the European Qualifications Framework as a model for this type of document that is worth to know by the EU countries implementing the NQF. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for higher education is characterized by the fact that learning outcomes are described in terms of knowledge, skills and personal and social competence. Unfortunately there are at least few difficulties Polish universities can experience
when developing curricula for the category of personal and social competence. The challenge for Poland, as for most EU countries, is to increase the competence of adults.

Key words: tertiary education in Poland, National Qualification Frameworks in Higher Education, Implementation of Qualification Frameworks.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the number of students in Poland has increased by almost five times; currently, more than half of the population aged 19–24 are students. It surely is a dramatic change, taking into consideration the fact that in the 1980s and 1990s, only 10% of the most talented young people from each year were admitted to studies. This trend, however, recognized and praised in many countries all over the world, entails important consequences for the process and results of education. In just a few years following 1990, the number of students in Poland has increased by five times and the gross enrolment ratio among young people aged 19–24 has exceeded 50% (T. Hejnicka–Bezwińska, 2011, p. 14). This quantitative leap concerned mostly humanities and social sciences and was possible mainly due to development of private schools and part–time studies. Following the existing form education process — as if nothing has changed — cannot yield as good results today as it did in the past, for example because the distribution of skills and level of qualifications in such broad representation of the age group is — in terms of statistics — very diverse. An acceptable option should be diversification of the education process and clear formulation of diploma requirements for each field of study, especially clear diversification of “licencjat” [B.A.] and “magister” [M.A.] diplomas. In theory, National Qualification Frameworks in Higher Education together with description of the courses of studies in the language of educational results seems a proper tool for this purpose. Such language enables us to monitor students’ progress and determine requirements one must meet to obtain a graduation diploma.
2. National Qualification Frameworks still being a challenge for higher education institutions in Poland

Implementation of Qualification Frameworks in the Polish education system is not only an international obligation resulting from the objectives of the Bologna Declaration and provisions of the Bergen Conference of 2005 attended by ministers of higher education from 46 countries or resulting from the Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council dated 23rd April 2008. This process should be seen as a tool to improve quality of education in the first place.

National Qualification Framework is a description of relations between qualifications, integrating various national qualification subsystems. Its main purpose is to improve clarity, availability and quality of obtained qualifications. NQFs have also been created for the purposes of the labour market and civil society. The fact that NQFs contain a description of hierarchical system of qualification levels is also important — each of the qualifications is placed on one of such levels.

Each of the national levels has its corresponding level in the European Qualification Framework for better comparison of qualifications obtained all over Europe.

In the European Qualification Framework, results of education are defined in the following categories: knowledge, skills, personal and social competences (Chmielecka E., 2010; 28.01.2014). Such main categories of education results should be considered jointly as being interdependent. The results described as “knowledge” include some elements of “skills”, results described as “skills” include some elements of “knowledge” and “knowledge” together with “skills” are an important component of “personal and social competences” (ibidem).

By the Regulation of the Prime Minister dated 17th February 2010 on Inter–ministerial Taskforce for Lifelong Learning, including National Qualification Frameworks was appointed. The Taskforce is composed of the following ministers: Minister of National Education – Taskforce Leader; Minister of Science and Higher Education; Minister of Economy; Minister of Labour and Social Policy; Minister of Regional Development; Minister of Foreign Affairs; Head of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister (Website of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 27.01.2014).
The most important legal acts concerning the issue of National Qualification Frameworks for Higher Education in Poland are the Act dated 18th March on amendment of the act¹ and two Regulations of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of November 2011².

3. The document entitled *The perspective of lifelong learning and National Qualification Frameworks in Poland – an attempt to achieve success*

*The perspective of lifelong learning* is a document defined as strategic, adopted by a resolution of 10ᵗʰ September 2013 by the Polish government. This document is a result of the work of the Interministerial Taskforce for Lifelong Learning, including National Qualification Frameworks. It sets objectives for policy concerning: learning in various contexts (formal, non–formal and informal), learning in all phases of life, from the earliest years to late old age, as well as identification, evaluation and confirmation of learning results (Website of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, 27.01.2014).

The issue of lifelong learning, concerning the improvement of competences and qualifications, is a part of the *Long–Term National Development Strategy. Poland 2030*, it also pursues goals set in the EU’s strategic document entitled Europe 2020. It is consistent with all the integrated development strategies, in particular with the *Human Capital Development Strategy* and *Social Capital Development Strategy*. *The Perspective* . . . is an important policy paper ensuring cohesive actions aimed at lifelong learning. Defining national strategic framework of lifelong learning policy is also one of the conditions for using European Funds in Poland in 2014–2020.

In the process of development of the idea of life–wide lifelong learning (LLL) in the EU, the following general principles of this

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¹ The exact title of the Act is as follows: Act dated 18th March 2011 on amendment of the act – Higher education law, act on academic degrees and degree in arts, as well as on amendment of some other acts.

² The exact titles of such regulations are as follows: Regulation of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education dated 2ⁿᵈ November 2011 on National Qualification Frameworks and Regulation of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education dated 4ᵗʰ November 2011 on model education effects.
policy have been established: recognition of learning in various forms and places (lifewide learning); recognition of learning in each phase of life (lifelong learning); universality — applying the LLL policy to everyone; evaluation and confirmation of learning results regardless of the place and time of learning; development of partnership for lifelong learning; placing an individual in the focus of interest of the policy; effective investments in learning.

Together with implementation of the new, effect–based learning, approach to qualifications, including National Qualification Frameworks in Higher Education, most of the policies implemented by formal education institutions put emphasis on the need of shaping creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation. In order for such changes to take effect, formal education institutions must be provided with policy autonomy, opportunity to create their own, custom–made education programs, as well as effective validation of results.

The document states that all forms of education should ensure « individual approach to learners, diversification of teaching methods and organizational forms, promotion of active and practical learning in problem–solving teams, as well as stimulate communication skills » (ibidem).

However, for years, tertiary education institutions have been witnessing a completely opposite process than the one proposed in the document — there are more and more students in groups, groups from various years are brought together due to budget cuts and many courses are taught only in the form of lectures. Promotion of active and practical learning is becoming a bureaucratic fiction.

One of the strategic goals described in the document entitled The perspective of lifelong learning is that professional education and training should prepare young people to find a job and to switch jobs in the future. In the opinion of the authors of that paper, one of the ways to achieve this is to

constantly stimulate professional ambitions and improve professional career opportunities, e.g., By establishing close relations between professional training and higher education and engaging professionals in the field of economy and civil society in school and university activities, as well as propagation of professional trainings, development of educational and professional counseling (ibidem).
4. Analysis of the opinions of academic teachers – review

One of the key changes in the Polish tertiary education system was the division of uniform magister studies in accordance with the adopted Bologna Declaration. Maria Flis — professor of the Jagiellonian University, currently in the position of Pro–Rector, expressed the following opinion on such change (Flis M., 2011, p. 39).

[...] we have failed to conduct a successful transformation of the uniform five–year magister studies. In most cases, the existing study programs have been automatically divided into three–year licencjat studies and two–year supplementary magister studies. The context of National Qualification Framework shows how far we have gone astray.

We may ask ourselves a question: how can we ensure good education quality and is this even possible in such situation? The author of the above opinion emphasized the fact that the purpose of academic institutions is to ensure teaching quality and quality requires good organization and diagnosis of the situation of the university — only then we can set proper objectives.

One of the challenges is to create an educational policy within the National Qualification Frameworks for Higher Education, this policy being a tool for improvement of education quality. The driving force of the National Qualification Frameworks are educational results that require us to think over the programs of studies (ibidem, p. 41).

NQF creates the possibility of correcting the programs of two–cycle studies. According to the Bologna Declaration, students can take up second–cycle studies in another field. Therefore, programs should be planned so that knowledge and skills at the level of B.A.

(First cycle) studies could be extended during second–cycle studies (in the area of humanities and social sciences). Second–cycle studies should broaden one’s knowledge, but in a narrower specialization.

And how the higher education institutions deal with evaluation of the results? What tools and procedures they use in the verification process? Higher education institutions mention the following aspects of evaluation of education results at individual level (ibidem, p. 43):

1. enabling the learner to monitor his progress in obtaining knowl-
1. Knowledge and skills;
2. Motivating students for harder work;
3. Providing students with necessary feedback, including comparison of student’s achievements (rankings);
4. Certification of obtained skills and providing access to higher educational paths.

The evaluation should be clear and constructive, telling the students about their strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas that need improvement.

Of course, it is relatively easy to tell what things should look like, but what does it look like in reality? How do the tertiary education institutions implement procedures to check if a given student has achieved the desired education results?

It is worth mentioning that together with a change of approach to study program planning, there should be a change in the way of conducting classes — the effort of academic teachers should focus not on conveying information, but on helping students achieve their desired education goals (i.e. Acquiring knowledge and skills and shaping attitudes) (Rydzewska–Włodarczyk M., 2011; 12.01.2014).

Mirosław J. Szymański, a recognized Polish sociologist and pedagogue, expressed his opinion on the quality of education:

Universities and colleges provide (or should provide) the economy and the society with highly qualified employees. As more and more young people are in education, also at the tertiary level, the relations between the quality of higher education and knowledge and skills of people taking up professional career in various institutions, are weakening. Mass higher education [...] must lead to deterioration of quality of studying in general and widening of the gap between the level of quality of various tertiary education institutions (Szymański M. J., 2011, p. 47).

One of the most prominent Polish philosophers, Tadeusz Gadacz from the Pedagogical University of Cracow, speaks about increasing bureaucracy that academic workers have to deal with today (Z karabinami na sznurku, interview 25.01.2014).

As soon as Polish higher education institutions entered the Bologna circle, as soon as financial resources from the EU began to flow, I had the
feeling of permanent increase of bureaucracy that is a burden not only to administrative staff, but also deans, rectors, heads of institutes and the researchers themselves [. . .] Higher education institutions have become a kind of Bentham’s Panopticon, where reporting, intended to measure effectiveness, has become nothing but permanent surveillance. There is not much left of the universities that were once based on the idea of freedom of study and trust in researchers’ competences. Freedom and trust are disappearing. More and more often, researchers take up academic initiatives outside university structures. It somewhat resembles a thing of the past – several dozens of years ago, true science had to flee from state universities because of ideological issues and today – because of bureaucracy. If opening a new seminar today entails writing numerous reports to a number of units: science quality and development, education quality, Bologna unit, unit for future and development of the university, department of finance and settlement etc., many of my colleagues come to the conclusion that it does not make sense and prefers meeting with students in private apartments.

While seeking the way out of the economic crisis, the European Union puts emphasis on science which should be innovative in order to become the driving force of the economy. Such definition of the role of science has been objected by humanists recently. However, innovation also applies to the approach to humanities and social sciences and education of creative citizens should be based on humanities. The professor of philosophy quoted above says (ibidem):

Polish humanities are forced to adapt to English language standards while losing the language of their own national culture. French write in French, Germans in German — of course later on their best works are translated into other languages, but we know that humanities — as Gadamer wrote — is closer to art and it cannot be deprived of its own language.

If some day, humanists were to implement directives of the regulation of the Ministry of Science, our national culture would be gone in one day. Cultural magazines, discussions, debates, translations of recognized works into Polish — they all would just disappear.

Translations were always the laboratory of language and its notions. Debates, public discussions and criticism in a broader context are the same tools for humanities as laboratory utensils for exact sciences. Laboratories are there to verify hypotheses and academic criticism and debates — to verify ideas.

The discussion on the role and condition of Polish humanities in tertiary education institutions started after publication of an open
letter in defense of philosophy in mass media. The direct cause of writing that letter was a local decision on closing the philosophy major at the University in Białystok because the number of candidates was insufficient. In Poland, there is a visible trend, according to which young people try to choose studies that are “useful in the future”, they are less interested in a higher education diploma. In the opinion of the Minister of Science and Higher Education — prof. Lena Kolarska-Bobińska (since December 2013), a sociologist, young people should choose studies that will provide them not only with knowledge, but also skills and competences that increase their career opportunities on the difficult labour market, such as social skills, ability to define problems and critical thinking. This is a set of qualities that are shaped during studies in humanities, therefore humanities should reclaim its role in Polish universities. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education suggested development of a “Humanities Pack”, consisting in:

— introduction of humanities courses to choose in each field of study, also in technical and exact science majors, e.g., in the form of workshops;
— putting emphasis on teaching competences and soft skills in the new governmental program of the so called ordered majors;
— new method of evaluation of academic units, taking into consideration the nature of humanities.

Details of such proposals will be discussed at the round table devoted to humanities at the end of February 2014. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education wishes to invite representatives of humanities to participate in the debate (Website of the Chancellary of the Prime Minister 1, 27.01.2014).

5. Conclusions

The regulation on education standards at higher education institutions in Poland contains a list of studies, described in the form of teaching content and minimum number of teaching hours. This description makes sense only when people taking up studies make up a more or
less homogeneous group in terms of talents — because only then a uniform education process can be effective. As it has been mentioned before, tertiary studies have become available for anyone and as a result, universities are full of young people with very different skills. In such conditions, uniform education process is suitable only for a small part of them.

The expected education results of NQFs can become the main tool for better adjustment of the teaching offer to meet capabilities of individual groups of students, as well as to the needs of the labour market.

Mass studying entails the risk of deterioration of teaching quality. This issue has been raised by Mirosław J. Szymański, who wrote about the so called “storage function of education” (Szymański M. J., 2011, p.47). It should also be mentioned that according to OECD’s report in 2008, Poland was the country with the highest percentage of magister graduates in the world, whereas since 2008, the expenses on science in Poland have dropped almost two times over four years from the already low level of 0.64% GDP to 0.34% GDP (in Western Europe countries, the average percentage of such expenses is 1.8% GDP).

The Interministerial Taskforce for Lifelong Learning, including National Qualification Frameworks, is responsible for monitoring of implementation of the objectives described in the strategic document entitled “The perspective of lifelong learning” (9.2013) — taking into considerations evaluation and recommendations of the European Union issued during monitoring of implementation of Europe 2020 strategy and European cooperation on education and training (ET 2020).

Currently, the development of key competences considered within National Qualification Frameworks still seems to be a theoretical rather than a practical function of higher education institutions in Poland.

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Part II

INSTALL PROJECT
INnovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn (INSTALL): The Narrative Mediation Path Methodology

MARIA FRANCESCA FREDA

Abstract

This paper describe an European project research–intervention, INSTALL, which proposes an innovative methodology, based on the use of narration, namely the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP). The project has a double purpose: on one hand it fosters the acquisition of the Key Competence defined “Learning to Learn”, functional to the improvement of the university performance and prevent the university drop-out; on the other hand it allows the evaluation of the narrative methodology designed on the purpose to develop such a specific competence. The NMP, structured in different narrative modes, has the aim to support and to improve learning processes concerning students considered to be late in their university studies. Specifically, we will discuss both the theoretical bases of the utilized methodology and its functionality in fostering reflexive processes of mentalization concerning the university life as experienced by students who have been late in their performance.

Keywords: L2L, reflexivity, disadvantaged/non traditional students, narrative device.

1. The aim of INSTALL Project

INSTALL, INnovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn, aims to respond to an ever–changing Europe and calls for a high level education that is freed from contents and instead focuses on skills. The project is coordinated by SInAPSi, “University Center for the active and participate inclusion of the students”, by Prof. Maria Francesca Freda, University of Naples, Italy. The other partners are as follows: National...
School of Political and Administrative Studies (NSPAS), in Bucharest, Romania, Dr. Dan Florin Stănescu; National University of Ireland in Maynooth (NUIM), Ireland, Dr. Úna Crowley; and University of Seville, Spain, Dr. José González–Monteagudo.

INSTALL specifically targets university students with the aim of preventing the phenomenon of dropping out, while improving the quality of educational paths at university. The goal is to enable disadvantaged students to fully reap the benefits of higher education in a lifelong learning perspective. The narrative mediation course aims to develop and enhance the Learning to Learn key competence through innovative ways of narrative mediation. At the end of the project the consortium has met with about 200 students.

2. The Target Student

The definition of disadvantaged students often includes subjects belonging to a disadvantaged part of society, migrants/students from migrant households, women, working students, disabled. It is common to include this category of students in the wider typology of those who are defined as “non traditional learners” (Council Conclusions on Social Dimension of Education and Training, 2010/C 135/02). These students, besides their disadvantage, deal with several issues such as, for example, starting their studies later than the average, or being first–generation students, enrolled on a full–time basis (Eileen, 1997; Miller & Lu, 2003).

Despite all the differences, the two conditions of “disadvantage” and “non – traditional” students, share some similar causes (Merrill & González–Monteagudo, 2010).

Moreover, in both categories, students are exposed to the risk of achieving their goals in a later moment of their university path facing, as a consequence, the drop–out phenomenon (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Choy, 2002).

Considering the overlapping of the two categories of students, our work is specifically addressed to the wider typology of Non Traditional Learners.

In general, Non Traditional Students are more exposed to the risk of dealing with phenomena of drop–out and low performances due
to the difficult tasks of development and evolution they have to deal with, being disadvantaged subjects from a socio–cultural point of view. The need to face such disadvantage leads them to take longer in the achievement of their university goals and sometimes, as a consequence, to abandon their studies. INSTALL targets directly at the group of Non Traditional Students during their transition form the first to the second year of the university course of study, as the first years are crucial for drop–out and underachievement phenomena (e.g., in Italy 17 to 20% of drop outs happen in the passage from the first to the second year of university).

In sum, these groups of students are the most exposed to university underachievement and potential drop–out. The research carried out by partners shows that these students cope with low academic achievements in the first academic year, affecting their entire academic experience and ultimately increasing exposure to social exclusion and drop–out. Reportedly, 20 to 45% of European students are non–traditional learners (Eurostudent III 2005–08, Social & Economic Conditions of Student Life in EU, Higher Education Information System). This is confirmed by the results of the research carried out by partners: approximately 25 to 35% of their respective academic population consists in underachievers exposed, to various degrees, to long term patterns of social and educational exclusion.

3. The Theoretical Framework of the INSTALL Project: The Key Role of Narration and Reflexivity Competence to promote L2L

Learning to learn is the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organize one’s own learning, including through effective management of time, information and relation. INSTALL project relays upon the idea that to develop a competence to study it is necessary to start a mentalization process through a self–formative path. Mentalization, also known as reflexive competence or reflexive function (Allen & Fonagy, 2008; Fonagy, 2002; Fonagy et al., 2009; Fonagy & Target, 1997; Meehan et al., 2009), connected to the formative path, it is a process that aims to understand the reasons of own and others behavior to act in the university context in a functional way to academic achievement.

Narration acts as an activator and a promoter of reflexive compe-
tence when it is used in a continuous alternation between narrative and meta–narrative processes.

Among the eight key competences identified by the European Union, the Learning to Learn competence is widely considered as essential to foster adaptability to new contexts and participatory inclusion in education and work environment.

Such a competence consists, therefore, in the acquisition of the awareness of one’s own process of learning and one’s own needs, identifying the available resources and the obstacles to overcome in order to learn in an effective way.

Therefore, it is a reflexive meta–competence or a high–order competence and consists in becoming aware of what one knows, how one knows, and why one knows. In other words, mentalization/reflexive function allows the learning subject to see and recognize him/herself while acting, and it combines the emotional, cognitive and social dimensions, which go across the educational experience, in order to give them a strategical direction.

Furthermore mentalization allows subject to recognize, elaborate on, and regulate mental states (emotions, intentions, desires, beliefs, etc.) which go across the learning process (Fonagy et al., 1997; Allen, Fonagy, 2006). In this sense, the student can activate a reflective process of mentalization about what and why he/she learns. The reflexivity process has the effect of suspending part of the actions of the person, to rethink the direction of actions in contextual terms, change perspective through a repositioning.

Narration, through the proposal to build a formative life–story, is the key mediation device oriented at fostering mentalization processes for students who have been late with their studies (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012; Freda, 2008a; 2008b; 2011; Davidsen, 2008; Hermans, 2001). Mentalization has a bidirectional and circular relationship with narration. Mentalization presents itself as a narration – whether spoken or written – insofar as the individual is constantly engaged in creating stories concerning his or her own and others’ mental states. The process is also defined as “a psychological self–narrative” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012); it is carried out through narration and narration can be generated in the interpersonal relationship through mentalization. Narration, therefore, can be used as a promoter and at the same time an indicator of the efficacy of a path of intervention (Allen & Fonagy,
Narration, therefore, acts as an activator and a promoter of mentalization when it is used in a continuous alternation between narrative and meta-narrative processes. This alternation promotes the transition from narrative sequences describing the events to reflective narrative sequences in which the subject uses the narration to reflect about his own being in the experience. This happens through the "narrative group" who activates and improves the potentialities of reflection inherent in the narration, such as the abilities to address complex problems and to build knowledge through experience (Freda, 2008a; 2008b; 2011). Narrative group fosters narrative processes strengthens a student’s competence of mentalizing by harnessing the impact of the representation of an individual’s mind by a number of people. This is also because the student has an opportunity to reflect on the experience of many others, to understand how one mind affects another mind and how the student is perceived by another member of the group.

4. The Narrative Mediation Path Model (NMP): an innovative methodology

NMP combines into one methodology four discursive narrative modes: Metaphoric, Iconographic, Writing and Bodily. Through the four modes the students can get the opportunity to mentalize their own personal way to participate in the University education and they are encouraged to develop learning to learn competence strategically and adaptively in the context. Each mode is developed in a module and it makes use of specific narrative inputs: in the metaphoric one there is a reference to proverbs and mottoes related to the University experience; in the iconographic mode we propose to use vignettes portraying the students involved in a typical University situation; in the writing mode there are given three narrative tasks; lastly in the bodily mode the students are asked to “sculpt” the future of the participants in the training, representing it through their own bodies, by means of body performances.

Each of these modes has already been used in previous studies aimed at fostering reflexive processes within educational and psychotherapeutic settings; nevertheless the methodology we propose
combines in an innovative way all of the four modes into one unique device. Mentalization is a multifaceted capacity, characterized by multiple functional polarities: it is a dynamic capacity involving analogical and digital levels, implicit and explicit, of the self and of the others. The different modes propose metaphors, images and inputs mediated by writings and sculptures that activate group meta–narrative discourses and give the opportunity to work at the same time, at different levels and degrees, on the several polarities and, consequently, presents the student with the opportunity to look at the problem through different angulations.

In particular, each mode allows to activate a different version of mind, to reflect on one’s own assumptions and, citing Bateson (Bateson, 1979), to build a specific “map” representing the student’s way to read his relations within the University “territory”. The use of multiple modes within one narrative device allows to make use of different versions of mind and so to introduce multiple maps through which the territory can be read and understood, facilitating the detection of analogies and differences. Lastly, it promotes the research and the choice of the most suitable maps in terms of functional representations, oriented to the subject’s purposes. In this view, the use of the four modes is oriented to the recognizing of the representations made up to “map the territory” (Bateson, 1979). The modes are activated progressively through the training setting; presenting the student with the possibility to assume different angulations to reflect him or herself, it gradually fosters a different representation of the self, more delineated, contextualized and action–oriented.

The Metaphoric input proposes to the students to choose proverbs and mottoes that represent their own University experience but are still denoted in a culturalistic and generalized way; such inputs request to them an epistemology of the common sense and a self–recognition in it, in order to realize their being “narrated” by the specific chosen proverb or motto.

The Iconographic inputs provide the possibility to represent oneself starting to delineate the features of his/her self as a student in action; nevertheless it happens while he/she is still in the shoes of the hypothetical student who it is possible to feel identified in, but not yet “clearly” and completely corresponding to the self.

The writing narrative inputs lead the student to recount himself
engaged in an action in the past, fostering a less opaque representation of the experience construction process.

Lastly, the bodily input invites the student to become the protagonist of an action in the future, to represent him or her self as a student acting within the university context.

Specifically, the metaphoric code fosters the participants to acquire a first knowledge of their own representations of the Self in training/education; the group members are not requested to “reveal themselves” by giving an account of their educational experience, but rather they are asked to recognize such an experience in a metaphorical representation, suggested by other people. Using this approach, moreover, the sense of the sharing experiences is brought to the fore. This code has the objectives to get a representation of the University experience from the account of each participant and to foster knowledge and awareness of representations of the educational University experience in each participant.

The proverbs represent a generalization of the educational experience, while mottos work as specific slogans suitable to describe one’s own formative experience.

The set of metaphorical tools used includes a list of proverbs and mottos typical in the local culture of the Partner Country.

Specifically, the students identify in the proverbs some possible reasons of their delay with exams, such as incompetence and inability to be tuned with the University routine (e.g., “as you make your bed, so you must lie in it”), listlessness (e.g., “slow and steady wins the race”), preference for extra-curricular activities, difficulties with peers or the tendency to envy them (e.g., “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”).

The mottos are more inherent to the field of “doing” and to the strategies adopted to overcome the condition of the underachiever: putting confidence in one’s own resources (e.g., “yes, we can!”), committing oneself to fate or trusting oneself to luck, playing it clever in order to get a change (e.g., “fortune favors the brave”), becoming aware of difficulties related to the University context the student chose (e.g.: “easier said than done”), or waiting for a change due to an external cause.

During the Iconographic mode some vignettes are used. The vignette is a projective tool that allows trainees to analyze the deeper
meaning and the symbolic value associated with the objects or characters drawn (McCloud, 2001; Wilks, 2004). Despite the condensed and synchronic dimension proposed by metaphoric inputs, compared with the previous mode, the vignette functions at a more diachronic level, suggesting the subjects figure a typical situation of their University life. The objectives of this mode consist, in fact, in the following: analyzing the educational experience at a diachronic level; promoting reflection about one’s own being—in—action within situations representing the University career.

In the writing code three written narratives are asked to students: the narration of a low point, a high point and a decisional turning point (e.g., see McAdams, 2008). Indeed, in this phase of the training path, the members of the group are deemed ready to work on how to use the theoretical and procedural knowledge acquired in order to operate in a strategic way, functional for University success. Writing, responding to the request to tell a story about the University experience, encourages a larger involvement of the students in the construction of the subjective meaning of the educational experience. Participants are invited to reflect on their own competences and in—competences, in order to analyze them and identify a possible turning point, starting from which it is possible to focus on strategic objectives, necessary to achieve one’s own developmental goals. The tools, therefore, foster the passage from the reflection on the weak and dysfunctional points of each group member to the detection of the strong points in one’s own experience, coming to a representation of the Self in training/education as potentially able to make use of what has been learnt, in view of the achievement of successful goals both in University and in their future job experiences. Specifically, the objectives of this mode are the following: the analysis of the connections between the actions performed and the competences used, in order to build and make explicit new meanings of experience.

The tools, therefore, foster the passage from the reflection on the weak and dysfunctional points of each group member to the detection of the strong points in one’s own experience, coming to a representation of the Self in training/education as potentially able to make use of what has been learnt, in view of the achievement of successful goals both in University and in their future job experiences. Specifically, the objectives of this mode are the following: the analysis of
the connections between the actions performed and the competences used, in order to build and make explicit new meanings of experience; the strengthening of the awareness of how people know and how they know the way to act in order to improve their performances; a support to the participants’ strategic action, instrumental in their University success.

The Bodily Mode uses the technique of sculpture, a creative dynamic and non-verbal way of representation. Students are asked « to sculpt the university future of the whole group, by shaping how they imagine it will be by the end of the educational path . . . ». The role of the sculptor is played by the whole group of students in training called to make a representation of the most significant relationships that bound them together and of the relation with the educational context. The sculpture once again, in this final phase of training, proposes a synchronic and condensed level of analysis of the personal experience in the training. The sculpture enables the students to achieve the following objectives: to convey non-verbal and symbolic representation concerning the future of the whole group and to encourage a synchronic, condensed, and shared representation of the ultimate phase of the process, of the achieved objectives and of the goals to be achieved in the future, after the training.

5. Roles, function and articulation of the four NMP discursive narrative Modes

During the seven sessions, Narrative Group Trainers will use a set of narrative inputs which differently refer to the four discursive modes. Through the four modes, the student is presented with the possibility of mentalizing their own personal way of participating in university education and developing a reflexive competence that allows the student to learn to learn in a way which is strategic and adaptive within the university context. Although the mentalization/reflexive competence is the final outcome of the training, in each mode a reflexive register is activated about the educational experience of the student at different levels of analysis, in relation to different educational situations and according to the different narrative inputs presented to the group as part of the training.
Predominantly, the training is conceptualised as a circular, reflexive process of mentalization about one’s own educational experience, starting from an initial synchronic representation of the educational experience (proposed in the first mode), passing through a diachronic analysis of a specific university situation, and finally, returning to the synchronic level in which the same experience is reinvestigated in light of the reflexive and meta-reflexive processes previously activated.

The reason behind the choice of using four different communicative channels during the training stems from two different factors related to the characteristics of the different inputs on the one hand, and on the other hand, of the participating students:

1. Narrative inputs have a different ‘pervasiveness’ according to the different communicative channels chosen, and consequently, a different effectiveness in the different phases of the training path. For example, visual–iconographic inputs are less pervasive, and therefore, are preferably used in the beginning phase of the training in comparison with the written inputs;
2. Students can differ in terms of being more or less ‘in tune’ with the different communicative channels and, accordingly, they can tend to use their reflexive potentialities in a different way. Thus, for some students the speech channel is that through which they are able to express themselves with fewer inhibitions. Alternatively, for other students it is the visual channel that more easily elicits the expression of the educative Self.

The sequence of the four communicative channels is also motivated by other factors:

1. fostering a progressive cognitive and emotional implication of the student in training, which is made possible through the use of inputs and narrative procedures increasingly absorbing and subjective;
2. promoting the transition on the part of the student from a global exploration of his or her university experience to the analysis of specific educational situations in which the student was the protagonist;
3. supporting the student in the reflection on such educational
situations up to the recognition of the active role taken and to the acquisition of a higher sense of responsibility for the subjective construction of the meaning of his or her own educational experience.

During each training session (and independently of the specific mode) the same methodological sequence is used. This sequence can be summarised as follows:

1. introduction of a narrative input;
2. narrative construction of the experience by means of different communicative modes (metaphorical, iconographic, writing and bodily);
3. Narrative Group meta–discourse on the proposed narration;
4. reconstruction of narrative experience.

References


Students “at risk” in Spain
Identities, Academic Performance and Influences from the INSTALL Training

José Manuel Lavié-Martínez, Dan Stănescu, José González-Monteagudo

Abstract

In this paper we intend to give answer to a series of questions that dig into the relations between students’ identity and their academic performance after completing a training process based on the development of mentalization competence — the INSTALL training, as described later on. More specifically we aim to: a) describe the identity that some university students “at risk” have created for themselves concerning their own academic performance; b) explore the way these identities may hinder their academic success; c) analyze the influence that INSTALL training has had on rebuilding those identities and improving academic achievement thenceforth.

We explore three students’ conceptions of self and experiences as expressed in a semi–structured interview that we conducted with each of them separately. All these students benefitted from INSTALL training and were asked to assess this experience in several respects. But far from being a formal assessment, each interview makes up a biographical account that is qualitatively analyzed. These accounts are approached as narratives on self that students form as they strive to make sense of their trials and tribulations.

Keywords: identities, academic performance, mentalization competence, higher education

1. Setting the scene: students’ identity as a research problem

Under the auspices of the narrative turn operated in the social sciences, we approach narratives as a tool for representing and advancing self and agentivity (González–Monteagudo, 2011). Identity as a discursive construction involves an understanding of self that is only possible
as a product of narrative: the way we understand and represent our identity depends on the discourses we create about ourselves and our relations.

From this perspective, both individual and group identity are built upon a process of differentiation. Identity formation may therefore be best represented as an active process of individuation based on the establishment of limits in relation to context, rather than a simple collection of features. These limits can be understood as boundaries (Castoriadis, 1995) within which individuals and groups create their own order and reality and define their own particular interpretive systems.

In accordance with this social–constructionist approach, we understand identity as an open, relational device that, like the narrative thread, evolves over time (Ricoeur, 1996). It does not exit, therefore, beyond representation (which is fundamentally self–biographical, even when it refers to a group). Exploring these constructions implies analyzing the meanings that emerge whenever an individual — a group of students in our case — interrogate themselves about who they are, what they do, and what they want to be (Hatch & Schultz, 2004).

2. A brief note on the INSTALL project as a model for intervention with disadvantaged students

It is not our purpose in this paper to describe the conceptual underpinnings of the INSTALL training from which the students we report here benefitted. We have presented this in more detail elsewhere (see for example Freda et al., 2012). Yet we want to offer some guidelines in order to contextualize our research.

The aim of INSTALL is the acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn, which involves an awareness of one’s own learning process and needs. It is implied that to develop this competence it is necessary to start a mentalization process of one’s formative path. This process of mentalization, also known as reflexive competence, aims to understand the reasons of one’s own and others’ behavior to act in a functional way to academic achievement. The project is based on the key role of narration as instrumental for the reflecting process of mentalization (Hermans, 2001; Davidsen, 2008; Freda, 2008a; 2008b; 2011).
So, INSTALL proposes an innovative methodology based on Narration, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), with the aim of promoting the Learning to Learn competence by developing mentalization/reflexive competence. Specifically, NMP consists of a group training process targeted to groups of disadvantaged students enrolled in the second year of university and in late with passed examinations. NMP combines into one methodology four discursive narrative modules: metaphoric, iconographic, writing and bodily. These four modules are implemented in a cycle of eight meetings conducted by Narrative Group Trainers (NGTs) who were been trained to use such methodology with disadvantaged students.

3. The students and the study

The research data we are using in this paper are part of an evaluative study concerned with the implementation of the INSTALL training in the University of Seville, in the first round of deployment of the INSTALL materials. Six months after completing training, we interviewed a number of participants who volunteered to reflect upon their training experience and its impact on their own lives in the context of a semi-structured interview. Each interviewed was conducted in a supportive atmosphere and took about an hour long. By using an open-ended set of questions, we encouraged each student to look back and reflect on the influence the INSTALL training was having on them after completion. All data were recorded and then transcribed.

For the purposes of this paper, we analyze three of these interviews with a special focus on these students’ constructions of their own selves as students. We have interrogated our own data by asking questions such as: Who am I? How do I see myself as a student? How does the INTALL training has helped me to gain a new insight on this core questions?

4. Exploring discursive constructions of self

In this section an outline is presented of the experiences and perceptions of three students on their academic performance as expressed in
the interviews we held with each of them. What follows is an attempt to capture their construal and portrayal of themselves as students ‘at risk’ through the use of different identity metaphors.

**Pablo: sense of difference as fear of failure**

Pablo is studying Finance and Accounting in the University of Seville. He describes himself as a student that had normally performed well at school until a certain point in his life when he began a cycle of underperformance and low expectations. Looking back on his academic career he has just now began to envisage some of the factors that contributed to forge a self–image of failure and a feeling of being “bad and clumsy”.

He acknowledges having a great potential academically speaking, but cannot conceal a feeling of unhelpfulness as a university student. As he speaks of his personal and academic experience over the last years, signs of what might be termed a “split identity” show up. This becomes evident, for instance, in the gap between his current self–concept as a student and an idealized past of academic achievement:

I am a person who could have succeeded at University, as I did before in my early years at High School. But there was a moment (at High School) when I started getting lower marks than expected, and (my father) was like: “ugh”. And that “ugh” meant a whole world to me. And then I tried studying, and that “ugh” came again. But it was no longer his “ugh”, it was mine.

Behind a façade of autonomy, he admits he’s needy and dependent on his family’s support. And he realizes that this assimilation of unfulfilled expectations — partly induced by his father figure — “made him small”. As he reflects on his academic progression, he notices how he has become involved in a pattern of underperformance and low expectations that has distanced himself from his aspirations as a university student:

When I enrolled for my undergraduate degree I was feeling a lot like becoming a university student. And you might say: “Well, you have not proved that to be true at all”. But the truth is that I do not know why I have not been up to expectations. Well, I do, I have just realized. But in that moment I did not know why I was failing, I could not find an answer.
But these contradictions he undergoes does not deal exclusively with this past and his present as a student. Pablo denotes too a separation between who he is as a person and who he is as a student. He remarks this idea because he acknowledges that you can know who you are as a person, but you may be confused as for who you are as a student. The patterns of defenselessness he has learnt within the academic context are a byproduct of his fear of failure, as he himself points out:

Now it seems to me that I had a fear of failure, and that fear has led me to actually fail from the very start.

As we explore later on, the INSTALL experience has helped him to overcome this dissociation between past and present; between personal and academic.

_Borja: sense of difference as hiding behind other self_

Borja is studying Medicine. He applied for the course at a moment in his university career in which he was feeling very depressed. In spite of his efforts and trials, Borja was failing over and over again.

When Borja was a child he was told that he was gifted. This has become a main cause for concern in his life ever since. As a gifted student, he has always lived this condition as a handicap and thereby has tried to conceal it. Hiding his true self from view is a core theme as he recalls his tortuous wandering through university: trying to hide his tribulations to those who might expect too much of him, and trying to hide who he really is to those who only get to see a fake representation of himself.

My parents have always held high expectations for me, which did not help at all. So I felt downcast, I was like: “if I tell them this [that I am failing] they’re gonna be disappointed in me”. And that’s why I felt as though I was locked up, and so did I with my friends.

His words are riddled with the language of long kept secrets, as implying a process of personal liberation that is only beginning to burst. He defines this process as one of reconciliation between his
long–term motivation (becoming a doctor) and his short–term agenda (attending to lectures and passing his exams).

Metaphorically speaking, he would describe his situation prior to the training as that of being inside a narrow room with a rope tied around his waist against the wall. The doors were shut down but not locked with a key. His INSTALL training did not result in the rope being broken, nor did it open the door for him. But it showed him that he could get his body untied and get away:

The course has allowed me to see that the rope can be broken and that the door is indeed already open.

**Coral: sense of difference as negation of fulfillment**

Coral faces the difficult situation of being studying a degree against her will due to family pressure. The tears she shed during the interview we held warn us that this is not just circumstantial: it’s her own personal drama.

Ever since she was child Coral was very good at languages. After high school she applied for a degree in French language — her inner wish. But her parents did not approve of her choice and made her apply for a degree in finance and accounting instead. It was — according to them — a much wiser decision in terms of employability. But Coral has always disliked economic — and law — related subject matters. This becomes apparent in the extra effort she has to put in order to pass every single exam she takes. And on top of that, she is still recovering from an operation on her back that prevented her from taking her first–semester exams.

Bringing to mind her university experience, Coral can hardly speak as she tries to hold back her tears. Her words are reflection of long–restrained grudges, and at times she finds it hard not to blame on her parents:

What I cannot understand is why they have never supported me so I could study what I really wanted. How come they’ve never said to me in these three years in which they have seen me suffering beyond words: “Come on, let’s do it”.

But hers is not a discourse full of reproach. Overwhelmed by the
burden of the high expectations her family placed on her — as the first member aspiring to complete a university degree — Coral strives to make sense of the internal contradictions she experiences: quitting could mean a step forward to pursue her dream, but also would leave her with the feeling of letting her family down. But this is a false crossroads she has to decide upon, as there is no decision to be made by her. Almost uncomplaining she defines her situation as an uphill struggle to finish her degree, in the hope that she will be able to study languages later on.

Having experienced the INSTALL training has helped her cope with all these setbacks and contradictions. Most importantly, she highlights the training group as a valuable context of peer support and mutual identification. Remembering other students’ testimonies, for instance, gave her strength during her illness — a period of convalescence that she remembers as one of the most difficult in her life, when she could hardly read or study for over half an hour. For her it is mirroring in her peers’ difficulties which encourages her to keep on trying, as it helps her mitigate her angst and solitude feelings. Therefore the most relevant thing she has learnt is to do with an important finding in her life: she is not alone, although the circumstances that contribute to her suffering are unique to her.

5. Becoming acquainted with reflexive competence: from awareness to reconstruction and beyond

Behind these three stories there are different biographical trajectories and life experiences that make them unique. But if we explore them in terms of the impact that the INSTALL training experience has had on these students’ personal and academic lives, we still can find some commonalities.

These three students, much like their peers in the narrative group, applied for the INSTALL course in the hope that they would develop better study habits or find out some innovative method to approach exams. None of these expectations were met. But along the way they learnt something they already knew.

Taken together, their retrospective account of their INSTALL experience suggests a number of benefits that might be having a direct
or indirect impact on their academic performance: they have changed their self concept and image as students; they have improved their ability to analyze their own academic path; and they have developed patterns of autonomy and integration.

Relatedly — and most importantly — these three students have engaged in a process of mentalization that has allowed them to reflect — at different levels of depth — on core issues of their identity as students.

Pablo has become more aware of the several gaps that pervade his “split identity”: an academic path imbued with past successes and present sense of failure; the seemingly insurmountable distance between his intellectual capacity and his actual achievement; the multiple contradictions that separate his self-concept as a student from his self-concept as a person; and ultimately, his cravings and his aversions.

As a result of his involvement in training, Borja experienced an emotional expansion that has opened up new faces to a dimension of himself he kept away from view. In his case, the reflective, dialogical nature of the course enabled him to share thoughts and fears in a non-threatening environment. The INSTALL course gave him an opportunity to open up and share all kinds of emotions. The role of the trainer was crucial for this in his experience. Taken together, all the sessions have enabled him not only to identify “the focus of the problem” (in his own words), but also to develop strategies to “grasp it”. The impact the INSTALL experience has caused on him can be found at different levels: physically, he has lost weight and started to build healthy habits in his daily life; psychologically, he has been receiving professional help to overcome the problems derived from his condition as gifted; and academically, he has improved his overall performance.

Coral has started to see his personal suffering in a new light. One of the most important things she learned in her INSTALL training was that she is not the only one with troubles. Indeed, when asked to sum up all her experiences and learning in INSTALL she uses a sentence like « You are not alone; there are more people like you ». Although this emotionally-laden account of her appraisal suggests only surface levels of reflexivity, it is an important step forward in her own identity work. And yet she reports some improvements in motivation as a result of her INSTALL training. She feels more
confident to ask questions in a lecture, to visit teachers for guidance, and the like.

To sum up, our analyses of these narratives depict three different identities of what might be termed as students “at risk”. These three identities share some core elements (they are all imbued with fear and a sense of difference). But each highlights a distinctive element that is not present as markedly in the others: being inferior to peers, using/dropping masks to cover/uncover difference, fleeing and isolating from peers. By drawing a brief portrait of these stories, we have attempted to sketch the diverse paths through which these students are seeking to generate more positive views of themselves through processes of reflexivity and mentalization that are pivotal in the NMP model.

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How do students experience the NMP as a tool for developing their reflexive function?

An interpretative phenomenological analysis

Dan Florin Stănescu, Elena–Mădălina Iorga, José González–Monteagudo

Abstract

The growing phenomenon of disadvantaged and nontraditional students increases the risk of educational underachievement and drop–out in the university context at European level. Within the European funded project INSTALL (Innovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn) researchers developed a qualitative methodology — Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) — consisting in a group training process targeted to disadvantaged students. NMP, based on the psychological concept of mentalization, also known as reflexive competence, combines into one methodology four discursive modules: Metaphoric, Iconographic, Written and Bodily. The use of a “multidimensional” narrative promotes a progressive cognitive and emotional involvement of the student; a gradual transition from the exploration of the entire university experience to a specific and individual experience and a gradual evolution from a reconstructive function of the formative experience to a planning function that allows students to act in an effective way in academic settings. In this context, we aim to investigate the way students experienced the NMP training process. The present study employed the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach that combines the dedication to understanding the lived experience of the participant with the recognition that achieving such an understanding requires interpretative work on the part of the researcher. Verbatim transcripts of five interviews served as raw data for the study. The results suggest that the use of different discursive modules supports the students in developing their reflexive competence during a formative experience which enables them to better adjust to the university context.

Key words: nontraditional students, mentalization, IPA, Narrative Mediation Path.
1. Introduction

Although research on mentalization remains scarce and mostly limited to the context of psychotherapy (Mentalization-Based Treatment), approaching the concept in new settings is required, as the functions that this particular capacity serves advise for exploring its uses beyond the therapeutic relationship. Research so far aimed firstly at conceptualizing the term, also known as mentalizing (which explicitly refers to the action as such) or reflective function, since there are a series of other constructs that it overlaps with. Allen (2003) distinguishes between mentalization and empathy, in that empathy is but one facet of mentalizing. As pointed out by Gallese (2001), empathic responses, originated in the mirror neurons system, imply simulating not only actions, but also others’ emotions and sensations. However, mentalizing also involves being « conscious of one’s affects, while remaining in the affective state » (Fonagy et al., 2002, p. 96) and perceiving them as meaningful, thus being broader than empathy.

Similarly, mentalization was associated with psychological mindedness defined by Farber as « a trait, which has as its core the disposition to reflect upon the meaning and motivation of behavior, thoughts, and feelings in oneself and others » (1985, p. 170). But mentalization highlights the process as such, by focusing on mental activity. Hence, the emphasis is on process not on content, as the goal is to foster the skill in mentalizing and not particularly minding the mental content that results from exercising the skill explicitly (Allen, 2003). By implying attentiveness to mental states in particular, mentalization is similar to mindfulness, a quality of consciousness. However, while one can equally mentalize about past and future, mindfulness is strictly present-centered. Further, whereas mentalizing is a reflective process, mindfulness remains pre-reflective, in so far as it refers to experiencing reality in a perceptual and non-evaluative way (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Finally, mentalizing is a form of imaginative activity, since the mind is in itself imaginative (McGinn, 2004; Sartre, 2004). Mentalizing, either implicitly or explicitly involves seeing as, that is making sense of behavior by begetting explanations within creative stories. Mentalizing creatively (Heal, 2003) does not express itself exclusively linguistically, as long as while trying to be aware of others’ mental states, one imaginatively recalls visual and other sensory images as one
How do students experience the NMP as a tool for developing their reflexive function?

strives to see, feel, and think from others’ perspectives. All the same, effective mentalization requires a grounded imagination, that is being imaginative without actually entering the imaginary, neither stimulus bond, nor completely losing touch with reality (Allen & Fonagy, 2006).

Moving further, Fonagy and colleagues (Fonagy, 1995; Fonagy et al., 2002; Bateman & Fonagy, 2006) define mentalizing taking into account two modes of experiencing: the psychic equivalence mode which highlights the distinction between inner and outer, fantasy and reality, symbol and symbolized, broadly speaking between the mind and the world, respectively the pretend mode which cuts loose from reality. Conversely, the mentalizing mode is situated in between these two modes. It implicitly or explicitly entails awareness of the mind’s intentionality or aboutness, since a mental state is a particular perspective or takes on a given reality. Shortly, while mentalizing, the mind is decoupled from reality while remaining anchored to it (Leslie, 1987).

The most recurrent definition of mentalization has its roots in the philosophy of mind (Dennett, 1987; Brentano, 1973 as cited in Allen, 2003) and sees it as

a form of mostly preconscious imaginative mental activity, namely, perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states (e.g., needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes, and reasons) (Fonagy, 2006, p. 54).

Likewise, mentalization involves both a self-reflective and an interpersonal component, as it implies « seeing yourself from the outside and others from the inside » (Allen, 2008, p. 313). However, in order to consider others as mental agents, adopting the intentional stance (Dennett, 1987) or the interpersonal interpretative function, in Fonagy’s terms (2006) is not sufficient. A specific set of cognitive skills that convey the ability to accurately and efficiently attribute mental states to others is also required: perceiving, recognizing, describing, interpreting, inferring, imagining, simulating, remembering, reflecting, and anticipating (Allen, 2003).
2. Methodology

The current study aimed at gathering first-hand information related to the lived experience of students involved in a formative experience (NMP – Narrative Mediation Path) that employed different discursive modules to support them in developing their reflexive competence in order to better adjust to the academic life. Namely, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used, since it is designed to enable the understanding of the lived experience of the participant, while providing a systematic approach to conducting qualitative research (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Each case is examined in great detail as an entity before moving to more general claims. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, comprising 11 open questions (Table 1).

