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## TRANSFORMING THE UNIVERSITY THROUGH THE STUDENTS' VOICE

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It can be said that higher education systems have undergone a momentous change that has irreversibly transformed the nature, the goals, and the scientific, educational and organisational practices. In Europe, and in particular in Italy, new working scenarios and new knowledge needs have emphasised the critical factors and contradictions of curricula and strategies of university governance that are all too often fixed on theoretical-disciplinary logic. There is often no parallel attention to the pertinence with outgoing professionals, when there is a need to give the right space to all the disciplinary areas in the courses. It is not difficult to trace experiences planned more on self-referential than *workplace oriented* criteria. Thus, the challenge of producing important, relevant knowledge for social, organisational and working contexts becomes increasingly vital for universities, as well as spreading investigation devices that can produce located knowledge.

There is still a significant gap and misalignment between the world of work and university, as well as between university and the students' need for personal and professional development. Planning courses that can intercept emerging, challenging learning needs compared to current working scenarios, talking with the *stakeholders*, are further commitments that characterise current academic policies. Some aspects of the new university set up could be summarised in a few dichotomies: user-client, general-located, vertical-transverse.

**User-client:** The students are no longer just subjects who use a service, but are the holders of wider, more complex interests than in the past. Parents' expectations, students' professional ambitions, personal attitudes and students' critical factors and fragilities all contribute to the students' expectations of university. More so than in the past, universities today must answer questions of knowledge, but also of care, support, specialisation and integration. If we look at the profiles of the current university students, we find that they have partly changed their status. They have become student-clients, with more awareness of what the organisation must guarantee in terms of learning and services, have different learning needs, have knowledge-gathering tools that can give value to services through national and international rankings of universities, pay more attention to a balanced evaluation of the costs and benefits (taxes vs occupancy, distance from home vs services offered, cultural vivacity vs safety).

**General-located:** Those who work in university environments know that it is not easy to change the attachment that teachers have about an idea of general and universal knowledge, that can go well for any course or any classroom. Many academic communities share unique meaning systems, where a view of education as a job of *knowledge delivery* remains central and where the student's learning is mainly seen as an individual process that is independent of any kind of social involvement. From a view of knowledge as a skill that must be exercised and then evaluated in a decontextualized way, the idea that knowledge is located and therefore anchored in contexts, practices and material and immaterial located restrictions becomes central.

**Vertical-transverse:** Both the economic world and in the European Union (EU), have supported various initiatives to help the development of transverse skills that are useful for staff to carry out active citizenship and to increase social inclusion and employment. Essential tools in these directions were identifying key skills in 2006 and a European reference framework on qualifications and academic certificates in 2008. The university is pushed in this direction to plan

programmes that can support the acquisition of strictly specialised or technical-professional abilities, and “soft” or “transverse” skills.

### **Challenges in the Italian University System**

Like any other organisation, the directions of innovation that are taking over the Italian universities are not straight (Raelin, 2000), or even expected.

Alongside routines that have difficulty changing, there are promising views that interpret the university's priorities in different ways, cohabiting and expanding. New awareness has emerged: a) the use of research as a transformational and collaborative process; b) the enhancement of professional knowledge; c) the professionalization of knowledge; d) training professionals whose skills are not just anchored in knowledge of the subject, but also in the students' informal learning. Knowing how to work in a group, managing to solve problems, knowing how to face improvisations and uncertainties that are part of working practices, being a leader or more simply, knowing how to write a report, are just some of the skills that universities are trying to offer across the board to the subject sectors and specific professional areas.

These new areas of interest outline promising openings so that universities can learn from their own experience and from critical incidents that occur and have been experienced in recent years. It could be said that we are in a phase in which universities are questioning their devices, routines and premises that govern their strategies: governance, research, teaching, and relations with the world of employment (DeMillo, 2015). We are seeing and have seen a critical, reflective validation process (Boud, Cressey, & Docherty, 2006) of systems of meaning and activities embedded in the university organisational system (Yorks & Marsick, 2000). Who can plan a course today without taking into consideration an outgoing professional figure, asking what is in the organisational routines that no longer works? Making a decision requires that the leadership and often the entire academic community questions its own usual methods for working and interpreting problems.

