An integrated learning project in university context: students' voices

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Adult education - like instructive processes involving new generations - shows two important aims: improvement of professional competence and democratic process promotion as basis for a renewed pedagogical relationship between individual and society. Formative paths planned according to the point of view of a new educability are actions of promotion, increasing and development of the individual, of building a new thinkability, both individual and collective, through improvement, change and factivity of learning conditions along the whole life (lifelong learning). This paper refers to an experience of planning, managing, and supplying in blended modality of a course activated at the University of Padua leading to the master degree in "Scholastic planning and project management of educational formative activities" and it intends to describe the theoretical frame of reference, the methodology, the implemented tools, and the overall reached results.

1 Introduction

The Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Padua activated in the academic year 2009/10 the experimentation of a university course – the fist dedicated to school management – supplied in blended modality in the master degree course in "Analysis and organizational planning of scholastic and training services".

In particular this paper intends to examine the planning, the supplying the evaluation of the online part of the course "Scholastic planning and project management of educational formative activities".

The characteristic consists in having singled out an operative way for fully implement the directions given by the Council for the Degree Course and the Regulations of the Degree Course about the iterative course planning realized with the assistance of a branch expert tutor and the coordinating staff that supported the university teacher in arranging and selecting methodologies and tools and especially in evaluating the results of the learning given by assessment of the online activities and the final exam in the lecture hall.

The students (35 in all) are all in-service school teachers in the first and second school cycle, that's to say studying workers, with an average age of 49 years. The dropout rate was of 3%. Most of them come from Veneto, with some coming from neighboring (Lombardia, Friuli) or more distant regions (Liguria, Campania).

2 Learning process as recursive dialogue

Adult education shows two important characteristics: improvement of professional competences and democratic process promotion as basis for a new pedagogical relationship between individual and community (Dewey, 1916).

Democratic sense and culture favor the self-fulfillment of the individual and the relationship with the other: education (the school), seen as a laboratory, and e-learning entirely have this connotation. They support the development of a mental attitude characterized by a cultural elaboration, both individual and collective, as an innovative and proactive element with respect to change in a way with pedagogical sense.

Other two characteristic aspects of educational processes acquire a special significance: the first consists in efficient intelligence, that allows the building of conditions enabling the participation to the common construction to be really participative; the second, that's to say the re-construction of the mental attitude of individual and group, intended as clarification of the reflection aimed to awareness and improvement. These aspects require from adult education planning the ability to hear and develop a widespread and distributed personal

competence.

According to the theoretical elaboration of M. S. Archer adult education implies a new paradigm: the interior conversation that – defined according to time – studies the relationship between structure and agency, that's to say between social structure and free behavior of the individual through reflexive choice (Archer, 2003).

This approach is called morphogenetic and it is realized through a particular time sequence, the "kairos" or "due time", whose consequences are important in learning.

Another peculiar aspect of the individual consists in the recognition of the existence of mental activities, that require processes of awareness by the learning subject. Archer defines these activities as "interior choices", basis of reflection, and considers them important for the building of agency, priorities and interests that carry out a self-definition process.

Adult education means to recognize the autonomous properties of human agency, take on the perspective of the first person, increasing the value of action ability of the individual (Archer, 2007).

Reflexive choices, that are the basis of the interior conversation, are processes through which the mediation and transformation between structural and cultural properties take place. Their actual position in the learning process allows an educability based on co-responsibility, co-planning and sharing and realized through successive steps of understanding, choice and dedication, that carries out the autonomous action model.

The interior conversation acknowledges to reflexive choices an authority parallel to the firs person authority acknowledgment (centering on the student), even though considering humanly real variables like fallibility, doubtability, and corrigibility (proactive value of failure) in the access procedures to natural knowledge and mapping. It redefines also the relationship between epistemology and hermeneutics by linking it to the connection between structure and agency, which the didactic action has to consider in a proper way.

It is a complex, criterial, and systemic reflection about one's own priorities, doubts, dilemmas, compromises, admissions regarding one's own purpose and interest horizon. This reflection has a close connection to the idea of motivation as intentionality with respect to one's own life project.

The development of Archer's argument leads to the binomial emerging individual = active and choosing subject, with a form of self-consciousness impossible to reduce to individual hearing or passive recording activity (typical of extrospection), because the complex reflection activities require self-questioning abilities (typical of introspection).

The above synthetically exposed model takes for granted the ability to check systematically what we make. This aspect is important in education because –

besides requiring a continuous activity of the individual, that again and again checks his knowledge and revises it in the light of the new – it stresses the great "weight" of the individual with respect to the intentionality of the transforming process itself (developmental competence).

In other words the transforming process of learning shows a close affinity to the decision-making process, because – thanks to reflexivity – there is a coincidence between choice and decision through repeated execution (in time periods) of self-checking actions, self-evaluation, self-knowledge (as basis of our decision-making processes and way to know one's own strong and weak points), taking on personal responsibility (subjective self-transformation and self-referential statements overcoming), strategic choices according to life project.

