Coaching and Teachers Training. An Overview of “HSH” Project in Lombardy

Serena Triacca
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano – Italy
serena.triacca@unicatt.it

Simona Ferrari
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano – Italy
simona.ferrari@unicatt.it

Pier Cesare Rivoltella
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano – Italy
piercesare.rivoltella@unicatt.it

This paper is about a research and training project, promoted by Regional Office of the Ministry of Education, that CREMIT addressed to hospital-school-home teachers of Lombardy. To face the organizational changes in the hospital school system and the adoption of new technology to support teaching and learning, beside an action-research process, the «BLEC model» was adopted for training: BL is for blended learning, E for e-tivity and C for coaching. The presence of the coaches was of key-importance: the function of this kind of expert is located halfway between that of the e-tutor and that of the consultant, acting by virtue of an external perspective and able to guide the processes. All the actions implemented by coaches to foster reflection were essential for the professional developement. The results in effect confirm an overall satisfaction about the learning experience, especially in regard to the «BLEC model», to the spendability of the gained knowledge directly into the professional context, to the opportunity of keep in contact with new colleagues.

KEYWORDS: Coaching, education technology, hospital-school-home, professional development, teacher training.

Serena Triacca, Main Researcher; she wrote §§ 1, 2, 3, 3.2; Simona Ferrari, Methodological Coordinator of the Research Project; she set the methodology of the research and wrote § 3.1; Pier Cesare Rivoltella, Scientific Coordinator of the Research Project; he wrote § 4.
1. Italian models of teachers training and ICT

It is well known that the continuous professional development of teachers represents a quite complex subject in regard to different points, first the crisis of the traditional «refresher courses», standardized and lecture-driven (Cattaneo & Rivoltella, 2010) and the demand for more customized training actions, far from out-of-contexts theoretical systems.

Identified the Education Technology as strategical for the development of innovation and teachers training in the Information Society, we want to recall in brief some training proposal designed by Indire\(^1\), concerning the use of ICT in school since the early 2000s.

The national plan called “ForTIC” aimed at technological literacy to achieve the European Computer Driving Licence. At the same time, with a project addressed to new hires, the “Puntoedu model” was implemented (Faggioli, 2005), characterized by a blended learning formula, with classroom meetings mixed with online activities, under the guidance of e-tutors. Ensure uniformity of training to the staff in the regional landscape and force uses and thoughts about the technologies were the main objectives. From 2002 to 2005, the Puntoedu model was also adopted for training in-service teachers and school heads.

The training model in those years increased the levels of technology utilization, but struggled to ramp up the development of the teaching competence; learning about ICT, beyond mere technical acquisitions, could no longer be isolated from the curriculum design. The training model had to be modified. “Di-GiScuola” (2007) and “Scuola Digitale-Lavagna” projects (2009) showed this change, based on the following assumptions:

- from the idea of technologies as tools to their connotation as environments;
- the transformation of the physical spaces of learning, due to new devices (IWB, tablet);
- from the centrality of the e-tutor to processes of consultancy, committed to coach who goes on-site, to the school, and support the teacher in didactic planning.

The latter factor highlights the transition from training to activation of advice, from general proposal to tailored-made solutions, from tutor perceived as a training vehicle to coach as design support, who helps teachers in the didactic transposition.

Over recent years these nationwide projects have worked as a model for regional projects, as “Hospital-School-Home Lombardy” designed and carried out by Regional Office of the Ministry of Education in collaboration with CREMIT (Research Centre on Education about Media, Information and Technology), based at Catholic University of Milan.

\(^1\) Indire is the Special Agency of the Ministry of Education, University and Research. For more details, in Internet, URL: http://www.indire.it/. Refer to Ferrari (2013) for the analysis of the main initiatives regarding technology at school, implemented from 2000 to 2013.
2. The Hospital-School-Home service in Lombardy

The Hospital School is active in Italy since the Fifties (Kanizsa & Luciano, 2006) and since the Seventies in Lombardy: it is today a complex and heterogeneous reality (Rivoltella & Modenini, 2012).