Urged on by university reform and the changes in economic contexts, new spaces have opened up for discussions that have required the adoption of different codes for speaking, sharing and resolving problems that are apparently only ‘technical.’ Students and their families have become more central in teaching-learning processes. What was routine a few years ago, today is the subject of negotiation for identifying attractive professional profiles, for planning sustainable study courses that can offer education that can win over clients, research commissioners, and partners for projects.

### **Opening a dialogic way with students: The case of the Department of Education, University of Siena**

It all began about three years ago when the new director, Loretta Fabbri, arrived at the Department of Educational Sciences, and I was given the role of Learning Representative for the Department. The scenario was challenging, as there were no organisational routines ready to respond to the new requirements of the new university set up. After some months of ordinary management at the department, there were mainly two incentives that created innovation. On the one side, the meeting and exchange of ideas, practices and examples among colleagues of other Italian and overseas universities. For different reasons, we met colleagues from other universities

and continents that allowed us to understand how what was normal for us could be done by following other criteria and methods. This partly created a collective validation of the positive things that had been done up to that moment. Thanks to the meeting with other experiences we managed to give a name to our practices and our ideas: student voice, work related learning, base centred learning, etc.

Exchanges like these often lead to new ideas and energies required to experiment with unusual practices. New work prospects with the students opened up to us. For example, we promoted research on students' university life with a group of students. The results of this survey helped the institutionalisation of spaces dedicated to collective study, group work and self-learning. Following this research, we created a space where the department students could talk out loud, discuss, find books on the open shelves, relax and make study a socially shared experience. If on the one hand, research has speeded up learning innovation processes, it allowed us to highlight some critical factors. The students provided unmistakable feedback. From a questionnaire handed out to about 200 students, it emerged that there is still too much distance between theories and tangible problems, that there is a need to discuss and not just to listen, that it is important for students to be validated even more for making proposals to governance bodies. The group of students that took part in this research has become an especially important observatory over time, a kind of forum for the development of the department. The initial group of students was a problem-solving community made up of students who are experts on university life and active players in governance, which can socialise the knowledge acquired at a wider organisational level (O'Neil & Marsick, 2009).

However, by creating space for students it also makes sense to replan teachers' space (Van de Ven, 2007). Student participation in university life, the thematisation of their right to live university beyond the classrooms, corridors and library, have proven to be important reference points for starting new willingness to change. To provide new study space for students, teachers' space was reduced. Sharing offices with other colleagues, being willing to reduce space available, has been a goal not always shared but accepted as it was part of a broader project of change (Adler, Shani, & Styhre, 2004). Sometimes, innovation occurs in the promotion of unusual evolution trajectories, in which the traditional criteria aimed at enhancing the roles rather than commitment or skills no longer apply. In the case study described here, the second trajectory was followed, initially involving the students as facilitators of the project. Students become the spokespeople of a problematic situation where university education not only intercepts the problems that they will then face at the end of studies, but finds it hard to introduce knowledge, experience, and examples capable of helping them to set their future professional during their university path.

The first contradictions emerged from the final report drawn up at the end of this experience: education too far from the tangible problems of the world of employment, an environment with limited resources for socialisation, classic teaching spaces with a low inclination for group work, the aesthetics of the environments far from young people's ideas.

This document has been configured as a useful item for encouraging further reflective action of the academic community: it was presented to the education committee and discussed at the department board. This hailed the start of the replanning of spaces and the creation of Campus Lab, the renovation of a garden-café, the extension of classrooms with mobile seats and tables, the planning of new extra-curricular initiatives to support the acquisition of transverse skills: the ability to work in a group, critical thought, a capacity to communicate, self-entrepreneurship.

The replanning of the wide setting of learning (the total area of the department and not just the classroom) has allowed elements of the project in order to catalyse the development of the community. Giving a voice to the students for the academic community meant interpreting educational innovation as a part of a broader renewal of rewriting the community. It was necessary to anchor the innovation project to communities that could validate, inspire and develop it over time. However, research also gave the student community the way to validate their pre-understandings about university. For example, the joint participation in planning the department spaces has urged students to see the connection between the micro dimension and the macro dimension of the university, to carefully evaluate the communication impact and the economic sustainability of ideas, to consider the compatibility of an idea with the time available, to develop strategies that are functional for working in a product-oriented team.

