

FOSTERING PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION GUIDANCE PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT: Education is a constantly ongoing process that allows individuals to interpret and transform reality. The variety of life contexts, formal, non-formal or informal, are explicitly or latently involved in this process and contribute decisively to building a personal knowledge and competence system at the basis of subjectivity. The aim of this paper is to highlight the role played by knowledge and competence arising from personal experience within profiles of professional competences, to implement possible reflective paths in higher education guidance processes.

KEYWORDS: personal knowledge and competences, higher education, subjectivity, guidance.

1. Introduction

Education is a process of acquiring a continually evolving form of one's identity that allows individuals to transform and occupy the world they live in, through the construction and use of diverse forms of knowledge able to foster their adaptation to the environment (Cambi 2010). Such a process must embrace a multitude of living conditions and experiences, and constitute an important contribution to the construction of a system of personal knowledge and competences at the basis of subjectivity (de Mennato 2003). From this perspective, human knowledge must assume a particular, existential importance, in that it is characterized by its interpretation in the world, beginning from the variety and significance of individual experiences (Bruner 1992; Neisser 1981; Polanyi 1990).

Knowledge is 'rooted' in the environment, in a relationship of co-adaptation with the mind, which cognitively and emotionally organizes knowledge (Bateson 1976) both explicitly, through formal facts and in tacit, latent ways too (Bruner 1992). At this point it is well understood that knowledge is expressed by one's own personal way of living in the world, based on individual, autobiographical repertoires that constitute a subjective key to access the real world. Consequently, each fragment of knowledge has no meaning in and

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of itself, but acquires it through the mental processes that connect new knowledge to that acquired previously (Neisser 1981), weaving a tight web between identity and alterity. In this way, human knowledge assumes a social value, in view of the circularity with which it constructs and shares itself with and between individuals; in other words, personal stories of education are realized in the light of other people's lives and experiences.

2. Processes of knowledge and development of subjectivity in higher education

With reference to the above, it is understood that students involved in higher education contexts enter the educational system 'in their wholeness', in that they bring with them personal knowledge and competences coloured by various personal epistemologies representing the way in which these relate to the system itself. Such settings, unlike other learning contexts, can create unique opportunities for contact with a vast array of knowledge, which should, ideally, facilitate individual and social experiences of all-round and self-knowledge. However, too often, individuals are not completely aware of the deeper causes that motivate their lives and educational choices, and interpret study as being isolated from other experiential contexts.

Explanations for such a division most likely hark back to the individuals' educational stories. A frequently found scholastic culture still concentrates excessively on the acquisition, retention, and repetition of content, while excluding the more intimate and personal components of learning, such as the emotional aspects. Consequently, these components are rarely recognized as the best way of supporting a meaningful learning in didactics, according to a constructivist perspective of learning processes (Cunti 2014), a perspective now backed up by scientific research in didactics and pedagogy.

Knowledge and competences developed outside formal teaching settings are understood as needing to remain separate, a concept that seems completely unsustainable, especially since every form of knowledge shifts continuously between an 'open system' of individual construction, and a 'closed system' of intersubjective and contextual construction (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1992). This means, in other words, that every form of knowledge has at the same time a *personal* value, because it is filtered by subjective processes of decodification, selection, and construction of reality, and a *social* value, since it assumes a significance in the context that produced it, which also makes it shareable and desirable to a greater or lesser extent (Bateson 1976; Maturana, Varela 1985).

The paradigmatic crisis of postmodernity (Bauman 2002) has intensified the climate of widespread distrust towards formal education, which seems to have progressively lost the ability to foster in students the competences needed to plan for the future, from both an existential and a professional perspective, decreasing the employability of students at the end of their career. If a vision of work that is generally coherent and fairly stable with its own formal education, still very socially rooted, is less and less clear or at least defined as job placement, it follows that formal education is gradually losing its appeal; this means that higher education is undergoing a lack of recognition of its value in use which, in the past, distinguished it from other forms of education, especially since it was considered a possibility for individuals to improve or enhance their own living and working conditions (Morin 2000).