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>— How would you describe/comment on the Install training experience?</td>
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<td>— In your opinion which are the strengths and weaknesses of this experience?</td>
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<td>— Which modules have been of most use to you? Why?</td>
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<td>— Has your participation in the Install course had any specific (+/-) effect?</td>
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<td>— Do you think that your university performance has been affected by your participation in the Install course? How?</td>
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<td>— Please tell us about an episode relating to your university life, which has occurred recently, when your behaviour, in your opinion, was influenced by what you have learnt during the Install training course</td>
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<td>— How did you feel in that situation?</td>
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<td>— What do you think that the other people present thought and felt in that situation?</td>
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<td>— How did you face that situation?</td>
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<td>— Why did you face it in that way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Do you think that your thoughts and emotions relating to that situation have changed? Why?</td>
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Participants were encouraged to talk as widely as possible about their experience during the NMP training program delivered within the INSTALL project. The interviews were audio recorded and verbatim transcripts served as raw data for the subsequent analysis, which followed in detail the four-stage process proposed by Smith and Osborn (2003), beginning with a close interpretative reading of the first case, where initial responses to the text were annotated in one margin. These initial notes were converted into emergent themes at one
higher level of abstraction and recorded in the other margin (Osborn & Smith, 2003). The researchers then interrogated the themes to make connections between them, which resulted in a table of superordinate themes for the first case, including as well the subordinate themes with identifying information. The process was replicated for each of the five cases. Next, patterns were established cross-case and documented in a master table of themes. Finally, the themes were transformed into a narrative account, while the analytic account was supported by verbatim extracts from each participant.

The participants — five female students enrolled in the INSTALL Narrative Mediation Path training (Romania in October–December 2012) constituted a reasonably homogenous, purposive sample (Smith & Osborn, 2003), sufficient to depict a perspective, rather than represent a population. The Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) consists in a group training process targeted to disadvantaged (non-traditional) students, based on the psychological concept of mentalization, also known as reflexive competence. NMP combines into one methodology four discursive modules or codes: Metaphoric, Iconographic, Written and Bodily.

3. Results

The emerging themes, as identified through the IPA analysis undergone refer to the relational context of the training (common/shared experiences with other colleagues), the change as such (awareness about changes) and the impact of the NMP both in terms of academic and personal life (post training/secondary effects). Concerning the common/shared experiences theme, participants relate about becoming aware of the fact that their stories are not isolated cases:

We have realized that we have common experiences, common feelings and it was nice to talk about various issues related to school, to understand that it is not only me going through such issues (An, 21);

I have found out a bunch of new and interesting things about my colleagues... some things that we have in common and we did not know before (Al, 21).
Similarly, this discovery is associated with a feeling of alleviation:

Colleagues were in the room and they have written about the same experience... and for me, to see that someone shares the same feelings about something we did together and further shares it at group level was... very pleasant (C, 21);

... in addition, I have seen my colleagues like that... I see that they have passed through the same situations as I did, therefore I am not a freak... as I used to see myself until then (L, 21).

Among the changes most frequently described by participants as made aware of (the second emergent theme), there was the management of exam pressure and a better organization of the learning process, as such:

Management of emotions at exams. I don’t know, suddenly I’ve become more relaxed (An, 21);

I knew how to distribute my learning time, how to learn. I’ve realized that if I don’t like a matter a marking of 8 will suffice (An, 21);

I’ve organized a bit my learning style, but not only this, the life style itself... I’ve come to trust myself more in doing that (L, 21).

As opposed to those who could not specifically name the shifts taken, finding it difficult to put a finger on what actually changed, some went even further and talked about higher order changes, taking into account the general functioning, irrespective of the context under discussion:

It helped me to open myself more... even to organize things... now I don’t stress myself that much (Al, 21);

I’ve realized that life is beautiful and not so stressful... it helped me see that I am a normal person and I don’t need to worry for everything (Al, 21);

We were able to share our feelings without being ashamed or afraid... I found myself making plans, setting objectives for the next week, next month, even for the next year (L, 21);

It helped me see myself in another way... to realize what I am doing and how I am doing it (Lo, 21).
Finally, when it came to listing the effects of the NMP training, accounts suggest that the intervention met its main goal, since improvements in academic results were reported:

This is the first year without any reexamination (C,21);

This time I didn’t have problems with exams (L,21);

This semester I managed to get higher marks than before, especially for interim projects. . . I become keener to take part in those projects (La, 21).

Further, the NMP meetings seem to have impacted the attending students on a more general level, improving their availability to take part of activities other than university related, doubled by a boost in motivation and self–confidence:

This year I was involved in a lot of activities… until the third year is like I did not exist at all, and now I realize that I want to do a lot of things (C, 21);

Now I am involved in much more activities… I bring new ideas; I get involved in the decision making process (An, 21);

It helped me find my intrinsic motivation… a wish to do things (L, 21);

I feel more self–confident… that I can do things… that’s all about… doing stuff (L,21).

4. Discussions and conclusions

The participants’ accounts described a beneficial change due to a relatively simple and gradually intrusive intervention (NMP). Although results cannot always be supported with specific behaviors, all participants reported feeling different in themselves. The change in the meanings attached to their university life involved a closer sense of social connectedness and a reduced sense of an alienated, isolated, and vulnerable self in the face of the academic challenges faced. Both the participants’ sense of self and sense of others were central to their accounts of the experience within the NMP training, as the discursive
modules used during the meetings seemed to have touched deeper psychic energies:

After an INSTALL meeting you arrive at home and you say to yourself — I have to think now... I have to reflect. Why am I here? What did I do with my life?... It makes you think at certain things related to your life, your decisions (An, 21).

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How do students experience the NMP as a tool for developing their reflexive function?

Can the level of motivation to engage with a programme of study in higher education impact the development of the key competence “learning to learn” among students?

EANAN STRAIN

Abstract

The European Council (2006) defines “Learning to learn” as the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organise one’s own learning, including through effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups. This paper notes how the former element, “the ability to pursue and persist in learning”, is particularly crucial to the successful development of this key competence and examines how the presence of “engagement motive” promotes persistence with learning. It highlights the motivational components that lead to engagement and academic achievement in higher education, and makes recommendations on how educators involved in developing the Key Competence Learning to Learn can exploit these components and promote engagement.

Keywords: motivation, engagement, first year, Learning to Learn.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to emphasise the importance of students’ active engagement with both their studies and learning to learn programmes, particularly focusing on the impact “engagement motivation” has on their academic performance. In this article, “engagement motive” refers to any of the numerous factors that contribute to student motivation for engaging with their programme of study. In the literature, the concept that higher levels of engagement with a programme of study can lead to higher academic performance is not new. For example, Graham, Tripp, Seawright and Joeckel (2007) state that « the roots
for active learning reach back in the literature to John Dewey... A diverse body of educational research has shown that academic achievement is positively influenced by the amount of active participation in the learning process». Schleicher (2007) indicates that «motivations, attitudes and particular values, along with skills and knowledge are deemed necessary for continuous, reflective and autonomous learning». Traditional skills and knowledge are certainly important and with the EU placing emphasis on examining the needs of, particularly, underachieving students in HE, and on developing Key Competencies, this paper reiterates the importance of developing student motivation so that they can reap the benefits of learning support initiatives (eg learning to learn programmes) and fully engage with their programme of study.

By identifying key components of motivation relevant to engagement in Higher Education, we could attempt to increase student attendance and academic performance, while reducing disengagement and drop-out. Developing intervention programmes that are designed to increase student motivation to engage, which would run alongside current learning supports, would help students adopt a deeper approach to their study. Evidence to support this idea is presented in this paper.

During the 2012–13 academic term, NUI Maynooth was one of four universities to implement a Learning to Learn programme on campus, INSTALL. This EU project, saw a total of 40 students voluntarily attend a one hour class each week for one semester, throughout semesters 1 and 2 in NUI Maynooth. A distinct difficulty observed with the implementation of the programme was encouraging students to maintain their attendance throughout the semester. It took an enormous effort to get students to a) turn up to the classes, and b) engage when they did attend. Although the project was a success, a need was identified to find a way of increasing motivation among students for such learning to learn programmes. This paper reviews a selection of literature that examines how students engage with their studies and the components of motivation that contribute to this engagement. It is recognised here that a reason for engaging with such learning is crucially important if a student is to be successful.
2. Methodology

In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority commissioned a survey in 2013, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) and issued it to all students in higher education. Items of particular interest to this paper asked respondents about their engagement with both their future planning and campus services which could help them form such plans. It was thought that if high levels of engagement were reported for these voluntary activities, valuable lessons could be learned about student motivation. However, results from the respondents who were in their 1st year of study at the time returned worrying figures: 70% of 1st year students “Never” « Talked about your career plans with teaching staff or careers advisors ». This large majority of 1st year students did not make use of the staff and services available to them on campus. In addition, 26% “Never” and 38% “Sometimes” « Explored where to look for jobs relevant to your interests », and, 37% “Never” and 34% “Sometimes” « Set career development goals and plans ». These considerably low engagement figures seem to suggest that 1st year students don’t feel the need to make career plans or use any related supports available to them on campus. These responses from 1st year students are of importance however as they occur within the same context that the majority of learning to learn programmes are run in H.E. The questions is, why is engagement so low?

3. Results / review of the literature

Literature generally agrees that the transition period associated with 1st year in university is a difficult time for students as they enter higher education for the first time. And, although learning to Learn initiatives can occur at any time in university, 1st year is a typically popular stage for these interventions.

The transition period has a major impact on student retention. In the UK, for instance, about two–thirds of withdrawals happen during or at the end of the first year (Yorke, 2001).
Additionally, a number of factors are generally accepted across international literature to be influential on university performance and attrition, with previous academic performance being hailed as the most significant predictor (Mckenzie and Schweitzer, 2001). This 2001 study also highlights that integration into university, self efficacy, and employment responsibilities were predictive of university grades. It is worth noting a study by Blaich, Wise, and Kuh (2011) in which 2200 students across 17 colleges and universities completed an array of surveys and tests at three points during their college education — when they first arrived on campus, at the end of their first year, and at the end of their fourth year. « The researchers found that on average, “Academic Motivation” declined to 0.45 standard deviation points by the end of first year. . . » (Blaich, Wise, and Kuh 2011). It seems to suggest that on average, if unsupported, students’ academic motivation will decline throughout the first year of study in higher education.

Other factors that are widely acknowledged as influential on attrition from first year of university are where students hold unrealistic perceptions of learning at university (Haggis and Pouget, 2002) and absence of motivation (Baker, 2004). An additional factor that is becoming increasingly acknowledged holds that a heavy workload can negatively influence engagement. For example, Mikkonen, Ruohoniemi and Lindblom–Ylänne (2013), observed that « a heavy workload was found to hinder interest–based studying (in veterinary medicine), whereas clear future goals helped these students to remain committed ». They also find that a lack of future goals diminish student’s commitment to their studies.

Research which has been reviewed for this paper has been selected because of its focus on student engagement and how it highlights slightly different perspectives on the conditions that may exist to facilitate the development and maintenance of motivation among students. This section considers a number of prominent elements which comprise the structure needed to support student motivation; autonomy, desire to succeed, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and, self regulation and discipline.
**Autonomy**

Baker (2004) found that students can develop high levels of intrinsic motivation and low levels of amotivation in an educational domain when they receive support which enables them to be autonomous in their decisions and choices by, eg, parents and teachers. Vallerand, Fortier & Guay (1997) found that in a study of high school students « the less autonomy supportive the social agents’ behaviors are, the less positive are students’ perceptions of competence and autonomy ». This eventually leads to low levels of self–determined motivation which is predictive of drop–out behaviour. There is some evidence from Deci, Eghrari, Patrick & Leone (1994) showing that if a person is given a meaningful reason for engaging with uninteresting behaviour along with support for their sense of autonomy and relatedness, they were able to internalise and integrate their behaviour, which is useful for maintaining motivation.

**Desire to succeed**

In a study looking at groups of minorities and non–minorities, Allen (1999) report that « a strong desire for achievement may be seen as an important component of student motivation to complete college ». There was an observed relationship between high levels of motivation and persistence among the minority group.

**Intrinsic & extrinsic motivation**

If we consider Malone and Lepper (1987) who define activities as intrinsically motivating if « people engage in it for its own sake, rather than in order to receive some external reward or avoid some external punishment », it seems that intrinsic motivation does have a very strong impact on performance. For example, Benware and Deci (1984) compared groups who had an active and a passive motivational set and found that the results of their study indicated that those who were more intrinsically motivated perceived themselves to be more actively engaged with their learning environment than others who were more ‘examination focused’. In contrast to Allen (1999), Baker (2003) in a longitudinal study found that a combination of
...social problem-solving appraisals, adjustment to university and intrinsic motivation towards accomplishment predicted higher marks over the course of students’ 3 years at university, controlling for university entry qualifications.

Perhaps the combination of these 3 major components serve to predict academic achievement more so than one isolated component. In earlier pieces of research, White (1959) and deCharms (1968) proposed that the need for autonomy and competence is the basis of intrinsic motivation and behaviour. Since this early research, Vallerand & Bissonnette (1992) supply evidence that intrinsic motivation helps persistence in studies, and offers the comparison between 2 groups of students as evidence; a group that is, and a group that are not intrinsically motivated. Their results showed that

individuals who persisted in the course had reported at the beginning of the semester being more intrinsically motivated, more identified and integrated, and less amotivated toward academic activities than students who dropped out of the course.

In a study which highlights some of the methods students use to increase their own motivation, Pintrich (2004) provide us with examples of how some students actively attempt to raise their levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in a bid to help them persist with meeting their course requirements. Pintrich (2004) also comment on how some students invoke negative affects to motivate themselves, such as guilt or shame, and reference further examples of earlier studies:

Defensive pessimism is another motivational strategy that students can use to actually harness negative affect and anxiety about doing poorly in order to motivate them to increase their effort and perform better (Garcia and Pintrich, 1994; Norem and Cantor, 1986).

Self regulation/discipline

Schunk and Zimmerman (Eds.) (1998) reviewed research and show that students’ motivation and academic achievement can be increased by working with them to increase their self-regulatory processes. They state that these self-regulatory processes can be successfully
taught. In a study by Tuckman (2003) which sought to determine the effectiveness of teaching students the use of learning and motivational strategies, found that students who received training benefited from an increase in grades for the semester in which the training took place, and the following semester. These findings are generally in support of earlier investigations by Zimmerman & Martinez–Pons (1986) which conclude that high academic achievement has a high correlation with the quality and amount of self–regulatory processes used by students. Torenbeek, Jansen and Suhre (2012) found that Self–discipline and motivation predict achievement indirectly through class attendance. They recommend that more practicals than lectures should be scheduled for students and highlight that more opportunities for practice during contact hours results in greater study success.

Final points

It is common in some courses that students are afforded the opportunity to choose to study a number of subjects within their course. This choice can prove overwhelming for some students. In a study by Mikkonen, Ruohoniemi and Lindblom–Ylänne (2013), it was shown that where a student has the ability to relate their present studies to future goals, it helped students who expressed well–developed interest to build motivation in elements of their course that did not touch on areas of their individual interest. The authors found that those students who didn’t have a utility for their course after graduation had a weaker determination to continue studying. « It shows that well–developed interest and the opportunity to work with it can do much to mitigate weaknesses ».(Mikkonen, Ruohoniemi and Lindblom–Ylänne 2013). Rather than dividing students into groups according to their chosen subjects, Ashwin and Trigwell (2012) observed 2 groups of students, and found that the group that had a view of learning that focused on developing new knowledge were much more motivated, and felt that they are more able to succeed in this context. Wingate (2007) compiled a framework for supporting student’s transition to learning to learn in H.E. and concluded that:

As motivation and self–discipline contribute to academic success (Komarraju, Karau, and Schmeck 2009; Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone 2004),
attention should be paid to these concepts from the moment students enrol at university.

4. Discussion

As mentioned above, students need to be supported to feel competent and autonomous in their behaviours (Vallerand, Fortier, Guay, 1997), and in cases where this support is not present or positive, it can lead to drop-out behaviour. Are students who experience lower levels of self-determined motivation prior to entry to H.E. expected to dramatically increase their motivation the moment they enter university? This may be difficult for them to do in isolation, and indicate a need for a dedicated support programme which would help increase their self-determined motivation. Wingate (2007) points out that students encounter difficulties when they lack an understanding of what learning at university involves. They recommend that institutes of higher education (H.E.) provide students with guidance on how to acquire knowledge, guidance on where knowledge comes from and what is expected of them in H.E. e.g., in the first semester. It makes sense to introduce students to the key competence Learning to Learn at this time in order to aid the process, and to make training such as INSTALL, available to all students in a given university. In an earlier study, White (1959) outlines the biological significance of motivation, i.e., it furthers the learning process of effective interaction with the environment. White states that «...an intrinsic need to deal with the environment seems to exist and satisfaction (“the feeling of efficacy”) is derived from it». This sounds very much like the current definitions of “intrinsic motivation” (Benware and Deci, 1984) (Malone and Lepper, 1987). When engaged with learning, a student’s efficacy beliefs seem to be a good predictor of performance; «...once enrolled in a course, efficacy beliefs are a much better predictor of performance than value» (Eccles et al., 1998). In a more recent study Pintrich (2004) examines the assessment of motivation and self-regulated learning in college students and recommends that it is important to include self-efficacy (or expectancy) constructs in models of university student learning.

However, many universities are «...failing to recognise that learning to learn at university means a fundamental change in students’
beliefs, is a complex process and requires support measures that go beyond *ad hoc* initiatives» Wingate (2007). An example of a typical *ad hoc* initiative would be the Orientation Programmes that are common to most universities which aim to aid student transition into higher education. Suhre, Jansen and Torenbeek (2013) commented that « the [student’s] perception of the orientation quality enhances intrinsic motivation for the study activities, thereby enhancing engagement in the course units and reducing experiences of academic pressure ». Individual interest could be said to “go a long way” to help, however. Hidi and Renninger (2006), comment that « . . . individual interest has been found to have a positive impact on attention, recognition, and recall persistence and effects academic motivation and levels of learning ». It seems reasonable to suggest that individual interest, therefore, should be nurtured by allowing students more autonomy in their choice of modules and content of their chosen programme of study. In another study, Mikkonen, Ruohoniemi and Lindblom–Yläne (2013) show that well developed individual interest can substitute for the motivating effects of clear future goals. It may therefore be easier to help students form future goals at an early stage through existing sources, like study planning programmes or career guidance programmes. To consider a point from an alternative perspective, Suhre, Jansen, and Torenbeek (2013) point out that there is a large body of literature that references how employers demand highly skilled graduates, who have an academic attitude and motivation. Activities which develop motivation among students for the sake of improving their engagement and employability does seem very desirable.

The image (figure 1) is a representation of a selection of that literature reviewed in this paper, arranged into a format that may be used to structure a supplemental programme of study which would address the needs of students in order for them to build sufficient motivation to engage with a learning to learn programme, and their programme of study in university. This image represents a model which could address the gaps in student motivation highlighted in this paper and be formed into a programme which could run alongside current learning to learn programmes. This model outlines a type of intervention that may aid students build enough motivation to help contribute to their engagement with a learning to learn programme, and in turn help them achieve in their first year in university. It is
suggested that this model be developed into a programme that students take alongside their academic programme of study, and learning to learning initiatives. It is not intended to replace, rather support, existing student interventions.

An obvious criticism is that this literature review is general in nature, and does not delve deep enough to allow for the development of a fully functioning ‘motivation enhancing’ programme in a university environment as the (below) model is very general in nature. Further investigation and pilot programmes would be needed to realise the functionality of this model in practice. A recommendation is to develop a programme like this which aims to increase student motivation, so that they can engage with learning to learn programmes at a higher rate, and ultimately increase their performance in higher education.

**Figure 1.** A graphic showing the 2 phases of support that an institute of Higher Education might implement to help increase student motivation to engage with Learning to Learn programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Focus of support programme</th>
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</table>
| **Step 1:** University provides support for the following | Positive support from significant others (Vallerand et al 1997)  
Support for sense of autonomy and relatedness (Vallerand et al 1997)  
Meaningful reason for engaging with uninteresting behaviour (Dee et al 1999)  
Future goals (Mikkonen et al 2013) |
| **Step 2:** University provides support for the following | Increase self-regulatory processes (Schunk et al 1998)  
Self Discipline (Torenbeek et al 2012)  
Motivational strategies (Tuckman 2003)  
Learning (eg learning skills programme) |

**Result:**  
Motivation  
Persistence in studies  
Academic achievement / Increase in grades
5. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper indicates that students need support in being autonomous to make choices and decisions, which can help them develop higher levels of intrinsic motivation. It is claimed above that intrinsic motivation helps persistence in studies. The literature generally agrees that the need for autonomy and competence is the basis of intrinsic motivation and behaviour, and, evidence is presented above which demonstrates that students regularly do attempt to self-motivate using extrinsic, intrinsic and even negative motivating methods. A strong desire for achievement in a student is seen as a better predictor of academic performance than a focus on achieving grades alone, especially when combined with higher levels of social problem-solving appraisal and adjustment to university. We identify studies that show that students’ motivation and academic achievement can be increased by working with them to increase their self-regulatory processes, and that self-regulatory processes can be taught. Additionally, engagement is seen to increase where a person is given a meaningful and related reason to perform a particular behaviour. Similarly, where students report to have low levels of interest in certain elements of their course, they can overcome potential difficulties with engagement if they have well developed individual interest or clear future goals. A general model is presented in the discussion which provides a basic layout for the development of a programme which could help students improve their motivation and engagement with programmes that promote the Key Competence of learning to learn. Shortfalls identified point to the ‘general’ nature of this review and the model presented. Recommendations are made for further investigation and trials to be conducted to realise any benefit of this model.

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What do you think about INSTALL?

Students’ post training interviews

ANNA CANNATA, FEDERICA PARLATO, MARIA LUISA MARTINO

Abstract

Nowadays, in European universities we are witnessing a growing phenomenon of non-traditional students / disadvantaged, groups at risk of drop-out and low academic achievement. In order to respond to this phenomenon, beginning in October of 2011, was funded by the European Community the INSTALL project (Innovative Solutions To Acquire Learning to Learn), of which the leader is the SInaPSI Federico II University Centre of Naples and the Prof. Maria Francesca Freda is the scientific coordinator, in collaboration with the NUIM University of Ireland, the University of Seville of Spain, the NSPSPA of Romania. Install proposed a group formative training (Narrative Mediation path) conducted by a psychologist, Narrative Group trainer (NGT), to support the process of mentalization, intended as reflexive competence, using different narrative codes: Metaphoric, Iconography, Written and Bodily. The training aims to promote reflexive competence of Learning to Learn fostering a functional adaptation to the university context. At the end of the meetings, were made ten in depth narrative interviews aimed to explore, from the words of the participants: the constraints and resources of INSTALL training; methodological aspects facilitating the reflective process; the implications in terms of academic performance at the end of the training. In addition, they were asked to narrate an incident of academic life, following the path in which they believe they have used new strategies, expression of a functional positioning in the university. The analysis of the interviews with IPA method, shows some NGT functions that, implemented, can support students in reflexive process and to develop functional competences to academic goals.

Keywords: Reflexive Competence, L2L in HE, Trainer’s Competences, Narrative methods, IPA.
1. Introduction

Nowadays, in European universities we are witnessing a growing phenomenon of non-traditional students / disadvantaged, groups at risk of drop-out and low academic achievement. In order to respond to this phenomenon, beginning in October of 2011, was funded by the European Community the INSTALL project (Innovative Solutions To Acquire Learning to Learn), of which the leader is the SINAPSI Federico II University Centre of Naples and the Prof. Maria Francesca Freda is the scientific coordinator, in collaboration with the NUIM University of Ireland, the University of Seville of Spain, the NSPSPA of Romania. INSTALL creates a training group of Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) to support the process of mentalization, intended as reflexive competence (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Allen & Fonagy, 2008), using different narrative codes: Metaphoric, Iconography, Written and Bodily (Hermans, 2001). The project’s aim is to enable students in late with exams to develop the reflexive competence of learning to learn (L2L, key competence Learning to Learn), in order to facilitate a functional adaptation to the university context.

During the project, the Federico II University has realized ten groups of training with heterogeneous students degree course/faculty, homogeneous for the common condition of students in late and/or with low exams average.

The group meetings, led by psychologists specialized in narrative methodology, allowed students to start a reflexive process on the university experience of each one in the light of the story of the other. An important function of the trainer was to start and open debate on the academic issues proposed by the students in order to broaden the discussion, to encourage the participation in the group discussion, to support the different points of view, respecting the times and personal styles of each one.
2. Method

Aim

Improving the quality of the INSTALL group training in the context of the University Federico II of Naples, from student feedback. Specifically, the aim is to explore, from the interview of the participating students, constraints and resources valuable to rethink and empower the NGT functions.

Tools

After a month and half the end of the training, the trainers have contacted the students of the Install groups by e–mail asking for their willingness to be interviewed in depth, to explore some aspects characterizing the path taken.

The interview took place in the Federico II University, in a ad hoc room; lasted 1 hours each one.

In particular it was constructed a narrative interview following this areas:

— the constraints and resources of INSTALL training;
— methodological aspects facilitating the reflective process;
— the implications in terms of academic performance at the end of the path.

In addition, students were asked to narrate an incident of academic life in which they believe they have used new strategies with respect to:

— method of study and learning strategies;
— time management (attendance at courses, study at home, presence for the exams);
— attendance and participation in class;
— attendance at peer groups for the playful aspects;
— interaction with teaching staff;
— keeping of the exam;
— academic performance (exams taken, passed).
3. Data Analysis

We have analyzed 10 audio–recorded and transcribed verbatim interviews.

To analyze the interviews, we chose the method IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborne, 2003; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The focus is centered on the life experiences of the participants and on the process of construction of meaning around particular events. For this reason it is found to be very suitable for follow–up interviews. When using the IPA, researcher arises mainly their interest on what happens in the flow of daily life experiences of people living something important. The IPA has as general aim to fully understand the meaning that people give to an experience. This analysis draws its origins from the phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997) and symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1983).

The IPA research focuses on the exploration of the experiences, perceptions and viewpoints of the participants (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). While the researcher tries to access the “participant’s personal world” (ivi., p. 218), insofar as this is possible, IPA recognizes that”access is complicated and depends on the personal views of the researcher... «necessary to make sense of the world through a process of interpretative activity» (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999, ibid. 218–219).

According to the fundamental assumption IPA, the content of each interview is divided into more specific areas, in order to obtain representative categories of the answers to the questions. The comparison between the areas obtained, and the consistency with the recorded material is subjected to the judgment of independent readers, so as to arrive at a more objective assessment possible considering that before forming each category, the transcribed material to be read several times. The analysis is described as an iterative cycle and inductive, which proceeds according to the following strategies:

1) closed and line by line analysis of the statements and understanding of each participant (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006);
2) the identification of emerging patterns (themes) within the experiential material, emphasizing that both convergence both divergence, similarities and nuances (Eatough & Smith, 2008), of-
ten before an individual case and then subsequently laid across multiple cases;
3) the development of a”dialogue”between the researchers, the data collected and their psychological knowledge, about what it can mean for those participants having interests in that context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, 2004) in order to conduct to build a more interpretive guide;
4) the development of a structure or a gestalt that illustrates the relationship between the themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009);
5) the organization of all the material in a format that enables the tracing of the data analyzed throughout the process, from the initial comments on the transcript, thought the initial development theme for the cluster to get to the final structure of the themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009);
6) the use of supervision, collaboration or revision of helping to develop the consistency and plausibility of the interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009);
7) the development of a comprehensive narrative, as evidenced by the comments and detailed data extracts that lead the reader through the process of interpretation issue by issue and supported by some visual forms (a simple structure, diagram or table) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

4. Discussion

From Textual analysis of the corpus, we report two kinds of classification: Emerging categories (themes) and super-ordinate categories.

Expectations/Reality: group therapy vs university lecture

The most recurrent extracts within the narratives of the students are: the brevity of the training, the not therapeutic training setting, the lack / shortage of methodological and didactic content, the expectation that groups were conducted by academic teachers, learning techniques, the expectation that the setting was similar to a classroom and that the path was organized in lectures on university model.
The expectations of students go in two directions: first, probably influenced by the presence of a conductor psychologist and the group setting, on a "psychopathological or iatrogenic fantasy", which connotes the INSTALL path as a kind of group-therapy, similar to the intervention model also spread by the media, under the name "Alcoholics Anonymous".

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations/Reality</th>
<th>The Ugly Duckling, The Prodigal Son</th>
<th>“Me Tarzan, you Jane: the meeting with Others/Diversity”</th>
<th>“RISIKO: active and aware in the university”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— brevity of the training</td>
<td>— student’s self-representation as isolated</td>
<td>— functions of the group (sharing, containment mirroring, multifocal look)</td>
<td>— moments of rest/study times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— not therapeutic training setting</td>
<td>— group setting students from different courses of study</td>
<td>— difference between the narrative codes relating to the representability of experiences and the emotional involvement</td>
<td>— looking for a part time job that does not limits the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— lack/shortage of methodological and didactic content</td>
<td>— European funding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— expectation that groups were conducted by academic teachers</td>
<td>— Lisbon program for the young European citizen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— learning techniques</td>
<td>— partnership with other universities</td>
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<td>— expectation that the setting was similar to a classroom and that the path was organized in lectures on university model</td>
<td>— the proposed project from their own universities</td>
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<td>— method of study; step to make more informed</td>
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The expectations of students go in two directions: first, probably influenced by the presence of a conductor psychologist and the group setting, on a "psychopathological or iatrogenic fantasy", which connotes the INSTALL path as a kind of group-therapy, similar to the intervention model also spread by the media, under the name "Alcoholics Anonymous".
This aspect allows us to capture a representation of student in late as student with problems/psychological distress, just like the alcoholics, addicted to a vice over which they have no control or choice, searching motivational support in clinical groups. In addition, as well as for self-help groups, participants are organized by the same “disease”, to the point that identify and recognize themselves as belonging to a specific group. An important aspect of this representation relates to the sense of efficacy and hope that students attribute to paths like this: participate in group therapy is helpful, talk to people who share the ”same defect” helps to cope better with the difficulties, use psychological support strengthens the motivation and helps to improve aspects of decision making and conduct with respect to the pursuance of negative behavior.

The second representation is more pedagogical relates to a process of ”assimilation” to the model of classroom lectures, familiar to students of all activities proposed by the university. This point informs us of how the variability of models of dialogue between institution and student is poor, as the diffusion of an asymmetric mode of participation in the environment, such as the lectures in the classroom with a low student–teacher interaction, affects the performances of students. In addition, finding of having “basic deficiencies”, students are expected to receive educational methodological suggestions. INSTALL has offered a thoughtful process and dialogue with the university, adapted to implement a transversal competence. The gap between expectation and reality, however, does not seem to result only in a simple ”disappointment”, but it results ”disillusion” that is as progressive discovery of a university that becomes an active partner to build himself a student who knows how to feel at home in his formative context.

This suggests a functional arrangement of the participants of the training offer and becomes an important reflexive factor in producing a good compliance during the path, with a low drop-out rate.

The Ugly Duckling The Prodigal Son

We have collected in this category the topics related to the transition from a student’s self-representation as isolated and struggling with problems that are not communicable and shared, to the possibility that
the student is recognized as belonging to a community (the group, the institution of the university, the European Community) and the social context. To settle this superordinate category, are the following topics: group setting, students from different courses of study, European funding, Lisbon program for the young European citizen, partnership with other universities, the proposed project from their own universities. Socializing experiences within a group setting allowed putting into words feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by many students, resulting in the accumulation of delay in their studies. Voluntary participation in the INSTALL path, meeting with other students belonging to other degree courses, participation in a range of European university project has allowed us to experience a sense of belonging to a collective context, institutional – university, local and European level. With INSTALL, as the student is reinserted in the university context and addressed by a proposal aimed to support the educational success for students in late in their studies. Federico II University with Install service communicated to the students attention to their participation as a promoter of academic success as students perceived. In this sense, we can say that students have understood the intention of the institutions (university and community) to intercept their need for inclusion by offering an holding space for the emotional aspects that organize the keeping up on time. On the other hand, we find the strength and significance of the “European Union metaphor”, i.e., how the institutional community is as an attractor for students and gives the initiatives promoted by local contexts added value, quality assurance.

Me Tarzan, you Jane: the meeting with Others/Diversity

This category includes issues concerning the experience of comparison with otherness, in particular the recurring themes to form this category relate to the functions of the group (sharing, containment, mirroring, multifocal look) and the difference between the narrative modes relating to the representability of experiences and the emotional involvement.

The mutual recognition of the border of the identity, the assumption of the constructive dialogue with otherness, makes possible the experience of different versions of being a student. The group, as
What do you think about INSTALL?

a narrative device, has promoted comparison functions and sharing of experiences of individuals, a reduction of suffering, the development of different versions of subjective experiences and a mirroring function of self in the other. In particular, the students expressed that they felt recognized in the experiences of others, but they have also had the opportunity to catch all aspects of divergence and difference. It would seem that they are left with a preliminary idea about the uniqueness and the lack of communication of their experience, only to discover aspects of communion, similarities and continuity with the experience of others. This step to sharing and mutual recognition, functional expression of the emotional aspects related to the experiences and the assumption of the process of inclusion in the university context. However, it would seem only a later conquest the freedom of recognize himself in the other in some respects, without sacrificing the necessary differences and the differences that create opportunities for development and agency.

In this process of recognize the plurality and the otherness, the creative use of different narrative modes that NMP helps to try ”different ways” to put into words the emotions and thoughts related to the experience. Students are encouraged by the different narrative modes to use different languages to describe the experience and to be able to express it.

Risik: active and aware in the University

We have collected within this category excerpts related to the planning and implementation of a more functional behaviors for the academic success: the relation between moments of rest/study times; looking for a part time job that does not limits the university, method of study; step to make more informed, design a plan of study individualized, change the course of study, attending college websites and forums.

The metaphor of the game “Risk”, suggested by one interviewee, there appears to be particularly representative and suitable to identify the change, the outcome of the reflexive process started with INSTALL: in order to achieve academic goals is essential to ”know the field” and perceive themselves and act as active subjects and efficacy in time management and relations, in planning the most appropriate and effective strategies to the context. The students do not perceive
themselves more “pawns property”, harnessed in “race against time”, but access to a representation of themselves as active actors, having developed awareness on the implication of the decision–making factors in the achievement academic goals. This representation suggests that in order to take part in the academic context, you do not need to plan a plan of attack (for example, having studied an examination or always go to class), it is necessary to have a ”tactic” that is a complex project that starts from camp rules and knows how to evolve according to the changing constraints of the context. It is necessary a contact, ”to be able to take the field” and expertise to anticipate and predict the moves of the other.

5. Conclusion

The feedback from the students suggest different issue about methodological aspects of the NMP. In particular, we believe that the methodological framework of NMP has enabled the emergence of emotional and relational dynamics between the members of the group that, if properly encouraged by the trainers, can produce good results in terms of reflexive competence and efficacy of strategies. In this sense, we believe that the analysis of the narratives of the students offers the opportunity to highlight some specific functions for the trainer:

1) supporting inclusive processes within the context: it is important that the trainer encourages a “dialogic” representation of the relation with the university institution, ie an institution with which it is possible to enter into dialogue and negotiate. It is functional to the adaptation to the context that the institution is experienced not only as a source of problems or academic setting, but as a partner and an active supporter of a competence that can be co–constructed. Activate a critical debate, primarily among the members in the group and with the same trainer, becomes an experiential opportunity for the construction of this new perspective.

2) Supporting the interest for the others as a vehicle for personal growth: the curiosity and the mutual opening that takes place in the group can be the subject of meta–learning for students
What do you think about INSTALL?

in the plurality learn to manage in new and creative ways the unknown. In this sense, it is essential that the trainer takes an exploratory approach, that raises and open issues that have arisen not only encouraging students to express their thoughts but also to ”fake” their beliefs act making an effort to hypothesize different versions of the same experience. Supporting the ”soft voices” that give equal space to the participation of each student, respecting the times and styles of each, with the aim of enriching the debate and recognize the equal dignity to all participants.

3) Promote a ”pragmatic” competence in which the intention before the action is a signal of an active and consciousness positioning of the student involved to seek resources (methodological, educational, motivational, relational, etc.). In order to recognize the obstacles to best address them, rather than avoid them. To this end, functional trainer interventions designed to engage students in a design process of academic life aimed at encouraging a process of connection between the emotions, intentions and actions, in which the student can build his actions within the academic context from his feelings, his desires and will. In this sense, to know ”territory” cannot be connected to ”know themselves” in order to be able to act efficiently for the purposes and in accordance with the expectations and plans.

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What do you think about INSTALL?


The use of the Reflexive Function Scale (RFS) in Higher Education

GIOVANNA ESPOSITO, NUNZIA RAINONE, RAFFAELE DE LUCA PICIONE

Abstract

The aim of this work is to evaluate the INSTALL European Project efficacy in fostering mentalization (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012) with students enrolled in the training programs. For this purpose, we administered to 59 Italian underachieving students lagging behind with their studies an especially devised open-ended questionnaire before and after the INSTALL formative programs. The questionnaire comprises questions inspired by the demand questions used in the Adult Attachment Interview and adapted for the specific university context. Answers were scored on the basis of the Reflexive Function Scale (RFS) (Fonagy & Target, 1997). Analysis showed a positive trend toward increased RF in most of participants. We discuss how the RF increase is to be credited to the multimodal methodology of INSTALL Project and we bring into focus the innovative contexts, e.g., normative–formative contexts, in which mentalization theory could be applied.

Keywords: Reflection Function Scale, Reflexivity, Underachieving Students, Mentalization, Evaluation

1. Introduction

Mentalization is a reflexive process that defines individuals’ and others’ behaviors as intentional mental states (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012), thereby necessitating the ability to use different cognitive skills (e.g., reflection, interpretation, mirroring) to signify relationship affective dynamics. Mentalization is the ability to understand both the reasons of one’s own, as well as other people’s, behavior, and the way such mental states affect the relationships one partakes in. In the former case, mentalization is the ability correctly to understand mental states and their link to actions; in the latter, it becomes a method to attribute
meaning to relationships, and analyze one’s own role in directing them (Freda, Esposito & Quaranta, submitted).

Interest in mentalization to treat clinical pathologies is now soaring in psychotherapy settings (Bateman & Fonagy 2012), yet on the other hand, interest is also deepening in normative settings, such as formative contexts. Data from research studies conducted in different schools (e.g., Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco 2005) has shown that the competence of mentalization is a supportive learning tool because it plays a scaffolding function in students’ learning (Padykula & Horwitz 2011; Freda, 2013). In contrast, there are only a few studies that investigate mentalizing competence in an academic context with a non–psychotherapeutic perspective. According to Fonagy, the importance of mentalization is not just for the psychopathologic field as it can more broadly be used to support individuals who are adapting to different community settings throughout life (Fonagy et al. 2009).

Our research intends to foster mentalization competence among university underachieving students lagging behind with their studies. Underachieving students are often Average Mentalizers (Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2005) who show a bias in their signification of university experience while under stress. They evince mentalizing impairments when dealing with specific university–related events and relationships, or specific developmental milestones (transition to university, fundamental exams, etc.). Understanding mental states may be conducive for them to finding a balance between cognitive and affective dimensions (Christie et al, 2008) which, in turn, can direct one’s conduct at university in a responsible, independent, and goal–oriented manner.

Our research addresses students who enrolled in some training programs which are part of the European project, INSTALL (INnovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn)\(^1\). The Project ultimately aims to develop the key competence of Learning to Learn. We hypothesize that such a competence can be acquired by assisting students to develop a mentalizing ability as regard the mental states and relationships that they form at the university.

In order to foster mentalization, we devised and tested a Narrative

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\(^1\) This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein
Mediation Path (NMP), i.e. a narrative formative method implemented over seven group meetings of about 10 students. NMP is based on a device, the narrative group, and four narrative modes (Metaphorical, Iconographic, Writing, Bodily), each conveyed by a specific narrative medium. The method is innovative because of its multimodality: different modes and media, as well as individual and group narrative levels, are integrated in a single method, which enhances the processes of reflexive construction of meaning (Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey, 2006). The succession of individual and group levels, as well as the sequence the media, are presented in, make it possible to target the multiple dimensions of mentalization, addressing isomorphically its complexity.

We decided to use narrative modes and media, and the narrative group, to foster mentalization because of some reasons. Firstly, it has shown how the narrative can simultaneously be a promoter and an indicator of the efficacy of a mentalizing intervention (Fonagy & Allen 2006), as it offers a wide range of input that is linked to facilitator creativity (Bateman & Fonagy 2012). Therefore, mentalization has a circular and bidirectional relationship with narration since it is a narrative form itself (oral or written). The individual who mentalizes constantly creates stories about his/her and others’ mental states. Then, the narrative group has an important function in fostering mentalization. The multiple viewpoints present in a group allow for multiple possible representations of the experience; the facilitator takes on the role of creative social mirror who keeps in mind the others’ mental states (Fonagy & Target, 1997); she represents these mental states, she turns them into a comprehensible language, and she stresses the notion that another exists because he is being minded in mind, because he exists in another mind. Therefore we can say that the group is a training arena for mentalization (Karterud, 2011); it stimulates complex, emotional interactions as each member is invited to think about his own mind and the minds of the others, thus activating processes of reflection.

Yet it is difficult to measure the progress of mentalization in mentalizing interventions experiences. There are different methods for the analysis of mentalization. The most important is represented in

2. These are weekly meetings of about two hours each.
the Reflexive Function Scale (Fonagy & Target 1997) and its revisions (Fonagy & Ghinai 2008). There are also studies that measured specific dimensions. Though not exhaustive, we mention a few: the analysis on the construct of empathy and on the reading non–verbal cues (Padykula & Horwitz 2011) and more recent surveys on mentalizing tasks (Beaulieu–Pelletier, Philippe & Bouchard 2012).

In this study, we use the Reflexive Function Scale (RFS) to assess the INSTALL Project efficacy in fostering mentalization with Italian underachieving students enrolled in the training programs.

2. Methods

A total of 59 students have taken part in INSTALL programs, divided in ten formative groups. The students come from different departments (Engineering, Modern Languages, Psychology, etc.) of the Federico II University in Naples. Most of students (N=23) are enrolled in the third year of their undergraduate program; 21 students have not passed all the required exams in the prescribed period of time (supplementary years of enrollment). The other (N=15) are enrolled in the second year (N=15). The average age is 26 (dev.st=5.2). All students belong to the class of underachieving students with low academic performance.

To assess the efficacy of our formative programs, we administered an especially devised open–ended questionnaire before and after the intervention. The questionnaire comprises six questions inspired by the demand questions used in the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (Main, Goldwyn & Hesse, 2003), adapted for the specific university context (e.g., “How did you feel during your first months of university life?”, “Have any of those thoughts and emotions changed with time?”).

3. The project was funded in 2011 within the ERASMUS Multilateral Project initiative. The SInAPSi center of the Federico II University took the lead in its partnership with three other European universities: US (Spain), NUIM (Ireland) and NSPSA (Romania).

4. Underachievement is defined based on a GPA below a certain score (23), or a number of credits gained less than 50% the prescribed amount at the time of participation to INSTALL.

5. Besides the aforementioned questionnaire, other qualitative/quantitative evaluation tools were administered which we will not consider here as beyond our present scope.
Answers were scored on the basis of the Reflexive Function Scale (RFS) (Fonagy & Target, 1997), originally devised to score transcripts from AAI but applicable to other texts as well.

The RFS operationalizes mentalization, or Reflexive Function (RF), on an ordered scale of levels from -1 to 9. Previous studies have shown that the normative population mean in an English context is about 5 (Fonagy et al., 1998).

Scoring was entrusted to two independent judges, blinded to the phase (pre vs. post test) and the group (1–10). The inter–judge reliability was acceptable (r = .83). Each answer was scored according to the following: –1 was assigned to an answer characterized by oddness or anti–reflexivity (e.g., My emotions haven’t changed at all, because in this world nothing changes and everything comes back to bite you); 1, in case of absence of reflexive function (e.g. I don’t know, I’ve never thought about it); 3, if the answer evinced awareness of mental states but no explicit link to behavior (e.g. I felt sad and worried); 5, if RF was explicit, ordinary, related to behavior but without particular elaborations (e.g., I often felt inadequate and thought about dropping out. I felt like I didn’t fit in this university, and I think this bears on my difficulty to pass exams); 7, for answers showing marked RF and high sensitivity, and an ability by the student to use an established “theory of mind” in different relational contexts (e.g., I worried the teacher and the other students were disapproving of me. Then I realized I was just imagining things. This awareness is going to help me in my future exams as much as in the exams I’ll have to pass in the course of my life, since I believe my university woes are not so much different from the ones I face in my everyday life); 9, if the answer subsumed all the features of the previous level in a fuller or exceptional form (e.g., In the beginning, I was always very agitated, and I tried to constantly control my emotions. I attempted to isolate myself, to shun pleasures. I never took the time to think about my anxiety, my feelings of fear, anger, and dread of being unfit for this faculty. Today I feel like every piece of the mosaic is beginning to fall in. I realize my problems at university come from deeper roots having to do with my insecurity, with my fear not being able to measure up, at home as at the university, with my parents as well as with my friends).

6. Reflexive Function is defined as the operationalization of mentalization as a construct (Fonagy & Target, 1997). It is, however, possible to use the two terms as synonyms.
Furthermore, pursuant to the manual, an overall score was given globally to each card with the same metric used for the single answers.

3. Results

Analysis showed a positive trend toward increased RF in all 59 Italian underachieving students. RF increased in 43 students at the end the formative program. Specifically, RF increased one level in 34 students, and two levels in 9 students. 16 students showed no increase. Moreover, we calculated the mean RF before (Mean=2.4) and after the test (Mean=4.2).

Figure 1. Levels of Reflexive Function pre– and post– test.

4. Conclusions

The data we obtained show an average positive increase in most of students enrolled in INSTALL training programs. The results reveal
the efficacy of the Project in fostering mentalization in underachieving students lagging behind with their studies. We believe the RF increase is to be credited to the multimodal methodology of NMP that makes it possible to target the various dimensions of mentalization and amplify reflexive processes. Specifically, NMP is an innovative formative model in the field of mentalization studies, where group and individual narrative devices, as well as narrative modes (even if with different media) have been used mainly individually (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012).

Nevertheless, at the end of the program most students scored 3 or 5 and only three students reached level 7 post-test, which indicates (along with level 9) more complex levels of mentalization. These data comport with the literature concerning the absence of extremes (−1 and 9) in “normative” populations (Fonagy et al., 1998). However, we believe the low frequency of values of 7 should be attributed to two reasons: at first, INSTALL training programs occur only seven times and this may represent a limitation in building a complex competence like mentalization; secondly, our questionnaire does not permit to detect the group–level inter–subjective steps we deem essential for the development and measurement of complex levels of mentalization.

As we mentioned, processes of sharing activated within group settings have an obvious transformative and reflexive potential (Lieblich, 2012; Seaton, 2008). Only through inter–subjective discourse can a person achieve a higher level of mentalization and can mentalize relations and recognize relational patterns enacted in different contexts. Accordingly, future studies will focus on analyzing the sessions’ transcripts to determine whether the inter–subjective narrative flow promoted higher levels of mentalization, and allows to measure it (Freda, 2011; Freda & Esposito, submitted; Freda, De Luca Picione & Esposito, in press).

Finally, a further issue that we bring into focus is about innovative contexts in which mentalization theory could be applied: normative–formative contexts. The student who enrolls in INSTALL programs can be representative of any other healthy individual who regresses in pre–mentalizing psychical moods when faced with stressing events, like failed university exams or transition form school to university. Obviously, pre–mentalizing processes occur with different intensity if we compare healthy and psychopathologic patients (Livney 2008).
However, what may be penalizing, in these cases, is that there are no possibilities for a psychotherapeutic intervention. In light of this evidence, we assert that mentalization is not a psychopathologic construct, but a developmental one: it is a context–specific and relation–specific competence that can be promoted in each subject and in every context (Bateman & Fonagy 2012). The caregiver (parents, psychotherapist or facilitator), who plays the role of minding into mind the other’s mind (Fonagy & Target 1997), and his/her relationship with the subject are the condicio sine qua non to promoting mentalization. He/she has to be trained at directing reflexive processes about the “formative self” and the relationships that the students entertain exclusively within formative contexts, without going into other personal dimensions that should be treated in psychotherapeutic settings (Salvatore & Freda, 2011).