The time articulation of learning allows a morphogenetic process of individual and group, which works in terms of transformation in agent (participation with collectivity) and in actor (subjects with intentionality – self-conversation) in a democratic building context. Actually to be actor means to select a field, a domain, to invest oneself in, to conceive projects and turn them in action, that's to say to express a motivation for cultural and social acting nourished by self-consciousness, which foreshadows the co-planning of the course and the overcoming of the acquiescence, that too often regulates learning behaviors in traditional education.

According to this vision the subject is able to elaborate future projects in an individual time, that has not to be just chronological or "kronos" (that of the civil registry for instance) and can generate "the knowledge of kairos, contest and situation knowledge, concerned with the singularity of events, capable to recognize the complexity of reality and to interact with it thanks to suitable cognitive tools, multiplying and comparing points of view, lighting up aspects of a situation and enlarging its perspectives".

Therefore education is an action of promotion, value enhancement and development of the individual, of building a new thinkability, through improvement (Lewin, 1948) and change (Bateson, 1979).

3 Methodology, activity structure and used tools

The above theoretic and cultural paradigms have modulated the planning of the "learning path" of the course in order to satisfy punctually the requirements of the transformation processes, that are typical of the subject contents.

The university teacher and the online lab tutor have co-planned the proposed learning course, that is characterized by a reinforced educational and participative dimension. This aspect has been singled out as realizable and indispensable condition in order to activate educational processes rather than

just a training.

Therefore the pedagogical paradigm has been intentionally moved from an idea of knowledge prevailingly based on deductive rationality models to a kind of rationality that gives more space to dialogical and cooperative modalities, that's to say to the inferential-deductive model.

A prevailingly inductive use of the course and its didactic resources conveys attention to the individual, agrees to the instance of taking on the responsibility of one's own learning process, given that the activation of "natural knowledge", the reconnaissance of one's own mental map, the implementation of procedures trough exercises, the transfer, the process reconstruction and the generalization turn out as fundamental steps (completed exercises), that cover the "learning corridor".

The structuring of the online lab of the "Scholastic planning and project management of educational formative activities" course linked to the other online labs for "Juridical regulations of school and training systems" and "Organizational analysis and planning in school and training services" was characterized by:

1. Trimodular structure, with regular rhythmic articulation of the three phases in order to allow a gradual building of the system vision, a scenery coherent with a perspective dedicated to school managers;
2. Close connection between individual study and collaborative learning in the laboratory in order to unite knowledge domain analysis and the direct and indirect experience fabric of the students;
3. Draft of three examination papers as synthetic moments of modular activity;
4. Activity conclusion with an individual final paper, based on the collective activity and in form of an interpretation from the point of view of a manager with respect to the didactic dimension of a reality (managing role).

From the point of view of the educational processes, globally intended to the acquisition of competences, that are typical of the managing status:

1. Strengthening of analysis tools (still used in simultaneously held courses), applied on the educational offer plan as a dynamic and founding document of a school community;
2. Strengthening/acquisition of planning tools with respect to the educational offer plan from a management viewpoint (orientation and coordination function fulfillment according to the law in force);
3. Acquisition of synthetic tools, that are typical of the school manager.

The implemented tools of the virtual learning environment (Moodle pla-

tform) have been characterized by collective communication and co-planning (forum), by consultation of materials (directories, pdf resources and web pages) and by individual responsibilization (test delivery window and work group choice).

As to the online activity peculiar processes, several interaction spaces have been arranged in which students:

1. Have experienced the sharing and the negotiation of contents and significance through semi-structured discussion (interventions of the online tutor with opening, relaunch, and conclusive messages);
2. Have experienced collaborative and cooperative strategies starting from the task of carrying out a collective product using the weaving technique;
3. Have negotiated the sharing of meanings (professional and practice community) also with respect to their own professional experience, re-examined from a more decentralized viewpoint.

At the end of the course, before the final exam in presence, a lecture hall meeting was held as integral part of the overall activity. The co-presence of university teacher and tutor, consistently with the co-planning carried out at the beginning of the course, has allowed to stress and to explore partially the two aspects mentioned in the introduction, in particular the participative process as a "space" for individual and collective growth.

4 Survey questionnaire structure and analysis

It has been chosen and quantitative-qualitative integrated approach in order to allow a multi-perspective analysis.

In order to evaluate the perception of course efficiency in a participative perspective through the direct involvement of the students, an individual online questionnaire was given to them to be filled in in anonymous way.

It has been chosen a set of closed questions in order to facilitate their coding. The questionnaire has been fashioned on a set of key words meant to qualify the learning process domains. The molding has followed a bottom up procedure in order to improve a conversational style and facilitate the spontaneity of the answers (Zammuner, 2003).

Therefore, with the conclusive question, the "path" metaphor has lead to the opening item for an ex post re-examining, crossing the areas of competence, constructive (non linear) processes, cognitive and professional priorities, individual and group reflectivity, approach and transformation.

