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OPENING THE PARTNERSHIP TO STUDENTS, FACULTY AND ORGANIZATIONS: THE “COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH” EXPERIENCE

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Subject-based research and inquiry: an Italian experience

As part of the picture of participatory, student-centred learning and the learning process (Weimer, 2013), considerable experiences of *student-faculty partnerships* (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014) and *engagement through partnership* (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014) are emerging with increased frequency and greater impact, which are centred on the participation of *students as partners* in education or in the development of research projects (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Healey, 2005; Jenkins & Healey, 2005).

Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014) define *student-faculty partnership* as a “collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (pp. 6–7). This is a process of collaboration based on reciprocity that places the following as some key elements that have been highlighted in literature: 1) trust and respect, 2) shared power, 3) shared risk, and 4) shared learning (Bird & Koirala, 2002) that can be acknowledged as being the basis for any partnership process, regardless of the subjects involved in them.

The partnership is the protagonist of the experience described here, which refers specifically to one of the *student-faculty partnerships* identified by Healey – who mapped out more than one hundred worldwide in his studies – together with Flint and Harrington (2014) and referring to *subject-based research and inquiry*. In this area, the authors highlight the involvement of students in research projects connected with subject content for their study course or similar to the professional area that they are studying for and preparing to work in.

On this matter, an Italian research-partnership experience has been developed since 2008 at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology of the University of Padua within the framework of the *PARIMUN Project – Parternariato Attivo di Ricerca Imprese-UNiversità* (Active Partnership of Research between University and Organizations) (Frison & Munari, 2012). PARIMUN project supports experiences of cooperation between humanistic programs and business organizations. It involves master students in Lifelong Education Sciences and Management of Educational Services, who plan their master’s degree dissertation according with companies located in the North East of Italy, where Padua University has its seat. The dissertation design starts from a question, a need, or just an interest proposed by the organizational representatives on the subject of lifelong learning, human resources management, adult education, teaching, learning, and training methods, evaluation, and assessment. In this way master’s students, guided by academic supervisors (teachers), are engaged in a knowledge co-design process which goes from the research design to the construction of research tools, to the dissemination of results spread with the active support of all partners involved, university and organizations.

The partnership process is therefore at the centre of this project that involved not just students and teachers, but also a third player, i.e. the contacts in partner organisations, usually human resources managers or socio-educational services manager, depending on the area of study that the project is part of.

The PARIMUN Project: a triangulation of players

The process started up by the PARIMUN project can be described as a triangulation of players (see figure 1) that rotates around a common element for all and for which each of them is asked to make their own contribution: the research. As this involves the writing of a thesis, it is the student in particular who is the protagonist of this process and who mediates the relationship between university (represented by his supervisor) and organisations (represented by the company contact person), who are linked in the figure below by a dotted line, meaning a less direct, less intense relationship than the one that the student has with them (Munari, 2007).

To the contrary, as the thesis project is born from a need or interest proposed by the organisation, the relationship between the student and his company interlocutor can be seen as closer and more direct than the one that the student about to graduate has with his university supervisor. This is not just due to the student’s considerable investment of time in the organisational context (to hand out questionnaires, carry out interviews or observations and anything else that the research may involve), but also due to the investment of learning and emotions that the experience of entering an organisation requires, something that is often happening for the first time.

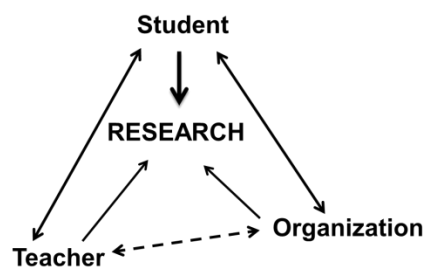


Figure 1: Representation of the teachers-students-company contacts partnership that characterises the PARIMUN project (Source: Munari, 2007)

This triangular dynamic, therefore, is based on the identification elements of the research in partnership, or rather, as it is defined in literature, of *collaborative research* (Commission of the European Communities, 2009; EUA, ProTon Europe, EARTO, & EIRMA, 2009; Frison, 2015). With particular reference to the definition provided by EUA, ProTon Europe, EARTO, & EIRMA (2009), they are therefore “activities where several parties are engaged in research towards shared objectives, collectively building on their individual background and side ground in the creation of new foreground knowledge” (p. 5). In the particular case of PARIMUN, the partnership research starts with the creation of collaboration with one or more organisations interested in developing a given realm of knowledge with the university and its students, and exploring and experimenting the possible operational repercussions (Frison, 2015).