The widespread crisis in which many young adults find themselves is, therefore, a difficulty in overcoming the so called *developmental tasks* (Havighurst 1953), which largely concern the construction of a life project that precedes a progressive transition to those areas of training and working that characterize adult life (Boffo, Gioli 2016). All of this is related to a negative vision of change and an inability to imagine the future, creating forms of discomfort that prompts youngsters to assume a distrustful attitude of a certain disorientation (Cunti 2008; Cunti, Priore, Bellantonio 2015).

An extremely unnatural and artificial compartmentalization of knowledge, overly analytical and fragmented, coupled with a lack of effective employability of the higher education system, requires a systemic approach to the issue. From this point of view, if individual existences are increasingly discontinuous, in the sense that they tend to change rapidly, with individuals the first to adapt to the environment (Bauman 2002, 2006), one wonders what kind of education is most suitable to overcome this *impasse*.

2. *The role of guidance processes in higher education*

Responding to the young generations' needs for the future cannot merely dissolve into the simple offering of prospects and opportunities, but requires these to be recognized as important chances by the individual. The necessity is to connect *higher education educational paths* with *employability* and *life projects* through guidance strategies that seek not only to undermine the widespread mistrust of the future, but, above all, to promote critical-reflective competences for students to imagine themselves as competent adults (Lo Presti 2015) and therefore effectively support existential transition processes from higher education to working contexts (Boffo, Gioli 2016).

The importance of guidance practices in higher education is now largely agreed upon by national and international governance policies, at least in terms of intentionality expressed on a declarative level. As a result, the fragmentation and precariousness of individual lives have prompted an important reconsideration of operational guidance strategies, revised considering theoretical paradigms of a constructivist matrix (Guichard 2005, 2012; Savickas 2002, 2005, 2015). From this perspective, the construction of a professional career is closely related to individuals' ability to adapt in a flexible manner to the flow of job events; in this sense, a current educational request seems to educate individuals to take reflexive attitudes that help them continuously define and re-define themselves in the workplace (Savickas 2015). In the dynamic construction of the Self, then, reflexivity and the exercise of metacognitive thought become a valid personal competence to be developed for the construction of a life project (Guichard, Pouyaud 2015). Today, individuals are constantly involved in dealing with various aspects of their lives and, for this reason, it is no longer conceivable to think that professional development is a totally separate field from the personal sphere, also considering that increasingly frequently, individuals are engaged in *dual careers* that see them involved in the foreground on both personal and professional levels (Arthur, Hall, Lawrence 1989; Hall 1976).

This theme is highly significant, due to the fact that nowadays, 'existential bustles' are increasingly frequent between the personal and professional spheres, which demands guidance strategies that urge the individual to deal with ever more frequent existential transitions. Guiding the subject to a personal life project, therefore, means nurturing a lifelong process of self-construction, emphasizing and articulating the various roles individuals play in their existential complexity; in this sense, guidance becomes an educational strategy to build one's own identity (Lo Presti 2015).

In the end, accessing personal knowledge and competencies also means working on professional epistemologies; personality traits and implicit theories play a key role in defining personal knowledge and contribute, often in a tacit and latent form, to the construction of changing professional profiles that seem to be necessary in a historical period strongly marked by precariousness and liquidity (Savickas 2015).

3. Fostering Personal Knowledge and Competencies in Higher Education

In the light of the above considerations, it is important to underline the prominent role of personal knowledge and competencies derived from personal experience through higher education contexts.