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NARRATIVE AS A REFLEXIVE PRACTICE
A conceptual and methodological frame to foster reflexivity on educational identity and professional practice

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Abstract

What is reflexivity, why is it so important in higher education, and how can it be implemented? We assume a semiotic standpoint to deal with these issues, focusing on the acknowledgment of the primary role of meaning in mediating the ways people take part in their system of activity, be it educational or professional. Reflexivity can be seen either as a specific educational model that teachers adopt to cope with the otherness of the students’ system of meanings, or a basic competence that higher education programs should promote in the students in order to improve their ability to manage the otherness with which they will deal in their professional practice. A specific reflexive model, based on narrative methods, will be presented. In this model, the development of the ways the students think of their educational identity and of their future professional practice is conceived as the emergent property in an intersubjective sense-making process, as every dialogic exchange can be regarded.

Key words: reflexivity, semiotic approach, otherness, narrative methods.

1. Introduction

What is reflexivity and why is it so important in higher education? What kind of object does a reflexive approach deal with? In what ways can a trainer develop this approach? These are only a few (of the most relevant) issues we want to address in this paper. A clinical psychology standpoint is assumed in dealing with these issues. Accordingly, education can be described in terms of a sensemaking process (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2006; Venuleo, 2012). As its object of reference (that is as its form of knowledge and of intervention) it takes
semiotic tools (chunks of knowledge, concepts, behaviors...) used by trainees to organize the meaning of their experience and represent the goals, functions and tools of their future professional practice. Given this framework, understanding why, what and how to deal with reflexivity in higher education means clarifying the role of meaning in the construction of professional identity, as well as understanding what (intersubjective) conditions might foster new ways of thinking, i.e. new meanings and new practices.

In the first two sections we will discuss these theoretical issues; in the third section we will present a training device that uses narrative methods to promote reflexivity among higher education students.

2. A semiotic standpoint on reflexivity

Elsewhere, we suggested thinking of reflexivity as the specific competence that helps people to recognize and mobilize the meanings embedded in the discursive and behavioral practices enacted within a given system of activity, be it an educational, professional, social or institutional system (Venuleo & Guidi, 2011, 2013). Many of the meanings people use are taken for granted, that is, not overtly and explicitly stipulated, but implicitly assumed. This means that they do not constitute an explicit body of reference for knowledge, but take the form of the given premise for each piece of knowledge. Even if implicit, taken–for–granted meanings nonetheless affect people’s ways of thinking and acting within their context. In the educational field, they might work as a constraint on the opportunity to generate new learning and to enact new practices. Some authors have suggested that the capacity of the system of meaning to feed students’ success reflects the consistency between the beliefs, feelings and actions motivated by their meaning and the role demands made on the student by the training situation (Cf. Cobern 1993).

As far as professional practice is concerned, a great deal of the literature produced in the last fifty years has pointed out the potentially dangerous effects of any professional action which does not pay considerable attention to acknowledging the users’ systems of meaning (expectations, role models, interests...) and of their regulative power over the intervention (D’Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2007; Guidi,
Salvatore & Scotto di Carlo, 2011). As a result, especially in professions with a wide margin of uncertainty and/or unpredictable situations (like the professions involved in the mental health services), the idea that the practitioners must be aware of the way their users represent the *what*, the *how* and the *why* of their work (Taylor & White, 2000) is gaining ground.

As we previously defined it, reflexivity can be regarded as the competence to recognize and mobilize the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in the way people take part in a system of activity. As such, it appears to be both a way of thinking of the teacher’s position toward the educational relationship, and, in many cases, a specific competence that higher education programs (designed to foster professional competence) are called on to enhance. In both cases, reflexivity is the competence enabling people to overcome the constraint that any implicit meaning and representation shared in a given context places on the chance to generate new meanings and new practices.

3. *Otherness* as the condition for, and output of reflexive work

Sensemaking is an intrinsically inter-subjective process. It is in the context of discourse and interaction that the frame of meaning suggested by an actor comes *alive* (Linell, 2009). One important implication of this statement is that any training deals with a process which occurs *among* the subjects and which has to be elaborated inter-subjectively, not individually.

According to our point of view, the acknowledgment of *otherness* — in the sense of the symbolic frame which recognizes the plurality of some possible different universe of meaning — is the intersubjective condition for, and, at the same time, the main output of reflexive training work based on one’s own and others’ schemata. In our conception of *otherness*, one cannot take others’ psychic realities for granted, for one does not know what others think and feel, nor which meanings they attribute to their relationship. Accordingly, a reflexive training setting requires the suspension of the implicit certainty that a common frame of meaning, defining the *what*, *how* and *why* of the training exchange, is shared by the actors taking part in a given situation. *What kind of aims motivate our ways of taking part in this system of activities?*
What do we expect from each other? What are the differences between your thoughts and mine, and what the implications of these differences? These are a few of the questions that we might keep in mind while working, and encouraging the trainees to work, on the concept of otherness.

Reflexivity (or, more precisely, the activation of reflexive thinking in an educational activity) specifically concerns the analysis of meanings through which the participants interpret their shared experience. In so doing, the teacher aims to implement a special educational function: listening, getting to know and working on and through the implicit meanings emerging, promotes in the students the use of a methodological approach to interpret what is currently happening. And this may be extremely important in their future professional practice in order to manage the encounter with the users’ autonomous subjectivity (which cannot be recognized or previously known), and/or their way of using the professional service.

4. How can reflexivity be implemented?

Given the strong link we see between reflexivity and otherness, our suggestion of using narrative methods should aim to achieve the goal of making explicit the variability of the meanings through which the students position themselves towards a shared experience. This opens up the possibility of questioning the implicit assumptions the students have about how and what the relationship should be, that is of inquiring about the meanings underpinning their specific version of the experience. Once made explicit, these assumptions can be mobilized and fostered through the methodological choice of not dealing with them as taken-for-granted meanings, but making them the object of a process of sensemaking, through the activation of shared reflexive thinking.

In the following, we will describe a reflexive training setting, in which we firstly made use of a tool called open texts (Eco, 1979) in order to activate the trainees’ experience. As a second, reflexive, step, we asked the students to account for the “open text” experience, writing a case report on what happened. In the third stage, we asked the students to participate to a reflexive conversation aimed at analyzing the meanings emerging in/through the written reports they had produced.
On the use of open texts

We suggest using open text to describe any partially structured training stimulus, where the attitude the participants should adopt towards it is not pre-established. It is worth pointing out that the same stimulus might be used as closed text, expecting conclusions, or as open text, calling “for further making, for the interpretative and constructive activity which characterize transformation, as opposed to reproduction” (Wexler, 2000, p.1325).

We are interested in pointing out three main functions that the use of a technique like that of open texts aims to perform in the educational field:

a) first, it helps to reject a conclusive interpretation, while operating as (if it were) a projective stimulus, so that the students’ educational and professional models are allowed to emerge;

b) second, it helps to work on the goal of challenging the idea that there is only one way to see, feel and think about any shared experience;

c) third, it helps to define the emerging issues in terms of an intersubjective dimension insofar as any definition of the problem that needs to be dealt with, does not rely on a single member of the relationship, but is shared by all the partners in dialogue.

“The woman on the bridge” (Montesarchio & Marzella, 1999) is an example of an exercise designed to operate as open texts. This exercise refers to a story about a woman faced with a very unusual and peculiar situation within which she first has to deal with 5 other different characters (her husband, her secret lover, a friend, a boatman, and a madman), and is then murdered. Below is the text of the story, followed by the instruction given to the trainers.

A young, married woman, neglected by her busy husband, lets herself be seduced by a man, and goes to spend the night with her lover, who lives on the other side the river. The morning after, to come back home before her husband returns from his business trip, she has to cross the river back. However, a madman blocks the bridge. She therefore looks for a boatman, who asks to be paid in advance for the crossing. The woman has no money with her, so she tries to explain to the boatman and to beg him, but he
refuses to carry her before being paid. The woman decides to go back to her lover and asks him to give her a loan, but he refuses with no explanation. Then, the woman goes to a friend of hers – an unmarried man who had always been in love with her, but was never requited. She tells him of her situation and begs him for some money; the friend refuses, too, as he is very disappointed by her behavior. At this point, after another attempt with the boatman, the woman decides to cross the bridge. The madman kills her.

**Task:** The trainer asks the participants of the course to select (usually 6–8) volunteers. The students selected are asked to perform a dual task: first of all, to make a personal classification ranking the six characters in the story (the woman, her husband, her secret lover, the madman, the boatman and her friend) in terms of their decreasing responsibility for the murder; afterwards, to draw up a single common classification with the other students. While in the first part of the exercise the students are asked to remain silent, in the second part, they are invited to discuss their opinions with the others.

In the exercise, the ways the trainees relate to the activity depends on the meaning–making processes through which they interpret the training setting (its goals, the competencies pursued, the aims of the exercise...). For instance, they could engage in the discussion and in the common classification of the characters of the story with the aim of highlighting their competence in collaborating (and recognizing in this attitude a basic competence of their future professional identity) or with the aim of reflecting on the meanings the story unfolds. Moreover, the exercise leads the plurality of meanings through which trainees relate to their task to be made explicit and to be recognized. In the case of a text like “The woman on the bridge”, obviously, any kind of classification will highlight the subjective positions the students take in regard to issues such as fidelity, friendship, marriage, money, values... Finally, the exercise does not present any intrinsic **solution**: there is not an objective truth or a univocal way of interpreting the experience. So, the participants will be led to deal with the impracticability of the idea that “others see the same things I see, and evaluate them in the same way I do”. Consequently, in order to take a common decision and create a common story, the students will have to face issues like: what kind of role should be given to the subjective position of each of us? What shared goal might allow our differences to enter dialogue? In this sense, the trainees are encouraged to take on
the same methodological attitude that a professional might assume in interpreting his/her user’s demand and their reciprocal otherness.

*Writing about the experience*

While experience is the basic terrain for learning, experience itself does not suggest how people are to interpret and deal with it.

The invitation to write an account of the experience is a way of pursuing 2 main goals:

1. On one hand, it can be seen as a major tool through which the trainer explores the ways the students have interpreted a given situation. Accounting for an experience is an act of sense-making shared with the other actors taking part in a dialogue and, as such, contingent to that relationship. In this perspective, the way the student gives an account of an experience can be understood as a performative act which prompts a given mode of making sense of the educational experience. This mode will underlie the (not necessarily conscious) choice of referring to some elements rather than others, and of speaking about them in a certain way. It is worth pointing out that, given the desire to understand the kind of educational and professional model that underlies the meanings produced by the trainees in their accounts, the trainer takes a non-central position: no criteria are suggested to construe the case reports, leaving room for the students to recognize the plurality of the universes of meaning emerging from their reports. This position is like that of a therapist who lets the clients express themselves in the way they choose, rather than replacing it with the therapist’s own assumptions or notions of the reality that should be described (White, 2007).

2. On the other hand, the request to write about the experience can be seen as an interpretative action, through which the trainer encourages the students to assume an active and reflexive role, to promote their involvement in analyzing the models activated when interpreting a particular experience in a specific way.
Reflexive conversation

Although the report is an act which explicitly conveys the sense the participants give to the experience activated by the “open text”, it does not per se produce reflexive thought on the experience. On the contrary, from a theoretical point of view, reporting is just another way the students reproduce their basic meanings. As such, reports are another kind of (open) texts waiting to be investigated.

The object of analysis of reflexive conversation, as we propose to use it, are the different reports written about the experience activated by the “open text” in order to understand the implicit and taken-for-granted theories-in-use in the ways of talking about it. What aspects did the students consider meaningful? What kind of representation of training and/or professional relationship did they express? The shift from a solitary, even if reflexive, task to a shared conversation allows the plurality of meanings embedded in the ways trainees relate to the open text to become explicit, so that the trainer can more easily highlight the “not given” nature of the students’ ways of reporting. This also opens up the possibility of examining the assumptions on how and what the relationship should be, which underlie the adoption of a specific version of the experience. In the end, these assumptions can be developed thanks to the methodological choice of making them the subject of sensemaking. This is precisely the main function we attribute to reflexive conversation.

5. A training excerpt

Elsewhere, we have more exhaustively described a type of workshop based on the individual production of accounts, followed by a set of group conversations aimed at developing reflexive competence (Venuleo, 2013; Venuleo & Guidi, 2010). Here, we just report a training sketch in order to highlight the kind of work that might be carried out using this methodology.

During an Academic Course on Methods and Techniques of the Psychological Interview, the teacher (one of the authors of this paper) proposed a psycho-dramatic role-play to the class: students were invited to imagine they were dealers (or buyers) in a special shop (a
Magical Shop), in which what is sold (or bought) are not commercial articles, but professional competences. After that, six students, chosen to play the dealer’s role, were asked to think about the kind of products (knowledge, methods, tools, and the like) that have to be sold in the shop; meanwhile, six other students, chosen to play the buyer’s role, were asked to think about the most useful products to buy in order to build “psychological interview competences”. Afterwards, in turn, all the buyers had to talk to the dealers and, if convenient, make a deal with them. All the other students were invited to take note of what was going on.

The teacher did not give any specific criteria for role–playing, nor for the observation of the situation. She was interested in detecting the students’ representations of the competences they considered most important and, thus, implicitly substantiating their professional identity.

At the end of the exercise, the students were asked to write a report about the role–play experience and to give it to the teacher. The students mainly produced two kinds of case reports, which were alternatively identified as: “summaries” and “confessional accounts”. With “summaries” we are referring to a kind of account in which the student reports “what happened”, as if the account aims at giving a faithful representation of the experience. Let us look at this text:

The teacher invited us to imagine we were dealers or buyers in a special shop, in which what can be sold or bought are professional competences. The “buyers” asked for the competence of “listening”, the capacity of interpreting and the ability to administer the Rorschach test. The “dealers” had the listening competence in stock, but not the other two competences.

By “confessional account”, we are referring to the texts that focus on the writer’s own feelings and expectations. The value of the experience is interpreted as a function of the closeness/distance to the subjective expectations: it is “all right” as long as something is perceived as attuned on one’s own desires. Let us look at this text:

I didn’t understand the “real” meaning of the role–play, but I enjoyed the fact that the teacher did not give a theoretical lesson, because I was very tired. It was a very nice experience.
In both cases, students said nothing about any expectations on the task of reporting their experiences, as if the activity had the same meaning for all the participants, and as if their cooperation with the task could be taken for granted.

In the following lesson, to work on these premises, the students were involved in a reflexive conversation. The teacher first of all suggested they compare the different modes they used in writing about the role-play. Some did have fun during the experience (presumably seen as a « break from the work involved in a more traditional lesson »), others said they got bored (and this could be interpreted as a passive participation in the activity; see, for instance, the following comment: « As an observer, I had nothing to do, while the other students were role-playing »). Some underlined the competence of the dealers, others their incompetence... in so doing referring to different lay-theories on the features of professional competence. Furthermore, some reported the buyers’ requests in detail, others the products offered by the dealers... In brief, the students considered different elements valuable and deserving to be written about and reported. This approach, despite the attempt to eliminate one’s own subjectivity from the account in favor of reporting the “facts” objectively, had to be recognized as a subjective position itself.

During the reflexive conversation, as there are no predefined questions orienting what the teacher will say or ask the participants of the group, his/her teaching role is the analysis of the meanings that the participants are sharing and constructing together. Let us take a look at the following excerpt from the conversation on the meaning suggested by the accounts written about the participation in the “Magical Shop” experience:

*Teacher*: Why did you write that the dealers were competent?
*Student A*: The dealers got to sell all the products of the shop.
*Teacher* (talking to students observing the situation): What do you think about that
*Student B*: In my opinion, what was sold and bought was not useful for a psychological interview. For instance, the ability to “listen” is not enough to understand how a therapist can help the patients. If I were a buyer, I would have asked for the ability to administer a personality test.
*Student C*: And if your client was the CEO of a company looking for the competence to make his employees communicate well, would you still
administer the Rorschach test?

Student B: Well... I have always thought of the psychologist as working in the psychotherapeutic context.

After this brief exchange, the students in question began to talk about the different ideas of the fields of intervention of a clinical psychologist. At a certain point, the teacher said: « Try to listen to what the buyers have to say. When you were looking for the competence of listening or for another one, what idea of a psychologist did you have in mind? ».

Other students began to talk about this:

Student D: I think that a psychologist, notwithstanding the different fields of his/her intervention, should help you to perceive your goals. When, as a buyer I asked for, and obtained a certain dose of “ability to listen” I felt satisfied, but I am now realizing that the dealer did not ask me what I meant by “listening” and what kind of problem I was trying to resolve with that competency.

Student E: That’s why I wrote that dealers did not seem competent to me. They misinterpreted their effectiveness with their rapidity in selling.

Teacher: Well, it seems we have different ideas about what the competences of a psychologist are, and of what his/her customer is like. In your accounts you proceeded as if you already knew that.

Student F: That’s true. I thought that my goal was to respond somehow to the buyer’s requests. Now, I realize that we had different ideas about the psychological competences.

Student G: I’d like to know what idea our teacher has. As an observer, I thought that the role playing was all right because the participants acted well. But was it what the teacher expected?

Student H: “Doing their duty” is what schoolteachers expect from their pupils.

Teacher: Then what do “my students” expect from me?

Student I: Probably, our fantasy is that if we diligently make an effort towards what the teacher assigned us, we will get a good assessment...  

Student L: And we will be repaid by the discovery of the “hidden” goal of the activity proposed...

In the example, the teacher helped the students to bring out their different points of view. In so doing, s/he was also promoting a specific positioning on the issue of what “being a good student or a good psychologist” means, therefore suggesting that the speaker’s
subjectivity is always involved in the construction of such a definition. The reflexive activity promoted by the teacher might unfold in very different fields of experience: the relationship among the participants and with the teacher, the symbolization of the professional identity, the image of the user, and any other area of “reality” that students and teacher share and highlight through their discursive positioning.

Through the reflexive conversation the meaning underlying the way the trainees relate to the training setting are made explicit and the lay theories on what these things mean to them in terms of the construction of their professional identity can be analyzed.

It is not an activity that can be done in a conclusive, objective way. The experience activated by the open text, followed by the writing of a case report of it, and the subsequent reflexive conversation have to be thought as recursive and circular processes. The reflexive conversation allows new meanings to emerge; and these meanings will bring a new direction in acting and thinking about the experience. And so on.

6. Conclusion

We suggested looking at reflexivity both as a specific educational model that teachers should adopt to face the otherness of the students’ system of meanings, and as a basic competence that higher education programs should promote in the students, in order to let them improve their capacity to manage the otherness they will deal with in their professional practice. Training through and for reflexivity requires a change both in the model of the educational relationship and of the methods adopted. Whereas in the traditional educational setting the compatibility between the users’ and the trainer’s model of interpreting the shared activity is treated as a naturally given element, in the reflexive setting the starting point is the acknowledgment of the other’s otherness.

In our view, narrative methods correspond precisely to the goal of making the variability of meanings through which to interpret the training experience explicit and indeed the topic of a reflexive function. The ways students think about their education and their professional identity is embedded in the account they make of an experience. The development of new stories and new forms of practice is the emergent
property of an intersubjective sensemaking process, as the dialogic exchange can always be regarded.

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A social constructivist approach to teaching reflective online
Challenges and opportunities from 3 case studies

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Abstract

Reflective writing is a common type of assessment for higher order learning across a variety of disciplines. As some classrooms shift online, so do their assessments. Facilitating and scaffolding reflective writing in an online environment can present unique challenges for both lecturers and students.

The purpose of this paper is to identify possible pedagogical challenges and opportunities that arise from developing the reflective competence in a fully online environment. It considers what tools could be developed for use in a Virtual Learning Environment to scaffold reflective writing and what forms of assessment and feedback might be best suited to teaching and assessing reflective practice online. This paper builds upon the growing field of research on online reflection. The paper is based on three case studies of a fully online module in which reflective learning journals composed a significant portion of the final grade.

The following themes emerged from the findings: 1) online composition is unique and has repercussions for teaching reflective competence, 2) the online environment presents opportunities for documentation, representation, and dialogue.

Thus this paper finds that there are pedagogical challenges and opportunities to teaching reflective competence online and suggests that to teach the reflective competence online, educators must adapt the curriculum and their pedagogy.

Keywords: reflective writing, online device, constructivism, higher learning

1. Introduction

As Ross (2010) states: «The context of writing reflectively online is different from other forms of reflective writing, with different sorts of implications for the identities of the student–writers» (p.354). Ross
suggests that when educators ask students to reflect online, they are asking students to do something different than the type of reflection students carry out otherwise. This paper explores the intersection between the research on online reflective writing and composition within online environments. Within this exploratory study my research is framed by the question: « What implications does the digital environment have for the assessing of reflective competence? »

I draw upon the fields of reflective writing, digital literacies, and composition in a computer–mediated environment. I propose that the combination of the reflective competence with the digital competence has implications for expression of student–writers and interpretation of lecturers. The bringing together of digital and reflective competences creates a new way for students to do reflective practice and consequently educators must consider how we are to teach and assess the reflective competence in the online environment if we are to address what the digital and reflective competence looks like in the digital age of higher education.

2. Teaching and Assessing Reflective Writing

Reflective writing is a common type of assessment for higher order learning across a variety of disciplines in higher education, especially professional fields of medicine, nursing, and teacher education (Craft, 2005; Das Gupta & Charon, 2004; Hoover, 1993; Smith, 2011). The term reflective practice has multiple connotations and an endless variety of models for reflective practice. As Smith (2011) states: « It (reflection) can be difficult to assimilate into teaching because the language is complex and the same terminology is used in different ways in different contexts or carries different nuances » (p.212). As a result of the variety of definitions and understandings of what reflection is, the definition of reflection I used within this study was given by Moon (1999):

Reflection is a form of mental processing – like a form of thinking – that we use to fulfill a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding and possibly emotions that we already possess.
There is literature around best practices in teaching reflective writing (Salmon, 2002) and assessing reflective writing (Carlile & Jordan, 2007) in the face to face environment. As some classrooms shift from a face to face environment to a fully online or a blended environment, so too must their assessments. As a result there is a growing field of research on text–based online reflection (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997; Henderson et al, 2004; Morgan et al, 2006; Salmon, 2002). The primary focus of that literature is to challenge the perception of online learning as lacking in higher order learning and lacking a relationship between student and educator (Henderson et al, 2004). I wish to add to that literature by proposing that it is not only the relationship between the student and educator that changes, but also the nature of online composition affects the product of reflection (the reflective journal entry) and how educators assess it.

3. Methods

I use three cumulative case studies from the same online module I have taught three times from 2012 to present. The cases were selected through convenience sampling which is a limitation of the study. Student reflective journals and my field notes taken at critical points comprise the data set. I analysed the data under two themes:

1) characteristics of student reflections;
2) issues with assessment.

4. The Module

The case studies are iterations of an online postgraduate professional development module I taught. Students on the postgraduate courses held a variety of roles in higher education institutions in Ireland, such as academic developers, lecturers, programme chairs, and learning technologists. The module is primarily online with one face to face orientation session at the beginning where we navigated the virtual learning environment (VLE) together and also discussed reflective writing since it was a key component in all assessments for the mod-
ule. I used the face to face session strategically to address the two components of the course I anticipated would need scaffolding: the digital and reflective competence.

5. Ensuring digital competence

There were no technical requirements from participants for registration so I knew in advance there would be variation in terms of digital competence and I did not want the technology to get in the way of the learning. There was a mix of technical aptitude and students varied along the continuum of “digital visitors” to “digital residents” (White & LeCornu, 2011). The variety posed a challenge as I endeavoured to create and support assessment practices that were equitable regardless of how familiar student were with the technology. I wanted to assess their ability to write reflectively, not their ability to navigate the online space to present their reflective writing. Thus I initially understood the reflective writing process as something that could be viewed separately and unaffected by the online space.

6. The reflective writing assessments

There are five low stakes reflective writing pieces due for assessment throughout the module and one high stakes reflective writing piece towards the end. The reflective writing pieces were to be written in the VLE. The toolbar within the reflective writing assignment allowed for students to insert images, videos, hyperlinks, and format changes such as bolding, italics, spacing. Each reflection had a set of prompts and guiding questions. Three models of reflection were presented as possible ways to approach the reflective writing task. I presented multiple models because student feedback was that there is not a “one size fits all” model.

I designed rubrics and marking criteria that would make the assessment process transparent. Data gathered from each iteration of the module informed the development of assessment for the next module. Thus the rubric for assessing reflections was modified with each iteration.
7. Results

Characteristics of Reflective Writing

There were expected and unexpected findings within this theme. The expected results were that the characteristics of reflective writing varied from case to case and within each case. Students who had experience with reflective writing as a result of professional experience, particularly nurse–practitioners, were adept at reflective writing and this showed in their journal entries.

However what was unexpected was that the characteristics of students’ reflective writing varied with their digital competence. Students who were at ease writing in the digital space went beyond writing text to include hyperlinks, images, and videos to extend their reflection. For example a student used a cartoon depicting a lecturer’s frustration with student engagement to convey her frustration after a particular class. Another included a video that they had shown in their class and referred to different points within the video and how his students seemed to respond.

8. Issues with Assessment

In the first case study I set out the following criteria that would be assessed in the reflective writing entries:

1) reflective depth;
2) integration of literature;
3) presentation.

Most learners used the marking criteria strategically and as a guide to focus their writing for each entry. I found the marking criteria useful because I knew what I was looking for ahead of time, articulated it in a transparent manner, and could use it to refer to students to how they could improve and where they had improved. At the start of the second case I invited students to put forth models of reflection and I re–designed the rubric to include digital competence, but I did not explicitly teach digital competence in any structured way. In the
third case I invited students to re-design the rubric themselves. From students suggestions and the analysis of my experiences from the first two cases I started thinking about an evolving rubric that challenges students to improve their reflective competence instead of a rubric that asks them to meet set standards every week.

In the first case the rubric did not address use of visuals, links, videos as they might relate to reflective depth, meaning making, or presentation. My focus when I was creating the rubric was to address how they expressed their reflections in the written format. It did not occur to me that they would include media other than text to express their reflections. When the rubric was re-designed in the second case to include digital competence I found that students were no longer using tools other than text as their digital competence seemed to be much lower than the previous cohort. With the third case I kept in the digital component of assessment and to address the uneven digital competence I began teaching in a structured way how one might extend their reflection with online tools such as hyperlinks, visuals and videos.

9. Discussion

Reflective Competence is a Moving Target

The use of a single rubric to assess students’ reflective writing over the duration of a module was frustrating not only to me but to the students (as evidenced in my field notes and in their journals). Students expressed frustration that they had ‘moved beyond’ the rubric and would like feedback that could help them deepen their reflective skills, not just marks that verified they had done the assignment correctly. I expressed frustration that the rubric did not reflect how students become adept at reflective practice. I began to wonder if reflective competence was more than just a skill to be ticked off, or if it could be assessed in a way that captures its complexity. This brings us back to the variety of definitions of what reflection is, what it looks like, and how we should assess it within a module when it is done repeatedly. In the third case where students were asked to re-design the rubric they too struggled with the premise of creating one rubric to
fit all reflective writing for the module. They suggest that different rubrics should be created to scaffold the students journey in reflective practice.

**Digital Competence should be Taught not Assumed**

I was unprepared for students who moved beyond text submissions to include multimedia and I was unsure of how to assess multimedia submissions as I had not considered the possibility that students would submit reflective pieces that would include content outside of text, i.e. images, photos, diagrams, videos, hyperlinks. I began questioning if multimedia content was “extra” or if it was integral to the reflection: were these images, links, and videos a way for students to make meaning in their reflections or were they just “dressing up” the “real” reflective work found in the text? Underlying were questions of how the virtual space invites a new form of reflective writing and how the virtual space transforms the relationship between text and image. For myself this raised two questions: how to teach writing effectively in the digital environment and how to assess students who make meaning with tools other than words? By the third case study I was aware that incoming students with a high digital competence were able to create a layer of digital complexity in their reflective writing, that others could not.

**10. Conclusions**

Returning to my original research question: « What implications does the digital environment have for the assessing of reflective competence? ». The following themes emerged from the findings:

1) online composition is unique and has repercussions for teaching reflective competence;

2) the online environment presents opportunities for documentation, representation, and dialogue.

More and more written assignments are submitted online in virtual learning environments with toolbars that give the students the
capacity to insert multimedia and visuals seamlessly into the writing. I suggest that multimedia and visuals in a written assignment are always rhetoric: their presence is meant to add credence to the argument, to persuade the reader of a particular line of thought or argument. Images, videos, and hyperlinks are a component of writing online. Student writing is changing because of the affordances of the available tools, yet has the assessment and teaching of writing changed in tandem? As educators we must examine what is at stake when a lecturer reads an online reflection that includes multimedia and restricts their reading to the text of words and not the text of images.

Thus this paper finds that there are pedagogical challenges and opportunities to teaching reflective competence online and suggests that to teach the reflective competence online, educators must adapt the curriculum and their pedagogy. Facilitating and scaffolding reflective writing in an online environment can present unique challenges and opportunities for both lecturers and students.

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Empowering non–traditional students’ careers through autobiographical writing

José González–Monteagudo, María Teresa Padilla–Carmona, José Manuel Lavie–Martínez

Abstract

The target group of non–traditional students includes adults, but also first generation students, women in a situation of inequality, workers, people with immigrant origins, and generally students from educationally disadvantaged background conditions. In this paper we will concentrate on autobiographical writing as a tool of empowerment, reflectivity and creation of personal resources to promote completion and avoid drop–out in HE.

Autobiography makes it possible to explore the past and the present of the autobiographer in the framework of the family, of the local community and the widest institutional and sociocultural contexts. As a training instrument, autobiography favours: self–knowledge, the ability to analyze the past; the setting up of connections between the experience lived, the present and future projects; and the identification of the most important factors that condition the personal and educational evolution of the autobiographers.

Our proposal of educational autobiography has a guided approach. In the training we have aimed to combine group sessions, centred on oral work, with the students’ autonomous work which consists of developing the educational, family and social life story.

At the end of the process, each student will have produced two written documents: an autobiographical story and an analysis of this story. In this paper we will present a case study of a disadvantaged student from a rural area, stressing the contributions of autobiographical writing to develop reflective competences and awareness about the relations between individual itineraries, family contexts, and broader sociocultural frameworks. We will specially focus on the analysis of the autobiography done the own student, navigating from subjective narratives to social and cultural comments and reflections. This approach favours innovation and empowerment in HE contexts, making possible the development of the reflectivity competence.

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The team leaders are Dr. Paolo Valerio and Dr. Maria Francesca Freda, University of Naples, Italy. The rest of the partners are as follows: National School of Political and Administrative Studies (NSPAS), in Bucharest, Romania, Dr. Dan Florin Stanescu; National University of Ireland in Maynooth (NUIM), Ireland, Dr. Úna Crowley; and University of Seville, Spain, Dr. José González–Monteagudo. The project undertook research and intervention between October 2011 and March 2014 in relation to university disadvantaged students, in order to promote social inclusion and to avoid early drop–out using narrative tools. The information and views set out in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Neither the European Union institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained herein.

1. Introduction

The target group of non–traditional students includes adults, but also first generation students, women in a situation of inequality, workers, people with immigrant origins, and generally students from educationally disadvantaged background conditions. In this paper we will concentrate on autobiographical writing as a tool of empowerment, reflexivity and creation of personal resources to promote completion and avoid drop–out in HE.

It is not our purpose in this paper to describe the conceptual underpinnings of the INSTALL training. We have presented this in more detail elsewhere (see for example Freda et al., 2012). Yet we want to offer some guidelines in order to contextualize our research. INSTALL is an European funded project which aims to prevent university drop–out of students who need support to fulfill their educational potential because of disadvantages caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances. In general, Non Traditional Students are more exposed to the risk of dealing with phenomena of drop–out and low performances due to the difficult tasks of development and evolution they have to deal with, being disadvantaged subjects from a socio–cultural point of view. The need to face such disadvantage leads them to take longer in the achievement of their university goals and sometimes, as a consequence, to abandon their studies.

The project promotes acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn at the university level by developing and implementing a
training course focused on narrative tools. This narrative methodology is aimed at sustaining the development of a reflexive competence, based on the process of mentalisation of learning experience on the part of individuals. This process of mentalization, also known as reflective competence, aims to understand the reasons of own and others behavior to act in a functional way to academic achievement. The project is based on the key role of narration as instrumental for the reflecting process of mentalization (Freda, 2008a; 2008b; 2011).

So, INSTALL proposes an innovative methodology based on Narration, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), with the aim of promoting the Learning to Learn competence by developing mentalization/reflexive competence. Specifically, NMP consists of a group training process targeted to groups of disadvantaged students enrolled in the second year of university and in late with past examinations. NMP combines into one methodology four discursive narrative modes: metaphoric, iconographic, writing and bodily. These four modes are implemented in a cycle of seven meetings conducted by Narrative Group Trainers (NGTs) who were been trained to use such methodology with disadvantaged students.

2. Context and aims

This paper is not focused on the specific tools used in the INSTALL training, but on autobiography as developed in educational university settings. Nevertheless, there is a strong connection between the writing mode of the INSTALL training and the project of the autobiography taking into account the subjective and emotional dimensions of both tasks.

Autobiography makes it possible to explore the past and the present of the autobiographer in the framework of the family, of the local community and the widest institutional and sociocultural contexts. As a training instrument, autobiography favors: self–knowledge; the ability to analyze the past; the setting up of connections between the experience lived, the present, and future projects; and the identification of the most important factors that condition the personal and educational evolution of the autobiographers.

Autobiographies are related to self and agency as well as to culture
and social dimensions. In order to stress the complexity and holism of autobiographies, we focus on Bruner’s contributions (González-Monteagudo, 2011). The problematic and unstable character of stories becomes expressly evident in narrative autobiographies, or to put it another way, in the narratives where the author, the narrator and the main character coincide. Bruner goes as far as to claim that the development of autobiography may be the most important research project in the field of psychology. At this point he cites Ricoeur, who argued that past experiences could only be described by way of a narrative (Bruner, 1987). Autobiography assumes a set of procedures in order to relate past experiences and, in this way, to create life itself. Autobiography is simultaneously a cognitive and an emotional achievement. Bruner links autobiographical narrative modalities to culture, given that culture provides cognitive and linguistic models to guide narratives. In the end, « we become the autobiographical narrative by which we “tell about” of a life » (Bruner, 1987). Culture then provides the tools, resources and sets of regular processes within a collective setting of possibilities and limitations. To address autobiography means to deal with the conceptions of self.

Bruner criticizes the essentialism, realism and objectivism of classical conceptions of self, and praises — following contributions from cognitive psychology and constructivism — a self that is transactional, distributed, dialogical, narrative and agentive (Bruner, 1990).

There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter... (Bruner, 2002, 64).

On one hand, self is a product of the conditions and contexts in which it operates. On the other hand, self is constructed and transformed through the stories it receives, creates and shares. Such dialectics between structure and agentivity make it possible to carry out the kind of studies on self and identity that overcome the limitations of traditional — individualist and essentialist — approaches to psychology.
3. Methodology

Our proposal of educational autobiography has a guided approach. In the training we have aimed to combine group sessions, centered on oral work, with the students’ autonomous work, which consists of developing the educational, family and social life story. Educational autobiography is a suitable instrument to explore the deep roots of learning carried out throughout life. The genealogical tree, the analysis of the family group, the commentary on the local environment, the lifeline, the personal shield or coat of arms and the learning narratives in different contexts (family and couple, school, peer groups, associations, information and communication technologies, leisure, the world of work) are some of the questions proposed as storylines of the written autobiography. These themes are offered as work possibilities and never as points that must be tackled.

In spite of the university institutional framework, the experience of autobiography has known how to preserve the spontaneity, creativity and freedom inherent to profound and experiential training activities, those that make progress in self–knowledge and the development of those taking part possible. In this sense, autobiography has a very open format and we believe that this is an important reason for the richness and strength of this training activity. Autobiography helps students to explicitly state their personal models and paradigms connected with culture, knowledge, representations, interpersonal relationships and educational values (Alheit et al, 1995).

In this section we will be presenting some biographical tools, used to develop the project of the writing of the own autobiography (Galvani, 1997; Lainé, 1998). The lifeline or timeline consists of a chronological representation of the most important events in a person’s life, along a temporal axis that is developed between birth and the current moment. This makes a first representation of the personal path organized around the family, school and other environments easier. The personal shield or blazon is a symbolic representation of personal identity, articulated around four elements:

a) the most important memory of childhood;

b) the most fervent wish concerning the future;

c) the favourite leisure activity;


d) the main quality subjects attribute to themselves.

The shield favors work on the imaginary through graphic expression and the freedom of criteria to communicate one’s own identity.

The narratives of learning experiences, from birth to the current moment are organized in connection with the major educational stages: between 0 and 6 years; between 6 and 12 years; and between 12 and 18 years. The students face, for the first time, the making of their personal educational history, articulated from experience, but which aspires to generate knowledge about socialization, education and teaching (West, 1996; Merrill, 1999; Dominicé, 2000). Photographs are documents of a major importance in educational autobiography. Digital technology facilitates the task of reviewing, ordering and reproducing the most significant images. The comments on the photographs by the autobiographers develop the capacities of observation and description, at the same time as they very naturally connect the different moments of the vital cycle (Ochoa–Palomo & González–Monteagudo, 2013).

Finally, the reflective and interpretative balance makes an overall view of the process carried out possible, as well as establishing connections between the different contents worked on, susceptible to a personal and narrative articulation (for example, from a temporal perspective, connecting with the past, present and future; or in terms of learning settings, such as the family, school, means, peer groups and others). It is a matter of building meaning from lived–out and recounted experience. This implies reflection about personal identity and its connection with the personal and interpersonal history, as well as a reflection on the different types of ego: told, occult, secret, perceived by others, desired, public, and reconstructed (Bolivar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001; Denzin, 1989).

In this activity the trainer takes on various roles:

a) the facilitating of clear guidelines to carry out the activity, from its own voluntary nature, to guarantee that the activity be a joyful experience of creative work, intellectual autonomy and profound affective experience;

b) the motivating of the desire to search and research, aimed at recuperating evidence, experience and feelings, in dialogue with the family, mentors, friends and educators;
c) the accompanying of the process of writing and the facilitating of strategies to unblock difficulties and encourage progress;
d) the reduction and relief of anxiety and unease that some students experience, who refuse to abandon the activity in spite of the difficulty that they experience.

The educator is the guarantor of what is secret and confidential. The students must also respect this when they carry out oral exchange sessions or when the students exchange their autobiographies to read them. By its aims, methodology, context and contents, educational autobiography is a training activity and cannot be conceived either as psychological aid or as psychotherapy. However, it can have, and in fact in many cases this does happen, a therapeutic effect, connected with the redefining of some events of the past and the achievement of a more integrated and mature perspective of personal evolution.

4. Results and conclusions

The autobiography permits us to establish close links between the education offered by the university, the experiential world of the student and the socio-cultural background to the whole. Also it opens up a powerful process of personal reflection, analysis, questioning and maturation. In the work produced by students we encounter the living pulse of human experience: illness, friendship, loss, pain, joy, that which has been long forgotten, separation, jealousies, all manner of other feelings, religious beliefs, shared experiences, death, sadness and personal crisis.

The autobiography is an innovatory educational project at university level, a practical activity in writing which focuses upon life histories and an attempt to conduct educational investigation from the standpoint of practical teaching. The autobiography is at the same time an adventure, a risk and an open project. It is also a self-generating project, continually renewed through the course of its own development (Pineau, 2000; Pineau & Le Grand, 2002).

We can think of autobiographies as transitional spaces for learning in which there may be changes in the students’ understanding as well
as positive benefits of story telling. This may be especially true in the case of students with low cultural and economic capital.

The use of biographical methods enables the non-traditional student to reflect upon their learning and experiences in higher education. This process also enables them to identify what facilitates their learning or not and identify strategies for improvement at an individual, departmental and institutional level to develop a successful learning career. Autobiographies also will provide an in-depth understanding of how non-traditional students develop or not a learning career and identity. The voices of participants are central, as they will inform potential strategies identified for policy and practice. Also we have been trying to involve students in the process of planning and implementing autobiographical writing.

The intense personal involvement favoured by group sessions centered on orality promotes an appropriation of experience. This appropriation is worked specifically in the final phases of the activity when requesting students to re-read the autobiographical text produced and to undertake the difficult work of submitting it to a critical analysis (Plummer, 2001). The students gradually discover that they are not only able to write their life stories — a question that many doubted when beginning the experience — but also, furthermore, they can become hermeneutist of their own writing and, consequently, of their own lives. The transition between the autobiographical story and the written analysis marks the genuine formative moment of the autobiography.

The analysis of the autobiography has a basically socio-cultural approach, although the student can decide the content and the approaches of his analysis. The aim of the analysis is for the student to place his biographical path in the framework of its genealogical and family context, of its local community and of its broader socio-cultural structure. The students place their own story better, this being understood as their personal itinerary and as a development that can only be clearly understood in the context of broader family, educational, historical and socio-cultural contexts. We believe that this effort of understanding the relationships between the individual development and the contexts of development promotes the construction of a theory by the students. This theorizing — which turns out to be very inconsistent, depending on the capacities of the different students
Empowering non–traditional students’ careers through autobiographical writing

— aims to contribute to the most difficult problem that this activity displays. We are referring to the construction of a personal theory that sheds light on the relationships between the personal biography, the contexts of the development of the intermediate level (the family, the school and the community environment) and broader socio–cultural areas. In the intersection of these three vertices — biography as a micro–level; close contexts as an intermediate level; and global contexts as a macro–level — is, we think, to be found the most decisive formative and reflexive principle of educational autobiography. The theorizing that is attempted is backed by the group debates, the carrying out of biographical activities in small groups, the search for relationships between worked out readings and the autobiographical story, the autonomous search for documentation and the analytical and reflexive writing.

Autobiography trains skills of observation, research and documentation. Gathering biographical material and documents is an exciting task whose limits are those that the students themselves set out. The micro–interviews carried out with family members and close educators start off as brief, simple and motivating research. This is an important methodological dimension of the activity. The students become more mature gathering, organizing and analyzing biographical material. The experiential initiation, carried out with this fieldwork in the family and local settings, increases interest and understanding about ethical questions (privacy, respect for the informers, the dynamic of secrets, trust in the testimonies), the work procedures (instrument design, data gathering problems, technique and data triangulation) and the hermeneutic problems derived from the analysis of the experience lived out (the involvement of the student who researches and documents, the diversity of perspectives, the difficulties of writing life stories, the variety of audiences of the stories produced, the usefulness of analysis for constructing a personal educational theory). For all of these reasons, autobiography is an easy path to provoke the debate about culture, education, new technologies, personal and collective identity, values, and pedagogical contents and methods (Mitchell et al., 2005).

To conclude, we would like to plant some questions that have arisen from various issues encountered during the above outlined work with autobiographies. Considering a few such ‘dilemmas’ seems to us an
appropriate way to end. The first dilemma is one that concerns the
divergent standpoints of the teacher and of the student. From our
perspective as teachers, the autobiography is an educational tool,
which contributes towards the development of critical thought and
expression.
From a student’s perspective, however, the autobiography is an
activity very different from — and sometimes an alternative to —
other university tasks. Students bring a lot of enthusiasm to their
portrayal of family life and school life and tend to forget the educa-
tional objectives and criteria of the activity. Students tend to value
the autobiography in terms of it as a door to their emotional nature,
subjectivity, experience and personal recollections whereas for us, as
lecturers, we value it as an instrument with which to consider ex-
perience, to amass knowledge and understanding of education in its
multifarious contexts, and to augment students’ ability to evaluate the
phenomenon of learning through a diachronic perspective, within the
framework of various spheres of socialization (family, school, peers,
means of communication and information, free time and leisure, etc.).
Up till now it has been difficult to reconcile both viewpoints.
Autobiography makes possible navigate between subjective narra-
tives and sociocultural analysis and reflections. This approach favors
innovation and empowerment in HE contexts, making possible the
development of the reflectivity competence. Even in the current criti-
cal situation of the European societies, Higher Education continues to
be a pathway to empowerment and intellectual and moral autonomy.
In this context autobiography has already produced fruitful results.
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Assessing reflective competence through students’ journals

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Abstract

Reflective competence is a primary requirement for practitioners. This emphasis has brought about a rethinking of educational process for professional development. One of the most used medium to develop reflective competence is a reflective journal or diary, especially in higher education. Our aim is to evaluate the feasibility of a coding scheme to categorize the characteristics of students’ reflective practice through the analysis of mental language used within their journals. We present a case study in higher education where we used such a method in order to explore how the students’ reflective practice emerged, how it evolved through time and how its different levels were embodied within the different phases of an educational setting.

Key words: Reflective practice, Reflective journal, Higher education, Mental language, Assessment.

1. Introduction

The emphasis on reflective competence as a primary requirement for practitioners has brought about a profound rethinking of higher educational process for professional development, particularly in areas connected with healthcare (Mann, Gordon & MacLeod, 2007), teaching (Kreber, 2005), training of psychologists (Sax, 2006) and management education (Cunliffe, 2004). Written journals are often proposed in higher education as a way both to develop and to assess reflective practice (Gleaves, Walker & Grey, 2008; Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Despite the popularity of this medium in many discipline areas, it’s not clear how to assess the quality of reflection in student journals (Dyment & O’Connell, 2011). In the literature we found that assessment
The procedures of reflective journals vary considerably, in terms of unit of analysis, method of analysis and theoretical models. What they have in common is that they analyse the quality of reflexivity referring to different levels, in accordance to the main different models (e.g., Boud & Walker, 1998; Wong, Kember, Chung & Yan, 1995; Mezirow, 1991). Their analysis usually requires a coding scheme to assess the level of students’ reflection. An interesting scheme for categorizing reflective writing (journal entries, essays, contributions to discussions on web forums) is described by Kember, McKay, Sinclair, and Wong (2008). It allows to assess the level of a piece of writing by using four categories: Habitual action/non–reflection; Understanding; Reflection; Critical reflection. We agree with Kember’s claim of a precise and non–equivocal definition of the different levels of reflection, but we believe that preliminary work is needed to specify which indicators can be used to recognize the presence (and then the level) of reflective practice in written texts.

Aim of this paper is to describe a coding scheme for assessing the reflective practice levels in students’ journals based on the analysis of mental language. We will present a case study in higher education where such a method was used, in order to explore how the reflective practice emerged, how it evolved through time and how its different levels were embodied within the different phases of an educational setting.

**Reflective practice and mental language**

Reflection refers to the beliefs, values, feelings and implicit assumptions used in setting and solving a problem (Mezirow, 1991). Schön (1983) proposed to consider reflexivity as a conversation with the situation. For many health and social care professions this conversation includes a dialogue with one’s own and others’ minds. We argue that studies on mentalizing (Fonagy & Target, 1996) and on the theory of mind (Antonietti, Liverta Sempio & Marchetti, 2006) can prompt a new and meaningful way to deepen the characteristics of such a dialogue between minds and to evaluate the use of reflexivity in work and educational contexts. Fonagy and Target conceptualized the reflective function as the individuals’ capacity to mentalize. Mentalizing is defined as the ability to use mental states to understand and to ex-
plain one’s and others’ behavior, and the recognition that these mental states are representations which can be fallible and can change because they are only based on one of a wide range of possible perspectives. These mental states include both those with a non–epistemic nature (wishes, intentions, emotions) and those with an epistemic nature (beliefs, reasoning, inferences). The ability to mentalize implies both a self–reflexive component, concerning the attribution to the self of mental states, and an interpersonal component, which refers to the process of conferring mental states to others. Such an ability to mentalize is not a stable characteristic, but a situated process that can be activated and put to different uses depending on the relational contexts (Allen, 2006). Following this theoretical framework, we have proposed a model to evaluate reflective practice (Bruno, Galuppo & Gilardi, 2011), defined as the process of attributing mental states to oneself and to others and of explaining one’s own and others’ actions with reference to those mental states. As the cultural perspective of research on theory of mind has highlighted the relationship between mentalizing and language, we have considered the use of mental language as an indicator of the reflective practice. By mental language we mean a lexicon composed by terms (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) that refer to mental states: cognitive (thoughts, beliefs, reasoning), emotive (fear, sadness, happiness), volitive (wishes). We argue that the analysis of the mental language can be a powerful tool to detect reflective practice in students’ journals. We assume that the active use of such a lexicon indicates that a student is using reflective competences.

In our previous paper we showed the first step of our methodology, focused on detecting the presence of reflective practice considering single mental words as analysis unit.

