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STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP: THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ITALIAN PROJECT EMPLOYABILITY & COMPETENCES

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The *Europe 2020 Strategy*, its Flagship Initiatives, and the new Integrated Guidelines put knowledge at the heart of the European Union's efforts for achieving smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2011). The communication of the European Commission about the modernization process of higher education (HE) starts with this call to action and highlights the key issues for Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) in order to fulfil their crucial role in society. Within this general political framework outlined by European documents, we focus on the main points related to teaching and learning processes and methods.

First, the agenda for the modernization of Europe's HE system (European Commission, 2011) underlines the need to improve the quality and relevance of HE by involving employers and labour market institutions in the design and delivery of study programs and the promotion of a great variety of study modalities (e.g. part-time, distance, and modular learning, continuing education for adult returners and others already in the labour market). Second, the European Union encourages institutions "[to make] the knowledge triangle work: linking higher education, research and business for excellence and regional development" (p. 7). This will be possible by stimulating "the development of entrepreneurial, creative and innovation skills in all disciplines and in all academic programs, and promote innovation in higher education through more interactive learning environments and strengthened knowledge-transfer infrastructure" (p. 7). This includes encouraging partnerships and cooperation with the business world, as well. Third, the document highlights the need for "putting Higher Education at the centre of innovation, job creation and employability" (p. 12) through various activities supported by European funds (e.g., knowledge alliances between universities and business, mobility of teaching staff and students, etc.).

The Report on *Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions* (European Commission, 2013) examines ways to enhance the quality of higher education, combining expert views and European universities' practices. The report underscores that many countries are asking students for their feedback, but the way in which their feedback has had an impact and creates change is not yet clear. In fact, the report states, "Higher education institutions need to create environments and feedback mechanisms and systems to allow students' views, learning experience, and their performance to be taken into account" (p. 28). Another key recommendation is about the involvement of students and business in curricular design: "curricula should be developed and monitored through dialogue and partnerships among teaching staff, students, graduates and labour market actors, drawing on new methods of teaching

and learning, so that students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability” (p. 41). Furthermore, the report states, “Higher education institutions and national policy makers in partnership with students should establish counselling, guidance, mentoring and tracking systems to support students into higher education, and on their way to graduation and beyond” (p. 45). In response, a consortium of universities and researchers, called Emp&Co (*Employability and Competences*) was created. The project involves four Italian Universities (Padova, Firenze, Siena, and Napoli Parthenope), and the research group is focusing on the innovation of teaching and learning methods and promotion of participatory teaching and learning methods in order to modernize university didactics, to promote partnership between students and faculty, and to encourage employability. Emp&Co has endeavoured to answer the European Union’s calls to action by researching teaching and learning methods, placement and internships, and strategies to develop dialogue, cooperation, and partnership.

Research

The research by Emp&Co was carried out starting from an analysis of literature that was mainly based on three specific theoretical directions. The first is *Learner Centered Teaching* (Weimer, 2013), a theoretical frame that combines several different approaches and makes them communicate, which promote teaching through the use of participatory didactics (Brockett, 2015; Spalding, 2014), as the teacher and student find themselves in a collaborative dimension and in an authentic relationship (Cranton, 2006). The key ingredients for this approach are: *the role of the teacher, the balance of power, the function of content, the responsibility for learning and the purpose and processes of evaluation* (Hattie, 2012; Nicol, 2013, Weimer 2013).

Developing learning that involves the students through types of partnerships with the teachers produces benefits for both the players involved in the process and for the organisation that grows together with the people. With regard to the teachers and their experience, involving the students transforms teaching practices, giving both sides the possibility to experiment a high level of thought and critical reflection (Kreber 2012; Taylor & Cranton 2012).

The second theoretical framework explored, which is less known to higher education teaching experts, is that of *Personalized Learning*, which is also central for the development of the research that we are conducting (e.g. Hartley, 2003, 2007; Shaikh & Khoja, 2012; Waldeck, 2007). It is seen conceptually as tightening the “connections between students and their learning environments (teachers, other adults, student peers, curriculum and overall school culture)” (McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010, p. 1).

The third theoretical reference is *Student Voice* that ratifies the *centrality of the person learning* and even more so, that *protagonism of the student* in educational contexts, that *Student Voice* (Cook-Sather, 2002; Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011; Fielding, 2004, 2012; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004)

considers to be a vital factor for improving teaching practices. This perspective has aimed at enhancing and promoting the role of students in schools and universities for over twenty years.

Based on this multiple theoretical framework, we wished to investigate to what extent teaching was participatory in the universities involved in the research, but above all, we wished to listen to the students' point of view through the creation and administration of a questionnaire that aimed to explore the following teaching areas:

1. The organisation of teaching;
2. The creation of a participatory environment;
3. Learning methods and resources;
4. Feedback and Evaluation;
5. Learning and dialogue with the world of work.

The aim is to acquire a clear picture of the learning situation in higher education in our country, and the questions that guided us in this first phase were: "How is it possible to explore the present status of the use and expertise of teaching and learning methods by the instructors in our university context?" and "How do students perceive use and expertise of teaching and learning methods utilized by their instructors"?

The research involved 3,760 students (2,453 F equal to 65.2% and 1,307 M equal to 34.8%) starting from a total number of approximately 50,000 students who received the invitation to complete the questionnaire via the Moodle platform for the *Emp&Co* project.

Some final reflections

Student Voice encourages relationships and partnerships between students and instructors (Cook-Sather, & Luz, 2015; Fedeli, Felisatti & Giampaolo, 2013, 2014; Grion & Cook Sather, 2013; Seale, 2009) and aims to create a participatory environment where students and teachers become partners in the planning and realisation of teaching practices. In our study we discovered that only a few teachers collaborate with the students and share the path they are proposing from the start. This aspect is even more highlighted when looking at data that underline the rarity of participatory, student-centred learning.

If we remain on the subject of methodology, we would like to underline a few factors, particularly the ones that were found to be most lacking in the research, to draw teachers' and students' attention to them. In particular we want to highlight the importance of promoting *active listening* between teachers and students with regard to reciprocal requests made both inside and outside the classroom, a *significant involvement* by all players present in the learning process and *sharing experiences*. The construction of *authentic relationships*, that create a learning

environment based on trust and reciprocal respect, with an integrated *feedback and evaluation* system that is built together. A *management of power* that is shared and critically thought out depending on the learning. These aspects are a part of a complex methodological dimension that should *accompany the interaction between teachers and students to aid significant learning and* critical reflection all through study, and even more so in life.

We involved the students in this perspective from the start, not just by administering the questionnaire, but also in participating in research meetings, conferences and study groups. This continuous exchange of activity created a good level of dialogue, shared management of responsibilities, and great attention to the voices of those people who are the object of the research in these projects, but who are not involved as active subjects.

A tangible example of what we have said above is the creation of this *special issue* that includes a report on the results of one of the conferences organised as part of the *Emp&Co* project in which teachers and research students present some key elements of participatory teaching, such as: Effective Feedback, Active Listening, Participatory Teaching and Learning Methods as areas of research and the perspectives of students and teachers who wish to improve university teaching.

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