From a review of the literature on scientific research engines and through the use of concepts and keywords referring to the themes of interest, it emerges that a certain awareness has developed: to promote more sustainable *employability* a range of personal knowledge and competences is necessary which, if accompanied by *knowing-how skills* (Boyatzis 1982; Campbell *et al.* 1970; Jones, Lichtenstein 2000) can determine a more effective job placement. In this sense, personal knowledge and competences, individual skills and psychosocial resources make it possible to convert technical and specialist knowledge in a specific field of work into more efficient work practices (Allen, Remaekers, Van Der Velden 2005; Boyatzis 1982, 1995, 2002, 2008; Spencer and Spencer 1993); beyond the specialist skills, therefore, those acquired in other life contexts can be defined as effective *professional amplifiers* (Allen, Remaekers, Van Der Velden 2005).

Research undertaken in recent years (Boyatzis 2002, 2008; Spencer, Spencer 1993) has also highlighted the role of *emotional intelligence* (Goleman 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee 2002) in describing and predicting human behaviour in the professional field, too; from this point of view, this particular kind of intelligence is understood as a real competence capable of effectively managing conflicts in the workplace and actively tackling work-related stress (Ashkanasy, Daus 2002; Jordan *et al.* 2002; Humphrey 2002, 2006). It has also been considered that individuals with elevated levels of such intelligence are more able to handle their own and others' emotions by developing a quality of positive relationship that can expressly improve the quality of work (Wong, Law 2002). Some of the empirical evidence in certain scientific studies also asserts that personal knowledge and competences play a prominent role in improving the construct of professionalism both in terms of emotional (Goleman 1995) and relational aspects (George 2000), significantly influencing the success and effectiveness of professional careers (Sturges, Simpson, Altman 2003).

Despite the obvious benefits of much scientific evidence, higher education still seems reluctant to promote personal knowledge and competences; in this sense, university students are not yet accustomed to the development of metacognitive abilities through the exercise of critical-reflective thinking about themselves and their own education; in fact, higher education still fosters knowledge characterized by repetition in a passive and uncritical way (Busana, Banterle 2008). This is also due to the fact that many teachers consider the development of personal knowledge and competences the task of job placement offices or external experts from business contexts (Boyatzis, Stubbs, Taylor 2002); teaching programmes are still mostly structured in a traditional way, which seems in direct contrast with certain research data, according to which formal education that also considers the personal

components of individuals is capable of educating individuals who can deal more effectively with their career path, making them more motivated and result-oriented, as well as able to work better in groups (Longenecker, Ariss 2002; Zimmerman-Oster, Burkhardt 1999).

The literature examined also emphasizes the importance of incorporating the development of personal competences into the mission of higher education and the enhancement of students' personal knowledge through implementation of curricular and extra-curricular programmes (Astin, Astin 2000; Zimmerman-Oster, Burkhardt 1999). To this end, some authors (Freshwater, Stickey 2004) have suggested guidelines to foster knowledge and competences gained from personal experience in higher education programmes, in which they take on a prominent position in the exercise of critical-reflective thinking, the implementation of tutoring and mentoring activities, and the development of empathy and emotional intelligence. Only in recent years have higher education curricula welcomed this perspective (Dugan, Komives 2007); for this reason, some universities have introduced courses on ethics and skills assessment programmes.

4. Final remarks

Although there have been some appreciable changes, the biggest challenge remains to promote and enhance the role of personal knowledge and competences in university curricula, as a fundamental part of the educational process (Boyatzis, Stubb, Taylor 2002). For this reason, it is necessary to guide subjects in their life cycle through innovative teaching methodologies that can strengthen the link between the academic world and the workplace, and make learning a self-directed process (Boyatzis, Kolb 1995).

In the light of the literature, as well as a reflective and transformative theoretical framework of learning (Mezirow 1991; Schön 1991), it could prove interesting to develop the phenomenon through qualitative research methods (focus groups, semi-structured and in-depth interviews) with the aim of further revealing the significance of personal experience in the construction of professional paths. A formal educational setting designed with such a framework implies directing individuals to enter into a close bond with the processes of knowledge from which an idea of themselves and the future can arise. There is then the need to implement educational practices that can communicate personal knowledge with expanded experience, culture, formal education, and the concrete conditions that surround the living and educational environments (Lo Presti 2015).

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