In this contribution we will describe the second step focused on detecting different levels of reflective practice activated in written journals through a quali–quantitative analysis of mental language.
2. Method

Participants and instruments

The context is a course in a Master degree in Work and Organizational Psychology, in the academic year 2005/06. The students are aged 23–28, mostly (80%) females, all with a bachelor’s degree in Psychology. During the course (21 lessons, 3 hours each) students were invited to write an unstructured journal (without any temporal limitations or any structured grid) on their learning experience. It wouldn’t’ be evaluated.

We analyzed 20 students’ reflective journals. Each journal is approximately 20 pp., for a total of 400 pages.

Data analysis

The analysis unit is the journal entry. In this way we intended to respect the frame the author used to organize his/her learning experience. Every entry was identified by the date or the number of the lesson that the student gave as a title of the entry.

Based on an extensive analysis of literature, we developed a coding scheme composed of five categories:

Cat. 0 – Non-reflective practice: it occurs when people report an observed event or a personal experience without referring to their own mental states or to those of other actors in the scene. The written text hasn’t any mental term;

Cat. 1 – Declarative reflective practice: it occurs when the writer relates or analyze an event/experience referring to mental states, but such a reference is presented as a mere enunciation. Thoughts and emotions are expressed, without rising any question on its own or others’ ways to interact with the situation. This practice seems to indicate the awareness of a mind at work, but the style is descriptive. Example: « It’s hard for me to work in a team »;

Cat. 2 – Relational reflective practice: it occurs when the writer relates an event, not only declaring its own or others’ mental states, but also comparing different mental states, their evolution over time (“before I thought so, now . . . I think . . .”), over space (“in that ex-
perience I thought / felt that way, now I feel / think this way . . . ”) or comparing subjectivities (“I think / feel this way, but others think / feel otherwise”). In part, this category is similar to the association level introduced by Boud and Walker (1998). We added the comparison between one’s own and others’ mental states and their evolution over time. Following Fonagy we assume that this comparison between thoughts / emotions / desires is an indicator of awareness of the partiality of our representations.

Cat. 3 – Interpretative reflective practice: the writer expresses mental states (thoughts, emotions, desires) that underlie others’ or its own behaviors (actions, but also decisions and problem setting . . . ) and refers to mental states to understand and interpret such behaviors. Example: “I did so because I felt angry”.

Cat. 4 – Critical reflective practice: it occurs when the writer considers a mental state as limited, inadequate and tries to get a new perspective. In writing there are explicit references to the evolution of ideas, beliefs, emotions, and to the reasons for this transformation (Mezirow, 1991).

Text analysis included the following steps for each journal entry:

— analysis of mental language: selection and categorization of mental words (cognitive, volitional, emotional);
— categorizing the entry with one of the 5 reflective practice levels of the coding scheme;
— consensual validation through cross–coding. Two judges made the coding. The judges’ evaluations were compared, and for each entry agreement was achieved through negotiation;
— analysis of the distributions of the 5 categories in the corpus and in each session;
— thematic analysis of the entries.

After coding each entry, the entries were categorized into three different phases, each corresponding to a specific period of the educational process:

— the first part (phase 1) corresponds to the first seven meetings of
the course. During this phase, students created the teams, and the main concepts of the course were introduced;

— the second part (phase 2) corresponds to the following eight meetings, when students were involved in conducting a simulation of a training unit and in reflecting on this experience as ‘trainers’ with teacher and other classmates;

— the third phase (phase 3) corresponds to the last six meetings in which students were helped to conceptualize and synthesize what they had learned.

3. Results

The findings we present here are aggregated. They are an example of information that is possible to obtain from the use of this coding tool in relation to a specific educational process.

The distribution of the 5 categories in the corpus is: Cat. 1 = 27%, Cat. 3 = 26%, Cat 2 = 23 %, Cat 4 = 16%, Cat 0 = 8%. Figure 1 shows the frequency of the categories 1–4 in each session of writing. Data show a high variability in the use of the categories of reflective practice. The distribution of the categories within the 3 phases of the journals allows us to connect the use of reflective practice with the educational tool of each meeting (e.g., lesson; psychological game; discussion).

In the analyzed journals, there is a significant difference among the categories used in three prototypical meetings: the first, the central and the last one. There is a constant and significant increase of sophisticated categories. In particular, the use of category 4 increased (sign. = .002, Friedman Test).

Looking at phase 1, there is a significant increase of categories 3 and 4 corresponding to the meeting number 4 (when teacher used an analogical game) and corresponding to the meeting number 6 (meeting characterized by an organizational task when students participated in a decision making process with the teacher — the insertion of two students within the work groups formed during the previous session). In phase 3 category 4 increased in the last meeting, when students conceptualized the learnings outcomes of the course.

Findings in phase 2 are more explicit if we introduce an additional variable: in this phase students, divided in mini–groups, had to lead
a training session with their colleagues as trainees. So each group simulated a trainer role only in one of the 8 meetings of phase 2, while the group played the role of participants or observers in the other seven meetings. Figure 2 shows that the categories 3 and 4 are more activated when the group has to lead the training session rather than when it has to participate in the training. At the same time the categories 1 and 2 are more used when the students of the group are participants.

Qualitative content analysis in the entries showed these recurring elements in category 4:

— the use of the first person (instead of the impersonal form “you”);
— the presence of astonishment and doubt and/or a negative emotional state (discomfort, embarrassment, anxiety);
— high production of writing from a quantitative point of view;
— the presence of others’ minds (He/She; They);
— the presence of mental words connected with questions concerning professional identity and future (Example: « I discovered that I have in mind an idealized image of trainers and I started to see them more as human beings after I played this role myself »);
— the modification of self– image in relation to experience.
4. Discussion

Findings showed that reflective practice changed depending on the context and specific situation. We could say that every single meeting stimulated different reflective practices, each of them suitable for making sense of that specific experience. There isn’t a linear trend of students’ reflective practices within each phase. Data analysis showed “jumps” among reflective practices, in relation to the specific conditions of the meetings. In particular, the students used more sophisticated reflective practices:

- when they simulated the role of trainer;
- when they were also physically engaged in the learning process (see analogic game, meeting 4);
- when they were requested to participate to decision making (meeting 6) and invited to use a problem–based learning process, which requires to define and discuss the problem and its nature;
- when they were requested to assess the learning process and its outcomes (last meeting).
This analysis highlights that *agency* activates sophisticated categories of reflective practice (Lee, 2005).

Concerning category 4 in particular, there are some common elements: the presence of surprise and negative emotional states (discomfort, embarrassment). This confirms what was claimed by Schön (1983) in relation to reflective practice as triggered by a moment of rupture and disorder in conversation with the situation. Equally important is the presence of others: this confirms the validity of understanding reflective practice not only as a conversation with the situation, but as a conversation between minds and with the situation.

Regarding the feasibility of this coding scheme, findings showed the advisability to consider mental language as an indicator of the reflective practices activated by young adults within learning contexts. The advantage of considering mental language is that it represents a precise and not socially desirable indicator. As a matter of fact, the writer can or cannot use a mental language without being aware of doing something desirable for the reader. The analysis of mental language can therefore help us recognize, as a first step, the presence and the characteristics of the writers’ reflective practice; in a second step, it may help us assess the level of their reflective practice.

A limitation of this study is that it includes a single case group with young psychologists undergoing training. More groups from different academic and extra–academic scenarios should be studied. Another limitation concerns the use of the journal in academic contexts. In an environment based on competitive, cognitively oriented examinations, students can launder diaries and write down whatever they think the teaching staff expects rather than truly exploring and reflecting on their own experience (Boud & Walker, 1998). To overcome this limitation, the mental language offers the advantage of not being socially desirable.

5. Conclusion

Based on a definition of reflective practice as a process of attributing mental states to oneself and to others and of being able to explain one’s and others’ behavior with reference to those mental states, in this contribution we have presented a coding scheme to explore how
students’ reflective practice is characterized, how it evolves through time and which educational conditions allow it to be improved. The analysis also gives some suggestions about educational activities and settings that can stimulate an articulated use of reflective practice.

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Education”, 23, 1–27.


Abstract

We know the importance of the group as a tool in the learning process (Gaudet et al., 2010; Kagan, 1989) and as a device capable of ensuring the acquisition of reflexivity (Schön, 1993) in socially situated, relational and collective processes (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). Practices such as cooperative learning and peer education, through discourse, confrontation, negotiation and dialogic processes structure the meanings of knowledge and increase resources in terms of acquisition of skills (outcome). However, in education, studies which focus on the “subject group” with the monitoring and evaluation of group processes still appear few. Transformative factors such as cohesiveness (Yalom, 1970), mirroring (Foulkes, 1964; 1975), interpersonal learning and universalisation, which appear to be relevant in therapeutic contexts, should be reconsidered with specific “variants” in training contexts; this is possible in some frameworks which consider the “thought of the group” as generated by an intersubjective construction of knowledge which is always anchored to a relationship. Objectives: We believe that rather than “the group tout court”, there are some conditions (i.e. the setting) which carry transformative instances, so we aim to show some specificity of the group—thinking in learning contexts. Methodology: Students of psychology have analysed some clinical cases individually and in small groups of work; subsequently they reflected on them through some reports, alternating the individual approach to that of the group. The texts, divided into “individual narratives” and “narratives of group”, were analyzed with the T–LAB software (Lancia, 2004). A questionnaire constructed ad hoc investigated the representation of students of the potential and the criticism learning in group compared with the individual learning. Results and Conclusions: The comparative analysis between the individual and group reports revealed the use of different languages, allowing us to infer the presence of a thought of group characterized by some specificity. Promoting the reflexivity, “in group”, on both the contents and the dynamics, makes it possible to bring in the foreground what, remaining in the background, sometimes gives resistances to transformative process (Pichon Rivière, 1971).

Key words: group dynamics, transformative factors, thought of group, narrative.
1. Introduction

In this period the group setting in educational and development fields, (lifelong learning) is living a very interesting moment for several reasons. The subjects and the social organizations are dipped into relationships and evolving situations, that are more flexible, fragile, precarious. “Plurality”, “multiplicity”, “heterogeneity” and the “valorization of differences” are considered constitutive aspects of reality and human existence. The point of view of the group, for its specific characteristics, is the summit of complexity and it represents an epistemological choice that is based on the pluralistic interpretation of the reality. The group is also the ideal place where you can deconstruct codes and values, meanings, ways of thinking and therefore face a becoming reality with open interpretative models (Margherita, 2008; 2009).

Learning is increasingly seen as a continuous and situated process which crosses all areas of experience, where the individual and the environment interact in an adaptive dynamic (Anderson, Reader & Simon, 1996). The group can be considered as a mediator between subject and environment, also as a community of learning (McConnell, 2002) where everyone allows the group to realize more than what the single members could do by their own with a deeper understanding of the contents and the processes. Thus, new approaches to the training define new forms of organization of knowledge, new modalities of learning. We consider the practices that structure the meanings of knowledge through the discourse, the comparison with the point of view of others, the negotiation and the dialogic processes; examples are the cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991), the socio–affective education (Lang, 1994), the peer education (Finn, 1981).

These methods have the group as central point and the construction of an educational environment characterized by a climate of collaboration, cooperation and responsibility, for example by facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experiences among peers. We can also consider the active participation of the learner, the debate and discussion that allow you to assess the validity of its powers with improvement that seems to be even more visible in long terms (Crouch & Mazur, 2001). For example, in the context of cooperative learning, there are well–defined roles and functions as for the collaboration,
where each member of the group has different tasks for the same objective, with equal participation and individual responsibility, and the leadership is shared and distributed. In this case, the learning can be thought in a planning that organizes the interaction between the members, such as结构性approach where the structures are sequences of behavior developed in the school context (Kagan, 1989). With students we have seen how the use of small–groups learning (SGL) improves the acquisition of skills, the performance at the exams, especially for the less able students, and reduces abandonment of the work, by encouraging cooperation among students and between students and institution (Gaudet et al., 2010). In this perspective, the working group is an important tool that makes possible the activation of reflective processes in the learners, facilitating those key processes of discovery, observation, representation and problem solving, as well as integration of knowledge. Learning facilitates a process which enables the learner to reflect on his/her life and on the environment; and further it allows the development of a meta–competence.

Starting from the studies about metacognition (Flavell & Welm- mann, 1977; Brown & Campione, 1986) which have inspired the educational and learning practice (Albanese, Doudin & Martin, 1995), we have seen how, in learning contexts, the reflexivity and the flexibility of thought and action are necessary qualities to make the individual able to recognize himself in the professional and existential changes, developing the competence to reflect in the course of action (Quaglino, 2006; Schön, 1993). The complexity of the training, related to the development of a reflective and meta–cognitive knowledge, will involve a constant integration between the cognitive and the affective dimensions of learning. In addition, it is important to remember that the reflexivity represents also a social, relational and collective process (Reynolds & Vince, 2004).

For the dynamic psychology learning is a transformative operation linked to the possibility to use a mental and relational field in which primitive and emotional experiences are transformed in thinkable data. We talk of “learning from experience” (Bion, 1962) when the emotional and affective qualities are attributed to the experience. This can be done initially with the support of another mind. So in the process of learning the focus shifts from content to process, from the amount of information accumulated to the willingness to learn
(Blandino & Granieri, 1995), therefore, to the mental and relational requirements in which the cognitive process can be realized. In several approaches, the group is considered as a training strategy that shows the potential for a space where knowledge can be built, *interpersonal learning*, but the group is also a tank of emotional dynamics.

Psychodynamic theories show how the group argues processes of *universalization* and *selflessness* (Bloch & Crouch, 1985), *cohesiveness* (Yalom, 1970). This means that the group becomes a social microcosm that can offer a different relational experience; a place to organize thought starting from emotional experiences (Bion, 1961). In psychoanalytical group psychotherapy the concept of *mirroring* relates to the capacity or incapacity of the person to recognize similarities and differences between self and other.

Mirror reactions are characteristically brought out when a number of persons meet and interact. The person sees himself, or part of himself often a repressed part of himself reflected in the interactions of other group members (Foulkes, 1964, p. 110).

The shared space becomes a way to discover its identity through similarities and it offers the possibility to integrate/modify plastically its image (Pines, 1983).

In Foulkes the concept of matrix is the network that exists among people who are united for some purpose; but the group is also the matrix of the mental life of the individual. For Karterud (2011) the concept of matrix, born in group analysis, concerns the concept of mentalization, developed in the field of psychoanalysis by Fonagy and his research group. Mentalization refers to the ability to perceive and understand oneself and someone else’s mental state, specifically feelings, purposes and wishes; it is a function, not a trait of personality; the mentalization is a competence which can be developed only within and through a relationship (Fonagy, 1991; Fonagy & Target, 1996). It should not be confused with introspection because mentalization is an automatic procedure, unconsciously invoked in interpreting human action (Bolton & Hill, 1996). Bateman and Fonagy point out some of the individual techniques that characterize *Mentalization-based treatment* (MBT), developed in the dynamic matrix of long-term day hospital treatment for patients with personality disorder,
involving multiple therapists and multiple treatment formats, in which groups played a prominent part. Today there is a pressing need to refine the understanding of mentalizing in groups. The difficulties of this application are related to the fact that interactions in groups are complex to measure. We have to point out that Mentalization–based treatment in group (MBT–G) is considered less tolerant of turbulence and chaos (Karterud, Bateman & Fonagy, 2012). In the context of group psychotherapy there are some state of minds in groups that are found in the dissociative processes of the mind and their impact on our ability to reflect on our own and others’ mental states in groups, according to the concept of “mentalizing stance” (Allen, Fonagy & Bateman, 2008). It is difficult to mentalize in the midst of experience when the representational nature, which permits mentalizing, is not present.

These transformative factors, which appear to be relevant in therapeutic contexts, should be reconsidered with specific “variants” in training contexts, within frameworks that consider the “thought of the group” as generated by an intersubjective construction of knowledge that always born anchored to a relationship. In fact, studies that focus on the “group” with the monitoring and evaluation of group processes still appear meager in training contexts. The absence of devices capable of considering the chaotic aspects that the group produces is also reflected in educational contexts that reproduce the application of the model of mentalization. In fact, as well as for the therapeutic contexts, there may be a risk that the group may reflect itself rather than reflect on itself, on the contents and on the processes.

2. Method

Based on the assumption that the conditions in which the group is enrolled will be the bearers of transformative instances rather than “the group tout court”, it is important to show some peculiar aspects of the group thought in learning contexts. 30 students of the Master of Science in Psychology, attending the course of Dynamic Psychology, were asked to discuss a clinical case through the production of a report, alternating mode of individual work to the working group. Our aim was to explore the representation of students about
the individual work and the one of working in group in learning contexts.

A questionnaire *ad hoc* was constructed in order to investigate the following dimensions:

1) the specificity of individual thought and of thought of group explored through open–ended questions and a Likert scale asked students to express themselves in relation to the ability of the group to stimulate reflective processes (area of thought and reflexivity);
2) the emotions experienced in working individually and in groups (emotions area);
3) choices and preferences on all aspects of individual or group, and the ability to be valued individually or in group (preferences).

The open–ended responses to the questionnaire were categorized through a content analysis. Reports are considered as end products of the individual work and of the work done in small groups. Each student has alternated two moments, having the opportunity to experience in the “here and now” the potential and limits of the two different experiences.

We have divided the texts (34 both individual and group reports) into individual narratives and group narratives. In particular the report is a text that represents for the psychologist a way of articulating theory, procedures and evaluation of intervention, through a linguistic elaboration into one relation with psycho–clinical categories which permit to build and organize the meaning of the events (Carli & Paniccia, 2005; Freda, 2011). Texts produced individually and in groups, have been analysed with the textual analysis software T–Lab (Lancia, 2004). The analysis level was that of the *co–occurrence*, a *co–word analysis* and *conceptual maps* (MDS maps). In that kind of analysis we have to point out the association between single keywords. Lemmas are considered as unities of meaning. The group reports’ organization, presented as notes and schemes, didn’t allow us to examine other textual analysis levels that we have imagined to carry on.
3. Results and discussion

Analysis of the questionnaires

Comparing the ways of individual works and the one of working in group, it seems interesting to report some data. The answers to the open questions were set down through the content analysis that produced the following categories: 1. the competences area; 2. the emotional area; 3. the Self expression area. In the representation of group work we can see some significant references to the idea that competences can be developed through the group; in particular we talk about metaskills that allow the transferability from a context to another. The focus on the task and the research of creative solutions seem to characterize the thought of the group (55%), which is considered more prosperous and profitable than individual thought. The group allows communicating, relating and negotiating processes (40%). In the other hand, the way of individual work allows to focus on the task, expressing one’s own point of view (72,5%) in terms of freedom and originality (Self expression). For the students the main point of strength of the work in group is the comparison among different perspectives (76%), the evident limit would be associated to the risk of the conformism, to the lack of expressing the Self (66%) and to the difficulty to deal the confusion (34%).

The emotional area is shown up with greater frequency in answers regarding the working group. In particular, the quality of the emotions is far more positive in the representation of the working group (for example protective, stimulating, intense), in contrast to the negative quality expressed in relation to the representation of the thought of the group (defined as conflictual, totalizing). This difference could be attributed to the idea that the emotional life and the misleading of the members of the group that characterize the thought of the group may obstruct the task of the group. It must be said that the 90% of students, at a direct question, agrees with the idea that working in groups stimulates reflective processes. The analysis of the responses related to emotional involvement in the phases of individual work and group work, shows that individual work generates negative emotions such as loneliness, disorientation and insecurity, while the group work encourages protection, relief and sense of participation. Furthermore,
those who worked before in group and then individually, declare that they were more at ease in performing the task. Although the 76% of students declare to prefer to work in group rather than individually, only the 33% declare to prefer to be evaluated in group.

Reports analysis

Starting from the idea that language is an indicator of the organization of thought, the comparative analysis between the individual and group reports reveals the use of different languages, reflecting the specificity of individual and group thoughts. As it’s well represented in the maps shown below, the MDS map of the individual reports reflects a higher organization that expresses itself with links, logical–temporal sequences, clusters of meaning according to those that can be considered as categories of sense for the understanding of a clinical case (psychodynamic theories, theory of technique, anamnesis). Differently, the map of group reports reflects a less structured organization and a difficulty in setting comparisons and in establishing relationships among the key elements useful for an understanding of the text that should be discussed (clinical case).

The individual report presents itself as a true narrative, on the contrary of the work produced in the group which can not be defined as reports. In fact, as it can be seen from the MDS maps in the individual reports several lemmas appear associated according to the categories of meaning: the red lemmas (phone call, interview, demand) refer to the first level of intervention clinical a psychologist performs in taking charge of the user, the blue ones (setting, therapy, session) refer to the theory of the technique, the orange ones (adolescent, identification, mourning, separation) reflect the theoretical concepts related to the psychodynamic model in line with the theories learned in the course, while those in green (stepfather, boy, mother) gather significant anamnestic data which are present in the clinical case. Instead, the map of what they have produced in the group doesn’t have a clear structure, where there is no association between lemmas and keywords that appear as isolated nuclei, dense of a meaning not yet articulated.
4. Conclusion

The group work is described and represented in idealized terms as for its efficiency and effectiveness, but when the students have worked in and with the group the reports appear to be more simple and poorer. The ability to connect the data and the knowledge is reduced;
the interpretations and the theoretical hypotheses appear synthetic, while the speech is confused. Subjects seem to “hide themselves” in the group even though, at the same time, in the post–experience questionnaires they underline the need to express themselves and their point of view that the group tend to obscure; this is in line with the data obtained in the area of evaluation, in which subjects stated their strong preference to be evaluated individually. The emotions converge on the theme of the expression of identity (in the transition from the individual to the group). In operational terms, the timing of the group is clearly longer and the deliveries are not always respected. In a way, we can say that, in our case, the group has expressed itself; it didn’t expressed the intersubjective construction of knowledge neither the opportunity to work on strategies and mechanisms involved in learning activities. Certainly the brief intervention did not allow us to observe a complex process; perhaps also because of the short time the work group has been more attentive to the relationships and less to the contents. The utility of the experience of working in group has been enhanced and sought–after in the statements, but in the practice it seemed to be related more to the motivational aspects related to “join together” rather than to “think together”. The relationship between relational processes and content was expressed in the dichotomy emotions/knowledge. We found again this dichotomy in our analysis: the works on clinical cases have collected the dimensions of the contents while the questionnaires the one of the processes and the relational dynamics. Where it was possible to integrate the levels it was created a “metacognitive” space that has enriched the meanings related to the learning context. Promoting “in group” reflexivity means to activate processes of thought as much on contents as on relational dynamics; in this sense it will be possible to bring in the foreground that, remaining in the background, it may resist to transformative process (Pichon Rivière, 1971). In the learning contexts, orient the training to the reflexivity could enhance as meta–competence the awareness of the interdependence of the group with some its own dynamics. It means to regard the group as a “subject” who learns what it can learn to think himself as a peculiar condition from which the mechanisms of construction of knowledge are enriched by a plurality of meanings.
The thought of the group between resources and criticism in higher education

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Part IV

RE–THINKING FORMATIVE PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
The impact of a reflexive training setting on the ways psychology students interpret their own role and the educational relationship

Marco Guidi, Claudia Venuleo

Abstract

RTS is a specific training model, in the form of a process of analysis of the ways students interpret their own role and the educational relationship. The forms of the RTS model and its main goals will be presented. A case study will be further proposed, in order to analyze the impact of a workshop based on the RTS model upon the ways the students of a bachelor degree in psychology conceive their own role, giving a meaning to what is happening. The workshop was organized as a course of 5 group sessions, where the students met once a week for 2 hours. A Lexical Correspondence Analysis (LCA), aimed at identifying the (dis)similarities emerging through the subjects’ (trainer and students) discourses, was used to detect the ways they viewed the experience. LCA was applied to the verbatim transcription of the discourses produced in the first, third and final session of the workshop. The results highlight 2 main symbolic transitions occurring in the course of the workshop, and concerning both the way adopted by the students to interpret their role and the way they took part in the process and evaluated the experience. The RTS workshop appears to have strongly favored both the students’ involvement in the activities and the construction of a linkage between the present training and future professional practice.

Key words: reflexivity, semiotic approach, otherness, narrative methods.

1. Introduction

Learning is traditionally interpreted as the acquisition of new forms of content. Additionally, this acquisition is framed as incremental, in a process where experts progressively transmit their knowledge to non-experts. Nonetheless, it is widely recognized that learning cannot be mechanically considered a matter of “what” is learned, nor can it be
considered merely cumulative. Rather, any teaching/learning activity is a process in which many variables influence the ways the students give meaning to the training setting (that is the educational goals, methods, tools, roles, etc.), and make use of the contents presented.

According to a cultural–symbolic perspective (Bruner, 1986; Harré, Gillett, 1994), the ways students have experience and give meaning to what is going on in their educational relationship is the result of an intrinsically intersubjective sensemaking process (Salvatore & Pagano, 2005). Consistent with this perspective, each training setting can be described as a context in which trainers and trainees discursively construe common (yet different) representations (that is meanings) of what, why and how the shared training situation means to them. Learning is thus always a matter of meanings... or rather, learning concerns any possible change occurring at the level of the meanings which is produced and shared within a given context. Thus, any change has to be conceived as the by–product of the individuals’ dialogical and intersubjective reciprocal exchange.

The goal of this paper is to present a specific training model — the “Reflexive Training Setting” (RTS), designed as a device for working on the meanings that shape students’ view of their role (Venuleo & Guidi, 2010). In the following, we shall briefly present the forms of the RTS model and its main goals. Then, a case study dealing with the analysis of the discourses occurring during 3 sessions of a bachelor degree workshop for second year students, will be presented.

2. How does Reflexive Training Setting work and what is it designed to do?

We coined the name “Reflexive Training Setting” (Venuleo & Guidi, 2010) to refer to a specific educational model by means of which to explicitly identify, and foster, the meanings used by students to interpret educational relationship, and which accordingly serve to give meaning to their future professional identity and practices. Instead of being characterized by a notion–transmitting system within an environment containing the teaching–learning activity, RTS is a teaching–learning process aimed at reflexively analyzing what is happening within the educational relationship itself. At the same time it
serves as a tool aimed to understand the meanings through which the learners interpret their role within the systems of relationship they are embedded in. The underlying assumption is that these meanings are what is shaping, and constraining, the participants’ cognition and knowledge of the reality they are experiencing.

Given these premises, in RTS the trainers have to address two main issues:

1. on the one hand, they have to enhance, in the trainees, the methodological competence to become aware of their cognitive, affective and symbolic assumptions about what is going on in the current situation, that is, to allow them to identify the (principal) meanings which give sense to (and affect) their on-going experience;
2. at the same time, they are required to allow the students to foster these meanings through the methodological choice of not treating them as given meanings, yet to make them reflexively questioned, so that they can be the very subject of current sensemaking within the training situation.

In the field of clinical–psychology training programs, the opportunity to experiment with this reflexive process, allows the students to experience a structural condition of the clinical setting (Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2009). The product of the educational relationship, as well as of clinical practice, is not “ready–made”, but is collaboratively construed through sensemaking processes which have to be collaboratively analyzed. It might also be noticed that the reflexive processes characterizing RTS can be appreciated in other kinds of training systems, too. Let us think, for instance, of situations where the meanings used by the students to interpret their role are somewhat “incompatible and contrasting” with the role the school asks them to play in order to create an adequate teaching–learning process. In those cases, RTS may operate in a methodological function, leading to the identification, harmonization and attunement of the meanings the students use to interpret their goals, roles and the rules of the game in the educational relationship.
3. Case study

The present study aims at examining the impact of an RTS–based Academic Workshop on the meaning attached to a training experience expressed by a group of psychology students. The workshop, about the “Management of the Educational Process”, was activated in the three year Bachelor Degree Course in “Psychological Science and Techniques” by the University of Salento, and was addressed to second year students. During the workshop, the students were encouraged to consider their own representations — conveyed by discourses and ways of participating in the training experience — as the real content of their “clinical” training activity, hence to investigate them in terms of a dual emotional/cognitive reflexive process. In order to do this, the students were, for instance, encouraged to think of their assumptions about what it would be useful to discuss during the course, or to talk about the ways they expected to relate to their colleagues and/or the trainer, or to think about their representation of the role to adopt towards the others’ discourses… and the like. As an additional device, students were asked to produce a report at the end of each meeting. These case–reports were intended as another way of bringing out the competence to recognize, in the discursive exchange, a “clinical text” accounting for the symbolizations of the students, on which to try to exercise reflexive thinking.

On a methodological level, the workshop resulted in the activation of several small–sized groups, meeting 5 times for two hours weekly. The sessions were conducted by a clinical psychologist, not belonging to the faculty.

3.1. The model of analysis

We use the term “symbolic matrix” to indicate a shared code of meanings through which the actors embedded in an activity build on the symbolic–affective terrain for their own (and reciprocal) identity. This shared code underlies (and gives rise to) the variability of the ways of thinking, feeling and behaving characterizing any system of activity. Identifying the symbolic matrix generated by, and emerging from a given population, allows us to highlight the similarity/dissimilarity relationships among the different ways people give their experience meaning, and thus to interpret its socio–symbolic genesis. The sym-
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bolic matrix can be analyzed in terms of Symbolic Dimension (SD), where each dimension accounts for a certain dialectic between two opposite, yet complementary, modes of making use of generalized meanings to symbolize a general quality of the on–going experience (e.g., reliable vs. unreliable, familiar vs. unfamiliar. . . ). In our study, sharing one of the meanings expressed in a symbolic dimension will make it clear how the students are interpreting, hence using, any given discrete element characterizing the educational experience (goals, organizational arrangements, standards, rules of the game).

The main hypothesis of this study is that the reflexive workshop — interpreted as the setting in which the participants’ symbolic assumptions are allowed to emerge and can be elaborated — has modified the students’ positioning along the main symbolic dimensions underlying the participation and the discourses emerging during the sessions. As a further hypothesis, we also expect to observe a misalignment of the trainer’s utterances compared to the symbolic positioning taken by the students in their utterances. We assume that the different positioning of the conductor would act as a perturbing element, generating new utterances, hence new meanings and therefore different ways of using the experience.

3.2. Goals of the analysis

The study used the transcriptions of the trainer and student discourses in the first, third and fifth (and last) workshop meetings of one of the small groups activated in the course. The goals of the analysis can be described as follows:

1. identifying the main Symbolic Dimensions mediating the discursive exchange going on in the workshop sessions, in order to analyze the symbolic field generating/giving sense to the participants’ discursive positioning;
2. checking whether (and in what direction) a change occurred in the positioning of the participants’ discourses in the early, intermediate and final sessions of the workshop experience in relation to the meanings comprised in each SD;
3. verifying whether, and in what way, the conductor’s discourse positioning differed from those of the students.
3.3. Data analysis

In respect to the theoretical assumptions previously recalled, the methodology of analysis considered meaning as its source of reference. The identification of the meanings emerging from the discourses is based on a word co–occurrence criterion which is directly connected to the lexical variability of the text. This criterion relies on the identification of the symbolic value of a discourse in the sequence established among the different meanings |a|, |b|, |c| . . . |n|, and not in their separate and discrete sense (Salvatore, Tebaldi & Poti, 2009).

To carry on the procedure of analysis described below, we made use of a specific software for text analysis: T–LAB (version 6.1, cf. www.t–lab.it).

3.4. Text indexing

The text obtained from the verbatim transcript was first of all indexed in relation to the moment/session of the discursive production (1=first session, 2=third session, 3=fifth session) and by the role of the speaker (T=trainer or S=student).

3.5. Lexical Correspondence Analysis

A Lexical Correspondence Analysis (LCA) — namely, a modified procedure of the nominal data Multiple Correspondence Analysis of Benzecri (1973) — was applied to the corpus obtained from the verbatim transcription. In general terms, LCA allows one to break down the overall lexical variability of a language corpus into synthetic and discrete dimensions, called factors, each one accounting for a part of the variability of the text. Each factor identifies a structure of two opposing sub–sets of co–occurring lemmas. We conceptualize the factors extracted in terms of the SD active within the symbolic matrix expressed by the discourses in analysis. Insofar as any factor has to be statistically considered as independent from the others, the factors can be geometrically represented in terms of mutually orthogonal axes. The combination of the n factors extracted by LCA will produce a hyper–geometric space made up of the n dimensions accounting, in
The impact of a reflexive training setting

In order to assess the effect played by the reflexive process in the course of time and by the different perspectives of participants in the discursive production, the analysis considered two variables: “moment of production” (session 1, 3 and 5) and role of speaker (Trainer and Students). These variables were considered supplementary, that is, they did not contribute to identifying the factors, but provided criteria at the moment of examining the results obtained.

Below, we will first present the symbolic field emerging from the LCA applied to the transcriptions; then we will describe the influence played by the dynamic role of time, in the course of the reflexive sessions, and by the different participants’ perspectives (hence of their complementary roles) on the meanings characterizing the training experience.

4. Results

4.1. The main symbolic dimensions grounding the discourses

FIRST DIMENSION: “Symbolization of the Learning Experience”

The first SD organizes the opposition between two different ways of symbolizing the learning experience (see Fig.1). Power/Affiliative Relationships (-). On the left polarity, the co–occurring lemmas appear to present the status of the learning experience in terms of power/affiliative relationships with others. This status is mainly defined by the reference to a me/others scheme (by the use of personal pronouns such as me and you) associated with the reference to the name of a teacher of the academic course (Salvatore), who is also the president of the bachelor degree course. The subsequent association with the lemma truth further underlines the power symbolic role of this pivotal figure of the academic setting — hence of the overall learning process — by shaping the idea of an asymmetric conception of the training relationships: an asymmetry of power within the relationship with powerful figures who “own the truth”. Yet, at the same time, a corresponding affiliative pattern emerges and construes...
the meaning of the training experience. This could be expressed in terms of an expert/non–expert duality which is displayed as follows: « Insofar as my relationship with the context is mediated by reference to other, powerful and important, figures, I cannot but imagine myself as weak and powerless, hence symbolically dependent and affiliated to them ».

*Intersubjective Process* (+). On the right polarity, lemmas refer to procedural functions and dimensions (*to use, to find, to enable, to support, to apply, to understand, to grasp*) to be undertaken (*to imply, implication, to organize, to propose*) and which are mediated by specific tools (*case reports*). Several entries (e.g., *dimension, category, modes, to represent, representation*) underline the acknowledgment of a symbolic world which, at the same time, differentiates (*personal, subjective*) and links together (*our, fusing, fusion*) different meaningful aspects of the educational process (*part, characteristics, puzzles, component*), hence see it as an intersubjective process.

**SECOND DIMENSION: “Experience–Regulating Identity Models”**

This SD accounts for the dialectical opposition between two different identity models through which the actors regulate their participation to the learning experience (see Fig.1).

*Professional Identity* (-). On the lower polarity, the co–occurring lemmas refer to elements concerning the professional identity (*identity, psychology*). This connotation is explicated in relation to the outside (*world*), thus in terms of the ways of entering practice relationships (*to apply*) and of the needs motivating the professional intervention (*needs*).

*Training Identity* (+). On the upper polarity, the set of occurring lemmas refers to tools (*report*), procedures (*to send, e–mail*), temporal dimensions (*timetable, next, time*), activities and functions (*to exchange, to grasp, to follow, to discuss, to compare*) which characterize the current workshop experience. This model is also represented in terms of collectivity (*we, our, all of us*) and appears to be solicited by the acknowledgment of the training activities as experienced in the here–and–now of the training.
4.2. Workshop Sessions/Time positioning on the symbolic field

Figure 1 also shows the positioning of the first, third and fifth/last workshop sessions on the symbolic field defined by the two main SD described above. Through this representation, we are able to show a time–dependent organization of the discourses, hence to make inferences about the presence of some kind of symbolic transitions possibly occurring in the course of the workshop.

As one can see, a clear transition occurred between session 1 and 3, which accounts for a shift affecting the first SD (named “Symbolization of the learning experience”). In the beginning of the training, the discourses were mainly shaped according to a power/affiliative relationship pattern. To understand this kind of pattern, it is worth underlining that the students had to engage in an extraneous setting in which they were invited to free–discuss and to try to reflect on what was emerging in the free discussion, thus they had to try to make sense of an activity with no predefined final outputs (hence without any clearly evident final goals). The emergence of a power/affiliative relationship pattern seems to reflect the need to find a symbolic handhold to grab onto, insofar as its meaning reflects the urge to affiliate to some powerful/pivotal figure detaining some sort of truth to succeed in a supposedly impossible task. In this part of the training, no goals or expectations about the training itself are making sense, in that the training’s meaning is confined to the kind of mutual relationships the participants may have in order to make the task of talking and reflexively thinking together acceptable.

In session 3 (and, later, in session 5), the discourses become mainly anchored to a general meaning symbolizing the training as a dynamic process, regulated by the participants’ subjectivity. This means that in this second phase, the training tended to let the participants think of their goals and negotiate the objectives of the shared training activity, as well as allowing them to make use of the workshop to explore the meaning of their role (either in terms of their role as student or of their future professional identity).

Another shift can be identified in the training process, which differs in the second SD (named “Experience–Regulating Identity Models”). This shift shows that in the first part of the training (session 1–3), the participants were more deeply involved in the here–and–now of
the workshop, and engaged in recognizing their role and (individual/shared) goals within the educational activities they were involved in. In session 5, the emerging meanings show that the students focus on the educational activities in terms of the elements needed in their future role in a psychological intervention, that is, they think in terms of their professional identity. The categories and goals anchored to this professional model can be more easily adopted by the participants in the workshop and appear as the (very relevant) final product/outcome of the reflexive training setting itself.

**Figure 1.** Time/Session and Speaker positioning on the symbolic field generated by the 2 main Symbolic Dimensions.

Let us now consider the positioning of the discourses the speakers (both the students and the trainer) made during the workshop within the symbolic field defined by the 2 main SD detected through LCA.

As Figure 1 shows, the students’ discursive productions are positioned at the intersection of the left polarity (named “power/affiliative relationship”) and the lower polarity (named “Professional identity”) of the symbolic field. In contrast, the trainer’s discourse is positioned at the intersection of the opposed polarities (“Intersubjective process” in the left, and “Training Identity”).
Consequently, while the training assumptions revealed by the students reflect their future-oriented and intervention-centered focus, the training function displayed by the trainer seems to have supported the students to further focus on the overall on-going workshop experience, and on its goals and functions. The trainer’s symbolic role can be mainly recognized in that of substantiating a contextualizing function of/within the training activity. This function appears to support the students in engaging in the self/collective reflexive process of thinking about the training activities, hence in becoming aware of their central role in any training process as well as of any future professional intervention.

5. Conclusive remarks

The objects, contents, rules and all the other conditions of the educational process cannot have ready-made, default and stable values/meanings, but are instead shaped and take on meaning in relation to the constructive action upheld by the socio-symbolic models through which the students interpret their training activities. The Reflexive Training Setting chooses as its main condition and methodology, that of serving as a training model in which the students’ meaning models can be expressed, analyzed, challenged and hence strengthened.

The results of the analysis conducted on the verbatim transcriptions of the training has shown two overall fundamental Symbolic Dimensions emerging through the participants’ discourses. One concerns the way of symbolizing the learning experience, and is displayed through the dialectics between a power/affiliation relationship pattern (hence representing learning in terms of the expert/non-expert duality) and a generalized meaning which acknowledges the relevance of subjectivity (and inter-subjectivity) in the construction of the goals and functions of the experience. The second dimension concerns the dialectic between two opposing models used by the participants to regulate their relationship with the learning experience. This SD on the one hand focuses on a model in which the training participation is anchored to the educational identity, and, on the other, focuses on a model where the participation is related to the professional identity.
The study presented shows that the participation in this RTS workshop led the students to progressively shift from their (initial) positioning, where they were signifying their training experience in terms of close bonds with a figure of power, possessing an intrinsic form of truth to which to affiliate. Insofar as reflexive thinking was stimulated in the students, they began both to anchor to a form of identity much more involved with the professional psychologist and with the needs that an expected future client might present, but also to explore the meaning of the training in terms of their (inter)subjective expectations and goals.

As a further achievement, the analysis of the positioning of the speakers (leader and students) participating to the workshop underlined that the teacher’s interventions were characterized by reference to the newness and otherness emerging from reflexive attention to what was going on during the training experience. The reflexive process enabled by the trainer, thus, operated as a device to challenge the discursive contents emerging from the students. This shift mainly concerns the level of not considering the training models of relationships as ready–made, but always to be explored, recognized and questioned. On a more general level, the shift to the students’ symbolic dimensions support the view that the training environment can be considered the product, rather than just the mere container, of educational practices. Hence, it is acting, speaking and, more in general, producing any sign that, in a training activity, generates the symbolic meanings the participants attribute to their context and which, in turn, recursively helps the participants to regulate the use they make of that same training context.

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The impact of a reflexive training setting


Guidance workshop

A narrative group approach to promote learning to learn

Alessia Vitale

Abstract

Since 2007 I coordinate a pedagogical guidance service, “Let’s talk about it”, at Milano–Bicocca University. This year the service is transforming, starting from the name that changed to “Guidance workshop”. This new educational service like the former one will be responsible for supporting students in university choice. The main change involves the setting: we moved from a more traditional reflection group to the construction of a narrative workshop setting, taking care of the educational dimension.

The workshop is designed for students, both incoming and already enrolled, in quest of guidance. All workshops are conducted by one or more expert students (enrolled to Master degree in Pedagogical Science). Concretely, the setting consists of installations, like museum ones, aimed to activate students’ reflexivity during the workshop. Installations contain biographical stories, drawings and other materials designed to generate reflective activities. Different kinds of languages (drawing, speech and writing) are offered to the participants.

The epistemological idea at the basis is working on polarities (e.g., dream and context) and start from these to carry out connections together with students to generate learning, or as Gregory Bateson would say “learning to learn”. From the standpoint of theory and methodology, the workshop is inspired by the theory of systemic–constructivist (Bateson, Maturana, Valera, Keeney), biographical narrative practices (Formenti, Demetrio, Josso), museum pedagogy (Munari), theatre, and animation. The work is still ongoing, our current conclusions regard the way we have chosen to rethink the setting. We reviewed the proposed narrative activities, building the full setting on storytelling, in particular paying more attention to the ongoing learning process. The chosen experimental path (Formenti 2009, Vitale 2012) consisted in combining the rigor of the educational practice with the imagination of the artistic dimension.

Key words: guidance, learning, workshop, aesthetics, storytelling
1. Introduction: presenting on the context and reflecting on it

If words can
shatter, empty, tear,
others have the grace to be able to regroup emotionally
and cognitively, to join together to feelings and to thinking.

MANUZZI (2013, p. 48)

And these words are poetic words.

Since 2007 I coordinate the pedagogical guidance service, “Let’s
talk about it”, at Milano–Bicocca University. This year the service is
transforming, starting from the name that changed from “Let’s talk
about it” to “Guidance workshop”. This new educational service will
be responsible, as it was for the former one, for supporting students
in university choice. The main change involves the setting: we moved
from a more traditional reflection group to the construction of a
narrative workshop setting, taking care of the educational dimension.
This transformation, still in progress, is a leap of frame of sense (Sclavi,
2003), methodologies and epistemological positions.

The “Let’s talk about it” were group meetings lasting two hours,
each led by two Master degree students in Pedagogical Sciences. The
reservation could be done either individually or in groups by free
phoning the University Orientation Office. At each meeting from
2 to 15 people could participate and they were aimed to consider
the possible choices of enrolling at the university. The participants
were invited to talk, write, draw, in a counselling framework: every
meeting had two practitioners, one lineup of questions and activities.
It’s difficult, even in retrospect, to say which model of counseling
resembled the meetings; that’s because the setting was a bricolage of
theories: theory of systemic–constructivist (Bateson, Maturana, Valera,
Keeney), biographical narrative practices (Formenti, Demetrio, Josso),
aesthetics practices (Dallari, Puviani, Munari), counselling model
(Keeney, Tomm, Boscolo, Cecchin, Caruso). It was a com–position
(Formenti, 2009) where the constructivistic idea was the connecting
pattern.

After years of service working following this line, me and the other
practitioners felt the need to change, to transform the setting, shifting
the focus from a pedagogical counseling service to one oriented to a
philosophical goal. The shift is the idea to give students an experience, like taking a trip, attending a theatre performance, or observing an artistic masterpiece. The pedagogist Scardicchio in describing the attending of a theatrical performance, writes:

A way of life in which art finds its deep and ancestral identity: teaches how to watch, to hear and even to live. Contaminating a view rather than being irrational, teaches us to think (Scardicchio, 2012, p. 2).

In order to develop a thought you must live an experience, take action. We want to offer the students not only to participate to a reflexive meeting but the opportunity to live an experience that is able to promote a learning to learn. An aesthetic experience that puts together thinking and feeling and awakens the aesthetic emotion mentioned by Scardicchio.

The process of disorientation/guidance is in fact an opportunity to think, to find patterns compared to their choices in their lives. It’s something that goes far beyond making a good choice of courses of study, it is an opportunity to better understand themselves.

This need to change arose from two main reasons, the first is autobiographical and relates to the organizational structure of the service: in 2002 I got pregnant and, when I came back work from one year of maternity leave, my idea of orientation and disorientation, as well as my approach to the world, was deeply changed. I moved from an idea about the epistemological orientation based on ladder steps, in which a passage is followed by another, to the idea of chaotic orientation, in which learning is a mystery, and life overflows and it is ungovernable. This inevitably had repercussions on the way in which I used to lead and plan the service. I decided to switch from a “schedule of activities” to a workshop to think (Mortari, 2002). The second reason concerns the need to spread our interventions in public happenings like university open days and meetings in high schools.

In these situations, schedule planning is a complex task for several reasons (e.g., number of students, tight timetable), therefore we were offered the opportunity to completely rethink our working scheme, in favour of a more flexible work setting such as the one characterising the workshop.
2. Objectives and methodology: to carry out a narrative and aesthetics workshop

The workshop is designed for students, both incoming and already enrolled, in quest of guidance. All workshops are conducted by one or more expert students (enrolled to Master degree in Pedagogical Science). Concretely, the setting consists of installations, like museum ones, aimed to activate students’ reflexivity during the workshop. Installations contain biographical stories and drawings and other materials designed to generate reflective activities. Different kinds of languages (drawing, speech and writing) are offered to the participants. To this aim we have combined a setting dedicated to storytelling: during meetings (2–3 hours), self-narration is used to connect past, present and future choices, and reflexivity in relation to the proximal system of influence (school, family, friends). A conversation develops around each of the stories, their interrelations, and emerging meanings (Bateson & Bateson, 1989).

Educational guidance meant to avoid “advice” and to enact reflexive action, focused on the participants’ experience, presuppositions and criteria. It educates to uncertainty (Formenti) by offering a space for action and meaning, shared in a group setting, facilitated by senior students (Master Degree in Pedagogical Counseling).

A shift is ongoing in the notion of future — from progress/repetition to openness and unpredictability (Morin, 2001) —, it demands a wider educational perspective of guidance as a space to think (Mortari, 2002), where the choice is seen as a continuous, dynamic process (Formenti, 2009). The notion of self-orientation, or learning to orient oneself (Vitale, 2012) has been implemented in the project “Let’s talk about it”, centred on students and how (besides what) they choose. They have to learn about the necessity for lifelong and lifewide self-orientation, as a constant of learning and working life. The epistemological idea at the basis is working on polarities (e.g., dream and context) and to start from these to carry out connections together with students to generate learning, or as Gregory Bateson would say: “Learning to learn”.

The choices that are interesting from the point of view of the method are three: to carry out the workshop using the Spiral of Knowledge; the idea is that guiding is to generate reflexivity that
guides the action; art and guidance: to carry out a workshop like a metaphor for living.

To carry out the workshop using the Spiral of Knowledge

The Spiral of Knowledge was proposed by Laura Formenti (2005, 2009), inspired by the cycle of the knowledge developed by John Heron (1992, 1996) and Peter Reason (1993). The latter has been proposed by the authors as a holistic knowing (Heron, 1996, p.52), that is, as a modelling of the process of knowledge, in the broad sense, although it is formulated considering in particular contexts of collaborative research. The cycle is based on four cognitive steps (ibid., p.54): emotion, imagination, discrimination and action. Laura Formenti, starting with this proposal, developed a model of knowledge based on a spiral process, i.e. a process in which there is no single point of beginning.