From a methodological perspective, the intervention-research strategy (Baron, 2008; Mérini & Ponté, 2008; Gilardi & Bruno, 2006) has inspired the PARIMUN approach. As Gillet and Tremblay (2001) highlight, there are numerous research methodologies based on a close and profitable relationship with the “field” and practical situations: the action-research, the intervention-research, the collaborative research, the participatory research, as well as the co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001) and the community action research (Senge & Scharmer, 2001), all of them having in common a generative partnership between researchers and professionals of enterprises, public services, associations, communities, etc. (Frison, 2014).

Furthermore, the research partnerships offer reflective opportunities as learning partnership (Delahaye & Choy, 2008) and occasions of research-based learning (Griffiths, 2004; Healey, 2005; Jenkins & Healey, 2005) and reflective practice, based on the particular relationship

between researcher and participants, according with action-research principles (Lewin, 1948; Gilardi & Bruno, 2006). From this point of view, collaborative research can be traced to *inquiry guided learning*, an inductive teaching strategy (Prince & Felder, 2006) where the student is faced with real or realistic problems and immerses him/her in a dimension of experience and situations (Fedeli, Frison, & Grion, 2016). *Inquiry-guided learning* recognises the potential of research as a learning strategy and encourages the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and aptitudes through the investigation of problems and open questions that are susceptible to being addressed and developed by following several directions that do not lead to a sure, unique answer (Lee, 2012).

Key elements of the student-faculty partnership in the PARIMUN project

To date, the experience of the PARIMUN project has been observed and studied with the intention of gathering evidence of its effects on student learning (Frison, 2011, 2014; Munari, 2011, 2014) and the reactions of organisations to this proposal for collaboration with the university and, more specifically, with humanities and educational research (Frison, 2013). The intention, therefore, is to consider the *student-faculty partnership*, that involves teachers and students actively and jointly collaborating to answer the requests of organisations.

Below are some particular elements of the partnership dynamics:

First of all, *the sharing of responsibilities and power*. In the triangulation described above, the teacher's role evolves and changes. It is no longer expert, centred on content and on teaching according to the "sage on the stage" model, who offers the student his own expertise, but is rather a facilitator, a companion in a process that sees both student and teacher work together in response to an organisational request coming from the "field." The empirical nature of the inquiry problem requires the production of a tailor-made intervention, guided at a distance by the teacher through his methodological expertise, but starting with the information and perspectives that the student acquires from being immersed in the field itself. As Cook-Sather, Bovill (2014), and Felten state, "partnership positions both students and faculty as learners as well as teachers" (p. 7). Given the complexity of the real, current and multi-disciplinary problems that organisational life brings to the attention of the university, the teacher and the student *learn* together from the contexts that evolve rapidly, with rhythms and levels of complexity that challenge academic competence, and thus enrich it.

Moreover, collaborative research presumes that all the partners involved — and the students are one of the partners involved in the research — actively and equally take part in the focus definition process and in designing the research itself. It also assumes that all the players, academic and non, contribute to the shared construction of knowledge process, a process that is both scientifically based on the one hand, but anchored by the questions and tangible problems of the above-mentioned organisational context on the other (Frison, 2015). It is the student's active responsibility, as part of this joint-participation, to guarantee the transfer of precise, efficient information between university and organisations. *Communication management* can therefore be identified as a second key element in the partnership dynamics of the PARIMUN project, and concerns both teacher and student. In developing a collaborative research project, it is essential to pay attention to the regular diffusion of information to all the parties involved and at all levels (Munari, 2012). It is therefore necessary to understand that it is the company interlocutor who processes the information to be transmitted, and who divulges it and in which way. It is also necessary to understand if and how this information is transmitted and if it is received by all the interested parties. Dual language is required for this: scientific on the one hand, that will support the writing of a research report and a graduation dissertation offered to

the academic community, but also corporate on the other, in order translate and formulate the theoretical and methodological terminology so that it can be accepted and enhanced by non-academic and can become the organisational players’ heritage. This exercise of “translation” clearly involves teachers and students and is the foundation of achieving an efficient partnership between universities and organisations.