As to the data analysis, an L matrix was arranged and structured in three

matrixes with a 0/1 numeric answer code. Each line of the matrix corresponds to the item profile, while each column corresponds to a variable, that allows to read the whole of the answers given to a question by all the interviewees:
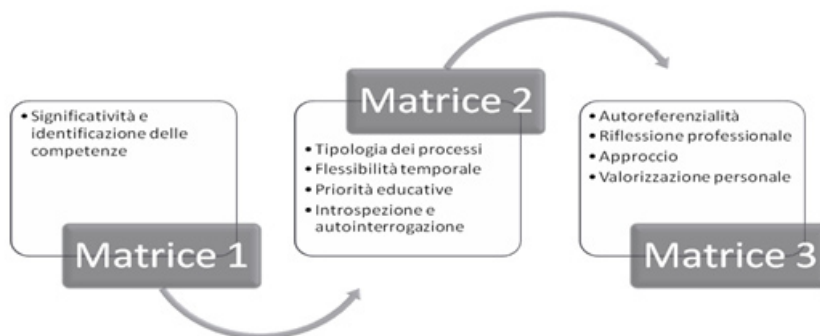

Fig. 1 - Analysis matrixes.

The matrix moved from a monovariate analysis to a multivariate one, that is to say from a descriptive analysis of the observed phenomenon to a first level of selective comprehension.

Actually the reading of the data resulting from the filling in of 33 questionnaires (on 35 attending students) has shown the following important elements:

- The improvement process (D1. 3/67%, D1. 5/64%) was characterized by increasing factors (variation of the starting situation), shared factors (distributed leadership experimentation), constructive factors (new profile production);
- The process supporting new competences was characterized by: content areas (specific contents implementation), areas of methodologies (exploration of differentiated methodological areas), transformation areas through awareness and improvement (building of new cultural and professional areas);
- Students show to understand the didactic choice not based on the content transmission (D6. 2/61%) and the identification of a collective action model, even though the attention to contents is not of minor importance (D6. 1/36% + D2. 3/24%); one third of the students perceives also the transversal self-regulative target (meant as control of cognitive, emotive, methodological, and motivational aspects) close to the professional dimension;
- The survey result confirms the perception of university structure as essentially attentive to the particular condition of the studying workers

expressed through the temporal consistency information of the online lab activities.
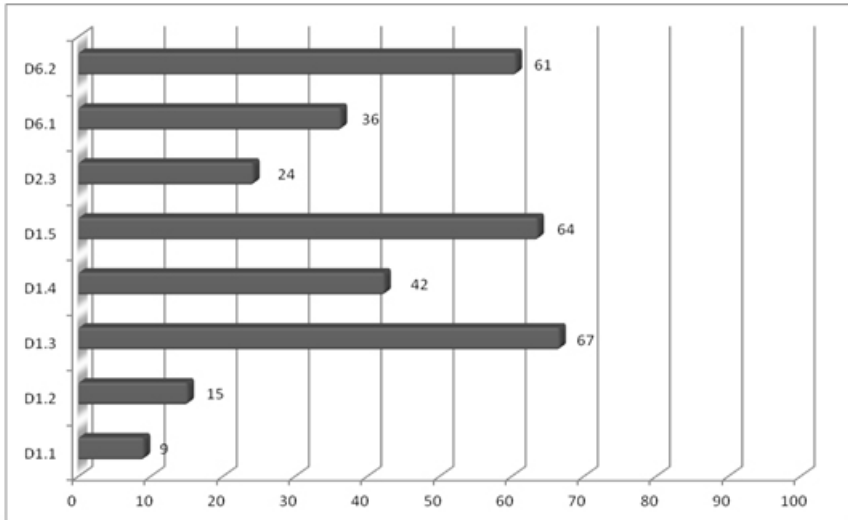

Fig. 2 - Histogram of the exemplifying questions (D) (value expressed in percentage)

The profile implemented through the course activities shows its consistency with respect to the adult training because the students:
- Noticed the prevailing presence of inferential processes;
- Understood the importance of adaptive and constructive processes rather than drilling ones;
- Understood the collective value of the course (D1. 1/9% + D1. 2/15% + D1. 4/42%), that rather than limiting the individual responsibility has strengthened it in a contest of practice and professional community.

Conclusions

In the light of what has been said, it is to notice:
- As a strength point, the important contextualization of the teaching didactic activity;
- As an improvement element, the further reinforcement of the introspection, self-regulation and self-questioning triangulation in learning processes;
- How university courses need to be more adhesive to context and educational needs of the users, that are represented in an ever increasing

measure by adults that already work and therefore require a contents and theoretical models contextualization in their professional practice. In these terms the analyzed online lab teaching intended to "build a plurality of ways of learning as conditions for a wide spreading of learning ability and to develop a reflective/proactive/critic thought" (Alberici, 2002).

Finally the students have noticed that the course operated through a specific action in improvement and individual and group transformation areas, which is the typical feature of the professional figure at the centre of this master course, the school manager.

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