Laura Formenti eliminated the numerical sequence of the steps proposed by John Heron and Peter Reason and transformed the very names in: authentic experience, aesthetic representation, understanding, intelligent and deliberate action.

This choice both indicates that the shown processes are not meant to follow a pre–formed cycle, and that these processes are rooted primarily in the action. In fact, the author, starting from the premise that knowledge is a constructivist action (Maturana, Varela, 1987), chose to use terms that are clearly connected with the ideas of “to do” and “to feel”, such as to bring, to represent, to understand, and to act.

The process of the authentic experience takes place when a person lives an embodied experience in his emotions and sensitive body, an experience that results from practices like “the touch with nature, the extreme challenges to live the fear and the limit, the artistic experience to remember the gesture, the colour, and the sound”. (Formenti, 2009 p.33). There is not a specific activity for contacting an authentic experience, it can be encountered in narration as like in colour. The important thing is that this experience generates attention to the embodied dimension, i.e. it activates a state in which the senses are active, straining forward to a possible emotion or a discovery. To prepare a setting that invites to contact the experience means to promote an
activity that *summons to be*, not only the subjects in research, but all the actors in research. The call to the experience is not an invitation to aestheticism or mannerism, it is a call to live an activity aimed to probe the very roots of the experience, the deepest ones we want to give voice at.

In the aesthetic representation we give a shape to the lived experience. The experience, especially when embodied in the senses, is complex. Therefore we try to give it a shape by: telling it, describing it, drawing it, or putting it into music. The action of giving shape, therefore, activates an abductive process in which the experience is encoded, i.e. a process in which a link between the experience pre-verbal and the representation verbal dimensions is established. It’s a way to offer the research subjects a chance to contact the experience and to make the basis to produce a first significance. During this process a physical body, external, and partially detached from us, is donated.

The intelligent understanding of experience works on the composition between experience and representation. It’s a new “shapeshifting” promoted by the attempt to make sense of what has been done and experienced. In this case, with “sense” we mean a social and verbal sense. One way to produce this type of “meaning” is to move towards the creation of a satisfactory theory (Munari, 1993) of what has been experienced. A satisfactory theory « is a coherent system of conceptualisations, strategies and actions, aimed to provide a satisfactory explanation, both from the cognitive as well as moral, aesthetic, and practical point of view of the world in which we live and work » (ibid., p.61) . When you do this, you are in the position of having to negotiate, because at this point the “making sense” is the result of a social, co-constructed process and not just of an individual act.

Finally, there is the process of *deliberate action*, designed to create a thoughtful and conscious act. The deliberate action is based upon the Heinz von Foerster’s aesthetic imperative: « If you want to see learns to act »(1988), which: « Suggests that you can start from the action to understand and build knowledge, to transform and unbind the sense in unexpected directions » (Formenti, 2009, p.35).
The idea that to guide is to generate reflexivity that orients action

In the knowledge model proposed in *Spiral of Knowledge* (Formenti, 2009), there is a focus on giving a shape to the abductive thinking (Bateson). The setting in fact, promotes an action aimed to produce an aesthetical representation of a lived experience. The aesthetic dimension, which takes place by the production of metaphors and symbols, gives shape to the experience:

The representation of experience calls into question the memory. In fact, its immediacy is recovered only in retrospect to be represented in some form, thanks to the languages. The first outcome of experiential knowledge and concepts are not words, but pictures: stories, dreams, poems and metaphors. A kind of knowledge that builds a bridge between the experience and the word (Formenti, 2005 p.68).

The aesthetic representation takes place between experience word: the action to give shape activates a meta–sensitive process in which experience is coded taking a shape and becoming a word (see previous paragraph). The experience of meta–sensitive coding is a process in which you establish a link between the dimension of pre–verbal experience and verbal representation.

In the process of the Spiral of Knowledge, not only a passage from the pre–verbal experience to the verbal representation occurs but, passing from them, a transition from pre–reflexive experience to a reflective understanding takes place. The concepts of pre–reflexive experience and reflective understanding are related to the theory developed by Karl Weick in *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995). The author, in studying how the individual and collective systems build meanings, adopted the concept of sensemaking. It is a process of construction of meaning that affects both the production of meaning, meant ad in its pre–reflective dimension, and its reflexive interpretation. The sensemaking comes from an unsettling experience, an experience that Weick suggests trying to build as much as possible to « increase the variety of language » (Weick, 1997, tr. It., p.214). Starting from this variety of aesthetic languages, Weick promotes an attention to the “constant powering” (Kaneklin, Scaratti 1998, p.42) of the process between sense and meaning of the experience, i.e. between the pre–reflexive attribution of meaning, initially given by the experience,
and the subsequent reflexive interpretation resulting from processes of discussion within the organizations. The process of sense–making finds affinity in the process promoted in the Spiral of Knowledge: they both suggest processes that move inductively from experience and promote a reflexive understanding of it. It is reflexivity that guides because it drives the action.

**Art and guidance: to carry out a workshop like a metaphor for living**

The abduction, according to Gregory Bateson, is a lateral extension of thought, which is a « double or multiple description of some object, event or sequence » (Bateson, 1984 tr. it., p.192).

As an examples of abduction, in the mental sphere of man, Bateson brings « metaphor, dream, the parable, allegory, all art, all science, all religion, all poetry, totemism » (Bateson, 1984 tr. it., p.192). The abductive thinking takes therefore place in the metaphor in the dream and in the art, i.e. in all those areas of human activity where it is possible to produce a manifold description of a phenomenon. It is the abductive relation, in the space of connection between phenomena, the place where thought produces multiple descriptions of the world. The metaphor, the art and the dreams have the distinctive characteristic to be able to shape the abductive relationship.

According to Bateson, metaphor as well as all the abductive thinking, embraces both the pre–verbal and verbal world. The abductive system generates changes in epistemology. In a game of connections and multiple descriptive relationships that take shape in the metaphor, in the dream, in the art and, as pointed out by Bateson with the famous example of Isador Duncan, in the sensitive body.

We chose to build the whole setting using art and imagination, in order to favour abductive processes. But this was not enough. The great passage from “Let’s talk about it” to the Workshop was to think of it as a stage. By participating in the workshop, students do not “use” metaphors but *enter into* a metaphor. The setting develops from art installations inviting you to live an experience, which is a metaphor itself for guidance. It is like going to an interactive museum, in which, as soon as you enter the doors, the installations and the setting ask
you to take a position with respect to the stories you are dating and the sensations you feel. It asks you to orient yourself. Is the setting *that educates the mind and directs the action*. Following this, thought and imagination go hand–in–hand because: « The inability to conceive is not a synonymous of rationality, but its impoverishment. Without imagination there is not even right » (Scardicchio, 2012; p. 3).

3. Results and conclusions: towards the construction of a setting in which the art promotes learn to learn

The work is still ongoing, our current conclusions regard the way we have chosen to rethink the setting. We reviewed the proposed narrative activities, building the full setting on storytelling, in particular paying more attention to the ongoing learning process. The chosen experimental path (Formenti 2009, Vitale 2012) consisted in combining the rigor of the educational practice with the imagination of the artistic dimension.

The philosopher Ernst von Glasersfeld identified the difference between the verbs *to match* and *to fit*, according to the author, *to match* can be used when it is claimed that a representation is true. That means, when it is considered as in realist theories, that both things represent “the same shape” (Glasersfeld, 1988 p.20), and homomorphically speaking, the same thing in itself. The verb *to fit*, however, can be used when we think there is no correspondence between the iconic representation of the thing and the thing itself. The author, in fact, from the historical concept of evolution “being fit”, argues that the knowledge of the world is reached through a process of co–construction, in which the man, from the concrete, creates representations that can only adapt to reality. Guidance workshop is carrying out on a principle of orientation that produces a process “of fitting”: the one on which we work is the *co–evolution of systems*, where *learning/choose is a context process*. A process aimed to generate learn to learn both in individuals and in systems.
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A short training to help future teachers in fighting discriminations

Anna Lisa Amodeo, Carmen Ricci, Alessia Cuccurullo, Gabriella De Simone

Abstract

This work describes an experience promoted by the Anti-Discrimination and Culture of Differences Service of “SlnAPSi” Centre of Athenaeum, of University Federico II of Naples, aimed to sensitize future teachers on the themes of homophobic bullying at school. Homophobic bullying is a social phenomenon very alarming based on sex differences and gender stigma. There are various forms of homophobic bullying and it is very common in school contexts; but schools are often unprepared to engage this kind of situations. Teachers are instrumental in the development of the students because they promote an integral formation of students, considering their peculiarity.

The main purpose of the intervention has been to prevent homophobic bullying in schools through the training of future teachers. Specifically, the experience aimed to train and provide them useful skills to the recognition and management of risk situations and the promotion of an inclusive school climate.

The described intervention consisted of a short training organized into a theoretical part and an experiential moment, and focused on the themes connected with homophobia and homophobic bullying. The educational path involved 8 groups of students attended an university course actived from University of Naples Federico II to train future teachers, named TFA.

During the theoretical part of the training, specific issues about discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender stigma were discussed and examined in–depth; while, during the experiential moment, students took part in various activities connected to their future role.

The experience carried out with the future teachers emphasized the fundamental role of sharing knowledge and experiences about the themes connected to homophobic violence. Our students, in fact, expressed the desire to examine in depth the topics of the training, also involving the scholastic agencies.

Keywords: homophobic bullying, higher education, teachers, schools, training
1. Introduction

This work describes an experience promoted by “Anti-Discrimination and Culture of Differences” Service of “SInAPSi” Centre of Athenaeum, of University Federico II of Naples, aimed to sensitize future teachers on the themes of homophobic bullying at school.

Homophobic Bullying is actually one of most habitual dynamics of bullying in classrooms. It represents also a cultural problem with specific characteristics to inspect. This phenomenon can express itself in various forms (Rivers, 1996; Warwick et al., 2001, 2006), like verbal, physical or relational abuses, individuals or in group. Scientific literature consider homophobic bullying a particular form of bullying founded on homophobic dynamics, not only pointed towards LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) population, but also to all the boys and girls perceived as different because their not adhesion to dominant models of masculinity and femininity (Kimmer & Mahler, 2003; Swearer et al., 2010).

With Platero and Gómez (2007) we can define homophobic bullying as violent behaviors because of a scholar is repeatedly exposes to exclusion, isolation, threats, insults and aggressions acted from peer’s group; the bullies use homophobia, sexism and heterosexual values to de-humanize and disqualify victim. This definition emphasize on principal theoretical concept of the phenomenon.

It’s important to underline that the studies on bullying (Olweus, 1993; Fonzi, 1997; Bacchini, 2000; Smith et al., 2002; Gini, 2005) locate three characteristics of this phenomenon: intention, orderliness in time and relational asymmetry. These factors are also present in the homophobic bullying; in particular, relational asymmetry is connected to the belonging/not belonging to dominant gender stereotype of the group (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Beyond the assonances with traditional bullying, there are also some peculiarity of homophobic bullying (Lingiardi, 2007; Tharinger, 2008): the greater invisibility of the phenomenon, the lack of support to non normative sexuality, the contamination of stigma for LGBT supporters, the normalization of homophobia and the prevalence of heterosexist ideology in society.

In the Italian context few researches has been realized to study the diffusion of the phenomenon: from a study realized in 2010 (Prati,
on a sample survey of 863 students, results that about half part of students used homophobic epithets toward their friends, considered gay and 1/4 toward a girl considered lesbian. So, the 19.93% of survey sample can be considered a “bully” according to scientific criteria of Fonzi (1997) and Olweus (1993). Moreover, the 3.71% suffered acts of homophobic bullying at school about every week.

Another Italian study has been realized from Bacchini (2010) in Campania: over 25% of the survey sample (3520 subjects of lower and higher schools) results involved in the phenomenon, in the role of bully, victim or both.

The studies about homophobic bullying emphasizes a double tendency of the phenomenon, systematized by Minton et al. (2008) with the division of it in to two typologies: the hetero–normative bullying and the bullying based on sexual orientation.

Considering the incidence of phenomenon, many studies focused on the effects of it on psychological wellbeing (see vol. 37, n. 2 “School Psychology Review”, 2008).

The perpetuated abuses constitutes different stress factors, with short–run and long run risks for victims: scholastic desertion, auto–marginalization, isolation, affective–relational problems, psycho–somatic problems, depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, self–destruction behaviors and suicide. These studies are founded on the theoretical construct of “minority stress” (Meyer, 2003, Lingiardi, 2007), that is the stress correlated to the belonging to a minority. Psychological development of people belonging to a minority and stigmatized group is signed by a dimension of continuative stress, macro and micro traumatic, consequence of hostile or uninteresting ambient, stigmatization episodes or violence. Homophobic bullying configure itself as one of the most strong predictors of psychological disease and psychopathological risk (Rivers, 2001).

Many studies were interested in define all the factors, connected to personality dimensions, that can stem or obstruct episodes of homophobic bullying. In general, literature gives a fundamental importance to two elements: the peers’ group and the scholastic environment.

Peers’ Group. Many studies emphasizes that homophobic behaviors are mainly perpetrated by groups, and in particular in peers’ groups
where an higher grade of SDO\(^1\) (Dominant Social Orientament) dominate (Poteat, 2007; Poteat et al., 2007).

**Scholastic environment.** School is one of principal places where homophobic abuses manifest themselves: the practice of deride peers is really widespread (Phoenix et al., 2003; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Part of literature attributes to scholastic environment, in particular sexual gender and scholastic climate, a most important role in homophobic acts. The network of friends could be a positive factor if scholastic environment is also welcoming.

Teachers’ support is also many important: with his role, in fact, teacher can moderate the perception of exclusion lived from LGBT population (Murdock & Bolch, 2005).

Despite of this fundamental role, even now Italian teachers appears low informed and formed about these theme. Many of them are not capable to engage situations of homophobic bullying in classroom.

For this reason, starting from the literature suggestions, it has been important to improve teachers’ capacity of recognize and engage situation of violence based on homophobia.

### 2. Objectives

According to the study of literature, the main purpose of the intervention has been to prevent homophobic bullying in schools through the training of future teachers.

Specifically, the experience aimed to train and provide them useful skills to the recognition and management of risk situations and the promotion of an inclusive school climate.

### 3. Methodology

The described intervention consisted of a short training organized into a theoretical part and an experiential moment, and focused on

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1. SDO is a construct of the social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). According to it, in the Society groupal hierarchy exists; so, some groups are dominant on others.
the themes connected with homophobia and homophobic bullying. The educational path involved 8 groups of students attended to the TFA; each group was composed of 60 students, future teachers of every school subjects and, with each of them, two training meetings were organized. The training was divided into a theoretical moment and a experiential one. During the theoretical part of the training, specific issues about discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender stigma were discussed and examined in–depth. In particular, the following topic were discussed: gender stereotypes, characteristics of homophobic bullying; the components of sexual identity; forms, dynamics and consequences of homophobia.

Starting from these focus, a discussion among students was encouraged.

During the experiential moment, students took part in various activities connected to their future role. For example, a situation of homophobic bullying at school was presented and, after this, students had to express their opinion and, specifically, their reactions and behaviors as teacher.

At the end of the training, it were provided useful tools to prevent, to engage and to contrast homophobic bullying at school. Specifically, the information and the deconstruction of gender stereotypes in the class were considered effective prevention interventions; while, a model of integrated behavior, “punitive–relational”, was considered the best ways to manage conflict situations based on gender and sexual orientation.

4. Results and Conclusions

The experience carried out with the future teachers and here described emphasized the fundamental role of sharing knowledge and experiences about the themes connected to homophobic violence.

In fact, during the training several themes were examined in depth starting from the requests of the same students. Them, in fact, often expressed the desire to deepen some topics of the training. These requests expresses the lack actually existing in teachers’ educational paths about these themes. They reflected, for example, about the difficulty of dealing with the issue of homosexuality in classroom; the
difficulty of having and of keeping a relationship with the families of their students; the difficulty of managing a situation of homophobic bullying in classroom; the difficulty of introducing the themes of discrimination and homophobia in classroom and comparing with the subjects they teach.

All these requests shows the hard and long walk the educative agency have to travel to guarantee the institution of a “Culture of differences” in the School.

Starting from these reflection other deepened training has been programmed for teachers and future teachers on the themes of homophobic and homophobic bullying.

References


Literature circles as a methodology for the education of readers in the university

RODRIGO MATOS DE SOUZA

Abstract

This paper is intended to debate literature circles as a methodological proposal, by discussing the concept of a reader, as a means of integrating an individual and the world around him through the production of meaning. It promotes the Literature Circle as a way of withstanding the advances of the contemporary world's most appealing diversions, as well as an opportunity to present the literary realm, whether in schools or cultural centres, without the burden that is usually carried into the teaching of Literature; The Literature Circles constitute a methodology to be applied in the education of literary readers, according to which not only the texts are presented, but also the individual’s experience with that given piece of literature. In Literary Circles the individuals are asked to read a text each week and discuss it together, sharing their worldview, their impressions on being in contact with that particular text, in addition to how it can be related to other works of literature and to their own lives. The participants are encouraged to read not only their own texts, but to engage in others’ readings, that they may intervene with their sensibilities, emotions, critique and silence. As a result, in this study, they attempt to represent their journey as readers and the way they perceive themselves thusly, or not, based on the activities they developed in the Circles.

Key words: Literature Circles, Reading, Readers’ Learning.

1. Introduction

Conceiving the act of reading as a complex phenomenon that transcends the mere process of mentally unfolding signs printed on paper, such is the greatest challenge that arises when approaching this cultural habit from a methodological perspective, as a practice to be taught. The subjectivity inherent to the act of reading seems to inhibit significant systematizations in the learning process. Nevertheless, to
regard such act methodologically does not entail demoting it to a didactic approach, according to which students should work on a product to be evaluated. Rather, it leads to perceiving it as a method for the production of meaning through reading that exceeds the academic setting. The problematization of these meanings is what will enable the individual to actually find [yet again] pleasure in reading, for it shall cease to be feared as a liability, thus becoming part of their lives.

Many are the ways through which a person becomes a reader, be it at school or at home, as a child or as an adult, in environments where books thrive or in circumstances where reading is forbidden, or enforced, or a source of pleasure. . . . The reasons are none the less varied. This pursuit of the objectification of the act of reading as a field of study is also supported by many other areas of knowledge. Due to the very dichotomous nature of reading — since it is a social practice though the act itself calls for subjectivity —, it slips through the fingers of those who endeavor to set out a pattern for both reading and reading instruction, most likely motivated by a pedagogical yearning insistent on trimming all human experiences down to methods of teaching/learning.

There is something in the custom of reading that is essential and is exclusively pertaining to the individual: their reading track — the way said individual faced the different forms of reading throughout his or her life —, which is deeply marked by how they performed the roles they were assigned by the many everyday situations. It is their lives and their ways of reading are branded by their own experiences, their relationship with the world.

The concept of reader has proven to be historically complex, sprouting on a far-reaching land, far too wide in range for the scope of this paper. I would not risk digressing with an overview explanation on this, for there already is plenty of that available. The only alternative left would be to try and summarize it, though this could somehow compromise some field which, by any chance, could be left out. Besides, the bounteous attempts made in establishing concepts of readers are far from exclusionary; indeed they complement one another (Jauss, 2005; Picard, 2003; Eco, 2004; Barthes, 2004; Jouve, 2002; Iser, 1996), each shedding a different light upon the subject. What I do here is to develop approaches that enable you, the reader, to better comprehend
the contemporary discussion concerning the understanding of the act of reading which sustains this text.

Such discussion is not intended to maintain that reading equals a metaphorical unearthing of unfathomably hidden meanings, which would then only be tangible to the author and would demand of anyone else a gargantuan effort in a doctorate education even if just to read a book by Guimarães Rosa. The goal is to enable the individual to play the role of one who stirs the text, proposing new renditions based on previous knowledge and problematized with other readings. After all, is that not what theoreticians of literary studies do? Do they not read and imply that reading in a more complex cultural universe, that which is inferred by the so-called western rational tradition?

Since we are not always provided with the same resources as those of said theoreticians, could that justly suggest that our reading bears less credibility, or is plainly poor? Quite the opposite, in all likelihood the people who experience firsthand the reality of hinterlands north of Minas Gerais are more prone to get a firmer grasp of Guimarães Rosa’s stories than scholars who must put in a greater effort, for years on end, to make sense of something that a common reader quickly understands, because the elements immediately refer to some experience.

Deleuze (2000), a philosopher often paired with the most arcane and difficult of authors, draws attention to this matter by saying that his work is best absorbed not by those clustering the university halls and classes, but by youngsters of ages fifteen through twenty, as they are not yet plastered by academic parlance.

What the French philosopher indicates is the fact that there are two kinds of reading: one concerned with the meaning of things, which is a commonplace in university classes, when a professor asks the student to sum up any given theory, for instance; and the other, with less restrictions and aimed at producing meanings, which uses the text as leverage to forge new concepts and new aesthetical, political and ethical consciousness.

This Deleuzian perception lines up with that of Barthes, which arranges these by-products of the literate culture into two categories: texts of pleasure and texts of bliss. The text of pleasure is that which « contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it » (Barthes, 2004, p.20), whereas the text of bliss
is “the text that discomforts” (Op. Cit., p.20–1), bringing disruption to one’s cultural and epistemological foundations. This idea of reading as a productive activity has branched out to many fields of knowledge and expanded the way we perceive our relationship with texts in print (as well as in digital form).

The contemporary discussion about the reader has broadened the way we see our relationship with the written objects, trying to purge old prejudices that would rather set readers into a hierarchy, according to which whoever reads any work that is non–canonical and not accepted by the academy, could not even be called a reader. On that account, what would we call somebody who resorts to a newspaper or a comic book, or the reader who became so following their relations with the Internet? The critic field of Reading approaches an understanding of the reader as one who reads indiscriminately all kinds of text, as in consonance with the thought of Jean Marie Goulemot, when he says that, be it popular or literate, reading “is always a production of meanings” (2001, p. 107).

Thus the reader arises as a producer of meanings, not a decoder of the author’s concealed meanings. It is the reader who overhauls the literary work. By establishing a reading they cause the text, the multiplicity of meanings lying within the literary object, to bring about an understanding, a reading that is but one possibility among many others. This is only feasible because « a literary work is an open and incomplete work whose reception makes it what it really is » (Gómez, 1989, p. 53).

In that sense, when we broach literature, in this paper, it shall be taken as any written productions of fictional nature, whether in prose or poetry. Fiction conveys something to someone about an object comprising reality; fiction speaks for something realistic, but not real. It amounts to a parallel universe, a timeless space. Accordingly, literature is a form of knowledge, whose meaning is in the dialogue between fictional universe and reality, in other words, a kind of thinking that uses fiction to provide meaning for life.

The construction of knowledge produced by a dialogue with the literary would take place in the process of reading, which transforms the individual as it allows them to overstep reality and leap into the fictional world, while also receding towards reality with an outlook reshaped by fiction. The literary reader signifies their experience
with the meanings produced while reading, evoking images, places, perceptions, feelings and spaces, begetting « a rupture within the individual’s experiences, signaling the possibilities from another universe and heightening their opportunities for understanding the world » (Zilberman, 2001, p. 55). Hence the literary reading as a prospect transformation for the individual.

2. Methodology

Reading in public is an age–old practice, showing up in numerous occasions throughout the history of mankind’s becoming, under all sorts of shapes and terms, minutely characterized by some authors (Fischer, 2006; Manguel, 1997; Hamesse, 1998; Lyons, 1999, Doctors, 1999, Darnton, 2010, Souza, 2011 et alii). However, such action, to read in public, is not to be mistaken for the goal of a literature circle, which is neither a rhetorical or oratorical exercise. The main feature of a literature circle is not the content to be read, but the performance and the meanings collectively produced.

A literature circle is a space where reading smells like freedom, ridden of that theorizing rancid found in classrooms, and of the presence of a scholar hogging discussions. Participants have their voice heard and respected. Nevertheless, or in addition thereto, participants / readers are required to commit to the maintenance and operation of the activities, since longing alone will not suffice, for it is indispensable, within a collective construction of meaning, for everyone to seize control of their instructive formation. At this point, I must mention the theoretical basis on which is founded the design of the Literature Circle, whose mainstay is sustained by Eliana Yunes’s concepts.

According to her, a literature circle can be justified as an allurement strategy, used to arouse the interest for the practice of the act of reading (Yunes, 1999). The literature circle bears similarities with a historical tradition, imprinted on the Western imaginarium: storytelling. It is about rekindling an ancient predilection, which has been put to sleep by the immediate, sensual appeals of the contemporary world.

At any given time, forsaking deadlines, the reading begins, then the participants share their impressions, inferences and commentaries on
the text, ensuing new interventions by the reader in charge, who shall base them on the text in their agenda or others at hand, preferably having thought in advance about most of the questions and comments raised, or even new interpretations proposed by other readers, and all of that goes to show that the reading is carried out by everyone throughout the duration of activities.

Besides the allurement of literature and the humanization bolstered by the Literature Circles’ activities, there is another important feature of it that should not go unnoticed: the matter of educational formation and intellectual maturation. Literature Circles are a welcoming space for disclosing and discussing each member’s reading history, which, much due to that interaction, is constantly revised, compared with others, as well as put into different perspectives by fellow members.

For each meeting there shall be a guiding reader — the reader who shall be responsible for conducting the session, as mentioned above — who, a fortnight before, had committed to the reading and the presentation of the book’s author, with whom they may or may not already be familiar. Their peers should also be engaged with the reading, agreeing to become aware of the author, the main theme and/or the text itself.

In this activity, in addition to reading the text — be it a short story, a poem, novel excerpt or whatever they see fit —, the guiding reader must recount their encounter with the text and/or author, thus putting into context the object of their selection: what the text meant to them on any stage of their lives, what led them to find that book in a bookstore or library, their first reading, the impressions thereby ensued when compared with that of other works of that author, or in fact anything else which may contribute to humanizing the choosing of said text, evincing it as a textual connection between the author and the reader and that is encouraged to be of a communal nature within that Literature Circle.

It is advisable that the guiding reader briefly relate the author’s biography, so as to reveal the historical context in which the literary text was written. It is not, however, mandatory, since, as previously stated, all participants should join in supplied with elements to problematize the guiding reader’s reading.

Such individual — the guiding reader — performs an essential role in keeping the Circle functional. It is his duty to keep words flowing
Indeed. As Yunes (1999) recalls, they ought to be able to coordinate, in the narrowest of meanings, for not only are they going to read texts like others, they are also bound to keep the Circle operational, being liable for its success as much as for its failure.

In keeping with the yunesian proposal, the guiding reader has to be experienced, but wise and humble enough to encourage neophytes to participate. It is worth stressing that novice guiding readers, on the other hand, should of course choose to work with what/who is known to them. The proficient guiding reader should not misemploy their literary knowledge to intimidate their companions — « it is, then, unacceptable for the guiding reader to use the Circle [author’s emphasis] as a realm, assuming a professorial demeanor to assert his position as “the sage one” » (Yunes, 1999, p. 20) — , instead they should concern themselves with problematizing the reading, by turns discussing the reading and listening to all impressions, concisely, revealing other possibilities, i.e., weaving the fabric of meanings being produced at the time.

A literature circle is an activity that borders on other spaces; it touches on more consolidated activities such as those pertaining to school, work and family, where there usually is a dominant figure prescribing how others should act. The circle is operated by a group of individuals accustomed to such atmosphere, and so, if the guiding reader does not assume a temperate posture, or if the attending readers do not speak up when they notice a more magisterial tone in anyone’s speech, then the circle may be doomed to turning into something it was not intended to: a breeding ground for proselytism, a therapy group or a general mystical experience. There is neither immunity nor privilege for anyone within the group. It is also a space for criticism wherefore no one is impervious to contestation. All members must bear in mind that the focus ought to be always on the text. The idea is to produce meanings cooperatively, having the whole group, the guiding reader as well as the attending readers, as co-authors of the text.

Following the guiding reader’s initial presentation, the attending readers are requested to collaborate by imparting any sort of information they have — biographical, historical, highlighting the context in which the text was written —; producing meanings, articulating the text with readings of other works by the author; telling their own
impressions, autobiographical stories, and even expressing emotions triggered (or mortified) by the text.

Once that session is over, and all information relevant to the text and its author has been exchanged, the process is once again started, whereupon the question is raised: who would like to sit in as guiding reader for the session a fortnight from then? Someone volunteers, or many of them do, and so the Literature Circle is reset into motion.

By partaking in a literature circle, the reader increases their literary experience, confronts their first impressions, feelings and inferences with those of other readers, totally or partially accepting, rebuffing or incorporating them. In contrast, a lone reader may only be able to have a similar experience in specific spaces — such as a conference, a classroom, or when meeting a few friends who share the same interest —, yet even so it would be safe to assume they would speak of it moderately, using it figuratively or didactically, or at worst, they could end up at the mercy of a dominant figure, though democratic as they may seem, who may curb some interventions that would be welcomed when speaking amongst equals.

3. Results

For any researcher, conceptualizing the reader demands a worldliness that is more devoted to showing the subjectivity of those who read rather than discussing theories on that subject. Perhaps that is why most of the academic material available is dedicated to ponder on the individuals — readers from the past or from the present. The main issue in this kind of investigation is the appropriation of the aforementioned subjectivity. This paper presents a way of assessing this predicament through the concept of representation, implicating all forms of socially elaborated symbolic construction.

This paper is a further delimitation of the dissertation Leitores do Rodapalavra: Representando percursos (Souza, 2008) [“Readers from Rodapalavra: Representing Trajectories”], wherein I endeavored to comprehend how the members of a literature circle from the extension program called Rodapalavra portrayed themselves as literary readers. Here, in this paper, I present the answers of four readers from the group to the question: “Are you a literary reader?”.
The sections hereby presented provide, succinctly, categorizations generated by the answers given by six interviewees for this research.

4. Discussions

All interviewees were led to literary reading, each in their own way, induced by elements from home, by other people, by places and circumstances. The readers indicated four contributing factors they deemed relevant to their literary backgrounds at home: listening to storytelling as children, the presence of books, book recommendations by family members and forbiddance of reading.

5. Depicting a literary reader

When directly inquired about what they believe to be a literary reader, the answers comprise a range of comprehensions, though they tend to fluctuate between the definition of readers and the depiction of one who reads. Such apprehensions convey a dialogue with a broader universe of meanings that are socially construed and, in this scenario, they identify the interviewees’ trajectory and place in society, as well as their relationship with literary reading.

For Manon Lescault, the image of a literary reader evokes a suffering that burgeons forth from knowledge. It echoes, thus, the biblical standpoint, which is nearly a common sense — since it belongs to an apocryphal text — from Ecclesiastes (« For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow », Ecclesiastes 1:18 ESV), referring to the eerie feeling they provoke on those around them, particularly at home. She hints at her own experiences to try to conceptualize the reader, and in so doing she assumes the identity of a literary reader: « I do not know whether I fit that profile, but I think the literary reader is a lonely character and I believe they are seen by society as a strange figure ».

She touches upon the Manguelian impression on how our society — the Western civilization — has contemporarily regarded literary reading, as « a pastime, a slow pastime that lacks efficiency and does not contribute to the common good » (Manguel, 2006, p. 185). In that
sense, the literary reader would be dismissed as an odd character, engaged in a socially discredited activity. This reader ends up perpetuating the way that others see her, or yet, the way she sees herself through other people’s perspective.

A diverging perspective is advanced by Benedita, for whom the image of the reader is torn between the pursuit of two varieties of reading: one is the literary and the other she classifies as pragmatic, the sort of reading that attends to a determined, immediate need stemming from empiric situations, besides, of course, the processes involving self-knowledge: « For me, being a reader means trying to comprehend oneself and the world ». As for reading literature, in her opinion, it is something that appertains to a person’s imagination and creativity, reaching something far greater the individual, which matches divine inspiration. The literary reader, in her account, is an enlightened being who deals with a superior, almost preternatural practice.

Penélope, however, sees the reader forthrightly as one who reads, regardless of the type or purpose of the text.

Nevertheless, she approaches the dichotomy introduced by Benedita, as when she heeds a peculiar trait of the literary reader.

The literary reader, I should grant, is not only that person who reads, but who pursues literature, who wants to understand it, who prowls after it, for the author, for their life and work.

Such conceptions of the literary reader announce the image of a quintessential reader, an intellectual, whose relationship with the books is next to sorcerous, conjuring a supernatural inspiration; or of an individual who ventures to read more than the text per se, gauging other parts of the book, which influence on how they are going to read it, such as its preface, its covers, etc. That is, the reading protocol, which « defines what should be the correct interpretation and adequate use of the text while drafts the ideal reader » (Chartier, 2001, p. 20). Penélope does not think of herself as a literary reader. She is afraid that, since she does not care for reading additional texts such as prefaces, epilogues, appendages and the author’s autobiographical details, she is not worthy of the title.

Stillness was Mavis’s first response. After a brief initial quiescence, there came an assembly of words, in a surmising tone, to sketch her
impressions on the identity of a literary reader:

I have been attending a few lectures and discussing what a reader is, too. I suppose that to be a reader, it means a person who is willing to just read in itself...to explore...to scrutinize...the world.

Such discernment is in conformity with productions that currently come from fields such as Cultural History and Sociology of Literature; both target, amongst other things, the reading of unclassical works, which have long been deemed unworthy and shelved away from the literary studies. Surely, at the very beginning of her studies in Languages, Mavis was confronted with discussions of the likes, compelling her to rethink and redefine her understanding of the state of being a literary reader.

For Justina Bojuda, the status of the literary reader is closely associated with the bliss found when reading.

Oh...literary reader...well, that would be being in touch with literary work and that brings me to the matter of pleasure, that’s the pleasure of reading, the appetite for reading, the literary work. I think that has to do with being a literary reader.

Raskolnikov, in addition to pleasure, calls to mind the question of intellectual inclination:

[someone] reads literature because it is pleasurable and also because they attain intellectual stimulus from it, that is, by choosing from different styles, authors, historical contexts, nationalities, themes, etc.

This condition is in tune with the Barthesian division of text of pleasure and text of bliss.

6. Conclusion

The individuals hereby presented illustrate the whole complexity in thinking the literary reading in contemporaneity, be it due to the miscomprehension of the potentiality of act of reading, or to attempts of reducing something that complex to the size of representations that are closer to our experiences. However, those narrations shows us
how the reading may develop in various manners, so many as the number of individuals, which proves it impossible to set only one way of representing the reader, such intricate and eccentric creature, so averse to confinements.

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Counselling for (disadvantaged) students

Models of intervention and experiences at two European universities

Maria Teresa Padilla-Carmona, Howard Stevenson

Abstract

Higher Education is experiencing a critical reform process in which, among other things, the importance of the social dimension has been highlighted. The essential role that the University has to play in promoting social cohesion and reducing inequalities should be translated into the provision of adequate services to students and the creation of more flexible pathways (London Communiqué, 2007).

As a consequence, international studies (such as the Eurostudent project) have been promoted, allowing a first characterisation of the different “publics” that enter Higher Education, and providing statistical and comparable data on many European countries. However, it is necessary to go beyond this information, adopting a more in-depth perspective that allows us to go deeply into the daily reality of non-traditional students. This paper presents the process and results of research that has been developed in two university contexts which have different traditions regarding the provision of support services for students: the University of Seville and the University of Nottingham.

First, a description of the profiles of non-traditional students in both contexts is made, emphasising some of the problems and difficulties they experience. This information comes from the analysis of written narratives of a total of 33 students (23 in the University of Seville and 10 at the University of Nottingham).

Second, existing services in both universities are described, exploring the opinions of the technical staff of these services concerning the mechanisms and support strategies commonly used. This information has been collected through 8 open-question interviews of technical staff and people in charge of the support services in both universities.

Beyond looking at the comparison between the services and profiles in both contexts, the results are intended to serve as a reflection of the strengths and weaknesses in the support given to students with non-traditional profiles, who may present disadvantages and the risk of social and academic exclusion.

Keywords: non-traditional students, disadvantaged students, counselling services, international approach, models of intervention
1. Introduction

There is no doubt that higher education is experiencing a decisive reform process which shows the importance of its social dimension. Thus, the London Communiqué (2007) sets out that higher education must play an essential role in promoting social cohesion and in reducing inequalities, and facilitate appropriate services to students and create more flexible pathways.

As suggested by Odds (2010), the improvement of the conditions of students’ access and continuation is more than a democratic argument: has entered the front line of the international debate about universities.

Students with profiles very different from the usual pattern (from economically disadvantaged environments, with a job or a family to deal with, disabled, etc.) access to higher education increasingly more frequently. Previous statistical studies (Orr, Gwosc & Netz, 2011) show that this new university public is an important percentage in many European countries. This can be what McNair (1998) refers to as an “invisible majority”, both for legislators and managers and for those who research in the field.

These specific conditions (age, family and work responsibilities, disabilities, coming from a different ethnic, cultural or economic background) can mean a disadvantage concerning academic progress in the university. Therefore, higher education should ensure all measures needed to promote inclusive education, equity and social cohesion while preventing the university drop-out of students who need support to fulfill their educational potential because of disadvantages caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances.

As a consequence, it is necessary to improve our knowledge and comprehension of the barriers and difficulties that these disadvantaged students can experience. At the same time, it is necessary to identify which services universities offer to guarantee their full integration into academic and social life.

This communication presents the results of two studies which have explored both aspects (the experiences of disadvantaged students and the characteristics of support services). First, a study was carried out in the University of Seville and later this was replicated in the University of Nottingham, given that there is a greater tradition of support services for non-traditional and disadvantaged students in the
United Kingdom. It does not mean to offer a thorough comparison of both contexts but rather to simply show the characteristics and singularities of each of them.

2. Aims

The purpose of this study is to investigate the characteristics and needs of non–traditional (disadvantaged) students at university, identifying the potential strengths and difficulties they experience in their academic development. Also, we aim to describe the Students’ Support Services, their usual strategies to help students and the way that they are organised.

3. Method

The studies have a narrative approach, as we are interested in studying students’ perceptions and descriptions, and we consider that the narrative approach is effective in providing insights into complex and contextualised student experiences (Benson et al., 2010). The use of the students’ written narratives and open interviews have been combined to compile the information. Specifically, in the Spanish context, there were narrations of 23 students with a different, non–traditional profile (mature students, from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, with family and/or work responsibilities, with special educational needs and belonging to other ethnic groups, cultures and nationalities) and 6 interviews of Support Services staff. In the UK context, 10 students took part with written narratives, as did two people from the Students’ Support Services and Widening Participation Team) were interviewed.

The analysis of the information was carried out from a qualitative perspective, aiming to extract significant category analysis which allows the points of view of the people involved to be gathered.
4. Results

Experiences of disadvantaged students

Regarding the results obtained we highlight, on the one hand, the analysis of the narratives of the non-traditional students taking part in the study. This is very diverse with respect to their needs and experiences. It is not only based on the context (Spanish and British) but also the different experiences we find within each of them, in part due to the specific characteristics of each group (students of other cultures, mature students, etc.). Some aspects that are more or less common in all the students are outlined.

Practically all the narratives, regardless of the characteristics of each group, showed that the first weeks of the first year are a critical period in which they experience the greatest difficulties. In this sense, the students stated that they were confused and somewhat distressed, basically because of two issues: adapting to academic life and its regulations and adapting personally to a new life which involved living outside the home.

I found difficulties in adapting to the new environment, because it was totally different that that I had been used to. I felt sometimes that I had help from nobody, when I faced difficulties in my studies. The first moments were exciting and frustrating at the time, because the amount of work was huge, I was not able to deal with it (British, Daphne).

Thus, I remember that the first weeks were challenging, as I had to get adapted here, not only in my academic life but also in my personal life (house, etc.) (British, Paul).

We can highlight the high motivation and resilience of the non-traditional students and, especially in the Spanish case, the many negative experiences which could have led to dropping out but which were overcome thanks to their persistence, motivation and effort.

(Studying at University) It’s what I have been searching for many years. I got it a bit late, but I got it and now I will not give it up! It’s what I’ve been looking for a long time (Spanish, Hernan).

And this implies that the students consider that, for them, to achieve
academic success means a double effort with respect to a traditional student.

Being a bit sensible, you have to provide more to reach the same, that is, you have to do twice, to get the same. That’s my conclusion of a non–traditional student, I do the same that someone else does, but I have to do it twice (Spanish, Man).

In global terms and although many difficulties and specific problems are enumerated, the great majority of the participants value their academic progress as being very satisfactory. This progress is considered to be in part due to the support received from different sources which we will analyse later, but it is also perceived as the result of their motivation and persistence.

Difficulties? Architectonic barriers. I have been asking for the adaptation of the building for four years at university but they haven’t done it (…). I’ve been asking for a reform for years but I am not being listened to. One time out of many, I went to “complain” about the lifts, the help they gave me was: “We can give you a stick to press the buttons” […] I am not going to stop until I get the building adapted, maybe I’ll do so for the last year of my degree, but, at least, this will remain for more people in similar situations to mine (Spanish, Yria).

The day–to–day university description of the ways in which the students plan and approach how they study and respond to the demands of the university context is also different between the students of the two contexts. This is explained by the different teaching traditions in Spain and the United Kingdom.

The work schemes which are most common among the Seville students are based on continued and persistent class attendance. High lecture attendance is one of the most common patterns among non–traditional students, and it is considered by individuals as key to learning. Taking notes, asking for further explanations of concepts that are difficult to understand, participating and giving their opinions, help them to optimise their personal study:

I need to attend lectures to understand the subject, if I don’t attend, I feel I’m missing something (Spanish, Magister).

However, tutorials (which are normally held individually or in
small groups at the teacher’s desk) are not considered as important as lectures and only a few students indicate using this resource. When they do attend, tutorials tend to be regarded as a ‘problem-solving’ device and not as a mechanism for guiding their own learning:

I haven’t made much use of tutorials, I haven’t had doubts to resolve through them (Spanish, Emma).

In the case of the students in Nottingham, the trend is to work more individually. This is seen to be helped by the tutor’s personal supervision. In general, the support and the follow up facilitated by the academic tutors are valued positively.

So far I think that my progress is successful and I am absolutely satisfied by the things that I learn and research and from the support and supervising that I receive. The main factor that affected my performance in a positive way is the support that I receive from the university, from my supervisor and my colleagues (British, Paul).

In spite of these nuances in their way of facing study, a key aspect linked to academic success always appeared in both contexts: the need of appropriate time management from the very first days.

My previous professional experience made me much more confident and efficient in the use of my time. I can give each task a balanced importance and not be overwhelmed by circumstances (British, Peli).

I wake up around six in the morning everyday, and I end my working day at the campus about 9 p.m. (Spanish, Isabel).

I often make schedules to organise my time (Spanish, María).

Regarding the support that the students perceive as receiving, important differences appeared. We understand them to be also due to sociocultural factors. As has already been commented upon, for students in the British context, the tutor’s support is key, as well as the general Students’ Support Services. In this way, these students know well what these services offer and turn to them frequently and value them very positively.
Except that, everything is fine and this is helped by the university’s peaceful environment and the good services that my superiors and my peers provide… (British, Henn).

In contrast, the Spanish context participants do not know about these services as an alternative to overcome their difficulties.

I use only a few services, I’d better say none, because I do not know about them; if we were given more information, maybe I would use them more (Spanish, Lidia).

For the Seville students, the main sources of support cited are family, spouse or partner, and classmates. This support takes different forms: providing motivation, helping economically, and offering technical assistance to complete assignments (for example assisting building concept–maps, PowerPoints, and so on).

The relationship with my classmates… is very important to me. We have become a family (Spanish, Yria).

If I have an academic problem, there is always a fellow student who helps me and gives me advice (Spanish, Isabel).

When Spanish students discussed family and partner support, they reflected on the multiple ways they receive help from loved ones: the economic contribution, of course, but also help looking after their own children to facilitate university attendance and encouragement during hard times.

Since my brother and I were young, our parents have instilled us with the significance of studies, and they have shown us they were working hard so that we could study and have a good future… (Spanish, Cristi).

My parents have influenced my learning, my father is an educated man and he likes talking about interesting topics, my mother helps me with my studies and she tries to motivate me and my brothers (Spanish, Carlos).

I was lucky to meet in my first year a fellow student who is also non–traditional, and, as a consequence of her disability she deals with study in the same way as me. Since then, we have made a team (Spanish, M. José).

In the case of the participants of the UK study, what appeared
more frequently is the feeling of isolation and loneliness which a majority of students experience. They miss the support of friends and companions and this makes their process of adaptation difficult both in the academic and the personal area.

My problem in studying in here was studying alone. Back home, I had friends to study together and ask questions any time but even though I have friends in here it is hard to study together (…) One difficulty about life in here is making British friends. It is hard to make friends and you just give up after a while (British, Earl).

Students’ Services

Generally, Students’ Support Services in both contexts are not different regarding the profile of the students that they are aimed at, nor in the activities which are carried out with a view to their needs. However, a different functioning with respect to the organisation is noted. So it is that in British universities and, in particular, in the University of Nottingham, although the services have a different content (orientation services to help students with disabilities, capacity-building programmes for widening participation in the university, etc.), they function integrated into a unique scheme (the same management is in charge of different departments). For practical purposes this means a greater integration of their staff and, of course, also of the activities that they offer. In comparison, the Students’ Support Services in Spain function more fragmentedly. This occasionally brings about an overlapping of the offer of activities within the same university.

In the unit, as its name indicates, we work mainly supporting disabled students of the University of Seville (Spanish, techn 1).

“We carry out legal advice according to the existing legislation (Spanish, techn 2).

All types of students in general. If they are students who don’t speak Spanish or students with some kind of disability, we redirect them to other companions who work more specifically with them (Spanish, techn 4).

Although the work focus is adjusted to what some authors have called “the services model” (Rodríguez Espinar et al, 1993), which tends
to work with a sector of the student population more reactively than proactively and is based on responding to difficulties that have already been detected, a faint tendency has been noted in the English context to develop a more proactive proposal than that which is noted in Spanish universities. In this way, when a specific programme or activity aimed at filling a gap is created, this programme is directly oriented at the whole group of students and is not limited to a sector of the students. This is the philosophy which all the services work with.

If it’s good for one student in particular, it’s good for all the rest (British, techn 1).

The financing model is seen to be key in these services. In the UK all the activities are carried out according to state subsidies that depend on, amongst other things, each university’s management. This financing arrives directly at the service and does not depend so strictly on the politics of each government team. Added to this form of financing is an additional system based on private donations and the voluntary workers who are quite frequent in British culture. As a positive effect, the services have funds to carry out activities that have a strong impact, such as is the case of the Widening Participation Office, which develops orientation programmes which begin in Secondary Schools. However, the compensation lies in the work of those in charge of each unit being more raising funds than planning actions, as is shown in the two interviews with people in charge of services.

I spend most of my work time raising funds that guarantee the continuity of all we do (British, techn 2).

5. Conclusions

It is important to emphasise that this work only briefly presents some of the results of our study as, because of space limitations, we have not gone more deeply into much of the information gathered, especially that of the students’ narratives.

In spite of this, we can sketch out some reflections about the strong and weak points in potentially disadvantaged students, as well as in the services which deal with their needs (see Table 1).
Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of the experiences of potentially disadvantaged students.

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<th>Strengths/Opportunities</th>
<th>Weaknesses/Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level of motivation and resilience of non–traditional students (S, N)</td>
<td>The first weeks in the university are outlined as a critical moment in the academic, personal and social adaptation process (S, N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level of class attendance and participation (S)</td>
<td>The students express many difficulties—both academic and personal (S, N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good individualised academic support which is positively valued by the students (N)</td>
<td>Sparse use of tutorials as an individualising learning element (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good skills/attitudes of time management (S, N)</td>
<td>Scant knowledge and use of the Students’ Support Services (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial and social fabric which cushions difficulties and disadvantages (S)</td>
<td>Social isolation, meager support relations between companions (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important support role of companions (S)</td>
<td>Action of the services focused on solving problems already expressed (S, N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversification of the services to deal with the needs of specific groups (S, N)</td>
<td>Insufficient coordination between services, need for a more holistic and conciliatory plan (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive valuation of the support services (N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(S)= Applicable to the students and/or services of the University of Seville
(N)= Applicable to the students and/or services of the University of Nottingham

In our opinion, to thoroughly know the daily experience of non–traditional and/or disadvantaged students is an essential question in the current panorama of Spanish universities and, in particular, of the University of Seville. In this way, the Students’ Statute passed in 2010 considers the need to improve the support offered to students in the sense of integrating and coordinating the numerous services which currently exist. This integrated and holistic plan—similar to the one in the UK context—would mean a key advance in satisfying the needs of all students.
References


Experiential workshops to involve students in reflecting about violence

Based on gender and sexual orientation

Claudio Cappotto, Alessia Cuccurullo, Gabriella De Simone, Carmen Ricci

Abstract

This work describes an experience promoted by the “Anti–Discrimination and Culture of Differences Service” of “SInAPSi” Centre of Athenaeum, of University Federico II of Naples. This experience has been organized with the aim of involve university students in reflecting about themes connected with violence and discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation.