### Three strategies to engage students and promote innovation in your department

Giving a voice to students means for us involving them and aiding their participation in innovative practices, trying to respect and balance their skills with the department's overall strategy. There were basically three theories/approaches to which we referred: student voice (Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013), transformative learning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). It is compared to these three theoretical backgrounds that the four examples of strategies adopted and experimented in the Department of Education Sciences of the University of Siena are given below. These are some work methods, sometimes used in a non-homogeneous way in this project and only systematised in order to make them more transferable.

#### Being a fly on the wall

Those working at the university often appoint externals or carry out activities on behalf of economic or institutional subjects. When there are no clear reasons to believe that a student's presence can significantly change the setting, these are the opportunities for giving the students a voice, asking them to do simple but effective jobs. One day, for example, I was appointed by UNICEF to carry out a training course for high school teachers on the subject of bullying. The course lasted 16 hours, four meetings of four hours each. Therefore, during my academic lesson, I asked who was available to take part and work alongside me in this external training activity. Three students accepted. I asked them to not intervene during the training days, but to help me draw up feedback. I also asked them to "be flies on the wall" (Brookfield, 2012) and use the grid below for each training day in order to focus attention only on some aspects of this experience.

| First day   | Second day  | Third day  | Fourth day  |
|---|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did the teacher organise the lesson?</li> <li>- What role did the participants have?</li> <li>- What were the strengths and weaknesses in the organisation of the lesson?</li> <li>- What did you learn from this first experience as an observing student?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did the teacher organise the second lesson?</li> <li>- What has changed compared to lesson no. 1?</li> <li>- What were the strengths and weaknesses in the organisation of the lesson?</li> <li>- If you were the teacher, what would you have changed and why?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did the teacher organise the lesson?</li> <li>- What worked and what didn't work?</li> <li>- How would you organise the last lesson?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Which skills do you need to manage a training course such as this one alone?</li> <li>- How would you develop them?</li> </ul> |

Giving the students a voice in this case meant involving them in an activity, providing them with a peripheral observation opportunity. However, this opportunity was also configured as a type of learning for the course teacher. At the end of the course I took the material written by the students and we discussed what they had drawn up together. Many of the suggestions allowed me to understand some of the mistakes that I had made in planning the activity. The students confessed that they had finally understood who the trainer was, what skills he needed and what difficulties adults create during a classroom training session. Some of them thus chose to go to work with children in the future, others continued with their studies for adult education.

**Creating a ‘student springboard’ within a conference**

While it is common in international networks for students to access sessions where different types of papers or works are presented, when the range is reduced to local networks, or work groups within a department, these opportunities are much rarer. A promising experience we tested was to create a special session at a conference where the students could return the results of a work that they had organised themselves during the year. In this specific case, it was a conference focused on the innovation of university teaching. The students were supported in the months prior to this by a tutor for the drafting of a report that could identify topics or problems to be shared with the university teachers at the conference. The students were accompanied on a path of drawing up a “cultural artefact” that reasoned out a work that they had already carried out. The teacher followed four steps wherein each student worked in small groups, formalising the research carried out during the previous years of university study.

| Step 1   | Step 2   | Step 3   | Step 4  |
|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creation of an on-line environment to share materials</li> <li>- Construction of heterogeneous groups</li> <li>- The tutor’s work with the role of catalyst for the group of students and help for processing the problem.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Distribution of materials useful for focusing and developing the problem</li> <li>- Drafting of a group by the group</li> <li>- Validation by the other groups (peer review)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drawing up of final report</li> <li>- Drafting of the presentation</li> <li>- Division of work with a view to the conference</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presentation at the conference</li> <li>- Final debriefing with the tutor</li> </ul> |

In the case of the Department of Educational Science, the experience was carried out in April 2016 and involved about 10 students as part of the conference on “Transforming Teaching Methods and Assessment in Higher Education.” Some of the ideas that emerged from this day laid the foundations and aided the creation of new projects and new paths of work within the department. Below one in particular is illustrated.

**The student researcher**

When we think about the practices used in research, we rarely include a student or group of students in this vision that do it together with us. The student is either the object of research or is the subject on whom the results of the enquiry are laid. In spite of this, we often describe the student as an epistemic subject to emphasise the constructive nature with which he generates knowledge. We rarely authorise him to enter our research practices, as if he would threaten our academic power. We often believe ourselves to be good teachers or educators without realising the power we have inside the formal education settings (Brookfield, 2012).