A third necessary element could be defined in the terms of *expanding the academic relationship*. The relationship between teacher and student is no longer a solely “scientific” relationship, mediated by its content, wherein it is the teacher who holds a position of “superiority.” It is rather a relationship mediated by several factors, from the investigation problem to the organisational context, to the problems that may hinder the student within the organisation (difficulty in communication, organisational changes etc.). In the partnership, the teacher becomes a support, accompanying figure and the type of reflection that in the development of *action research* were directed at the practitioners involved in an *empowering participation* and in a *co-generative dialogue* may be extended to the student (Elden & Levin, 1991).

A fourth and final element concerns the *effects of this dynamic on didactics as well as on planning and delivery of teaching*. As a learning experience, collaborative research includes the development of skills such as problem-solving, self-management, entrepreneurship for the student and changes in didactics such as teaching courses and strategies that are focused on operational problems brought up by the organisations involved, on the academic side (Borrell-Damian, Morais & Smith, 2014). On this matter, the *work-related* dimension of the partnership is expanded by the non-reversibility of research in and with the organisations and of actions carried out within it. This is for all three players involved, but above all for the graduating student-researchers, a real experience that requires everyone to go beyond the boundaries and prejudices that “simulation” may maintain (Frison, 2015). It also offers the student the opportunity to project academic knowledge outside, to the organisational world and the professions. Students are thus urged to rethink knowledge by collaborative research and recombine it to put tangible solutions into action and it is through this very projection activity that collaborative research and university-company cooperation become opportunities — bridges to aid the changeover from the academic dimension to that professional dimension. In this perspective, Borrell-Damian, Morais & Smith (2014) also point out how collaboration can favour the planning and delivery of teaching, degree courses or PhD programmes, devised together by universities and organisations, starting with active participation and testimonials brought by the students in this process.

Of the effects on didactics and on the delivery of study courses and teaching, we can mention the experience of *Expo Thesis 2016*, a dedicated event for the spreading of collaborative research projects that are currently active in course of *Management of Educational Services and Lifelong Learning* and the spreading of their results. For the preparation of the event, and with a view to enhancing and expanding the teacher-student-organisation partnership, each student about to graduate was invited to create a presentation poster on the progress of his own dissertation, sharing the structure with his own company contact person and with the supervisor (see some photographs of students and company contacts taking part in the event in figures 2, 3 and 4).



Figure 2 The group of PARIMUN's students involved in the 2016 edition of *Expo Thesis*



Figures 3 and 4 Students and organizational representatives involved in the 2016 edition of Expo Thesis

Conclusions

Collaborative research is only one of the possible strategies that the university can offer and adopt to encourage student-faculty partnership experiences and practices and, as in this case, students-faculty-organization partnership. If we think about it, this is a strategy used in activities that the universities already offer: in the case of collaborative research, we could speak of a kind of evolution and expansion of degree dissertations, a mandatory step that teachers and students have to take together. There are many other moments and activities that students and teachers share: lessons, of course, exams, accompanying the work experience or placements, dissertations, as already highlighted. These are mandatory macro phases of academic life for both sides. Rethinking them in terms of student-faculty partnerships means rethinking them by giving students an active role, acknowledging them for who they really are, i.e. the true protagonists of these macro phases that are a typical characteristic of their academic path. It is not, therefore an action of promoting especially constructed activities. It does mean rethinking moments and initiatives that are already an integral part of academic life using a new approach, so that they acquire a new form if launched again and undertaken under the perspective of students-faculty partnerships.

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