Educational paths of University courses appears, even now, far away from the possibility of discuss these fundamental themes: students appears devoid of fundamental instruments to engage future working situations of discrimination.

For this reason, the training realized with the students appears a fundamental leg of their educational journey.

Starting from these reflections, the objective of this work is to analyze the experience carried out with the students and to reflect about it, with the aim of understanding if experiential workshops about these themes can be an important moment of their trainings. In addition has also been important to verify if the workshops methodology can be a valid instrument to prevent various kind of discrimination in Higher Education.

To reach the proposed aims, each workshops has been observed from a non–participant observer, who had the task of observing, describing and drawing up protocols about the experience. Questionnaires and observations carried out from the experience has been analyzed through the use of qualitative methodologies.

Keywords: Experiential workshops, discriminations, campus climate, Higher Education.
1. Introduction

Italian University courses appears, even now, far away from the themes connected to violence based on gender and sexual orientation. Many University students, in fact, are frequently lacking of the instruments to engage future working situations of discrimination about these themes.

In addition, various scientific studies and researches (for example D’Augelli, 1989; Ellis, 2009; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Rankin, 2003) shows how University appears places of discriminations, characterized by an homophobic climate.

Even though the term Homophobia is actually common used, it appears not simple to describe the main characteristics of this phenomenon. The reason is that talking about homophobia means refer to many factors; not only psychological, but also social dimensions. In fact, individual homophobic beliefs are socially supported by collective stereotypes and discriminatory conducts are legitimate with common prejudices (Garzillo, Racioppi, Stanziano, 2010). The psychologist G. Weinberg introduced in 1972 the term in his book “Society and the Healthy Homosexual”, to demonstrate that the intolerance against homosexuality can be considered a real mental illness.

J. Drescher (2003) shows how Weinberg built a clinic syndrome as well as a theorist of XXth century created an illness called homosexuality¹.

In this way, Weinberg individuated different origins of homophobia: religious motivation, secret fear of a personal homosexuality, removed envy for sexual freedom and threat to established values.

Such etiological theorization represented a psychodynamic balance toward psychoanalytical theories of yore (Drescher, 2003).

So, according to original intent of the author, homophobia should be considered between “classic phobias”; but at the same time Weinberg underlined its aggressive payload and also its inclination to convert itself in violence, qualifying it as an “atypical” phobia.

The contribute of Weinberg obtained a stronger impact on the debate about homosexuality, and his original theorizations has been extended from many academics. In particular, has been necessary

¹ In 1974 homosexuality was deleted from “Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Illnesses (DSM)” published by American Psychiatric Association (APA).
Experiential workshops to involve students in reflecting about violence

...to operate some transformations of original concept, because of the Greek suffix “phobia” indicates, correctly but also reductively, some negative physical and psychological reactions on homosexuality, and also some hostile thinks and behaviors. For this reason, “homophobia” is not a satisfactory term, because its emphasis on individual causes (Lingiardi, 2007).

In fact, during the years, the concept has been enriched by a socio-cultural connotation. For example, W. Blumenfeld (1992) recognizes four levels of homophobia:

— personal (it regards the prejudices of individual against homosexuals);
— interpersonal (when individual prejudices becomes conducts);
— institutional (it refers to discriminatory policies acted by various institutions, such as government, companies, religious and professional organizations);
— social (stereotypes and prejudices against homosexuals acted between their social exclusion).

It appears clear that homophobic people, like racists, xenophobic and misogynists refers to a codified system of believes they need to defend from the threat of dangerous subjects.

So homophobia can show itself in different ways: like Pietrantoni (2009) says, « it can be practiced, ignored, tolerated and opposed. Don’t call it homophobia is expression of homophobia ».

The reflection about the presence of homophobia in our society stimulated different studies about the diffusion of this phenomenon in various kind of organizations and, in particular, in Universities.

University might be described as a place dedicated to the free and respectful exchange of ideas and in which discrimination and violence are not tolerated. Unfortunately, many studies about college climate reveals a widespread anti-gay prejudice in University. In particular, Rankin (1998) demonstrates that homosexual and bisexual students experience an hostile campus climate. In another study about homosexual and bisexual students experience at Yale University, 26% of them reports threats of physical violence, 50% reports two or more incidents of verbal assault, and 48% feels that future harassment is fairly or very likely to occur (D’Augelli, 1989).
More recent research of Rankin (2003) reports that 74% of LGB undergraduate and graduate students rate their campus as homophobic, and 60% of LGB students report concealing their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid discrimination. In addition, it has been also documented that lesbian and gay students experience significant negative consequences from being exposed to violence and harassment on campus (D’Augelli & Rose, 1990; NGLTF Policy Institute, 1993).

These studies show that homophobia on University campus is still a significant problem and therefore universities are not perceived nor experienced by LGBT students as ‘safe spaces’ in which to be open about sexual orientation/gender identity. So, it appears necessary to improve the campus climate and to promote a greater inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the college community.

Prejudice and discrimination against lesbian and gay students is often intensified by a lack of knowledge and understanding between heterosexuals and the LGB community. An American research shows that experiences aimed to raise campus awareness about homophobia and to educate the University community on lesbian and gay culture and history contribute to a positive change in campus climate toward lesbians and gay men (Getz & Kirkley, 2006). In particular, interactive presentations focused on areas such as gender stereotypes and experiential workshops on sexual orientation and other diversity issues provide all students the opportunity to reflect, to understand about this themes and, also, to recognize their own prejudice.

Finally, experiential workshops allow to college students to learn an expertise, about this themes, to engage in their future working situation.

Starting from this reflection, the “Anti–Discrimination and Culture of Differences” Service of “SInAPSi” Centre of Athenaeum, of University Federico II of Naples, started an experience to introduce these themes in Higher Education, with the aim to provide students theoretical and methodological knowledge.

2. Objectives

This work is aimed to analyze the experience carried out with the students, to verify if the workshops methodology can be a valid instru-
ment to prevent various kind of discrimination in Higher Education and to provide students with valid instruments to engage future working situations.

3. Method

To reach the proposed aim, the “Anti-Discrimination and Culture of Differences” Service planned and provided to students two cycles of experiential workshops focused on differences issues.

In particular, each cycle consisted of three workshops, divided on subject area: Humanistic area, directed to students of various Courses of Studies relating to the humanistic and social sciences (for example: Sociology, Psychology, Social Sciences, etc.); Legal area, directed to students of Courses of Studies relating to the legal–social sciences (for example: Law, Political Science, etc.); and General area, directed to all the students of the University of Naples Federico II, interested in these themes.

Each workshops has been divided into two sessions: a theoretical moment and a practical one. The first one was characterized by the explanation of some theoretical basic constructs: stereotypes and prejudices; sexual identity and its four components (sex, gender, gender role and sexual orientation); heterosexism; homophobia and transphobia; feminist theories and queer culture, etc.

During the second moment students has been active protagonists of different activities and role playing, such as:

- some brainstorming on important word, like “discrimination”;
- the “hot chair” activity: each student had to put himself in a position of active and participate listening towards an homosexual boy with and his problems;
- an activity where students personifying a group of social workers were stimulated to suggest to a municipality assessor ideas and projects to contrast homophobia;
- the “circle of empathy” activity: the host personified an homosexual boy turning to each student (as if he was a psychologist/social assistant), asking him to listen and to communicate;
- a role playing about a working group that try to solve a discrim-
ination situation in a specific social context (school, association, work, etc.);
— reading and discussion of clinical cases and laws relevant this aims.

At the end of each workshop, each student compiled a satisfaction questionnaire. Each workshop has been also observed from a non-participant observer, who had the task of observing, describing and drawing up protocols about the experience. Questionnaires has been analyzed through the use of qualitative-quantitative methodologies; moreover, some significant phrases has been extracted from the observations to describe emotions, thoughts and considerations.

4. Results and Conclusions

Starting from the theoretical references exposed before and the results of the analysis it has been possible to make a conclusive reflection about the experience carried out with the students.

It’s important to underline that about 50 students of various Courses took part to the workshops. According to us, this is a first, important, element: it was the first time, in fact, that an experience of this kind was proposed to University students. As regards the satisfaction questionnaires, three parts were located: a first one connected to a general satisfaction of the student, a second one exploring the most important factors for a good experience, according to the same student, and a third part about the opinion of each student about the experience and the “Anti Discrimination” Service.

The results of these questionnaires shows that there is a general contentment of our students about the workshops: the most part of participants declared a clear satisfaction about the realized experience. They feel welcomed and thank that the intervention has been valuable. The only negative point appears the inconvenience of the location, sometimes too small for the number of participant. Many more information has been collected from the analysis of the third part of our questionnaires, organized into seven opened questions. According to the answer collected, the most part of our students were motivated to participate from the desire to do a new experience and learn more
about the themes; moreover, some of them where intrigued by the not-theoretical methodology used, that is far away from the usual University learning moments.

The expectations of the participants were confirmed, because they declared that this experience gave them more knowledge of the themes and also about themselves and their capabilities of hearing and welcome.

Starting from the experience, some students suggested devices to improve the workshops, such as the inclusion of direct evidences.

Moreover, despite the absence of direct discriminations lived in the University context, the most part of the students affirmed the importance of an Anti-Discrimination service inside the University, and they also suggested a greater promulgation of it between all the students.

Other interesting causes for reflection came from the reports of observations.

During the experience, in fact the students reflected together about the themes; one of them said that it’s important to « starting from the beginning, from a culture of differences. . . ) Knowing that many points of view exists can brought to an exchange, evading a crash ».

According to the students, the experience has been important to “take a challenge”, to understand the “difficulty and the powerlessness of the non-discrimination”, to increase the “willpower of welcome”.

So, the analysis realized shows that it’s very important to introduce in Higher Education themes about sexual orientation and gender identity. The introduction of this themes, in fact, contributes to the construction of an inclusive and non-discriminatory climate in the University, developing a well—being spirit for all University students and a culture of differences in future working contests. Speaking of which, some students said: « this experience make me grow up! »; « thanks to this experience I gave sense to some things of everyday »; « it has been a way to exchange ideas »; « . . . I have understand many things about homosexuality. . . I know I have prejudices, but I think it’s the time they die »; « I’m happy, because I know that this isn’t the end: I’m going at home with something to elaborate! ».

Moreover, results shows that practical workshops are an excellent method to train the students and to fight discriminations based on gender and sexual orientation.
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PART V

REFLECTING ON STUDENTS’ IDENTITY
A comparative study regarding anxiety and negative and positive emotions

In the case of “traditional” and “non–traditional” student

LOREDANA IVAN, DAN FLORIN STĂNESCU, ELENA–MĂDĂLINA IORGA

Abstract

“Non–traditional” students, as identified in most international access and retention studies, are usually associated with the following features: low income or economic status groups, people with disabilities, students who are first in their family to participate in higher education, mature age students, people from minority groups and refugees. Therefore, whereas traditional students remain those making the transition directly from school to higher education, the “typical non–traditional student” is an adult, aged 25 and older, who has returned to further or higher education, either full or part–time. Moving further, the difficulties to learn and to integrate to the university life might be different for “non–traditional” than “traditional” students. The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between anxiety (trait and state) and the proneness to experience positive / negative affectivity in the case of a group of “traditional” (N=37) and “non–traditional” students (N=58) enrolled in a public university from Romania. Using STAI to measure both types of anxiety and PANAS–X to investigate positive / negative affectivity proneness, an analysis was performed comparing results between the “traditional”, respectively the “non–traditional” group. The findings suggest that ’traditional’ students tend to experience more state anxiety than “non–traditional” ones, whereas the “non–traditional” students tend to experience more negative emotions as opposed to “traditional” ones.

Key words: non–traditional students, anxiety, affectivity.

1. Introduction

Increased enrolment of adults in college over the past 20 years has stimulated research comparing traditional and nontraditional students,
along with the widespread of approaches such as “continuous education”, “lifelong learning” or “knowledge economy” (Bowl, 2001). Non–traditional students are usually over 25 years old (Ely, 1997; Nora, Kraemer, Itzen, 1997), are part of an ethnic minority or have a low socio–economic background (Sokolowska, 2009). Other features of nontraditional students refer to: low frequency in attending courses, financially independence, having a full time job, first generation students, taking care of a dependent person (Choy, 2002).

The differences in academic results between traditional and non–traditional students are mainly caused by social or economic circumstances specific to the second group. Similarly, non–traditional students seem to have different expectations regarding university life, being less interested in social and leisure activities, as opposed to traditional ones (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011). Furthermore, due to a more stringent need for an effective time management, non–traditional students tend to experience high level of stress when taking part in extracurricular activities (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011), related to the endeavor of finding a balance between school, work and family life. This role overload was associated with academic integration, identified as the most important factor in preventing university drop–out (see Cleveland–Innes, 1994).

Similarly, some studies focused on dispositional factors that might impact academic achievements within the two categories of students. Based on these assumptions, the current study aims at investigating possible differences between traditional and nontraditional students concerning positive and negative affectivity (PA/NA) and the level of anxiety measured both as state and trait. Watson and Clark (1998) defined PA and NA as two dominant and relatively independent emotional dimensions. Existing research already linked PA to social activities, satisfaction and the frequency of pleasant events, respectively NA to stress, poor coping mechanisms and the frequency of unpleasant events (Brief, Burke, George, Robinson & Webster, 1988). Thus, individuals high on PA are more energetic, focused and easily engage in pleasant activities, while those low on PA are less energetic and experience often sadness (Watson & Clark, 1998). On the contrary, individuals high on NA are experiencing more often anger, contempt, guilt, fear or nervousness, while those low on NA are usually more calm and serene. Previous research (Jolly, Dyck, Kramer & Wherry, 1994; Mineka, Watson & Clark,
A comparative study regarding anxiety and negative and positive emotions

suggests that NA is strongly associated with anxiety and depression. Spielberger (1983) distinguishes between state and trait anxiety: while state anxiety is caused by threatening situations, trait anxiety refers to the dispositional tendency to experience intense states of anxiety in response to threatening situations (MacLeod & Bucks, 2011). Of course that the two are dependent — trait anxiety tends to moderate the level of state anxiety, which is caused by distinctive contextual requirements (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1980). Generally speaking, individuals experiencing trait anxiety tend to focus mainly on negative stimuli (Mogg, Bradley & Williams, 1995; MacLeod & Hagan, 1992). Some authors were also interested in determining the way people with high anxiety experience positive/negative affectivity (Eisner, Johnson & Carver, 2009). Although findings are not conclusive, there is some evidence that individuals with high levels of anxiety tend to diminish positive experiences (Brown, Chorpita & Barlow, 1998).

2. Methodology

Considering previous research and the assumed objective for the current investigation, the following hypotheses were advanced: (H1) There will be significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students regarding state and trait anxiety; (H2) There will be significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students regarding PA/NA. The current study was conducted on a convenience sample consisting of 96 students at a public university from Bucharest, 37 traditional and 59 nontraditional, 18 to 44 years old (M= 20.66, SD= 3.44), 87 females and 9 males. First, participants completed a screening questionnaire to determine whether they were traditional or nontraditional students. Next, they were administered the STAI and PANAS–X scales, paper–pencil version. For anonymity and confidentiality purposes only demographic data were additionally required (gender, age, and year of study). Data were collected during a two–week period. Anxiety (state and trait) was assessed using STAI (State–Trait Anxiety Inventory, Spielberger, 1983), a self–report measure that comprises 40 items, equally distributed on two subscales: S–anxiety (contextual anxiety) and T–anxiety (anxiety as a personal characteristic). Each subscale has a different rating: the 4–point scale for S–anxiety ranges from 1=...
not at all, to 4 = very much, while the 4–point scale for T–anxiety ranges from 1 = almost never, to 4 = almost always. Good internal consistency was reported for STAI .86 (Spielberger, 1983).

Positive and negative affectivity were measured using PANAS–X (Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale – Expanded form), developed by Watson and Clark (1992). The questionnaire measures the two original higher order scales (PA – Positive Affect and NA – Negative Affect), as well as 11 specific affects: Fear, Sadness, Guilt, Hostility, Shyness, Fatigue, Surprise, Joviality, Self–Assurance, Attentiveness, and Serenity (Watson & Clark, 1994). PANAS–X comprises 60 adjectives that describe emotional states on a five–point Likert scale related to the intensity of the state in the moment of the completion (1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 = extremely). The internal consistency reliabilities for the two higher order scales reported in the validation tests is above .83.

3. Results

First, all variables were tested to determine the distribution of data using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (K–S test). Results show that state anxiety (M = 60.92, SD = 9.21) and PA scores (M = 3.26, SD = .46) are normally distributed (p > .05), while trait anxiety (M = 58.70, SD = 8.77) and NA (M = 2.14, SD = .57) scores have a non–normal distribution (p < .05). Further, we tested whether there are significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students in term of state anxiety and PA (Table 1).

Results confirm the fact that traditional students tend to experience higher levels of state anxiety compared to nontraditional ones (t(93) = 1.98, p = .05). Regarding PA, findings do not suggest the existence of significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students (t(93) = .63, p = .51).

Due to the non–normal distribution of the scores for trait anxiety and NA, the possible differences between the two groups of students were investigated using the Mann–Whitney U test (table 2). Significant differences were identified between the two categories of students only in the case of NA (U = .00, p < .01), results indicating that nontraditional students experience more frequently NA compared to traditional ones.
Table 1. Differences between traditional and nontraditional students: test for independent samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63.24</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>59.44</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affectivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affectivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Mann–Whitney U test: Trait anxiety and NA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trait anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>59.43</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58.24</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affectivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>.07</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mann–Whitney</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trait anxiety</td>
<td>992.50</td>
<td>−.615</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative affectivity</td>
<td>730.50</td>
<td>−2.62</td>
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</table>

4. Discussions and conclusions

The study of emotions in academic settings continues to receive increased attention, mainly with respect to aspects such as self-regulated learning, achievement motivation, course enrollment, and career decision making (Efklides & Volet, 2005; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Furthermore, these issues are more relevant in the context of nontraditional students, who are an increasingly important social group in EU, calling for more flexible tertiary education system able to promptly
respond to their specific needs. Since individuals high in positive affect are more focused externally on promoting positive outcomes, whereas those high in negative affect are more focused internally on preventing negative outcomes (Elfenbein, 2007), we suggest that different strategies in working with traditional and nontraditional students should be adopted, in order to assist them in reducing academic stress and facilitate graduation.

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Attrition and retention in the academic context: an exploratory study in a South Italy University

Emanuela Ingusci, Francesca Palano, Maria Velia Artigas

Abstract

In recent years, in the international context, the phenomenon of University attrition has grown exponentially. In the Italian context, many students leave University before completing their academic course which affects them not only socially and economically, but also has serious consequences on their personal life. Tinto proposes a model that, while admitting the influence of individual characteristics, focuses on University social and intellectual contexts, considering them as a central element in the process of academic drop out. The aim of this study is to examine the role of the main variables identified by Tinto’s Model in a sample of University students from the Psychology faculty. The survey was conducted through a structured self–report questionnaire; it was made up of individual variables (past experience, personal abilities, family background), organizational variables (goal and institutional commitment, social and academic integration) and psychological variables. The results indicate a substantial validity of Tinto’s Model for the context studied, the South of Italy, despite some clear differences, which can be explained by cultural and organizational differences. Limitations of the study are discussed. Further studies could investigate whether the replication of the study in other universities provides different results. Finally, the study provides interesting indications to explore new strategies to promote retention and academic success.

Key words: attrition, retention strategies, academic drop–out.

1. Introduction

The concept of attrition is very difficult to define, for two main reasons: the plurality of causes that generate it, social, cultural, educational, psychological and family background; the variety of ways in which it manifests (repeated leavers, failures, irregular frequencies) (Van Stolk, et al. 2007; Godfrey et al. 2010). The literature (Tinto, 1993; 2010)
on the topics of attrition and university persistence identifies three main types of factors involved in these processes: background factors, factors concerning suitability between individuals and university institutions and context factors. Retention, persistence and completion in post–school education have been the focus of increased attention internationally in recent years. The theoretical model most commonly referred to in this student retention/drop-out literature is the Tinto’s Model (1988). According to the model, attrition in the academic institution is part of a long process of interactions between an individual (with their own characteristics, skills, financial resources, previous educational experiences, and intentions) and the other members of the social system and academic system of the University.

2. Method

The aim of the study is to explore the Tinto’s Model in an Italian context, in a sample of students studying human sciences. The hypotheses are the following:

— the intent to persist/leave is related to individual and contextual variables (age, gender, past scholar experiences and final grade);
— the institutional commitment and the abilities and skills will contribute to intent to persist in the academic life;

Sample and procedure

Data were collected in 2013 from 261 Italian students of University of Salento, in Lecce. They were asked to complete the questionnaire during the lessons, in academic libraries and in study areas, by the Research team. The questionnaire was in paper format. All participants were unpaid volunteers; informed consent was requested and privacy was guaranteed. The students were from the faculty of Educational sciences, specifically from the field of Psychology. They were principally women (90.2%). Most of them (79, 2%) had a background in Human sciences, the others came from technical backgrounds. They were from First level degree of Psychology (77, 3%), and from Second Level degree of Psychology (22, 7%). The participants have regularly
attended all the lessons of the courses in which they involved. The mean age is 23.4 years.

Measures

The questionnaire is composed of the following sections:

1. abilities and skills (College Student Survey, 2006). The participants are asked to indicate own perception of different abilities and skills, in a range from 1 (not present) to 5 (very much);
2. past scholar experience (Cabrera et al., 1992). High school diploma grades have a significant influence on whether a student will persist or abandon university;
3. goal and Institutional Commitment (Pascrell, Tinto, 1980; Nora e Cabrera, 1993). The former is a commitment to the goal of obtaining a university degree, while the latter concerns the effort of the academic institution, to install a sense of belonging in its students;
4. academic integration (Tinto, 1987). It is defined as the level of congruence between individual intellectual development and the intellectual climate predominant in the institution;
5. intent to persist or to leave (adaptation scale of Eaton and Bean, 1995). It concerns the intent to persist in or to leave the academic courses; it is measured considering the time spent in the academic context.

3. Results

The data were processed with software used for studies in social sciences. Descriptive statistics were calculated, at first, including means, standard deviations, t tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for gender comparison, age groups, final grade and past scholar experiences on each of the scales, while Stepwise Regression was used to measure relationships between the institutional commitment and abilities and skills with the intent to persist in academic life. Initial analysis showed that there were no significant differences for gender. Table 1 reports mean differences by final grade, considered a strong indicator to mea-
sure the influence of past scholar experiences, related to individual and individual–institution variables. The analysis showed that there are significant differences. Tinto stated:

Intensions or goals specify both the level and type of education and occupation desired by the individual. Commitments indicate the degree to which individuals are committed both to the attainment of those goals (goal commitment) and to the institution into which they gain entry (institutional commitment) (Tinto; 1993:115).

The students with a higher grade have a higher probability of persisting in achieving academic goals; they also have higher self-confidence than others (Table 1). These students build relationships with their colleagues; this means that their interpersonal skills are higher than others, so they are more integrated in the academic and social institution. Results also showed that the students with low grades; have more difficulties committing and pursuing the goal of degree, so they are likely to procrastinate over exams and in general, all the activities planned to achieve academic degree. They think it is unrealistic to expect to reach this goal and consider abandoning this goal. These results are confirmed by the relevant literature (Morris, 2002).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. ANOVA results final grade– individual and contextual variables.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual and contextual variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self–confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty to goal commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to persist</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In table 2, results indicated mean differences for students from different academic situations. In Italy, the students who take longer than normal to complete their university course are called students out–of–course. They are likely to protract the exams because of different factors (work, family, economic difficulties or low self–esteem about own academic ability). This causes a delay in the goal achievement.
Furthermore, they are likely to procrastinate because they have more difficulties seeking information, building relationships with their colleagues which could have a positive influence on their own intellectual growth and help them if they have a personal problem. They also have lower levels of institutional commitment than their colleagues; they do not feel they belong to the university, so they are not certain that the university is the right choice for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. t–test. Mean difference for students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional commitment about certainty of the right choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional commitment about institutional values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. t–test. Mean difference for age.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger / older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty to Goal commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results (table 3) indicated that the students, who are over 25 years old, have more difficulties in pursuing academic goals. They cannot achieve these goals, so they get demotivated with low self–esteem and low confidence about their own personal skills. The analysis of regression (table 4) highlights a relationship between personal and contextual variables and the intent to persist in achieving academic goals. Institutional commitment about certainty of choice and the
self-perception of academic abilities are positively related with the intent to persist. The table indicates that the Institutional Commitment about certainty of choice and the perception of own academic abilities predicted the intent to persist. Students who are more integrated in the university and with more self-confidence about their own personal abilities, are more likely to take new challenges not only in their academic career but also in their future profession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>R² correct</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std Er.</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional commitment about certainty of the choice</td>
<td>.437</td>
<td>.199</td>
<td>.274</td>
<td>4.027</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Ability</td>
<td>.404</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>.155</td>
<td>20.571</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Stepwise regression on intent to persist.

4. Conclusions

The pervasive growth of interest over the recent years in the thesis of attrition–retention in educational contexts, has brought with it challenges about how to develop new strategies to improve retention and persistence in academic institutions. College persistence requires individuals to adapt to the new context, both intellectually and socially. Many people may have difficulties during this process of adaptation (Tinto, 1993). The difficulties come from different factors: the inability of individuals to separate themselves from previous forms of educational organization (especially for first year students), the difficulty for individuals to adapt to new and more challenging demands, both academic and social, of the University environment (especially for students who take longer than normal to complete their university course). Furthermore, individual variables are related with the attrition and the intent to leave. Low levels of self-efficacy of abilities,
skills and interests of the student can predict a procrastination of studies (Tinto, 1993).

**Limitations**

There are some limitations to the study. Firstly, the cross-sectional nature of the study limited the findings; we could not show evidence for causal direction between variables. Moreover, the self-reported data was another limitation, because the way students perceive themselves could be inaccurate. A further limitation was that the academic course differences were not included in the study design. Consequently, another limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability of the results.

**Practical implications**

The current study contributed to previous research in a number of ways. It investigated the relationship between the individual and his ability to adjust to the academic institution on the intent to persist. This is important for the University, to develop new strategies for future retention. The Institutional Commitment construct measured a student’s commitment to remain at this University. The finding that this scale is significantly related to persistence (.000) emphasizes the importance of student’s feelings of belonging at this institution. Future research can revise the academic and social integration, because as Tinto (1993) postulated, if the students feel integrated in both of these areas, their commitment to remain at their current institution is strengthened. Furthermore, personal abilities have to be considered. The sample of the study is heterogeneous. Future research should focus on the students first years at college, with a longitudinal study, to identify risk factors and to avoid the academic drop-out. Finally the role of the quality of teaching is important to prevent attrition.
References


Student’s interpersonal competence during the first university semester

Alina Duduciuc

Abstract

This study examined the relation between students’ interpersonal competence and their autonomy / dependency on parents during the first semester of university. For this purpose, 100 Romanian freshmen completed the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ). The results showed that most of the students have low and average scores at ICQ, compared to a smaller number of students who showed high interpersonal skills. There were no significant association between the housing situation of the students and their interpersonal competence, but, on average, students who live by themselves have a slightly higher interpersonal competence as compared to those who live with their parents. Almost half the subjects discuss the faculty experience with their parents, while some of them only do it occasionally or don’t do it at all. On average, students with a job scored higher on the sub-scale initiating social contacts. However, in the case of this research, interpersonal competence does not depend on whether the students lived with their parents or not.

Key words: interpersonal competence, autonomy, interdependence, students.

1. Introduction

This research is focused on interpersonal competence in emerging adulthood (19–25 years) by studying a particular social group: students in their first year of study at the university. It is interesting to observe how interpersonal competence varies along the university years and how to strengthen this ability at one of the most significant stage in individual’s development: the age at which — in most Western societies — young people are expected to take decisions, to become independent from their parents and to prove their communication skills during their university studies, at work or in their social interac-
Alina Duduciuc

Thus, we shall notice how autonomy from parents correlates with interpersonal competence indicators — respectively, the ability to establish social relations, to provide emotional support, to manage conflicts and to be assertive. This study was also an opportunity to test and validate a new research tool within Romanian population, i.e. the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ), drawn up by American psychologists Duane Buhrmester and Wyndol Furman in 1988.

Interpersonal competence — understood as a set of abilities and skills directly noticeable in a social context — has been studied extensively since the classical period of social psychology (1935–1961). Early theories and research defined interpersonal competence as the extent to which a human being is able to gratify a series of needs in inter–human relations, such as security, belonging, love, as well as respect (A. H. Maslow, 1954/2007). These are the roots of the general meaning which is used today to refer to the concept of interpersonal competence, namely a series of potential behaviours (expression of agreement, initiation of social relations, empathy, assertiveness, consolation, managing interpersonal conflicts), which the individual can exhibit for a success outcome in certain circumstances of life (such as harmonious relationships with the others, finding a partner in life, getting a job, arriving at a good social performance etc.). Nowadays, no less than a hundred concepts (Spizberg & Cupach, 2002) were carried out to explain interpersonal competence, which made it difficult to measure: interpersonal sensitivity, interpersonal skills, empathy, emotional intelligence, disclosure, nonverbal accuracy, social support etc. Whether it was operationalized with cognitive indicators (ability to understand the others) or behaviour indicators (ability to have an appropriate behaviour in interactions with the others), interpersonal competence was described, both in theory as well as in research, as having a facilitating effect on communication and social relations, a key role in human development and in the adaptation of individuals to the environment, a motivating function on pro–social and cooperative behaviours (Bandura, 1997; Carton, Kessler & Pape, 1999; Greene & Burelson, 2008; Hess & Philippot 2007; Saarni, 1999; Spitzberg, 2008; Ivan, 2009).

In social psychology, as well as in developmental psychology, the age range 18–25 years was referred to as “late” stage of adolescence or “emergent” adulthood. A number of studies and theories concluded that late adolescence is an important period for individual
development, because that is when individuals create an autonomous identity and renegotiating relationships with parents. The psychological process of separation has been conceptualized as finding the balance between emotional involvement with parents, privacy and detachment from them (Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004).

In Western and North American societies emerging adulthood is sometimes marked by winning some rights from a legal point of view — such as the right to vote or to marry without parental consent. However, at a social level emerging adulthood is equated with either entry to college (Montgomery & Côté, 2009), or with getting their first real job. A characteristic of this period is the limitation of the influence of parents in favour of the peer group, as well as the involvement in a wide range of relationships, activities and social roles (friend, colleague, student, participant in voluntary programmes and internship, spouse, etc.). These new social relationships specific to this period, increasing the vocational and interpersonal aspirations, redefining the types of behaviour expected from the others (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009).

The relation between interpersonal competence of young people and autonomy from their parents has identified the changes in cognitive development (such as how faculty influences the development of moral thinking, the cognitive or emotional capacity with increased autonomy), or in the social context of learning (socio–economic statute, gender, ethnicity, number of students who make up the seminar group, the specificity of the studies, the learning environment, etc.). Interpersonal skills have been link to successful social interactions, such as the initiative of social contact, communicating positive impressions, the ability to express interest and the social approval of new relationships thus established (Buhrmester, 1990; Buhrmester & Furman, 1988; Chow, Ruhl and Buhrmester, 2013). Students who consider that they have harmonious relationships with their parents, their peers, their teachers and their partners have high interpersonal competence and are able to meet the expectations of the different social contexts (outside the faculty) (Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004; Labrecque, Wyndol & Moooney, 2006).
2. Method

Given the results of the previous research which used the ICQ (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg & Reis, 1988; Buhrmester, 1992; Furman & Buhrmester, 2009; Chow, Ruhl & Buhrmester, 2013), I conducted a questionnaire–based investigation through which I wanted to note if there is a connection between the interpersonal competence of the students and the level of interdependence establish with their parents. More specifically, I was interested in the extent to which the subjects prefer to seek the support of their peers, and detach themselves from their parents, in favour of social benefits specific to their age (choosing a career, adapting to the student life, etc.). I was also interested in observing whether there is a difference between those who have high interpersonal competence and those who have low such competence, and in the way in which this triggers autonomous identities, independent from their parents. This approach was an opportunity to also test the ICQ and validate it within the Romanian sample.

Research tool

In order to test the relationship between the level of interdependence and interpersonal competence, I created a questionnaire with 53 questions. The first 40 questions are the items of the ICQ scale, therefore their measure the interpersonal competence of the subjects on the five dimensions: initiation of interpersonal relations, assertiveness, conflict management and emotional support. Next, the questions in the questionnaire measured the subjects’ attitude toward discussions with their parents, the extent to which they consider them important and the degree of interdependence of the relationship with their parents through statements with which the subjects were supposed to express their agreement or disagreement.

The Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire

(ICQ) is an instrument measuring interpersonal skills, which asks the subject to carry out a self–assessment in relation to certain communication situations considered successful in some life contexts such as: initiating social relations; assertiveness; self–disclosure; emotional
support; conflict management. On a scale from 1 to 5, the subjects assess the extent to which they are able, for example, to introduce themselves to a group of people where they intend to integrate; to refuse the request of a close friend when they consider it inappropriate; to admit having made a mistake to their partner in an interaction, etc.

The scale was designed by Duhane Buhrmenster and its collaborators in 1988 and includes 40 items, grouped in five sub–scales which demonstrated internal consistency and fidelity during testing and retesting in previous studies conducted with the ICQ (Buhrmester, 1992; Furman & Buhrmester, 2009; Chow, Ruhl & Buhrmester, 2013). In the initial validation research (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg & Reis, 1988) (N= 453), the Alpha Cronbach coefficient was high for the five sub–scales, proving thus optimal internal consistency, on the five dimensions (that is, initiating social relations $\alpha = .86$; assertiveness, $\alpha = .85$; self–disclosure, $\alpha = .82$; emotional support, $\alpha = .86$; conflict management, $\alpha = .77$).

The participants

A number of 101 students responded to this questionnaire. The students were enrolled in a course of Psychology of Communication at the Faculty of Political Sciences, at a private university in Romania. Of the total number of participants in the study (N=101), 72 of them were female and 27 were male, between the ages of 18 and 24. At the time of the study, about 17% of them had a job, although their work experience was quite limited – approximately one year. As regards their housing situation, approximately 70% (N=70) of the subjects included in the study lived alone, and 30% (N=31) lived with their parents. Most of the participants in the study (N= 82; 81%) paid their tuition from their parents’ income, and only 7% (N= 7) use their own financial resources.
3. Results

*Testing the ICQ for validity and fidelity*

By using all the 40 items proposed by the ICQ authors, I arrived at a level of reliability of .802, measured with the Alpha Cronbach method, comparable to levels recorded in the research using the ICQ (Buhrmester et al, 1988; Buhrmester, 1992; Furman & Buhrmester, 2009; Chow, Ruhl & Buhrmester, 2013). As regards the sub–scales scores, I got a validity high enough for the sub–scale “establishing/initiation of social relations” $\alpha = .776$, sub–scale “assertiveness” $\alpha = .850$, sub–scale “self–disclosure” $\alpha = .714$, sub–scale “support” $\alpha = .811$, sub–scale “conflict management” $\alpha = .802$. ICQ showed internal consistency of the five sub–scales indicated and it showed that all items making up the sub–scales load the values included between $\alpha = .791$ on their factor and $\alpha = .806$. Therefore, in the interpretation of the results, I have taken into account the answers of the subjects for all the 40 items, as they appeared in the initially proposed version of the scale, and I then calculated the interpersonal competence of the subjects.

*Interpersonal competence*

The scores for the ICQ have ranged between a minimum of 40 (very low interpersonal competence) and a maximum of 200 (very high interpersonal competence). In order to distribute the subjects into four groups, I have calculated the percentile. Depending on the scores obtained, four groups of subjects resulted:

1) those with very low interpersonal competence (G1, with scores between 0 and 133);  
2) those with low interpersonal competence (G2, with scores between 134 and 143);  
3) those with average interpersonal competence (G3, with scores between 144 and 145);  
4) and those with high interpersonal competence (G4, with scores between 151 and 200).
Next, the results will be analysed by comparison between these four groups. Of the total number of subjects (N=101), approximately 23.76% (N=24) have no interpersonal skills, if we relate to the minimum and maximum scores obtained by application of the ICQ. Opposite to them, are the subjects with high interpersonal competence, respectively 27.72% (N=28). Students who scored low and average at this scale are approximately equal in number, respectively N=25 (24.76%) and N=24 (23.76%). In terms of their distribution on an axis with a maximum and a minimum interpersonal competence, we could state that the majority are grouped around the low and average scores (N=73), compared to others who showed high interpersonal skills (N=28). With regard to the other components of the scale (Table 2), i.e. self-disclosure, initiation of social contacts, conflict management, support and assertiveness, there is a slight difference between those who lived with their parents and those who lived alone, with respect to the component initiation of social contacts. Thus, those who lived by themselves, on average, got a higher score for the component “initiation of social contacts” (M=34.38; SD=5.26) compared with those who lived with their parents (M=27.54; SD=5.37). However, on the whole, in the case of this research, interpersonal competence does not depend on whether the students lived with their parents or not.

The relationship between interpersonal competence and housing situation

Of the total number of subjects who scored high on the ICQ scale (N=28), only 7 lived with their parents and the rest (N=21) by themselves in their own homes. Of those with low interpersonal competence (N=24), eight lived with their parents and half lived alone (N=12) (Table 3). The results do not show a statistically significant relationship between the housing situation of the students and their interpersonal competence, but, on average, people who live by themselves have a slightly higher interpersonal competence (M=143, 53; SD=14.80) as compared to those who live with their parents (M=140; SD=15.65) (t=92.916; DF=96).
Autonomy versus emotional dependence on the parents

Most of those included in the research (N=43; 42.6%) consider that it is important to discuss student life–related issues with one’s parents, while 28 (27.7%) of them believe that those discussions are not important. Almost half the subjects (N=49; 49%) discuss the faculty experience with their parents, while some of them only do it occasionally (N=10) or don’t do it at all (N=4). The reasons for which they still turn to their parents for the communication of the problems they are facing during their student lives are: for 31 of them the fact that they believe that their parents understand them, and for 23% the fact that they used to share their social situation with their parents during high school. Nearly half of the students covered in the research (46%) said they did not feel obliged to talk to her parents about their student life just because the parents were paying for their tuition. 10% of the subject said that they discussed with their parents about the faculty experience because the parents were paying for their tuition.

Assertiveness versus the importance of communication with the parents

On average, the scores for the assertiveness component were lower for those who considered that it was important to communicate with the parents (M=28.95;SD=7.8) about some aspect of student life, compared to those who did not consider it important (M=13; SD=2.9). However, assertiveness was not correlated with the fact that students lived or did not live with their parents (Table 7), but it was correlated with the importance given to the discussions with them (t = -1.74; P = 0.07011 < 0.05). From here we can infer that those who no longer considers discussions with their parents important at this age have a higher ability to say no and to refuse the requests of others, when they find them exaggerated or impossible to fulfil.

“Old” habits and the initiation of interpersonal contacts

The results showed that students who used to talk to their parents about their high school life have lower skills (M=28.46; SD=7.86) to initiate social contacts during faculty, as compared to those who were not interested in sharing these aspects with their parents (M=31.11;
Student’s interpersonal competence during the first university semester

SD=0.89). On average people with a job scored higher on the sub-scale initiating social contacts. As shown in the table, there is a significant statistical relationship between having a job and the ability to initiate relationships (F=4.54; P=0.036 < p= 0.05).

4. Discussion and conclusions

How do their communication skills change with the increased desire for autonomy? The relationship students–parents change with the start of their life at the university. As indicated above, the subjects included in the research maintained a balance between the desire for independence (autonomy) and involvement in the relationship with their parents. On the one hand, they were at the age at which they still considered that communication with parents about student life was important (academic situation, adapting to faculty). The students still maintained close connections with their parents, even if they were no longer living with them, simply because they had a relationship in this respect reinforced during high school — when they used to talk about “grades and teachers” — and because it helped them practice “small–scale” communication skills which they must prove outside the primary group.

Contrary to our assumptions, the desire of students to have an autonomous identity didn’t radically change the importance that they attached to communication with their parents. Results revealed that the more importance the subjects attributed to discussions/communication with the parents, the higher their interpersonal competence is. As regards the scores obtained for the ICQ scale, on the whole, we could say that most of the subjects included in the research are grouped around low and average scores (N= 73). We could explain these results by the fact that most of the subjects were in the process of redefining the relationships with their primary group and with the peer groups, which made the self–assessment process more difficult. In previous researches (Rebecca Jacoby R. Rubin, Elizabeth E. Graham and James T. Mignerey, 1990; Schwartz, Jonathan and Buboltz, Walter, 2004; Lauresen Brett, Furman Wyndol and Moooney, Keren, 2006), communication “inabilities” were attributed to the lack of interpersonal skill development courses from the school.
The results indicated that a higher degree of autonomy from the parents helped students to improve their social contacts and increased their assertiveness, meaning that those who do not consider communication with their parents important seem to be adapt better to situations in which they should say “no”, and refuse requests made by friends or by people from their social environment which they find exaggerated or impossible to fulfil.

In perspective, a study on this topic could include a higher diversity in terms of socio-demographic characteristics of subjects or could monitor the communication skills of the same subjects longitudinally, during years of study at the University, thus overcoming part of the limits of the present research.

5. Annex

Table 1. Interpersonal competence in relation to the housing situation of the students (N=101).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>with parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>140.7</td>
<td>14.80</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>143.1</td>
<td>15.65</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Scores for the components of the scale in relation to the housing situation (N=101).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing situation</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiation of social contacts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27.57</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30.38</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assetiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29.75</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>29.65</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-disclosure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23.89</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>24.41</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34.78</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>34.30</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24.71</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>24.34</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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Higher education and lifelong learning

A research on “non traditional” students at university

ANDREA GALIMBERTI

Abstract

According to european recommendations and european educational policies, universities should be able to promote and support lifelong learning. On the other hand universities are in many cases structured around an idea of a “typical” student. Adult students who decided to re-enter higher education after (or during) a work period and students with unusual learning careers are often “fish out of water” with experiences, personal projects, identity needs that appear not to fit the usual institutional expectations. In line with international literature, there is some evidence that these students have a higher risk of non–completion due to different kinds of difficulties related to their “a–typicality”. The challenge is to integrate identities that are not only different but experienced as opposite (student vs. worker, or adult, or parent...); the social feedback (generally negative) to the learning choice; the way they dealt with previous experiences in education.

This contribution presents my Ph.D research based on auto/biographical work with “non traditional students” in Bicocca University. The workshops involved about 50 participants and were based on estethical, metaphorical and reflexive processes.

The narrative materials produced during the workshops were analyzed through a plurality of “sensitising concepts” able to enlighten in different ways the experience of lifelong learning in a university context. In students’ stories the relation with knowledge go beyond a mere instrumental view: structural factors, social ties, identity issues, imagination and desire are intertwined in complex ways.

The final step of the research was a co-operative inquiry with a team of researcher/students that previously experienced the biographical workshops. The co–operative inquiry interrogated the learning experiences of the participants and resulted in a project addressed to the institution. This project is structured around the concept of “learning identity” connected with the constraints and the opportunities of the university environment.

Keywords: lifelong learning, university, non-traditional students, biographical methods, transformative learning
1. Lifelong/lifewide learning and university: my research questions.

The challenges of *lifelong* and *lifewide* learning are posed to the whole education system and particularly to university. Over time the academic world has changed its relation with society through the transformation of its functions or missions (Scott, 2006). Nowadays the university is facing more and more the difficulty of committing itself only to the “formal” knowledge, given the tendency towards the informal and non–formal dimensions of learning that comes from politics and the market. There are growing demands to develop in the students “transversal skills” and life skills, besides the more common specialized skills and knowledge related to the academic disciplines.

Moreover after the transformation from élite niches to “mass higher education” institutions (Trow, 1999), universities are now facing a new challenge: the extension of the their population in a lifelong direction. This step entails a particular attention for “mature aged” students, a category that still remains outside from the “academic tribes and territories” (Becker, 1989).

The question of my research project concerns those students enrolling at university after a “non–traditional” path, or with personal backgrounds that do not consider the academic path as a “natural outcome”.

In the specific literature I found a wide range of research studies concerning the so–called “non–traditional students”, defined as « under–represented students in higher education and whose participation is constrained by structural factors » (RAHNLE, 2011). This category is so wide that it includes, for example, students whose families of origin did not have any academic experience, students coming from low–income families, adult students who work and students with disabilities.

These students are considered at risk in terms of access, retention, active participation, academic success, and social integration.

I focused in particular on the students whose family had not been to university before (first generation entrants) and on adult students that start their educational path during or after a working period. In addition to the greater difficulties they face in overcoming the barriers to the access to higher education, these students also have
to take on one more challenge: that of composing different worlds and finding a synthesis that is satisfactory for their changing identity. They have to connect their social networks with new links originated by their inclusion in the academic world and they have to compose their social roles (e.g., the role of parent or worker) with the role of student. In these cases a situation of “floating” may occur. Floating is “a deep feeling of being paralyzed by events or experiences that a person cannot cope psychologically, emotionally and socially” (Bron, 2010); a difficult situation that, nevertheless, when recognised through self-reflection, could trigger a process of learning. I was interested in students’ coping strategies involved in the integration of these aspects and in their learning strategies.

Different research studies in the field of adult education and of the sociology of education show how adult students develop forms of multilevel identity (Kasworm, 2010) inside universities. This identity is on the one hand based on their individual biographies, motivations, present roles in life and expectations, and on the other hand co-constructed in relation to the ethos and actions of university (also depending on the type of university they enroll or the subject of study) but also in relation to the influence of the institution perceived on their own personal world:

This interest in integration led us in turn to explore what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional adult students. Such an identity is itself part of the integration process which enables people to become effective learners and which promotes or inhibits completion of HE. (Field, Merril & West, 2011: 2).

2. Research method

Many of the research studies on “non traditional students” use the biographical or autobiographical methods thanks to their attitude to grasp the point of view of the participants. Usually the experiences of the students are collected through one or more narrative interviews.

I considered useful and interesting to choose the autobiographical methods, exactly because of their potentiality to give voice to the insiders and to highlight a whole world of meanings.
Biographical methods revealed useful to interrogate the research objects, in fact:

— biographies may cast a light on “resilience factors”, by focusing the experience of those students who are non–traditional, and nonetheless do not abandon; they could tell what they experienced and how they managed to take the challenge of being “invisible” for the university;
— biographic narration is a way to offer space for students to become more active; students at risk can better understand their experience by telling it, becoming reflexive and active in relation to it, finding new strategies for adaptation or for claiming space. And maybe they can avoid drop out, but we must also say that drop out is not necessarily a “problem” in the biographic view (Quinn et al., 2005).

My epistemological background is based on systemic thinking and constructivism. From these perspectives the auto/biographical work follows some general premises:

— “self–construction” as a systemic, conversational, and compositional process;
— multiple levels beyond the individual level of construction (the “agent”): relationships and contexts, where individual actions and meanings can be seen as effects of interactions;
— stories and meanings are not only subjective. They are developed in a context with its own possibilities and constraints. Different contexts create different narrations.

The term auto/biography, with the slash, seems to fit these ideas. It was coined to draw attention to the complex interrelations of the construction of one’s own life and that of another person (Merrill & West, 2009).

I wanted to emphasize the pedagogical, relational and participatory dimension of the narrative methods, and therefore I chose the form of the autobiographical workshop. With this kind of methodology the research project had a double value: while the workshop represented a chance for reflection and potential learning for the participants (and
for the conductors, who are themselves non–traditional students), its outcome – in terms of stories – represented a corpus of data that is suitable for analysis and interpretations.