As the Ministerial Memorandum n. 108 (December 5th, 2007) affirms «the hospital school is a source of research and innovation. Indeed, it was the first to experience and validated models geared to the educational and organizational flexibility, personalized learning, use of educational technologies, knowledge and use of various and different tools and languages, special care for the educational relationship, all methods that can be applied effectively even in the interventions of home-schooling»².

What needs to be taken into account is that frequently hospital teachers live in condition of “isolation”, suffering from the lack of sharing experiences within a wider network (Trotta, 2003); they are moreover asked to be innovative, equipped with competence, sensitivity and flexibility. Many are the variables involved: different sizes of hospitals, variety of settings and learning materials available, different levels of teaching experience and training, students from different backgrounds and short or long-term hospitalization. To summarize what has been said up to now, we can refer to a metaphor suggested by Mantegazza (2005), which defines the hospital school as «walking on a tightrope».

The Regional Office of the Ministry of Education therefore had to rethink this complex system, both to enhance and disseminate the best practices and to distribute resources in a more appropriate response to local needs. To do this, an action-research aimed at mapping organizational models, teachers skills and needs was required to Catholic University of Milan; in addition, a training course to support professional development of about 70 hospital-school-home teachers in Lombardy, aimed at strengthening teaching, technological and relational competences³.

3. The training proposal for hospital-school-home teachers

The “HSH project”, begun in April 2011 and organized in four modules⁴, was built up to satisfy the following needs:

- to promote and to develop the integration of educational technology among the competence of teachers, especially the videoconferencing systems that

---

² In Internet, URL: http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/normativa/2007/cm108_07.shtml.
³ The last training initiative dedicated to hospital-school-home teachers, “HSH@teacher”, goes back to 2003. It was set up by ITD of CNR, Genoa, for the account of MIUR.
⁴ The first module “From the practices to the action model” was configured as an action-research (Van der Maren, 1999). The aim was to survey the practices of hospital teachers, share experiences and map models. The following training modules focuses on “Inclusive Education: the relationship with the sick student”, “One-to-one teaching” and “Inclusive teaching: developing and sharing digital resources”.

today is for the hospitalized children and home-schooling students an opportunity to maintain contact with their class: technology represents a real «connective tissue» (Rivoltella, 2012, p. 80);

– to allow the exchange of views and sharing of experiences among teachers, within a reserved community: it is well known that the effectiveness of training projects grows when provides participants the opportunity to share perspectives and look for solutions to common issues, driving peer-to-peer collaboration (Fullan, Bennett & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1989; Guskey, 1994; Little, 1982);

– to set up an online repository to value and store lesson plans and educational products, also available for “ordinary” school teachers. While in almost all fields the designers work as a community, exchanging collaborations and information, school teachers usually operate in isolation, and this affects both design patterns and professional development (Laurillard, 2012).

3.1 Methodology: the «BLEC model»

The whole of these necessities and the experience has already gained by CREMIT with the Regional Office through the development of education technology courses for teachers and administrative staff (Ferrari & Garavaglia, 2012); it has led to identify the training proposal, based on the adoption of the «BLEC Model» (Rivoltella & Modenini, 2012), that is the model of blended instruction whose structural features are blended learning, e-tivities and coaching.

**Blended learning** stands for a «brick&click» course (Pittinsky, 2003), delivered in a mix of presence and distance, thanks to the availability of technology platforms. According to Ardizzone & Rivoltella (2004), the spatial variable is not the only one to qualify the idea of blending; we have also to refer to the use of different teaching methodologies like seminars, short lectures to introduce conceptual frameworks, thematic workshops, group works led by coach, online discussions (Ligorio et al., 2006). The learning environment has been set up around three areas:

– a documentation one, consisting of a repository of materials;

– a discussion board to talk about the content of the training module where the expert of the module is available for asynchronous interaction;

– virtual groups for reflective activity, within which the coach manages development and delivery of the e-tivities.