Involving students in some research activities is described as a promising approach to overcome both critical factors: enhancing the student's knowledge potential and distributing power within the learning setting.

Two areas can be found in universities where the students can carry out research together with the teacher: research aimed at producing data useful for making decisions about strategic department problems; and research aimed at writing the final dissertation defined together with an external organisation — a company, for example.

Below is an example of 'syllabus' inspired by the "student researcher" approach. This is an example of how various work phases were scheduled as part of a course on general pedagogy, in order to support the students in producing data to be used for organisational innovation:

1. use an 'active learning' approach in our courses and try to support a 'transformation' in the students' perspectives asking them to plan and develop a research project;
2. plan the innovation of the Department following a bottom-up strategy in accordance with the students.

The class was organized in groups of 5-6 students and each group worked following the procedure described below:

| Processes   | Requests to the students  | Outcome  | Learning setting   | Time % |
|---|---|--|--|--------|
| <i>Defining the problem</i>                                 | Use your experience to identify a problem that concerns the Department or define a problem with an external stakeholder | A clear description of the focus and the purposes of the research work.<br>Which problems exactly you want to solve?         | Work in small groups, free debate<br>Setting: in the classroom<br>In an external context (family, workplace, etc.), interview with the stakeholder. Setting: outside the classroom | 5%     |
| <i>Validating the research focus</i>                        | Share the research object with the professor of the course and the Director of the Department                           | A description of the research object aligned both with the students' needs and the Department needs or the stakeholder needs | Informal meetings with the Director or the stakeholder<br>Place: outside the classroom   | 5%     |
| <i>Defining the background theory</i>                       | Chose a theory that can be useful to define the units of analysis, and to form your personal points of view             | A short paper on the core concepts of the theory   | Outside the classroom, small groups, free literature review  | 20%    |
| <i>Choosing the methodology, sample, tools (interviews,</i> | Read material provided by the teacher and draw a concept map  | A mind map of the chosen methodological approaches   | In the classroom, plenary sessions   | 15%    |

|   |  |                                      |   |     |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|---|-----|
| <i>questionnaires...)</i>                                 |  |                                      |   |     |
| <i>Carrying out the research</i>                          | Contact the subjects, collect the data                           | Qualitative or quantitative datasets | Outside the classrooms, individual or group activities                | 25% |
| <i>Interpreting the data</i>                              | Make sense of the data with the support of the provided examples | First draft of the paper             | In the classroom, small groups  | 15% |
| <i>Tutoring</i>   | Validate your research with the community                        | Final paper                          | Outside the classrooms, small groups with the supervision of teachers | 10% |
| <i>Plenary session with 'stakeholders' or 'costumers'</i> | Learn how to show your research in 15 minutes                    | Power point presentation             | Final contest, small groups   | 5%  |

## Conclusions

There are many roads already taken and validated in literature to increase the involvement of students in our university contexts. This background contains a shared idea that “participating” does not mean “learning” and that there are at least three conditions to be met in order to make an experience a moment of personal and/or professional growth:

1. Students' participation in new practices, research, collaboration, work does not necessarily ensure that they learn. Learning from practice is a difficult experience, which often requires support and help. Whether these are tutors, on-line tools, experts, professionals, learning requires a scaffolding structure;
2. The results of students' reflections must be formalised in a material item (a report, a learning object, a presentation) and must be shared with suitable organisational levels. If the students' voice does not reach the right people or groups, it risks remaining unheard;
3. Work protocols with the students must include informal moments, and they must be carried out inside and also outside university structures. The teacher who acts within this perspective makes research, collaboration and the drafting of a report a strict activity but one that is also enjoyable and interesting.

There is no doubt that when we manage to set up group work that involves students in new topics and we allow their points of view to emerge, the research has a good possibility of increasing its impact. When we lose contact with students, we risk giving or organising very interesting lessons to students who no longer exist, whom we have old ideas about. The image that we have of today's students probably risks being too anchored to our experience of past students who are now teachers.

Although several goals and milestones can be reached without any action aimed at involving the students, actually there is no reason to not try to have a closer relationship with the students' mind and practices. Currently, as much as research has progressed, there are no counter-indications in literature.

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