3. The research design: auto/biographical workshops and co–operative inquiry

I articulated the research on two different contexts which produced different kind of processes and results: the auto/biographical workshops and a co–operative inquiry.

A. Auto/biographical workshops: A Grundtvig LLP project

I structured the autobiographical work (Dominicè, 2000; West et al., 2007) with “non–traditional students” within the Grundtvig LLP project “European Biographies – Biographical approaches in Adult Education” which started in July 2009 and ended in July 2011.

The general aim of the project was “to enrich and improve methods of biographical work with adults, and to make biographical approaches better known in European adult education institutions, as a powerful integrative and experience–based pedagogical tools for reaching and integrating socially marginalized persons into society” (quoted from the brochure). Each partner institution (from Austria, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Turkey) realized pilot projects introducing new biographical approaches into their work. The results were gathered in a common handbook and cd in English.

As a partner of the project, under the direction of prof. Laura Formenti, the Bicocca University team chose to address non traditional students, who are defined in literature as under–represented, and whose participation in higher education (HE) is constrained by structural factors.

The basic idea was to gather learning stories from students who appear not to fit the usual institutional expectations, for example adult

1. The partner institutions were: Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca; Ie– Berlin Institute for Lifelong Learning in Europe; Ibika Institute for Biographical and Cultural Research (Goettingen, Germany); University of Innsbruck; eFKa Women’s Foundation (Poland); Kusadasi Public Education Center (Turkey).
students who decided to re-enter higher education after (or during) a work period, or students who had changed faculties.

Aware of the danger of reducing people to the status of deficit in relation to the university, the attention was focused on resources, coping strategies, retention. Retention is not well defined and focused in current studies (Longden, 2002); recent work in the UK (Yorke & Longden, 2008) appears to favour a greater emphasis on student “success” which is all together a wider and more positive focus.

The stories were gathered through narrative workshops articulated in three meetings (three hours each), in small groups. As a matter of fact the stories were not simply “gathered” but each participant was in continuous dialogue with other participants and narrative proposals.

Auto/biographical workshops were designed and managed by a team of “researchers/students”, who were invited to experiment auto/biographical methods through personal exploration, to reflect on their implications, specifically in terms of ethics.

The workshops, articulated in three meetings, three hours each promoted writing and sharing, in small groups, personal narrations that were meant to:

— give voice to individual learning stories within the university;
— highlight differences and connections between the participants’ experiences;
— develop meaning and understanding through dialogue;
— foster reflexive processes, and possibly deliberate actions.

The framework used to structure the different workshops was represented by the spiral of knowledge proposed by Formenti (Formenti 2009) that link together different dimensions of experience like aesthetic representation, reflection and action.

The workshop activities were structured in order to allow an exploration of students’ experiences from new perspectives. The dimension of “new” was gained through proposals based on cognitive displacement (Munari & Fabbri 2005), aesthetical experiences and group debates.

Overall 50 students participated in the workshops. Their texts were shared and, with the author’s consent, published online in a website (https://sites.google.com/site/storiedellabicocca), specifically
created to make them visible to other students and members of the institution.

B. Co–operative inquiry. A reflexive stance on the whole research process

I decided to engage some participants in order to reflect together upon the experience at university, its representations, the theories developed by the participants and the consequences on education, generating a shared and participatory hermeneutic circle. I based this phase on the co–operative inquiry paradigm:

Co–operative inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it (Heron, 1996: 1).

The co–operative inquiry is based on key features (Heron & Reason, 1997, 2008):

— research is conducted with people rather than on people. All the subjects are fully involved as co–researchers in all research decisions both on content (what we research) and method (the ways we use to explore it);
— there is intentional interplay between reflection and making sense on the one hand, and experience and action on the other;
— the co–researchers engage themselves in the actions they have agreed and observe and record the process and outcomes of their own and each other’s action and experience;
— the full range of human capacities and sensibilities is available as an instrument of inquiry.

The group of co–researchers decided to explore learning identity and university environment (with its possibilities and constraints) drawing on personal life experience as well as on the experience developed through their participation to the project “Storie della Bicocca”.

In each meeting a topic was decided and interrogated through questions able to trigger self–reflexive writings.

The following are some of the questions that drove the exploration.

— When had I the feeling that university was eager to meet me?
— When did I feel that university was a place useful for me?
— When did the university allow me to dream?
— When did I transform the university from an “unplace” to my own place (did this happened at all)? How and what did I feel/see (or I didn’t see/feel) before and after this transformation?
— When did I feel recognized as an adult, with my own and proper learning interests?

The co–operative inquiry produced as a result a new project based on participant’s experiences and reflections. The project aims to create workshops where students may explore and reflect upon their learning project, developing connections between their life and university experience. The project could become part of the university strategies to foster retention:

Pedagogic strategies that draw on relevant experiences, and relate them to academic knowledge, are likely to enhance integration and promote completion (Field, Merrill & West 2011: 9).

4. Analysis and main themes

What topics the students’ stories presented? Self descriptions, descriptions of experiences at university and of learning processes were in the foreground. I could identify the following common themes.

A. Structure and agency

Structure and agency are mutual influencing factors. Individual agency is shaped by the constraints of structural factors (family culture, class, gender etc), but, at the same time, the agent experiences these constraints in a subjective way, developing meanings and ways to act them out in different ways.

The stories stressed both the importance of students’ background (cultural economic, social capital) as well as how the possibility to exploit the human and symbolic capital of the university in an active way.
B. Social capital

Social capital is a multidisciplinary concept that represents all the benefits coming from social connections. It is intertwined with lifelong learning: in general, social connections help to generate trust between people and thereby foster the exchange of information and ideas. There is, in general, a mutual beneficial relationship between these two concepts, but it is not a simple one, depending, in fact, on a range of other elements (Field, 2008). For example, when the network producing social capital is based on very close and strong links (bonding social capital), the space for reflexive learning seems to decrease.

Students stories show how « the interplay between networks and learning is not simply part of the process by which skills and techniques are shared, and information is passed around. It is also an active part of the process of making sense of the world, by talking about feelings in complex and apparently contradictory ways » (Field, 2005: 128). Universities can facilitate the formation of new networks promoting learning both “real” and “imagined”, stimulating the sensemaking processes.

Universities can facilitate the production of “imagined social capital” by opening up the strange and the unfamiliar to be reframed and reused by students in new symbolic networks. (...) Symbolic networks may be the networks of those we know who are given a symbolic function, imagined networks may be with those we don’t know personally, or who may not even exist, but with whom we can imagine desired connections. These networks provide resources of power and resistance and appear to be more useful for survival than formalized support networks are (Quinn 2010: 15–23).

C. Self and mutual recognition

Recognition become a fundamental issue when we start to consider skills and learning as relational processes. Learning identities in transformation implies the dimension of self and mutual recognition. The students’ stories stress the importance of university as a “public space of appearance” (Arendt, 1958). The necessity of being recognized by others (students, professors, family, friends) in the new learning identity of “university student” produces a series of different effects.
In some cases a “struggle for recognition” (Honneth, 1995) is taking place, in other cases students write about gratitude for the special gift coming from recognition. At the same time the possibility of being recognized as competent learner is linked to one’s own ability to “create” this identity. The stories present these two sides of the same coin.

5. Which effects in terms of learning?

A pedagogical orientation, based on “learning from experience”, informed all the processes involved in the research. However learning was not conceived as the main aim but as a sort of “side-effect”, as a possibility emerging from the workshops constraints.

All the autobiographical activities were meant to trigger sensemaking processes:

Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world (Weick et al. 2005: 409).

The idea of learning biography (Dominicè 2000) was a frame of reference: starting from the participants’ experiences the workshops promoted reflective thinking and transversal competences (learning to learn) through the exploration, manipulation and comparison of learning stories.

The different dimensions (aesthetic, metaphoric, cognitive emotional) and the cognitive displacement (Munari & Fabbri) involved in the workshop activities created a space for narration ut also for reflections and even transformation. I refer to “transformation” following the meaning pointed out by Mezirow:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action based on the resulting insight (Mezirow 2000, p. 8).
Transformative learning is always to some extent an epistemological change rather than merely a change in behavioural repertoire or an increase in the quantity of knowledge. In this sense it is a dimension always not granted and hard to program; during the narrative workshop came out in form of conversation between students triggered by the narration sharing.

The participants to the co-operative inquiry gained another level of reflection. They constructed their own research questions to interrogate their experiences in new ways and then wrote a new project following the local theory emerging from the inquiry process.

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Rethinking disadvantage

Towards a mainstreamed model of intervention with disadvantaged/underachieving students as a truly inclusive approach

DAVID MARTIN

Abstract

This paper argues that in order to maximise outcomes in terms of improving academic achievement for tertiary students, it is necessary to rethink our conceptualisation of disadvantage. It suggests, from a review of literature, that some students deemed to be disadvantaged based on standard categorisation are becoming distinctly advantaged through the supports they receive, leading to inequality of opportunity in some contexts for mainstream students. It is acknowledged, that disadvantaged categories require interventions, however, it is also argued that these categories are not necessarily homogenous groups. Disadvantage may thus be displaced from established groups to mainstream students for whom similar provision may not be currently made. This paper, therefore, advocates mainstreaming models of intervention such as the INSTALL (INnovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn) project as a means to helping all students reach their potential.

Key words: disadvantage, inclusion, underachievement, categories, first year experience.

1. Introduction

The INSTALL project which is funded by the European Commission promotes « the acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn at university level by developing and implementing the innovative methodology Narrative Mediation Path » (INSTALL, 2013). Similar to other student intervention programmes, the INSTALL project selects target student groups for participation in the programme. There are two criteria used for student selection for participation; low academic performance and personal factors that may negatively impact
on academic achievement. This selection process necessitates the identification of groups of students that may be in need of intervention. The categorisation of groups in need of intervention is useful for this process, but it may not take account of individual needs. These categories are well established within tertiary institutions and include students with disabilities, mature students and students of low socio economic status. Categories can vary across international boundaries; for example, categories exist for disadvantaged indigenous groups in Australia.

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, in his work *The Order of Things* presents categorisation (a human invention) as problematic in that we are always trying to reclassify, rearrange and redefine them (Foucault, 1974). Whilst the INSTALL project does intervene in terms of under–achieving students, the aim of this paper is to propose a widening of participation on the programme through an examination of categories. This would allow participation of not only those students deemed to be at risk of underachieving by virtue of their membership of a particular category, but those also outside these categories deemed for other reasons of being at risk of not reaching their potential, underachieving and/or dropping out. The ideas for this paper arose from the author’s own discovery of the potential benefits of participation in the INSTALL programme to mainstream students who would not currently fall under pre–established categories for disadvantage.

2. Methodology

The conclusions arrived at in this paper are the result of a review of literature that focused on predominant themes of disadvantage and inclusion. Variations in the conceptualisation of disadvantage and inclusion can result in differing criteria being used to determine who is disadvantaged. The use of disadvantage categories for example may promote the collective needs of a group but overlook the challenges of the individuals within the group. Two subthemes were investigated in an attempt to identify sub–surface disadvantages that exist for mainstream students who do not belong to any of the established categories. These subthemes were *transition theory* and *self–confidence*.
and the investigation sought to examine what disadvantages exist within the mainstream student population. A conceptual framework is presented for the hypothesis that disadvantage within this context can be displaced from one group of students to another. If a student within a category is advantaged through institutional intervention then the mainstream student may potentially be disadvantaged as a result in given circumstances.

3. Review of Literature

Disadvantage and transition through college

Transition theory as developed by Schlossberg is used to understand college students in transition in three main phases: “moving in”, “moving through” and “moving out” (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson 2006, p. 116). Primarily recognised as an adult development theory, Schlossberg’s transition theory “is also relevant to traditionally-aged college students” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010, p. 213). The theory can apply to students traditional and non-traditional, regardless of age, who can often feel marginal and that they do not matter (Schlossberg, 1989). The dynamics in terms of the student perceptions and characteristics will influence the difficulty or ease of the transition. For example, a student transitioning from second level to university can feel that going to university is what is expected of them. For other first generation students this transition “involves breaking away from and redefining their family history” (Rendón, 1998, p. 3). The focus of this investigation is on the “moving through” phase. Higher education internationally has been progressive in identifying groups of students who are deemed to be disadvantaged. However, attempting to identify the attributes that constitute disadvantage can be complex. These attributes are not consistent across institutions. Confining attributes to poverty and socio-economic status, for example, gives an “under-nuanced perspective” (Smit, 2012, p. 378). Smit also cautions against the labelling of students as disadvantaged as it may not take account of the students’ willingness to learn. This willingness to learn could be considered a significant asset within the assets/liabilities envelope a student may possess. Students do not
encounter disadvantage at equal levels (Coram, 2007). The level of disadvantage is highly dependent on the extent of liabilities and assets possessed as a student transitions to university. The institutional notion of equality and inclusion may not correspond with the academic experience of the student. Thus, inequality may be reproduced within the university. This may be occurring despite the now well established aspirations of educational institutions to create a level playing field for all students. This is paradoxical when one considers that «education is often held up as a mechanism able to challenge and redress inequalities in society» (Outhred, 2012, p. 881). It would be naive and indeed misleading to view disadvantage in simplistic terms. Students who come to university will require coping strategies both in the academic and social contexts.

In a narrative analysis of an interview of a socio–culturally disadvantaged student in South Africa, Marshall and Case (2010, p. 502) concluded that because of the student’s disadvantaged background, he had developed coping strategies that served him well in university. They do concede, however, that not all disadvantaged students manage to acquire these coping strategies. In a review of higher education equity research in Australia for 2000–2005, Ferrier (2006, p. 2) asserted that

the identification of equity categories... has a number of shortcomings. It tends to provide a simplified picture of the extent and nature of “disadvantage”, it masks diversity within groups and can set de–facto boundaries around equity programs and activities.

The Council of Australian Governments is targeting disadvantaged groups which it asserts are under–represented within third level education. Their determination of disadvantage is indigenous groups who are of low socio economic status (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Thus these incoming university students, it could be argued, belong to multiple categories of disadvantage.

Account should also be taken of diversity within categories. As there can be variations of diversity within a particular category, it «should be replaced by more relevant categories of disadvantage» (Watson & Pope, 2000, p. 6). Members of equity groups can experience differing levels of disadvantage. Julie Willems, in examining
indicators of potential disadvantage in higher education, concludes that « there are gradients of disadvantage » within equity groups and « that educational disadvantage can occur in any group of learners–equity group or not » (Willems, 2010, p. 618). It should be noted that not all students may wish to identify with, or become a member of, their “allocated” equity group.

Some students may wish to transcend the labels they may acquire as equity category members and position themselves differently in the university environment (Devos, 2012, p. 962).

A UK study examining whether mature university students were disadvantaged in terms of employability found that they are far more likely to find full time paid work. This is paradoxical in view of their associated negative narrative which is of disadvantage relative to “traditional–age graduates” (Woodfield, 2011, p. 499). There is, however, a belief that there is a relationship between university education and increased remuneration (O’Brien & O’Fathaigh, 2007). This does suggest that mature students, who are often categorised as disadvantaged within third level education, may in fact be advantaged in some contexts.

The inclusion/exclusion dilemma

The term inclusion is often regarded as a philosophical ideology. However, a deeper analysis would suggest it “implies that someone has been excluded” (Ballard, 2013, p. 762). There have been many interpretations of inclusion and it is a concept that has been repeatedly “problematised” by researchers (Pather, 2007, p. 627). In an Australian study of inclusion in higher education, Armstrong & Cairnduff (2012, p. 926) conclude that there should be a « serious engagement with the issue of inclusion, rather than a superficial rhetorical approach ». Others provide a more universal definition:

Inclusion is a belief, philosophy, practice and educational imperative that argues that all... students have a sense of place, position and power in an educational setting (Bourke & Mentis, 2013, p. 864).
Thus, within this context, it is imperative that the institution take account of student diversity. In Ireland, tertiary education institutions differ from second level institutions in their ability to include. Drudy & Kinsella (2009, p. 660) point to the challenges faced in second level schools « when the system is segregated by sex, religious affiliation and social status ». Tertiary education in Ireland does not share the same challenges. In a paper looking at the redefinition of the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion within the context of special needs education Corbett argues « that equality and inclusion without consideration of differences is meaningless » (Corbett, 1997, p.58). There is a danger of viewing inclusion in education in over simplistic terms. Inclusion and achievement within education is about empowerment of the individual to make informed decisions and self-determination. There is a danger that a sphere of polarities may exist within education in terms of who is included and who is not. Setting out criteria for inclusion which exclude may create territorial boundaries which may prove counterproductive.

Disadvantages within the mainstream “group”

As students transition to university they may encounter an issue with self confidence. Schlossberg (1989, p. 5) argues that “people in transition often feel marginal”. She points to how we can feel marginal in one place and central in another. There is the potential for feeling marginalised every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition. Bewick, Koutopoulos, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham (2010, p. 633), in a study of psychological well-being of undergraduate university students, found that students encounter heightened stress on entering university. The stress is particularly high during semester one with a decrease in semester two. What is worthy of note is that this study found that stress levels did not fall at any stage during the university experience to pre-enrolment levels. This study points to the need for supports to help students to negotiate this transition. In a UK qualitative study of Higher Education, it was noted that some mature students entering college felt that « they lacked self– confidence on the one hand but still had a desire to prove that they too could be successful » (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004, p. 308). Building student confidence has been identified as an important factor in increasing
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student motivation (Redmond, Quin, Devitt, & Archbold, 2011). Thus, it is vital that the student has the belief that he/she has the ability to succeed. Unless students in higher education have the confidence to persevere they are likely to disengage from their academic pursuits (Pulford & Sohal, 2006, p. 1410). University life itself can play a role in building self confidence as students progress (Sar, Avcu & Isiklar, 2010). There is evidence also that levels of confidence will directly impact on student performance.

In a study of non-completion in Institutes of Technology in Ireland, it was felt that many students lack self confidence even though it was felt that they were « more than academically able for their course, many seemed to have little confidence in their own ability » (Eivers, Flanagan & Morgan, 2002, p. 78). There is also a relationship between self-confidence and cognitive ability (Kleitman & Stankov, 2007). The implication is that the degree of self-confidence will influence the degree of academic performance based on cognitive ability. Evidence suggests that confidence is a good predictor in terms of predicting academic achievement in some disciplines such as Mathematics and English (Stankov, Lee, Luo & Hogan, 2012, p. 756). It would appear that for students to achieve academically, they require the confidence in their own ability to do so. Georg (2009, p. 78) contends that « the expectation of success is influenced by the student’s academic self-concept ». In the shift to self-regulated learning Taylor (1986, p. 59) asserts that students go through a “disorientation” phase which occurs when experience does not conform to expectations. As a result, students experience confusion, anxiety, tension and loss of confidence. The mainstreaming of student supports, while not resolving these issues, could lead to the inclusion of these vulnerable students.

In an outline of a study (not yet published) that examines the first year university experience, Cusack, Gilmartin, Roper, Carr & Freeney (2013, n.p.) refer to « the importance of planning the transition to third level education ». Proctor, Prevatt, Adams, & Reaser (2006) noted that there is a strong correlation between study skills and academic success. These generic skills include note taking strategies, time management etc. Within this context applicants to university who were high achievers at second level may not possess the skills necessary to succeed in university. Balduf (2009, p. 275)
asserts that colleges should provide “pre-emptive strategies for all incoming freshmen, including motivational and time management strategies”.

According to the report of the Irish strategy group on the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, there is a lack of preparedness input in second level schools for higher education. This results in a deficit of critical thinking skills and the ability to adjust to self-regulated learning in the first year of higher education. Pending reform of the second level curriculum, it suggests that assistive strategies be put in place for first year students to assist with the transition from second level to third level (Hunt, 2011, pp. 1–130). Within the context of self regulated learning an autonomous student is one who possesses the “skills” and “knowledge” required to pursue his/her studies underpinned by the self-confidence to apply these traits (Hussey & Smith, 2010, p. 157). Students who have never had a difficulty in second level, can suddenly find that having enrolled in university, are confronted with different and more difficult challenges. These students, as a result, experience a significant shift from being dependent to adopting a role of autonomy. Some students may find their attempt to adopt this autonomous role challenging. The ability to do this will depend on the adaptive capacity of the student. This can affect their confidence and their perception in terms of their ability to progress within their chosen area of study (Quinn et al, 2005, p. 21). This experience can lead to disengagement with the learning process resulting in chronic underachievement and ultimately dropping out. It could be argued that students who are underachieving for the reasons outlined above, could themselves, become a disadvantaged group. Students having enrolled in university may not have the confidence to engage with the assistive agencies when necessary (Redmond, Quin, Devitt & Archbold, 2011, p. 7). If students do not engage with the learning process, they are less likely to engage with assistive agencies.

4. Discussion. The displacement of disadvantage hypothesis

Based on findings from this review of literature, it would appear that if interventions are in place for selected groups of students and not
others then it may be possible that disadvantage is being “displaced” from one group to another. The author proposes this as a new concept of “disadvantage displacement” as outlined in Fig.1 below.

**Figure 1.** Simplified diagram of possible group disadvantage pre intervention (Source: Author).

Smith (2005, p. 2) asserts that “Examinations are arbitrary allocators of success”. By implication then, examinations and assessment processes are the arbitrary discriminators in terms of who achieves and who does not. Figure 1 shows how both equity groups and the mainstream group are positioned within the university in terms of disadvantage.

**Figure 2.** Simplified diagram of possible group disadvantage post intervention (Source: Author).

Based on the issues raised above in terms of lack of confidence and lack of preparedness, it is suggested that the mainstream group could be positioned a little differently here to include disadvantage. This is premised on the notion that the university presents as a level playing field in terms of equality of opportunity. Based on the assumption that all university students are examined and assessed on the same level, it may be possible that those considered disadvantaged could become advantaged post intervention. Mainstream students who may not be able to avail of similar interventions may become displaced in terms of their rankings within the examination and assessment results. It is argued here that these students consequently may become disadvantaged. This disadvantage displacement is demonstrated in
Figure 2. A mainstreaming of student supports/interventions that have thus far been the reserve of equity groups of students would go some way to addressing this apparent disadvantage displacement, which I suggest may be currently occurring.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to rethink disadvantage and the use of categories in identifying groups within university who are deemed to be disadvantaged. The use of categories has been critiqued in terms of inclusion, and more importantly, exclusion. It would appear that in some contexts, the use of categories to identify students in need of interventions may in fact act as a means to exclusion. Disadvantages that exist for mainstream students who do not belong to, or identify with, a category for disadvantage, have been identified. It is argued that if one group of students can avail of supports/interventions because they are broadly labelled as disadvantaged, students who are not considered disadvantaged may unwittingly become disadvantaged through their exclusion from the same supports and interventions. A conceptual framework has been put forward as a means of understanding and investigating displacement of disadvantage. It is proposed, therefore, that consideration be given to the mainstreaming of the INSTALL project and other models of intervention to offer all students a greater opportunity to reach their full potential. It is intended to utilise this conceptual framework to advance this research further with the inclusion of empirical research.

References


RENÓN L.I., (1998), *Helping nontraditional students be successful in college*, “About
Rethinking disadvantage


PART VI

FOSTERING KEY COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
To fail or not to fail?
Identifying students at risk by predicting academic success

Fonteyne Lot, De Fruyt Filip, Duyck Wouter

Abstract

Student attrition problems are manifest worldwide. Therefore, the identification of students at risk of failure is of major importance. In the current study several cognitive and non–cognitive factors are evaluated in terms of predictive power for failure in the first year of university. Next, a model is proposed that can predict who passes and thus identifies students at risk for academic failure. The sample consists of 461 newly enrolled students in psychology and educational sciences programs. Educational background variables were retrieved from the university database and several cognitive (mathematics skills, reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge) and non–cognitive (motivation and self–efficacy) measures were administered at the start of the academic year. Logistic regression analysis was used to predict first year academic. Four predictors prove relevant for identification of students at risk of not passing the first year: academic self–efficacy, hours of mathematics instruction in secondary education, results on a basic mathematics test and vocabulary knowledge. A model containing these factors identifies 25% of failing students, while maintaining a specificity of 98%. The practical implications of these results are manifold. First, they help identifying at–risk students. Moreover, they are helpful in designing intervention strategies for those at–risk students. Lastly, they serve as a basis for the development of an online tool that helps future students evaluate their cognitive and non–cognitive abilities in order to choose a major that best suits their potential and background.

Key words: Academic success, predict, non–cognitive, cognitive, performance.

1. Introduction

Participation to higher education is on the rise worldwide, but there is considerable room for improvement in graduation rates. Student
attrition problems are manifest worldwide. The OECD (2013) reported that 32% of tertiary students did not graduate from a program at this level. In Flanders, a mere 40% of the university students pass all courses during the first year of studying. This is alarming, even more so since first year performance is one of the best predictors of academic retention (de Koning, Loyens, Rikers, Smeets, & van der Molen, 2012; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999).

High drop-out and low success rates in undergraduates demonstrate the continuing importance of the search for factors influencing academic achievement in post-secondary education. This is especially relevant in regions such as Flanders, where there is an open access policy in higher education. There are no entrance exams and a secondary education degree is sufficient to enroll in almost any higher education program. As a consequence, attrition rates are high and institutions pursue the early identification of students at risk of failure.

Cognitive factors and academic success

Historically, cognitive factors have dominated the study of academic achievement. This is not surprising as the first broad test of cognitive ability was specifically designed to predict achievement in an educational context (Brody, 2000). Since then, studies have consistently shown that cognitive ability predicts academic achievement (Ackerman & Heggestad, 1997; Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 2000; Farsides & Woodfield, 2003; Kuncel & Hezlett, 2010). As a result, it is mainly cognitive ability that is tested for admission decisions in countries with restricted access to higher education. Most of these tests assess a combination of verbal and quantitative skills (Sedlacek, 2011). Hence, we include both verbal and quantitative measures in the current study.

Non-cognitive factors and academic success

Cognitive ability measures remain important, but research shows that correlations between ability measures and academic performance are lower at more advanced levels of education (Boekaerts, 1995). Thus, recently there is a shift in focus towards non-cognitive factors. This research is growing steadily and supports the contribution of these fac-
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Toors to the prediction of academic success (Allen, Robbins, & Sawyer, 2009; Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, & Le, 2006; Shivpuri, Schmitt, Oswald, & Kim, 2006). For example, studies show that academic outcomes can be predicted by personality (Conard, 2005; O’Connor & Paunonen, 2007; Poropat, 2009; Trapmann, Hell, Hirn, & Schuler, 2007), study skills (Credé & Kuncel, 2008) and motivation (Komarraju, Karau, & Schmeck, 2009).

Robbins et al. (2004) conducted a meta–analysis of 109 studies on the relationship between non–cognitive constructs and college outcomes. They found that, on top of the cognitive factors, the strongest predictors for GPA were academic self–efficacy and achievement motivation. This led us to add these factors to the current study.

Self–efficacy was originally defined by Bandura (1997). In short, it is “the belief in the ability to succeed”. Research shows that more specific measures of self–efficacy have better results in the prediction and explanation of related outcomes (Choi, 2005; Pajares, 1996). Hence, we are especially interested in academic self–efficacy. Numerous studies provide evidence for the relation between academic self–efficacy and academic performance (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Elias & Loomis, 2002; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1986).

Motivation was investigated from a self–determination perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which discriminates between two broad forms of motivation that lie on a continuum: autonomous motivation versus controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation is believed to have more desirable outcomes on academic success (Komarraju et al., 2009; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005).

Background variables and academic success

Two background variables are included in the analysis because of their presumed predictive value: educational background and gender.

Large differences in passing rates are found between students with different educational backgrounds. In Flanders, students from secondary education programs with a higher emphasis on mathematics systematically obtain better results in higher education (Declercq & Verboven, 2010; Rombaut, 2006). On that account, we included the variable “hours of mathematics instruction in secondary education” as a proxy for educational background.
Gender is also included in the study since women nowadays outperform males in college entry and completion (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008).

The aim of the current study is twofold. First, we want to evaluate the predictive power of cognitive, non–cognitive and several background factors for failure in the first year of university. Second, we are in search of a model that predicts who passes and thus identifies students at risk for academic failure.

2. Method

Procedure and participants

Students were given paper–and–pencil versions of the basic mathematical skills test in the first statistics class of the academic year. Other tests were administered online in the course of the first semester. Only data of new incoming undergraduate students in the fields of psychology and educational sciences were analyzed. The sample consisted of 461 respondents. The dataset was randomly divided into a training set of approximately 75% of the cases ($N=337$) and a validation set containing the other 25% ($N=124$).

Measures

*Basic mathematic skills* were measured by an instrument designed specifically to identify at–risk students. Since it is our intention to discriminate at the low end of the distribution, basic mathematic operations rather than highly difficult mathematical problems were included. The test consists of 20 items measuring operations such as the rule of three and operations with brackets.

*Reading comprehension* consists of an English text with 5 multiple choice questions. This text was previously validated and used in the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test.

*Vocabulary knowledge* was administered with the LexTALE (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012). Respondents are asked to indicate whether 40
words and 20 non-word are correct Dutch words or not. The resulting score is an indication of general Dutch proficiency.

For Motivation, the “Zelfregulatie Vragenlijst Leren” (Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, & Lens, 2009) was administered. This is a translated and adapted version of the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Respondents indicate on a 5-point Likert scale to what extent they agree with different reasons for studying. Items for controlled (e.g., “because I’m supposed to do so”) and autonomous motivation (e.g., “because I want to learn new things”) are included. The Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) is used to measure the strength of self-determined study motivation. This measure combines scores on all subtypes of motivation and has been used on other occasions (see e.g. Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005).

Academic self-efficacy was measured by an adapted version of the College Academic Self Efficacy Scale by Owen and Froman (Owen & Froman, 1988). Since “social” academic aspects such as “talking to a professor privately to get to know him or her” do not or to a lesser extent apply to undergraduate programs at universities in Flanders, these items were excluded from the original scale. Students use a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their confidence to execute 22 typically academic behaviors such as “writing a high quality term paper”.

Background variables gender and hours of mathematics in secondary education were retrieved from the university database.

The Outcome variable is “passing the first year successfully”. Results were retrieved from university database. Students who dropped out before the end of the academic year were categorized as “failed”.
3. Results

*Descriptive statistics and group differences* are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and differences between failed and passed students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Failed</th>
<th>Passed</th>
<th>Effect size Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics test score</td>
<td>14.07</td>
<td>16.28</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary knowledge</td>
<td>17.69</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic self-efficacy</td>
<td>13.86</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Male=1; Female=2)</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of math instruction in secondary education</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Evaluation of predictive power*

To evaluate the predictive power of explanatory factors for failure in the first academic year, recursive feature elimination was applied to the testing set. This is a logistic regression that follows the backward stepwise procedure and is embedded in a K-fold cross-validation. Cross-validation was performed on 10 subsets and was repeated 3 times. Analysis shows that a model with four variables has the highest average accuracy (.71). The four variables with incremental predictive value are academic self-efficacy, hours of mathematics in secondary education, mathematics test score and vocabulary knowledge. Although hours of mathematics instruction in secondary education significantly correlated with mathematics test score, there was no problem of multicollinearity (VIF < 10) (Field, 2009).

*Cross-validation of predictive model*

Next, we build a regression model consisting of the identified factors and used cross-validation for evaluation. Parameter estimates of the logistic regression model (as seen in Table 2) were forced onto the validation sample.
To fail or not to fail?

Table 2. Parameter estimates and model specifications in the testing set.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B (SE)</th>
<th>95% CI for Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>-15.167* (2.697)</td>
<td>Lower: 1.326, Odds Ratio: 1.573, Upper: 1.866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic self-efficacy</strong></td>
<td>.453* (.087)</td>
<td>Lower: 1.142, Odds Ratio: 1.367, Upper: 1.636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hours of mathematics in Secondary Education</strong></td>
<td>.313* (.092)</td>
<td>Lower: .993, Odds Ratio: 1.256, Upper: 1.589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathematics test score</strong></td>
<td>.190* (.045)</td>
<td>Lower: 1.209, Odds Ratio: 1.209, Upper: 1.322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary knowledge</strong></td>
<td>.228 (.120)</td>
<td>Lower: .993, Odds Ratio: 1.256, Upper: 1.589</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² = .34 (Nagelkerke), Model χ² = 95.18, p < .01

Tabel 3 shows the diagnostic values of the model in the validation sample. Overall classification succes was 69.4% with an Area Under the Curve (AUC) of .73. A cut–score of .50 is standard, but does not serve our aim. We are rather in search of a cut–score that allows us to identify students at risk of failure, without wrongfully classifying passing students. Thus, high specificity is essential. For this purpose the cut–score was set to .13. Diagnostic values of the model at cut–score .13 are also shown in Table 3. At this cut–score we are able to identify 25% of failing students with a specificity of 98%.

Table 3. Diagnostic values of the predictive model in the validation sample at different cut–scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cut–score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sensitivity</strong></td>
<td>82.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specificity</strong></td>
<td>47.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive predictive value</strong></td>
<td>71.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative predictive value</strong></td>
<td>63.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Accuracy</strong></td>
<td>69.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Area Under the Curve</strong></td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Discussion

Hours of mathematics in secondary education, vocabulary knowledge and score on the mathematics test contribute to the prediction of first
year academic success. This is in accordance with well established admission tests such as the SAT and ACT, which measure verbal and math ability and are in essence general intelligence tests (Sedlacek, 2010). Our results show that even basic skills tests can tackle the cognitive ability needed in higher education.

Academic self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of first year academic success. This is in line with previous research and supports the importance of non-cognitive variables for the prediction of academic success. Reading comprehension and motivation as measured from a self-determination perspective did not have incremental explanatory power. Neither did gender.

The practical implications of these results are manifold. First, identification of 25% of the students who do not pass the first year makes it possible to proactively stimulate them to subscribe for remedial courses. Moreover, intervention strategies can be designed in accordance with these results. For example, sessions can be organized in which basic mathematic skills are trained. Also, study skills sessions can augment academic self-efficacy because training students to develop successful learning strategies may increase their confidence in their abilities (Komarraju et al., 2009).

Lastly, the results serve as a basis for the development of an online tool that helps future students evaluate their cognitive and non-cognitive abilities in order to choose a major that best suits their potential and background. This way, detection takes place even before enrollment, which spares potential students the motivational and financial costs of not passing.

There are several limitations to our study. First, we operationalized the outcome variable as a dichotomous pass-fail while the reality is more complex. Since the Bologna declaration, flexibility in trajectories has increased enormously. Therefore, a more longitudinal approach in which graduation serves as outcome variable is more in order. Nevertheless, first year academic performances has been documented as a powerful predictor of overall academic achievement (de Koning et al., 2012) and retention (Murtaugh et al., 1999). Next, our study was limited to majors in psychology and educational sciences. It is yet to be established whether these results can be generalized to other fields of study. Lastly, other factors have been shown to contribute to the prediction of academic achievement, such as study skills (Credé &
Kuncel, 2008) and test anxiety (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Personality has also been thoroughly studied in relation to academic achievement. Especially the Big Five factor conscientiousness shows incremental validity for predicting academic success (Conard, 2005; Noftle & Robins, 2007; Poropat, 2009; Trapmann et al., 2007).

The addition of these factors might increase specificity of the model.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that we can identify students at risk of failure in the first academic year with relatively few predictors. At the start of the academic year, we can identify 25% of the failing students with a specificity of 98%.

References


Fonteyne Lot, De Fruyt Filip, Duyck Wouter


Qualitative and quantitative evaluation of an English language peer tutoring program for low achieving students

Gökçen Aydın, Oya Yerin Güneri

Abstract

The purpose of the current qualitative study was to present the evaluation of a peer tutoring program at METU which aimed at giving academic support to the low achieving English language preparatory school students (tutees) with the help of junior students (tutors) in the Department of Foreign Language Education (FLE). The sample of the study consists of 15 tutors and 15 tutees. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Moreover, an evaluation form is filled out by tutors and tutees to have triangulation. To analyze quantitative data descriptive statistics were used and for the qualitative data, inductive coding was conducted on focused group interviews.

Key words: peer tutoring, academic support, low achieving students

1. Introduction

In college education, different interventions are designed for low achieving students because student success is the most desired outcome of college. With the changed perspective about learning, students take an active part in and outside the classroom activities. Growing number of empirical studies also emphasize that student interaction like studying cooperatively or with peers to increase success (Howard & Smith–Goodwin, 2010; Hsiung, 2012). In the literature, peer tutoring is defined as the process in which one student helps the other student/s learn a concept or practice a skill (Thomas, 1993). Peer tutoring has been applied in many areas such as college learning, medicine, physical education and language (Power et al., 2011). Regardless of the age, duration or the place of study, peer tutoring is
found to deepen academic achievement. Students are also found to favor studying with tutors (Howard & Smith–Goodwin, 2010).

Peer tutoring is a valuable process because studying with peers gives many opportunities to members as they are actively in the process (Comfort, 2011). When a student tutors the other one, both groups benefit from the experience. Research shows that tutoring process leads to increase in academic skills, interpersonal, social and team skills, and classroom behaviors of tutees. In addition, it provides chance of receiving immediate feedback and leads to academic achievement (Fuchs et al., 1995; Hsiung, 2012) of tutees. Furthermore, the literature points that peer tutoring is a process in which students can enhance their skills in a number of different areas like reading, writing, physical education, etc. (Dufrene et al., 2010). Similarly, a meta–analysis based on academic benefits of peer tutoring reveals that students participating in peer tutoring interventions achieve more than non–participating students (Bowman–Perrott et al., 2013).

On the other hand, tutoring is beneficial for tutors because the process increase their self–esteem, positive attitude towards subject matter and college, experience in the field, professional development and satisfaction, improvement in interpersonal and social skills and giving feedback (Kennedy et al., 2010; Howard & Smith–Goodwin, 2010, Menesses & Gresham, 2009).

As peer tutoring can be a way to increase success, Middle East Technical University, Learning and Student Development Office has designed a peer tutoring program called “Let’s Learn Together (LLT)”. In the program, low achieving English language preparatory school students were matched with junior students enrolled in “Community Service Course” in English Language Teaching (ELT) program in FLE Department. The aim of the program was to enhance the academic achievement of preparatory students (tutees) by developing their English language skills and also to contribute to professional development of ELT students (tutors) by creating the opportunity to use their field knowledge into practice and improve their teaching skills.

The purpose of this case study is to evaluate the “Let’s Learn Together (LLT)” tutoring program which integrates the community service course with an English language learning environment. The findings provide beneficial information regarding strengths and weak-
nesses of the program and suggestions for the further improvement. The results also provide valuable information to the future peer tutoring programs designed to improve student success in English language learning.

2. Methodology

“Let’s Learn Together—LLT” Academic Support Program has been developed and implemented by Middle East Technical University, Learning and Student Development Office in each semester since 2011. Within the scope of the program, tutors were volunteer students attending “Community Service Course” in Department of FLE and tutees were volunteer preparatory students who were in need of academic support in English language. All tutees were beginner level students in preparatory school and students who had the lowest grades and voluntary to take academic support were chosen to be included in the program. At the beginning of the semester, an announcement was done for both groups of students and volunteer students were asked to participate in. The coordination was ensured by the researchers working at Learning and Student Development Office at METU. Before the program had started, tutors were provided one hour of training about the program that included the aims, process, the role and responsibilities of the tutors.

All tutors and tutees were matched to study the whole semester as two tutees per tutor. The program lasted 12 weeks. A specific day and a classroom were assigned to the each pair; peer tutor and tutee worked together for two hours in assigned classroom in preparatory school each week. There was not a curriculum to be followed by tutors, each tutor designed weekly study program according to the academic needs of the tutees.

More specifically, tutees found the opportunity to get academic support about lack of practice and grammar knowledge, to develop reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, to participate actively in learning and to receive immediate feedback about their studies. On the other side, tutors got support from the instructor of the community service course and the instructor came together with tutors once in a month to get feedback about the program and provided help
about teaching English. During the program, the principal investigator visited one pair each week and took the attendance of tutors and tutees during the whole process. Tutors were also asked to inform the researcher about the tutees who did not attend the lessons regularly.

The sample of the current study includes 49 FLE students and 98 preparatory students. After the completion of the program, two data collection phases were followed for the evaluation purposes. During the quantitative phase, program evaluation survey was used to collect data. Among participants, 41 FLE and 57 of DBE students responded to the evaluation surveys. The tutor survey composed of 7 items regarding gains and overall satisfaction about the program. The tutee survey had 5 items regarding gains, the evaluation of the design of the program and overall satisfaction.

The second qualitative phase included semi–structured focus group interviews. Among the program participants, 15 FLE students (among tutors) and 15 preparatory students (among tutees) volunteered to participate to the focus group interviews and tutors answered 13 open ended questions regarding their experiences, gains, difficulties or challenges of the program. Tutors within groups of five came together to share their experiences. On the other hand, tutees also came together within groups of five to share their experiences, improvements and difficulties via answering 10 open ended questions. The interviews lasted nearly an hour and overall six different interviews were conducted with tutors and tutees separately.

3. Results

The results of the quantitative analysis indicated that both tutors (Table 1) and tutees (Table 2) had moderately high level of complacence for the program. When the means of each item were calculated, it was seen that both tutors and tutees placed a high value on their overall satisfaction with the program ($M=4.41$, $SD=.67$; $M=5.00$, $SD=.00$) on a 5—point Likert type scale, respectively. Table 1 showed that tutors found this program useful and worth conducting in following years. Tutors decreased their anxiety level by improving their teaching skills as a future teacher. The high mean scores indicated that tutors experienced how to teach low achieving students. Similarly, tutees
mentioned that overall the program was helpful and increased their success. All of the tutees were satisfied with the number of exercises that they had the chance to practice English language. Moreover, tutees indicated that the program was designed according to their needs ($M=4.82, SD=.38$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. The program evaluation of tutors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>n</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My anxiety level decreased while teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could teach according to different students’ level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could communicate with a student whose age was closer to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I practiced how to give feedback to a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, program helped me improve my teaching skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program was useful for me in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think this program should continue in the following years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. The program evaluation of tutees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>n</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The time of study was enough per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were given enough exercises during the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program was appropriate for my needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This program influenced my success in a positive way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This program was helpful in general</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualitative data analysis was carried out by inductive coding to analyze focus group interview data. After the code list was prepared based on the codes, the codes were categorized and themes were identified in relation to codes. Interview results indicated that positive experiences, negative experiences, benefits of tutees, quality of the program and the role in the program constituted the five themes.
based on the experiences from the peer tutoring program. Positive experiences were identified as the first theme and tutors reported positive feelings such as enthusiastic, self–confident, respected, excited and lucky; relationship experiences such as establishing the relationship, being less hard on students and staying close to students on the side of tutors and asking questions in a friendly atmosphere on the side of tutees; chances to practice for the first time in their undergraduate level such as experiencing being a teacher in the classroom and how to teach to low achieving students, adjusting the language level and understanding students’ point of view.

On the other hand, tutors also stated some negative experiences in terms of feeling anxious and tired; and difficulties that they have experienced in the program such as coping with delays and attendance problem: One tutor stated that «It could be difficult to arrange two hours to study after delays». Tutees also reported some difficulties such as being tired after the class.

Tutees also revealed some benefits of the program such as improvement in their English skills by critical thinking, reviewing the grammar topics, speaking, reading, and listening skills, reinforcing themselves and getting feedback via exercises. Having the chance to ask questions and practice more in a friendly interactive environment gave them the opportunity to improve themselves. The tutees mentioned some of the good qualities of the program such as its being student–centered, each tutor’s having only two tutees, studying two hours in a week and a silent study environment. Tutors considered this program as very supportive and stated that it reflects the care of university for its students. One tutor stated that «It is just like METU is caring for its students».

Finally, tutors specified their roles within this program as helping, guiding and motivating low achieving students by checking, controlling and giving suggestions. On the other hand, tutees stated their roles as getting help from students not teachers, which led them to ask questions without hesitations. Using different data analyses was helpful to ensure trustworthiness of the study. Therefore, triangulation and peer debriefing were utilized to increase trustworthiness.
4. Discussion

The results indicated that LLT peer tutoring program was beneficial for both tutors and tutees despite some difficulties such as delays, not attending the session and difficulty in arranging make up classes. Tutors and tutees were checked regularly during the program. However, tutors mentioned that sometimes it could be difficult to motivate low achieving students to study more especially when they got low marks in their courses. Low achieving students in both quantitative and qualitative evaluation stated the benefits of studying with a tutor on their English language proficiency by. In focused group interviews, preparatory students’ responses were in accordance with the advantages mentioned in the literature like feeling free while asking questions (Kennedy et al., 2010), developing academic, interpersonal and social skills (Fuchs et al., 1995; Hsiung, 2012). Therefore, it could be concluded the program was successful in reaching program outcomes. Overall, both tutors and tutees suggested the program to be continued in following semesters.

5. Conclusion

The results were in accordance with the literature as both groups of students have found the process valuable and successful. Tutees mentioned that with the help of the program, they improved their language learning skills in a friendly atmosphere. Additionally, tutors stated that they practiced how to teach and establish relationship with students. However, the study has some limitations. First, not all of the students filled the evaluation form and focused group interviews were conducted with small number of students. Thus, in the future studies, the ways to motivate participants to attend qualitative program evaluation or focus group interviews could be taken into account. Furthermore, it is recommended that in future studies, individual interviews could be conducted with volunteer tutors and tutees to assess the program.
References


Reflexivity is listening

ALBERTA GIANI

Abstract

The paper aims to highlight the link between the capacity of a caregiver to listen to the “insufficiently developed” emotions of a child and reciprocate them, with the ability of a teacher to listen to the pupil in his/her entirety. In both these two relationship, the Self plays a main role. According to the conception of James (1890), it represents the intersection between the experience in its objective dimension of existence with that of the subjective one: what experience gives us is instantly a unitary world of things and relationships.

Key words: reflexivity, listening, emotional dimensions in Higher Education.

1. Introduction

The attempt to combine two concepts so little explored in a predicative manner as a whole, comes from the desire to deepen the emotional–affective aspects that characterize the interactions in educational contexts. The idea is to highlight a link between the capacity of a caregiver to listen to the “insufficiently developed” emotions of a child and reciprocate them, with the ability of a teacher to listen to the pupil in his/her entirety. For that to happen I think that both the caregiver and the teacher should reflect upon themselves, on their own history, their own emotions, desires, conceptions, representations and values.

2. The theoretical assumptions

Many patients trust me, they have confessed to me, only after realizing that I wish to learn from them: this discovery may in fact build, for some, the first step towards a basic level of trust that if it is not rooted in experience,
can prove to be hope without foundation (Casement, 1985; trad. It., 1989, p. 18).

I would like to start from this statement to describe how a person interacts and develops in the context of family and school and how the quality of these interactions are the product, and at the same time the source of the level of listening and mutual recognition. It is the type and quality of experiences lived and acted out by the person in multiple contexts that define and structure the Self. Choosing to look at reflexivity as a way of listening through the complex construction of the Self, refers back to a specific conceptual choice, in this sense I believe that:

— we live in a world of relationships and it is through them that things, events and people acquire their meaning;
— the Self is an achievement of evolution (Darwin, 1872), the result of a constructive process that emerges towards the 2nd / 3rd years in conjunction with the development of language (Stern, 1985);
— the Self, according to the conception of James (1890), which is still valid today (Amerio, 2013), represents the intersection between the experience in its objective dimension of existence with that of the subjective one, in other words, says James, what experience gives us is instantly a unitary world of things and relationships;
— how the person perceives and interprets the experience constitute the joint that articulates the theory of attachment and the dynamic and social conception of the construction of the Self.

The theoretical frame of reference moves within the parameters of socio-constructiveness using interpretative paradigms borrowed from the theory of attachment and the theory of the mind, both reviewed through the clinical trials of Fonagy and his research group.

3. The development of the Self and its elements

We have been using the expression competent child for a long time to indicate how the human being, like other living beings, possesses
genetically programmed skills to ensure survival and development. The term “reflective” was introduced by William James (1890) to describe the moment in which the state of mind of an individual, in the evolution of the structure of the self, becomes a subject of thought.

For a long time research has neglected the study of the Self as a mind agent, favouring instead, what James had called empirical or categorical Self, which concerns the representation of all the properties that the person believes to be true with respect to him/herself (Neisser, 1988; Harter, 1999).