The qualifying moment of the proposal is indeed represented by e-tivities: they are assigned in each module to the learner and consist in short tasks, usually equipped with scaffolding materials and job aids, achieved in the space of a few hours of work (Salmon, 2002). They require teachers to deal with their

5 The learning environment was hosted in a Moodle LMS. In Internet, URL: http://www.hshlombardia.it/formazione/.

6 A few examples of the proposed activities: mapping those working in the hospital school service and its functions, using Mindomo; analysis of learning needs through the SWOT matrix; presentation of a problematic didactic case faced during the professional experience and forum discussion; design of a lesson plan; design of a WebQuest.
own practices, with the aim to develop situated learning. Each e-tivity is monitored by the coach, then presented and discussed with the expert during the face-to-face meeting at the end of the module. Therefore the training exceeds the model of cultural transmission and is mostly oriented toward the design format, encouraging the weld between the time of cultural elaboration and reflection with that of the action in context (Rivoltella & Sinini, 2012).

The key-element of the model is represented by coaching. Beyond the multitude of possible definitions of coaching, from business to education fields (Angel & Amar, 2005; Fletcher, 2012), there are some common-core themes: a collaborative and egalitarian relationship coach-coachee, a focus on finding together solutions, the non-essentiality of a domain-specific expertise about the coachee’s learning (Stober & Grant, 2006). In school education, the coach is an expert whose function is midway between that of the e-tutor (Rivoltella, 2006), who provide facilitation and support, and that of the consultant, acting by virtue of an external perspective and able to guide the processes.

We widely discuss about it in the following section.

3.2 «It all started with a drawing, such as a child’s first day of school...»

We are going to explain why we have defined coaching as the key-element of the training model adopted in the “HSH” project, introducing some data collected through the customer satisfaction questionnaire.

As shown in Table 1, we notice how most of respondents have appreciated the support of the coach (“6” value of a 6-level Likert scale). It is 57% of the sample, 25 of 44 responses received.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>presential activity</th>
<th>online activity</th>
<th>presence and distance blending</th>
<th>theory and practice balance</th>
<th>individual and group works balance</th>
<th>coach support</th>
<th>spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=min. satisfaction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6=max. satisfaction</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Satisfaction for the element of the training course (nº of answers).

The same satisfaction is recorded on the recognition of the coach «as a reference point» throughout the course. The coach is in fact the figure of the staff with whom the coachee has had more opportunities to interact, at least two face-to-face meetings for each module, on average three e-tivities in the virtual group and messages by e-mail. No other investigated areas in the questionnaire has provided such a high percentage of single responses.

7 This is the incipit of a teacher’s final Project Work.
During the initial classroom meeting\(^8\), mutual acquaintance was fostered by a simple but playful activity\(^9\): the coach had access to the representations of the teachers’ self (“What is the identikit of the hospital school teacher?”) through a drawing&collage activity in small groups. Due to the fact that coach was a person outside the system of teachers’ membership and non-expert of hospital school, it was possible to activate a first space of trust: teachers were able to express themselves freely, without fear of judgment; the coach had a welcoming attitude, that recognize first the teacher as bearer of skills and solutions to problems. He fielded active listening, benevolent and without preconceptions, appreciated as rare in the workplace.

Throughout the modules, the coaches\(^10\):

- **orientated** the learner to find bearings, within the contents of the classrooms meeting, by appealing to prior knowledge and existing skills;
- **made visible** teachers’ know-how and good practices, providing summaries of e-tivities in forum;
- **supported** the exchange and comparison in the heterogeneous and territorial group’s forum\(^11\), confirming the teacher as a «reflective practitioner» (Schön, 1983; Fabbri et al., 2008);
- **motivated and remotivated** regarding to the difficulties of the teacher’s role – and the technological ones – with private messages;
- **evaluated** the activities, providing prompt feed-back.

The evaluation was intended as enhancement of the achievements and progress, a way to stimulate reflection, for example through the final project work: teachers were asked to retrospectively retrace the learning achievements, showing a collection of materials and experiences of the course to self-evaluate and place them in a continuum of learning\(^12\). The category of reflexivity leads to ge-

---

\(^8\) Four heterogeneous groups of about 20 teachers were made; each group were assigned to a coach.

\(^9\) An excerpt from the discussion board: «I enjoyed very much the activity; it had been far too long since I did not do something creative and free in a training course... I talked about it with my headmaster and we thought it would be very interesting to try to replicate the activity of collage (same theme!) with our students».