Having given little attention to the social dimension of the construction of the subjective self or ego of James, is due to the influence of the Cartesian doctrine (Fonagy, Target, 1997; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, Target, 2002; Amerio, 2013) which claims an infallible and direct access to introspection and it’s intentional mental states. Currently, neuroscience, philosophy of mind and the theory of evolution have seriously challenged the Cartesian view of the mind (Damasio, 1994; Dennett, 1991; Gopnik, 1993).

In other words the cognitive studies on development and on meta-cognitive knowledge, (Flavell, Green, Flavell, 1986, Cornoldi, 1995) that have researched the mechanisms by which it is possible to think about ourselves because we are able to think, as well as those related to the Theory of the Mind (Astington, 2003; Baron–Cohen, 1995; Dennett, 1978), that supported that mentalizing is considered a skill that allows us to give a psychological sense to social behaviour, both support the thesis that it is the social interactions, which are contextually situated that activate the constructive mechanisms of the Self. In essence, it was found by a significant amount of research, that we aren’t born naked but we have psycho–physiological equipment that allows us to survive and grow.

Stern (1989) identifies four conditions that must be present in at least minimal levels of consciousness, to be able to speak of a sense of nuclear self (2–6 months): being an agent, or being the source of an action; of having a sense of owning boundaries, of possessing a body; of being a unit with a sort of continuity on the temporal axis; of possessing his/her own affectivity. Based on this sense of self, the other dimensions of the Self are going to be built in the interaction with the environment. These dimensions are: the subjective Self, the verbal Self and the narrative Self.
The subjective Self appears around 9–12 months when the child seems to recognize in another a kind of mental content. He/she proves capable not only of intentional actions but inter–intentional ones: he/she will make gestures to draw the attention of the caregiver to objects that he/she wants to get and also, becomes aware that the other person may have an affective state similar or different from his. This allows him to use the emotion of the other person to regulate his/her own emotions: it is the affective tuning, which occurs not only at the level of an implemented activity, but at the level of internal states for which, the caregiver tries to get in touch with the subjective content of the mind of the child and tries to share them.

Around 15–18 months, with the development of linguistic and symbolic capacity, the verbal Self takes shape: the child begins to use personal pronouns, plays pretend and uses symbolic play. Finally, the self–narrative allows the child to tell his own life story, to identify what is important to him and what is not and why it is so, to say what happened to him as well as which emotions and sentiments he/she feels. Each of these Selves is important. Each represents a level at which the next develops and all remain as parts of us for a lifetime as separate but inter–dependent spheres of experience.

From this brief analysis, the dimension of the Self that we are interested in is the narrative, not only because it’s considered as the resulting function of narrative processes, certainly individual, although with strong inter–subjective valence, but, specifically, because it can represent a central joint. It is believed in fact that listening to your own narrative Self is activated through the ability to tune in to and recognize the other person; the other person, in turn, becomes not only an activator of the process of reflexivity on the narrative Self, but also the organizer of the representations constructed in the interaction. Therefore, it is this dynamic that, in some way, defines the attitudes and directs the actions.

This process, whose origin is to be traced in the interactions that the person experiences in early childhood, continues, as we said, for the entire existence and it declines dynamically depending on the types of interactions experienced and exhausted by the same person in different life contexts. In the first place, surely the family or, better said, the families, within which the care giver acts, but also in the
Reflexivity is listening

various specific contexts of the nurturing/training path, ranging from nursery school to university

4. The reciprocity of the Self in listening

In the course of his/her development the child builds a variety of interaction patterns with his/her adults of reference, the patterns of “being with” (Stern, 1995). These represent the fundamental structure through which the child builds its own interactive model of ‘meeting with the significant other, that will be repeated in the course of his/her relations with the other during his life.

In the past the influence of parents on child development, and their ability to form the successive representations has been exaggerated. However, it seems undeniable that the early experiences affect the ability to process and interpret the psychosocial environment in depth (Fonagy 2001; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, Target, 2002): secure attachment relationships allow for deep mentalizing (Pianta, 1999).

In essence, Fonagy states that mentalizing and the set of capabilities that belong to it, arising from the interpretation of the interpersonal mechanism, can either be facilitated or delayed by the experiences of attachment, and can play a key role in creating the environment experienced (Fonagy, Jurist, Gergely, Target, 2005, p.16).

This mechanism of interpersonal interpretation, however, does not contain representations, but allows for processing of new experiences, because not only is it the mediator of attachment experiences, but it is also the product of complex psychological processes generated by the proximity of the child with the attachment figure. It is a mechanism, typical of mentalizing, which allows him/her to explain and predict the behaviour of the other person and that Fonagy and his research group defines as reflective function in an operationalized version (Fonagy, Jurist, Gergely, Target, 2002; trad. it., 2005, p. 16).

In other words, knowledge of the Self as a mental agent is not innate, but it is a skill that evolves and is built in earlier relationships. If the context of attachment provides a secure base, the child can develop sensitivity towards the states of the Self. This is through the internalization of the answers of the mother’s reflections of that
discomfort, which is going to constitute an internal state. The empathic expression of the mother, however, is not recognized as belonging to the mother, but for the child represents an organizer of the state of the Self.

There is a concept that seems interesting for our analysis and it is that of mentalized affectivity, which indicates the mature capacity of affective regulation, where affections are used to adjust the self, identifying the subjective meanings of their own affective states (Fonagy, Jurist Gergely, Target, 2002; trad. It., 2005, p. 52).

This concept may represent an area of intersection between therapeutic and educational interaction. The purpose of both of these is to modulate, tune, and primarily balance (but not exclusively) by words, our way of being in the world, its significance and indeed very often, re–significance. Then clearly, the implicit and explicit theories of reference, content, paths, action taken, interaction strategies, assessment tools, and the aim that drives the whole process changes.

For therapists it is about dealing with resistances, defences, a whole way of psychological functioning, which is expressed not only by distortions of mental representations, but also as inhibitions of the same mental functioning. I do not intend to occupy areas that are not mine, and it is also true that every school of psychotherapy has its methods of control of a relationship with another. Nevertheless, I think we need to deal with our own emotional dimensions.

For the teachers, likewise, despite the real and profound differences, I think that they understand, and give significance to their own feelings in the interaction, allowing for the non–intellectualist but deep recognition of the other person, his desires, emotions, needs and fragility. It is the Self, especially in its narrative dimension of reflexivity that can listen, hear and recognize the narrative of the other person.

5. The education system and listening

The attempt that I try to do here is to identify a link between the origin of the construction of the Self, explained in the context of the social process and communication with significant figures, with the subsequent unfolding of the Self in various educational contexts. Which place does the student’s listening occupy for the teachers? How
much are you aware of the reciprocity in the interaction? And do the teachers or Professors listen to themselves?

I believe that in order to be able to listen to the other person you have to listen to yourself. It’s a workout, a sort of training of the mind to experience more interactions and possible scopes. This is because it is the other person and the multiple everyday contexts (both formal and informal) that provide a great deal of questions, problems, queries and emotions that tell us something about ourselves.

In the lower levels of school, teachers are much more receptive and prepared for the recognition of others (Giani, 2010), but not so much as Self–narrative, but for the ability to empathize with the little ones in the first and second classes of Kindergarten. Already in upper & lower Secondary school, modes of interaction begin to modify themselves, until they take on the characteristics of major departure and of assumption of a more structured role in the academic field.

Even scientific research in education and psychology is not very rich in this respect, delegating to other fields, primarily the clinic, areas of study that at least can have many points of contact and convergence.

These reflections have nothing to do with “doing good” and the consequent social damage that it has caused and is still in place. The school’s words are the words of masks: I’ll explain and you be attentive, you’re wrong I blame you, you be as I want, I don’t want you as you are. The space for the body is not in school. Like how emotions have no words, and words have no bodies. The lives of others do not enter in school. A school where everyone finds space for his memories and his own history becomes a school with significance, that builds meaning and participation.

However the school is still dominated by lectures explained by teachers who speak and pupils that listen — if they listen. When they listen, they do so but everyone for themselves. A teacher should listen to everyone’s contributions and build spaces and contexts where the meaning of the whole is more than the sum of its parts (Morin, 1999) and is a shared meaning, by its dynamic and modifiable nature, and in which everyone recognizes themselves.
6. And the Higher Education?

There are so many ways to listen to students: during meeting hours, in class, by e-mail, or through blogs or forums (Lugli, Mizzau, 2010). Other times in the hallways or in cafes. Listening to students does not mean giving up the rigor of training and the acquisition of strong and specific skills. Quite the contrary. It means reflecting on those aspects of the Self, as you can’t only play the role of researchers but also that of teaching, you must activate the processes of learning and assessment. You can not feel, perceive and hear the other person if it’s not in its entirety and in the entirety of his/her self.

7. Conclusions

Let me conclude with a narration of a personal experience. Of all the academic events, exams are for students (but also for teachers) a psychological space in which many elements of verification of their commitment converge (to put it in a nutshell).

I prefer the oral tests, a bit for the contained number of students, but mostly because I need to understand how the student orients themselves in the subject, and what type of links they are able to implement, within it. During the examination of a student I became aware of a strong discomfort that she expressed through body posture, pallor of the face and the mode of speaking slowly and in low tones. To say a few words of encouragement, to make her feel at ease as much as possible and to smile, didn’t cost me anything. I simply felt, or better still listened to her discomfort. The performance, because that is the thing to be evaluated, was not brilliant, but neither insufficient. The examination was passed, which allowed the girl to resume her studies after a period of psychological distress.

Damasio affirms that cognition and emotion are always in some way connected. The emotion is not in the «lower levels of psychic life as opposed to reason, but in its midst» (Damasio, 2000) and both co–exist with the wider autobiographical self.
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Assessment of competence at University

An explorative survey

Marianna Capo, Rosaria Capobianco, Maria Carolina Galdo

Abstract

The assessment of the competences wants to be an integrated action of orientation, motivation and support, with the aim of support students into the building of their learning project through the analysis of core competences owned. The focus is to make clearer individual competences to give them the possibility to be spent into the learning system.

In the 2012/2013 academic year, a pattern of Assessment of competences, has been offered to the first year’s students of some Department of the Federico II University of Naples. The service is developed into a guided auto assessment course of self-competences, formed by different steps through which every student has the possibility to be an active protagonist into an auto consciousness process. The auto assessment is operated by students that, autonomously and free to decide, chose to follow the pattern of his assessment.

Key words: lifelong learning, orientation, self-guided evaluation, competences for individual empowerment.

1. Introduction

The assessment of the competences wants to be an integrated action of orientation, motivation and support, with the aim of support students into the building of their learning project through the analysis of core competences owned. In the 2012/2013 academic year, a pattern of Assessment of competences, has been offered to the first year’s students of some Department of the University in Naples Federico II. The psycho–pedagogical service called Entry Assessment of competences for new enrolled, was born and developed by the University Centre SInAPSi.
The assessment of competences action wants to attend a series of aims that mark the specific function in respect of other entry orientation methodologies and that can be synthetized in this way:

— identification of competences and potentialities that students can invest into a realization of a learning project into the High learning;
— acquirement of auto assessment, activation and choice’s autonomous ability in respect of a self–learning goals;
— students implementation of socio–cultural of References Frameworks and emotional registers right.

2. Method

The methodology of the Assessment of Competences (from now and then AdC) was born, after the Second World War, in Québec and in the United States, when the necessity to recognized various personal competences was shown because of encouraging the engagement into the labour market. From Canada it develops and extends mainly in France, one of the European countries that more than others, tested and improved the assessment process. From France the AdC extends in the whole Europe, even as well as the European Recommendations.

AdC definition is still in progress. From the second half of the 80’s, when the first tests in France were attempted, the definitions have been changed and explained, from time to time. In the wide outlook of the definitions expressed by the most important AdC French theoreticians show up, because of the originality of their contribution and their elaboration level, the definitions by authors like Jacques Aubret, Michel Joras, Arlette Yatchinovsky and Pierre Michard, Claude Lévy Leboyer and Claude Lemoine. According to Joras, the AdC is the body of actions that have to allow workers to examine their own professional and personal competences, their vocations, to delimit a professional or a learning project. In line with this interpretation, but in a more complex way, there are Yatchinovsky and Michard. According to them, the Assessment is a process that has to allow to subject to elaborate his own professional project, not only in a long run, but even in short and medium one.
Claude Lévy Leboyer, placing the AdC among tools for the careers developing with conspicuous learning involvements, defines it as the point of juncture among three different fields of resource. Consequently in Lévy Leboyer’s opinion, the AdC must help subject to raise consciousness of all his acquisitions came from the original learning, from lifelong learning and from professional life in order to make a strong auto assessment of his career’s projects. Claude Lemoine, finally, points out the psychological and pedagogical dimensions of AdC, because this way associates a psychological analysis of competences to an active pedagogical dimension, able to offer to subject to take possession of knowledge that concern him. According to Lemoine, the pattern of assessment of competence’s goal, is to allow to some adult people to know better their own competences, and starting from there, set up a personal or professional project (Lemoine, 2002).

The assessment of competence is centered on the subject because he is considered as the protagonist of his story and the main maker of his own adaptation to the life environment (Aubret, Damiani, 1993). In order to the Levy–Leboyer’s classification (1993), the approaches of the various types of Assessment of competences should be four: relational approach, differential approach, ergonomic or expert approach, the approach based on the self–image. The model used into the project Entry Assessment of competences for new enrolled, suggested into the Psycho–pedagogical Services Center of the University SInAPSi (Services for Active and Participated Inclusion of Students) by the Federico II University in Naples, is a model that, starting from the various existing classifications of different theoretical and operative approaches (Levy–Leboyer, 1993), is integrated, that is coming from integration of two approaches: the relational and the self–image one. It is a model, then, that examining contributions and potentiality, common and specific elements, various pros and cons of any approach, supports the valorization of the narrative and autobiographical dimension to encourage the subjective experience, to activate that planning dynamic to help subject to define his own life project. But it is also a model that, being integrated, does not go a priori for the possibility to have recourse, where necessary, to employ tools that use an objective description of behaviors (for example, assessment questionnaire of the socio–relational and motivational competences, etc.).

The adopted integrated model, is based on some fundamental prin-
ciples: the centrality of the beneficiary students of the assessment, a value–free approach of whom manages the assessment and the necessity of doing a “map” of the competences to transfer them in other contexts. The choice of using an integrated assessment model that links different approaches, supposes that who manages the Assessment, could master the different correlated techniques, to avoid to identify as integrated approach what is simply expression of methodological versatility (that is absence of every consciousness of involvement between theory and technique). The Assessment offered to the first years’ student of the Federico II University of Naples, is not shown as a service of hetero–assessment, but as an activity of auto assessment help, in which subject, who decides to take a part in it, must be supported through the active identification on his own knowledge and competences. The assessment model proposed, about competences, refers to different European Qualification Framework, operating, as we can see later, an integration based on exact planning choices. The assessment model refers to competences defined by the European Qualification Framework (EQF), OMS’ Life Skills, the key competences of the DeSeCo project and ISFOL model. Moreover, referring to the competences defined by the European Qualification Framework (EQF), talking about fulfillment of obligations of education, Italian rules define eight citizenship keys competences.

They have been bended together in this macro–categories. Even the DeSeCo project, one of the most ambitious directed by OCSE from 1997 to 2002, defines exact basic competences: they are linked and are expression of ethical maturity and autonomous and responsible assumption of their own learning. DeSeCo project’s results add meaning and conceptual depth to the learning notion along the entire life, explaining a reflexive context for the international enquires that have the verification of learning as its own object. The project purposes three macro categories of competences.

At the same time the fundamental center of Life Skills, identified by OMS, defines a set of basic cognitive, emotional and relational abilities that allow to subjects to work with competence on the individual and social plan. The first important systematic setting, about competences “model” out of the scholastic culture, and for this reason especially connected to the working world, is the Isfol (in Italy is the Institute for professional training develop of workers).
3. Results and discussion

The 144 examined students come from the following university courses: Agricultural Technologies and Environmental and Forest Sciences, Social Service and Modern Studies. Assessment pattern is composed by three phases. During the first phase, called phase of presentation, are shown to students, in collective session, the goals, the steps and the progress of the assessment of competences. Into the second phase, the inquired one, we have the administration of the auto assessment questionnaire. In the third phase, the conclusive one, is given to everybody a printed version of the competences profile, where graphically the map of inquiry competences is figured in “strong points” and “weakness points”. Assessment pattern is composed by three phases, each of them characterized by the use of different tools. All meetings are guided by a specialist in pedagogy and a specialist in psychology, with experience in group dynamics and auto biographical narration practices. During the first phase, called phase of presentation and welcome, are shown to students, in collective session, the goals, the steps and the progress of the assessment of competences. The aim of this first important step is to supply useful and necessary information to allow students to take part to the assessment, explaining possible doubts and even to encourage motivation and participants’ autonomy during the administration. In this phase, to students that want to take part to the project, it is proposed to filling a presentation form: it is a data collected tool, with the aim of a right valuation of the speech. It is expedient to put together procedures and data entry through an access form that is the unique for every psycho–pedagogical service offered by SiNaPsi. The presentation form allows, moreover, to divide students depending on some detected and shared in the international literature profile (nontraditional, underachievement and disadvantage). This represents the essential tool to record the baseline and objective dimension of performance.

The presentation form differentiates from the format that is the same for all SiNaPsi’s psycho–pedagogical services only for the addition of a session dedicated to “My story”. It is composed by open questions, divided in two analysis areas that want to discover:

1. the most important events and formative steps, possible professional and non–professional experiences, (free time, sport,
charity work, political militancy activities or to any other field that requests a type of continuous engagement). Concerning formative experiences, is required to indicate formal course” (school, courses, etc. . . ) and even “informal course” that are the personal experiences (such as reading, theatre, cinema, etc. . . ) in which students think to have learned something important, even if they have not been official honors (such as the certification of the status, certificate of attendance, etc. . . );

2. actual conditions e future perspectives. Regarding reflections about present, students have to compare with possible satisfactions, discomforts, expectations or hopes linked to their actual university life. They have also to indicate those events that they think that changed the “sense” of their life (such as loss of cutie pie, the birth of a son, etc. . . ).

The required analysis follows the memories and ideas line that will come to mind of students without the obligation of using a chronological order in the description. The filling of the form is individual and therefore self–managed. Students have to adopt an analytical–descriptive thought about their own life experiences, and they have to descript themselves in first person. This activity will be used again into the device of the smallest group, supporting students through the comparison, to read again in an analytic way their own learning professional and personal experiences, describing and analyzing their own past life story and linking it to the present perceptions. Another tool used in the first phase, and reused in the end of assessment pattern, is the Differential Semantic (DS). This is a tool that attends to get emotional means (connotative) that is assigned to a specific object or event. It is defined semantic area and it has a solid structure, while the concept collocation in this area changes among subjects.

Into the second phase, the inquired one, we have the administration of the auto assessment questionnaire. The aim is to explore and elaborate knowledge and consciousness that every student has, about his own resources and basic competences, in terms of “strong points” and “vulnerability points” that, according to him could support and/or obstructed him into the university attended course. The questionnaire is formed by forty items and proposes a serious of claims in respect to which students have to be set along a continuum from 1 (not in the
(Four answers Likert’ Scale). The questionnaire presents a compact and clear graphic setting, it is developed in auto-filling and auto-explicated way, because items are simple and short. The choice and the structure of items are referred to key competences that in a planning location have been selected in this way (Table 1. Core competences).

The administration of questionnaire represents a first important moment of reflection about oneself and one’s learning course, and, in this sense, an introductive phase for group experiences. The assessment project of competences, in fact, is taken as an intervention-research with the aim to promote a guided reflection’s course that contemplate also a moment in restitution to students.

In the third phase, the conclusive one, is given to everybody a printed version of the competences profile, where graphically the map of inquiry competences is figured in “strong points” and “weakness points”. The adopted tool is the device of the smallest group and works according to an autobiographical narrative methodology. The goal is to provide students a body of feedback to compare each other and extend the way of thinking about one’s action’ space. In the smallest group’s reporting dynamic, leaders take the attitude to an active listening skills and, encouraging exchange and sharing among its members, act as easy maker of the analysis process and of locking on competences. The aim is to start a self-knowledge process, helping students to improve researches and finding critical points. It is fundamental that students could experiment smallest group’s space such as a place where they can be heard, without being judged.

Last reflection pertains to the role that the session of group’s work has into the assessment’s pattern and that, for some of its characteristics, could be considered as an hetero-valuation moment. This session, managed by two operators of the psychological and pedagogical area, has the aim to offer to beneficiaries the opportunity to enrich, from a different perspective, the process of self-knowledge and self-valuation. Thanks to the active involvement of students in reflection about assessment pattern’s outcome, partakers are incited to interact each other operating a comparison among different points of view: the acting subject, his spokesmen in the group and the external observer ones. The comparison comes out from the relation between the final result of the assessment, that is the competences map, and things
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro–Competences</th>
<th>Competences</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self–Construction</td>
<td>Learning to learn</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with others</td>
<td>Cooperate and participate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Act in an autonomous and responsible way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relation with reality</td>
<td>Communicate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Identify link and relations</td>
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<td>Acquire and understand information</td>
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<td>Life skills</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-awareness building skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coping with emotions</td>
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<td>Empathy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal relationship skills</td>
</tr>
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</table>

came out in the first descriptive auto–analysis planning phase about “My story”. This work satisfies the belief that, starting from the guided narration, into the semi–structured situations, is possible to introduce into the auto–knowledge and auto–development of every partaker, elements of reflection and comparison about “self–in situation” and in particular about “self–in relation”.

The auto–analysis dimensions, that are clear into the answers given by auto–valuation questionnaire and by the descriptions about “My story” concern:

— formative and professional experiences;
— motivations/story;
— self–image/auto efficiency;
— projects/interests;

Finally, it is introduced to the group the satisfaction questionnaire: it is a tool ad hoc with multiple answering questions.
4. Conclusions

Depending on the students’ answer to the 44 items purposed by auto assessment questionnaire, it has been possible to identify their competences that could be defined, by and large, as “weakness” points and “strong” points and that are a very important part of entry basic competences baggage owned by the student. Data, clearly, change substantially in relation to the examined College (Table 2. Levels of competence).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro–Category</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self–construction</td>
<td>Planning</td>
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<td>Relationship with others</td>
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<td>Life skills</td>
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The table points out that, in general, an high number of students has given low scores to some competences referred to the two macro–categories Self–construction and Relationship with reality. In particular, the following competences are part of a weakness level of competences: Planning (form Self–construction macro–category) and Problem solving (from Relationship with reality macro–category). Between a low level of
competence and an high one, there are a series of competences with scores that swing between 3 and 3.09, there is an intermediate category that cannot be underestimated because the values are not so far from the weakness category.

Three of these five competences that belong to a medium level, are part of the Relationship with reality macro–category: these are Find links and relations, Communicate, acquire and interpret information.

Into the intermediate level we also find the Learning to learn (from Self–construction macro–category) and Stress Administration (from Life Skills macro–category). Among competences identified as “strong” points, that are a part of an high level of competence, there are Cooperate and participate, Act in an autonomous and responsible way and Interact in group. All of three competences are part of Relationship with reality macro–category, that is why students think to be able to stay into the social life in an active and conscious way.

Among Skills, if we keep out the Stress Administration, a medium level competence, the first year’ students demonstrate to have real competences such as Emotions’ administration, Interpersonal relationship administration, Empathy, Critical thought and Self–awareness, to demonstrate how much students think to be able to recognized themselves, their behavior, their strength and weakness, their desires and their disregards.

Defining a map of competences, to first year’ students, that participated to the Assessment of the Competences offered by the “Federico II” university, the possibility to know all that potentiality to invest into the realization on their own learning project.

References


The role of english proficiency level

Personal and affective factors in predicting language preparatory school students’ academic success

GÖKÇEN AYDIN, OYA YERİN GÜNERİ

Abstract

This study investigated the role of demographic factors, English proficiency level, personal and affective factors in predicting English language preparatory school students’ academic success. Participants of the study were 415 English language preparatory school students (158 pre–intermediate level, 158 intermediate level and 99 upper–intermediate level students) from a public university in Turkey. The demographic information form, College Learning Effectiveness Inventory and Affective Characteristics Questionnaire were used as data collection instruments. Multiple regression was utilized to analyze data. The results indicated that 53% of the total variance was explained by the model. Among the predictor variables, English proficiency level, classroom communication, stress and time press, and English self–concept were found to be significantly related to language achievement. The findings showed that students who had high English proficiency level, better communication skills within the class, high English self–concept and felt more stressful achieved higher scores in English Proficiency Exam.

Keywords: Academic success, personal factors, affective factors, effective learning

1. Introduction

The issue of student success has taken the attention of many researchers throughout the years. Traditional approaches put importance to instructors’ skills, content of the program and institutional characteristics for student success. However, trends in later years have changed the perspective from passive learners to active learners in the process (Hutley, 2001) and underlined the multiple factors that impact college student success. For example, pre–college experiences (mainly
academic preparation, family background and college readiness); student engagement (study habits, time on task, peer involvement, first year experience and campus environment); post–college outcomes (grades and employment) (Kuh et al., 2006).

During college years, the first year is defined as crucial transition period for giving a start to university experience (Kuh, 2001). This transition year deserves to be considered as the crucial point due to including cultural, academic, social and personal changes (Johnston, 2010). While a successful first year experience leads to satisfaction and better performance through university years; dissatisfied, disappointed and confused students are found to experience high levels of stress and low achievement (Johnston, 2010, p. VII).

Studies that investigate first year student success put high importance to demographic characteristics such as age, gender, place of residence and background knowledge (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010). According to Kim et al. (2010), the literature representing student success can be summed up under the three sets of variables. First of all, previous achievement in high school could be used as a predictor of student success in college (Wolfe & Johnson, 1995). Secondly, circumstances variables like demographics or socio–economic status influence student success and cannot be changed easily by the students. Thirdly, factors that are under the control of the individuals like behaviors, attitudes, values and self–perceptions form personal variables (Forsyth & Schlenker, 1977). When the achievement test scores and previous high school success cannot explain the whole concept of success after having been searched during a long history, researchers come to the conclusion that there are other academic, social, environmental and personal factors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Among personal variables, academic self–efficacy refers to students’ competence in succeeding academic tasks like exams and homework (Schunk, 1991); time utilization is defined as « the ability to effectively organize your time and responsibilities in order to get most out of your day » (Combs, 2007, p. 74). Besides the attention spent for time management, how a student organizes the tasks, concentrates and pays attention to study influences the success (Pauk & Owens, 2011). Colleges are places of not only education but also social activities. Students who take the advantage of participating in college activities feel
more engaged in college life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, student achievement also depends on students’ satisfaction about the college they attend. Students who are emotionally satisfied with the college show high rates of attending and achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, student–faculty relationship, which is a significant factor related to achievement, has a progressive effect when the teacher shows interest in students’ achievement (Kuh et al., 2006).

The development in humanistic theories has directed the attention towards learners’ feelings, thoughts and emotions in student success. The importance of affective factors has emphasized in second language learning together with other fields (Krashen, 1987). According to language learning theories, basic skills and structure of the language are the first requirements of learning on the surface. However, the underground side hides that affective factors, which refers to learners’ responses to learning situation like attitudes, motivation to learn, anxiety and self–perceptions (Atba¸s, 2004, p.1) have a significant impact on learning (Bown & White, 2010). Among other affective variables, attitude and motivation, anxiety and self–confidence are considered notable factors for language learning (Krashen, 1987). In a college environment where first year students are learning a foreign language, student success depends on various kinds of personal and affective factors. The aim of this study is to find the role of English proficiency level, personal and affective factors predicting language preparatory school students’ academic success.

2. Method

The purpose of this study was to find the role of English language learning affective factors and personal factors over language preparatory school students’ academic success. A demographic data form (ID number, gender, age, English proficiency level at DBE and student’s residence type), College Learning Effectiveness Inventory–CLEI (developed and revised by Newton, Kim, Wilcox, Beemer and Downey in 2008) with 51 items and 6 subscales: Academic self–efficacy, organization and attention to study, stress and time press, involvement in college activity, emotional satisfaction and class communication and Affective Characteristics Questionnaire–ACQ (developed by Atba¸s to
measure the affective factors influencing English language learning in 2004) with 36 items and 5 subscales: Effort to learn English, interest in English, value attached to English, English self-concept and speaking anxiety in English) were administered to 415 Department of Basic English students. Among 3000 preparatory students, 600 participants were randomly selected by stratified random sampling method and 415 students responded with a return rate of 75.66%. Among participants, 158 (38.1%) of respondents were pre–intermediate level students, followed by 158 (38.1%) intermediate level and 99 (23.9%) upper–intermediate level student and 199 (48%) of them are female and 216 (52%) of them are male. Moreover, the mean age of the participants was 19.41 with a standard deviation of 1.04 and their ages ranged between 18 and 28. Furthermore, 51.8% of the participants are staying at METU dormitories while 48.2% of them are staying outside the campus. Descriptive statistics and hierarchical regression analysis were executed to analyze the data.

3. Results

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis indicated that demographic variables were not found as significant predictors in the first step, \( \Delta R^2 = .02 \), \( \Delta F(3, 359) = 2.36, \ p > .05 \). In the second step, when English proficiency level of students were entered into the model, the results were found to be significant by explaining 41% of the total variance, \( \Delta R^2 = .41 \), \( \Delta F(2, 357) = 129.01, \ p < .05 \). Adding personal variables in the third step increased the accountability by 9% with a significant value, \( R^2 = .09 \), \( \Delta F(6, 351) = 11.01, \ p < .05 \). Finally, in the last step, affective variables were entered and the model was significant by explaining 3% of the variance, \( \Delta R^2 = .03 \), \( \Delta F(5, 346) = 4.63, \ p < .05 \). The regression model was significant as shown in the Table 1 and overall 53% of the variance of the scores can be accounted for the combination of predictors.
Table 1. Results of the Hierarchical Regression Predicting Academic Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>∆R²</th>
<th>∆F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METU Dormitory vs Family</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METU Dormitory vs Other</td>
<td>-.59</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.44</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre–Intermediate vs Intermediate</td>
<td>9.36</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>9.41</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre–Intermediate vs Upper–Intermediate</td>
<td>14.15</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>11.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Self–Efficacy</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization and Attention to Study</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.77</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress and Time Press</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in College Activities</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Satisfaction</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Communication</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort to Learn English</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in English</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-1.70</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Attached to English</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.62</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Self–Concept</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Speaking Anxiety</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Dependent Variable=English Proficiency Exam. p < .05

Among the significant predictors, English proficiency level of students, pre—intermediate vs. intermediate \((\beta = .41, p < .05)\) and pre—intermediate vs. upper intermediate \((\beta = .54, p < .05)\), appeared to make the strongest contribution to the prediction of students’ academic success. It was followed by English self—concept \((\beta = .24, p < .05)\), stress and time press \((\beta = .16, p < .05)\) and class communication \((\beta = .10, p < .05)\). However, gender, type of residence, involvement in college activities, emotional satisfaction, interest in English, effort to learn English, value attached to English and speaking anxiety were not significant predictors in the model.
4. Discussion

According to results, for the strongest predictor of students’ academic success, the upper–intermediate class students achieved the highest scores, intermediate class students achieved less than upper–intermediate, prognostically; pre–intermediate class students got the lowest proficiency exam scores. Even though students in lower proficiency classes received extended hours of training in English language, the language proficiency gap between groups still existed in the proficiency exam. Therefore, the present findings confirmed earlier studies (Krashen, 1981) indicating that there was a significant relationship between proficiency level, or prior knowledge in target language and academic success.

The class communication was found to be positively associated with academic success. This finding was consistent with the literature indicating that students who were open to communication and felt relax had higher grades (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The study revealed surprising results in terms of stress and time press. Although the literature argued intensely the negative effect of stress over student academic success (Alzaeem, Sulaiman & Wasif Gillani, 2010), the findings of this study indicated the benefit of some stress for motivation and performance (Cahir & Moris, 1991). Another surprising result was the nonsignificant relationship between academic self–efficacy and academic success which might be due to the fact that the participants of the present study were English language preparatory students and their academic self–efficacy might be based on only English language; closely related to this prediction, their English self– concept was a significant predictor of in the academic success present study, which was a consisted result with the literature (Dörnyei, 2009).

Furthermore, the results showed that predicting students’ academic success was not associated with organization and attention to study. Involvement in college activities was not also found to be related to academic success. Aitken (1982) concluded that the impact of involvement in college activities might start after the first year because language preparatory school students might not know all the possibilities or how to be a part of those activities at campus. Contrary to the literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), emotional satisfaction did not come out as a predictor of academic success which might be
explained by the Umbach and Wawrzynski’s (2005) suggestion that students might tend to search for support not from faculty but from other sources.

Results showed that only English self-concept predicted academic success but not the other variables of motivation and attitudes towards English and speaking anxiety. The more students had higher self-concept regarding learning English, the more they achieved (Dörnyei, 2009). The reason for non-significant relationship between motivation and success might be that the literature emphasizes the positive association of willing to learn a foreign language and academic success (Noels et al., 2000), but learning English is a compulsory for the students in language preparatory school. Academic success of preparatory students was not associated with speaking anxiety unlike the literature (Krashen, 1987) because English Proficiency Exam does not include speaking part.

5. Conclusion

The findings showed that students’ English proficiency level, communication skills, English self-concept and stress level are stronger predictors of achievement among English language preparatory school students. The findings of the study might offer some suggestions for further research. First of all, future studies could be conducted with students from other universities at all language proficiency levels. Another suggestion for future research might be including some other factors to the model such as adjustment to the university, autonomy, commitment to the university and study habits among personal variables; and language study and learning skills, native language skills, prior exposure to language or reading anxiety among affective variables can be added in order to find the predictors of unexplained variance.

References

Alzaeem A.Y., Sulaiman S.A. & Wasif Gillani S., *Assessment of the validity and reliability for a newly developed stress in academic life scale (sals) for pharmacy*


Learning strategies for improving performance in ICT–mediated contexts

Ana García–Valcárcel, Francisco Javier Tejedor

Abstract

Learning strategies are directly related to the quality of learning and enable identification of certain causes of low or high academic performance. Strategies can facilitate the adequate solving of study tasks by helping learners to select the best techniques, control their application and assess the outcomes. They are internal cognitive procedures with a high degree of complexity, and they can be favoured by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT).

The main goal of this study is to analyse how ICT can help to develop suitable learning strategies in order to improve the academic performance of university students. The study was carried out with a sample of 860 students from the University of Salamanca. To gather the data we devised a “Scale for assessing the utility of IT in the learning process” based on a review of different studies. A reliability of $\alpha = 0.87$ was obtained for the scale.

The descriptive analysis of the data confirmed the norms and profiles of the use of the different strategies on the part of the students and assessment of the strategies in terms of improving academic performance. The study concludes with an analysis of the differences in use of the different strategies on the part of subsamples of students with “greater” or “lesser” academic success. As a methodological novelty we contribute a graphic representation of these differences based in ROC curves.

Key words: Learning strategies, ICT (Information and Communication Technology), academic performance, ROC curves.

1. Introduction

Learning strategies are directly related to a student’s learning quality, since they allow us to identify and diagnose the causes of differences in performance and thereby improve learning (Beltrán, 2003). When students put certain learning strategies into practice, it is not a spontaneous occurrence but rather the result of intentional practice. For this
reason several proposals have emerged recently which under the title of teaching how to learn, or learning to learn attempt to train students in these learning techniques. From this perspective, a learning strategy can be understood as the process through which a learner chooses, coordinates and applies procedures in order to reach a learning–related goal. At present, to develop the skills for managing the huge amount of information available, students need to know how to access, search for and, above all, select the information that can help them in their learning activities. Mastery of these skills means that the student has acquired specific competences relating to the use of ICTs (García–Valcárcel, 2010; García–Valcárcel & Tejedor, 2011).

A learning strategy can be considered as a guide for actions to be taken; it is always a conscious and intentional act, addressed to achieving a learning–related objective (Nisbet & Shucksmith, 1987). Strategies establish what is needed to complete a study task well, select the most suitable techniques, control their application and assess the outcomes (Tuñas, 2007). The actions are always taken by the student, to support and improve his or her learning. They have a high degree of complexity, and depend on the students’ choice, in accordance with the procedures and knowledge already assimilated, their reasons for learning and the guidance they have received. They are fundamentally cognitive internal procedures (Martínez & Bonachea, 2011). Pozo (2003) characterized them as integrated sequences of knowledge or activities chosen with a view to facilitating the acquisition, storage and/or use of information or knowledge. Knowing learning strategies helps students to plan and organize their own learning activities, and requires a certain degree of knowledge about learning itself. This meta–knowledge is necessary if students are to be able to make a strategic use of their skills.

Five general types of learning strategies have been identified in the academic context. The first three are cognitive strategies that help students to prepare and organize the contents in a way that makes it easier to learn (information processing), the fourth is addressed to controlling a student’s mental activity in order to direct learning and the fifth is support for learning so that it takes place under the best possible conditions:

1) rehearsal strategies. These are the strategies that involve active
repetition of the contents (saying, writing) or focusing on key parts of it;
2) *elaboration strategies.* These entail making connections between what is new and what is familiar;
3) *organization strategies.* These involve grouping the information so that it is easier to remember (classification, arranging in order of importance);
4) *metacognitive strategies or strategies for controlling comprehension.* These involve remaining aware of the objective, tracking the strategies used and the success achieved with them, and then adapting behaviour in consequence;
5) *support or affective strategies.* The fundamental mission of these strategies is to improve learning efficiency by improving the conditions under which it takes place. These include: establishing and maintaining motivation, managing anxiety, managing time effectively, etc.

Cognitive strategies are processes that allow us to understand, fix, elaborate and structure information; they foster autonomous, independent learning, carried out in such a way that the reins and control over learning gradually pass from the teacher to the students, making it possible for them to plan, regulate and assess their own learning. For Rinaudo, Chiercher and Donolo (2003), the cognitive strategies involve types of thinking or behaviour that help to acquire information and integrate it into already existing knowledge, as well as to recover already existing information. They include review strategies, strategies related to attention and encoding processes, which are superficial, and elaboration and organizational strategies, which entail deeper processes and critical thinking.

The metacognitive strategies involve the activation of higher aspects of knowledge: planning, control and regulation. For their part, resource–management strategies include the organization of time and the study environment; regulation of effort, peer–learning and help–seeking. Ruíz Tarrago (1999) compares this type of strategy to “intellectual work techniques”. The students must choose from among their repertory the most appropriate learning strategy according to a series of factors (Tuñas, 2007):
a) Learning contents, type (data, concepts...) and amount;
b) The previous knowledge a student has about the contents to be learned;
c) Learning conditions (time available, motivation, a students’ personal conditions...);
d) The type of assessment the student will be subjected to.

The strategies students choose can be boosted by the use of ICTs, and we therefore are interested in analysing how students rate them.

2. Method

Variables

The variables considered in the study are as follows:

1) ICTRATE: The variable “Rating of ITC in learning strategies” is the mean of the sum of the scores given by the subject to the set of items on the scale. A variable is thus generated on scale of 0 to 4;
2) with the results of the factor analysis we created two new variables (which take, respectively, the name of one of the two resulting factors), obtaining for each subject in the sample that person’s mean score in each of the sets of variables that load on each factor: thus, for each subject we obtain their score in the variable “thinking strategies” (COGSTRAT) and in the variable “procedural strategies” (PROCEDSTRAT);
3) real grades. This information was obtained from the official records of student grades in the subject that was given in an ICT environment. It generated a variable with a range of 0 to 10.

Objectives

We studied the variable “Rating of ITC in learning strategies” (ICTRATE) to learn the students’ opinion about the potential of ICTs to help in the most relevant learning strategies with a view to improving
their academic work, and by extension, their performance. To com-
plete this basic objective we also wished to test whether there were
differences in students’ ICT ratings according to their different levels
of academic performance.

Sample

The study was implemented at the University of Salamanca (Spain).
The theoretical population of reference was defined by the class
groups, the set of teachers and students involved in teaching innova-
tion processes that incorporate the use of ICTs in certain subjects. The
“class group” of the teachers that accepted the invitation to participate
was established as the sampling frame, the final sample comprising
20 teachers and 860 students for whom data were available in all the
variables under consideration.

Instruments for evaluating the use of learning strategies

Diverse studies have been carried out regarding the learning strategies
used by university students. Weinstein, Schulte and Valenzuela (1995)
made an adaptation of the LASSI for Venezuelan students, creating the
Study and Learning Strategies Inventory (Inventario de Estrategias de
Estudio y Aprendizaje, or IEEA) with ten scales for assessing learning
strategies. López–Aguado (2010) analysed the strategies in relation
to students’ autonomous work. Many of the studies carried out in
Spain have applied the ACRA scale (Román & Gallego, 1994). Among
the most interesting are the studies that have attempted to find a
relation between the learning techniques employed and academic
performance, in some cases using reduced versions of the same scale
(De la Fuente et al., 1998; De la Fuente & Justicia, 2003). Based on
the structure of this shortened version and the studies cited above
by Rinaudo, Chiecher and Donolo (2003), we devised the 9–item
“Scale for Rating ICTs in the Development of Learning Strategies”
(“ICTRATE –DEA”) (see Table 1), and used this instrument in the
research described here. This scale was implemented with a view
to: 1) Learning how students rate ICTs in relation to the strategies
they use in their teaching–learning process and 2) Testing whether
there were differences in these ratings in relation to different levels
of student performance. Five response categories were established for each item, ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”, scored from 0 to 4 points. Reliability analysis of the scale provided a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of 0.869, which, given the length of the scale at 9 items, can be considered optimal.

Factor analysis with varimax rotation provided the information presented in Tables 1 and 2. In the first of these we see the resulting factor structure and the loadings of each variable (strategies) on each factor. The criterion of retaining the factors with values $\lambda > 1$ determined the recognition of two factors that explain 61.5% of the variance. On the matrix of rotated components we can see the loading of each variable on each of the factors retained. Their observation allows us to determine clearly the typology and corresponding name of each of the factors:

— in the first factor the highest loadings (above 0.50) correspond to variables (strategies) 6, 7, 5, 4 and 1, which are linked to the so-called “thinking strategies” (cognitive and/or metacognitive);
— in the second factor the loadings above 0.50 correspond to the four remaining strategies (9, 2, 8 and 3), which are linked to the so-called “organizational, procedural or instrumental strategies”;

This structure, simplified given the number of strategies included in the scale, can be considered consistent with the data presented in the preceding sections. We therefore consider that their use can lead to reliable information that is valid from a structural and theoretical point of view.

3. Data analysis

a) Analysis of the rating of ICTs in learning strategies

Observing the frequency distributions by response category in each of the items we see that the highest percentage of response in the “strongly agree” category (4) is for item 9 (« They help me to seek resources that will be of use in academic tasks »). This is what students
consider the most important contribution of ICTs to their academic work. The following positively rated uses of ICTs have to do with the following learning strategies: they help me seek resources that will be of use in academic tasks; they are helpful when reviewing learning; they improve the writing of academic papers; they help me organize my academic work better; they make it possible for me to have better cognitive organization; they help me regulate the effort I put into academic work; they improve the possibilities of working with other students. The least positive ratings refer to the following strategies: ICTs allow me better to develop critical thinking and allow me to optimize how I manage my time.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation and median) of the ratings of ICTs (ICTRATE variable) made by the students with respect to each learning strategy, allowing us to observe more precisely the comments made.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item content</th>
<th>Mean (0 a 4)</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. They are helpful when reviewing learning</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>0.850</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. They improve the writing of academic papers</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>0.830</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. They help me organize my academic work better</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.866</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. They allow me better to develop critical thinking</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>0.846</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. They make it possible for me to have better cognitive organization</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>0.789</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. They allow me to optimize how I manage my time during study</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>0.942</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. They help me regulate the effort I put into academic work</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.903</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. They improve the possibilities of working with other students</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. They help me seek resources that will be of use in academic tasks</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>0.836</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two variables created based on the factor analysis have mean scores of 2.50 (thinking strategies) and 3.01 (procedural strategies) for the whole sample. These scores show that the students recognize the
greater value of ICTs in connection to the “procedural or instrumental” strategies as opposed to the “cognitive” strategies. The correlation between the scores of these two variables is 0.63. The difference of means between the variables, for the correlated samples, is highly significant (t=26.38; p=0.000).

b) Differences in the rating of ICTs for developing learning strategies according to academic performance

To learn the relation between a student’s ratings of ICTs as a support of learning strategies and his or her academic performance we considered the variable “real grade” of the students on a scale of 0 to 10, corresponding to the real grade obtained in the June exam sitting in the subject taken in an ICT environment. We divided this variable into two categories: high performance (a grade of 7 or above) and average performance (a grade below 7).

Table 2 shows the means of each item in the sub-samples of high performing students (high-p group) and the average performing students (average-p group). The high-p group has higher means in all the items. Analysis of the significance of the differences in means, both non-parametric (z in the Mann-Whitney U) and parametric (t for independent samples) showed highly significant differences in the ratings of ICTs as a support for learning strategies.

The analysis of differences according to performance for the variables generated from factor analysis provides us with the mean values appearing in Table 3. It can be observed that the students in the high-p group have higher mean scores than those of the average-p group in the two variables, indicating that their rating of ICTs is more positive with respect to both of the macro-strategies studied (cognitive and procedural). The analysis of the differences in means of the two sub-samples turned out to be highly significant for the two types of strategies.

4. Discussion

The results of this research, which coincide with the opinions of authors such as Fandos and González (2011), clearly confirm that the
**Table 2.** Ratings of ICTs and learning strategies: Differences according to academic performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item content</th>
<th>Overall Mean</th>
<th>Mean: average–p group</th>
<th>Mean: high–p group</th>
<th>Z (MW–U)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. They are helpful when reviewing learning</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>-4.40**</td>
<td>-4.53**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. They improve the writing of academic papers</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>-7.43**</td>
<td>-7.31**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. They help me organize my academic work better</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>-5.15**</td>
<td>-5.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. They allow me better to develop critical thinking</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>-3.36**</td>
<td>-3.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. They make it possible for me to have better cognitive organization</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>-2.53**</td>
<td>-2.81**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. They allow me to optimize how I manage my time during study</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>-3.30**</td>
<td>-3.53**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. They help me regulate the effort I put into academic work</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>-3.59**</td>
<td>-3.57**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. They improve the possibilities of working with other students</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>-5.02**</td>
<td>-4.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. They help me seek resources that will be of use in academic tasks</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>-3.86**</td>
<td>-4.17**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(**) Statistic significant at $\alpha = 0.01$.

**Table 3.** Means in the overall strategy variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T value</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COGSTRAT</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>-4.70</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCEDSTRAT</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>-6.86</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proper use of ICTs has a clear effect on the development of learning strategies, assisting with academic work, and on certain keys to academic success. This conclusion is in agreement with the study called ImpaCT2 (Harrison et al., 2002), which showed that greater student involvement in the learning process owing to the use of ICTs
improves their opportunities for reflection, analysis, problem–solving and critical thinking, as well as for developing skills for communication, independent learning, and group work.

According to Domínguez (2009), the suitable use of ICTs in the teaching–learning process promotes autonomous learning, collaborative learning, critical and creative thinking, the development of problem–solving strategies, learning scenarios in open (undirected) environments, interactive work, the capacity for oral and written argumentation, the creation of non–linguistic representations of what students are learning, the availability of useful tools that foster a greater ability to carry out research, to organize, evaluate and communicate information and the creation of virtual educational communities.

Tools that stand out for their ability to help reinforce teaching–learning processes is the proposal of the “Institute for Human and Machine Cognition” aimed at providing help for building and sharing knowledge models based on conceptual maps (Cañas at el., 2000). Buzán and Buzán (1999), based on their studies, report that students’ ability to retain information, and their comprehension, creativity, and the communicative capability can benefit from the association of drawings and images. Also of interest are the proposals by Johnson and Johnson (1999) in relation to collaborative learning, and the studies by Esteban and Zapata (2008), who analyse the learning strategies that students bring into play in an e–learning framework.

5. Conclusion

The final interpretation of the results can be expressed as follows: the dependent variables studied associate higher values with the group of high–performing students, indicating that students with high academic performance think that ICTs have a greater potential for supporting their learning strategies than do students of average performance, even though all the students rated technologies positively as instruments that facilitate the search for resources and the writing of academic papers.
Learning strategies for improving performance in ICT–mediated contexts

References


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