\(^10\) The following data are obtained through the analysis of the discussion boards.

\(^11\) An excerpt from a teacher’s project work: «Being able to access a forum in which to resolve any doubts or have some explanations about topics discussed was very fruitful to manage shared problems within the territorial group, where I worked closely with my colleagues. The comparison and discussion of ideas, integrated by the coach review, was useful to foster an interactive and engaging dynamics».

\(^12\) Some excerpts from the teachers’ project work: «At the end of the first e-tivity I felt more aware of the reality in which I work, the map helped me to develop an overview and at the same time to mentally arrange in a systematic way the different actors and the relationships between them»; «This activity has strengthened my problem setting-solving strategies, enhancing my skills of observation, forcing me to use a holistic approach»; «Through this activity I have gained a greater ability to pay attention to some of the nuances that sometimes run the risk of being neglected because of the hectic daily work in the hospital»; «All the activities have been very engaging as they are innovative in the field of multimedia teaching; it was a challenge! With the help of coaches and experts I have been able to apply strategies that have enabled me to clarify the steps of intervention and to achieve the goal with very satisfactory results». 
nerate new thoughts, as well as memory activation; it is a way to think about the action as possible, to foresee the action (Berthoz, 2011).

Unlike an e-tutor (Rivoltella, 2006), that basically acts as a facilitator, the coach accompanies side-by-side the group in the training process and supervises the professional implications of the actions that teachers are asked to do: according to Rogoff (2003), «learning through guided participation»\(^{13}\) refers to a training in which the practitioners are actors and not mere beneficiaries.

![Diagram of metaphors of training](image)

Figure 1. Metaphors of training (Castoldi, 2001).

The proposal of Castoldi (2001) can help us to highlight the different metaphors of training, precisely related to the subject’s level of activation. In our experience, we can situate in the “training as research” quarter: teachers, in fact, are called to be active «in organizing and building their own learning experience. It is a process of review and development of cultural and professional experience by the subject who “place himself in research” and activates a construction and deconstruction of his knowledge asset» (Castoldi, 2001).

4. Final remarks

The experience and the international literature, especially in the UK\(^{14}\) where there are many cases of successful applications of coaching at school, at the moment confirm that there is not an exclusive coaching approach for all the situations, considering the uniqueness of each individual, context, group.

\(^{13}\) «The term “guided” in concept guided participation is thus means broadly, to include but go beyond interactions that are intended as instructional. In addiction to instructional interactions, guided participation focuses on the side-by-side or distal arrangements... » (Rogoff, 2003).

\(^{14}\) In Internet, URL: http://www.curee-paccts.com/mentoring-and-coaching.
As taken from the “HSH” learning experience, an overall satisfaction has been registered\textsuperscript{15}, in regard to the following elements related to coaching:

a) \textit{development of new knowledge}: the actions of the coach had the objective to enable new learning, starting from the enhancement of existing competence;

b) \textit{spendability of the gained knowledge}: as said thus far, coaching is geared to the acquisition of competence by the teacher to improve performance in everyday educational practice, offering innovative solutions from methodological point of view and also from that of content and technologies;

c) \textit{opportunity of keep in contact with new colleagues}: the coach has promoted the development of a community of practice in order to make visible the «knowledge in action» (Cattaneo, 2009).

There is certainly room for improvement, if we refer to the requests reported by teachers in the final customer satisfaction\textsuperscript{16}, however the experience has had the merit of asking teachers to focus first on methodological aspects (how do you teach? what are advantages and disadvantages of one-to-one teaching?) and later on the technological ones, although these are recognized as essential for teaching effectively in the delicate setting of the hospital school.

\textbf{References}


\textsuperscript{15} Some excerpt from the discussion board and teachers’ PW: «The course made me reflect on my ways of relationship and work»; «it gave me new motivation and the opportunity to share my experience with colleagues near and far».

\textsuperscript{16} Some examples: more practice, during the face-to-face meetings, about the software for the construction of digital contents; enhance opportunities for discussion and sharing of concrete experiences.


