

Clinical-pedagogical reflections on soft skills in formative pathways for the education professions

Riflessioni clinico-pedagogiche sulle soft skills nei percorsi formativi per le professioni educative

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abstract

The topic of the transversal competences and soft skills needed for professions, required both by Europe and by the productive world, has exploded. In 2016, the European Commission issued a new Skills Agenda for Europe, which stresses the centrality of competences, especially digital and entrepreneurship competences, conceived as presuppositions for employment and innovation in the digital economy and society. Nowadays, in Italy a specific law dedicated to the competences of educators and pedagogists has been proposed. The great risk that can be glimpsed in the European model, on a critical and clinical perspective, is in the presumption of engineering existential flows and processes that, with this rationalizing operation, they can really be controlled and governed. The specificity of transversal competences and soft skills of the education professions, which manage with pedagogical intentionality and educational design all the areas of the course of human existence, from birth to old age, in multiple contexts, has to be stressed. Therefore, the formative pathways for the education of these professions require even more urgently a transformation of the pedagogical device, of the learning setting, of the educational models and didactic practices proposed to the students by the teachers and university organizations.

Keywords: *pedagogy, soft skills, education professions*

La questione delle competenze trasversali e delle soft skills per le professioni, richieste sia dall'Europa sia dal mondo produttivo, è esplosa. Nel 2016, la Commissione Europea ha emanato una nuova Skills Agenda for Europe, che enfatizza la centralità delle competenze, specialmente quelle digitali e connesse alla imprenditorialità, intese come precondizioni per l'occupazione e l'innovazione nella società e nell'economia digitale. In Italia, è stata proposta una specifica legge relativa alle competenze dell'educatore e del pedagogista. Il grande rischio che si può vedere nel modello europeo, da un punto di vista critico e clinico, risiede nell'ingegnerizzazione dei flussi e dei processi esistenziali che si pretende di controllare con la razionalità. La specificità delle competenze trasversali e delle soft skills delle professioni educative, che approcciano con intenzionalità pedagogica e progettazione educativa tutte le età e i contesti del corso dell'esistenza umana, deve essere sottolineata. Pertanto, i percorsi formativi per la formazione di queste professioni richiede una urgente trasformazione del dispositivo pedagogico, del setting di apprendimento, dei modelli educativi e delle pratiche didattiche proposte agli studenti dai docenti e dalle organizzazioni universitarie.

Parole chiave: pedagogia, soft skills, professioni educative

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1. The European drive to define transversal competences and soft skills

Today we are in a situation in which we have to measure up to all the European guidelines (Boffo, 2016) and with the standards that the European Commission has identified through the strategy Europe 2020 for “smart and sustainable growth” (European Commission, 2010), as well as with the Conclusions on Early Childhood Education and Care, which the European Commission (2011/C-175/03) identified together with all the Member-States in 2011. “If until 7 or 8 years ago, pedagogists, educators and all those who in various capacities were engaged in studying educational theories and practices, possibly in connection with the legislative deciders and administrators, could carry out their own reflections regardless of political topics and the effective conditions of practice, now we can no longer do research and deal with the topics regarding early childhood education and care without referring to the European context which outlines the institutional, administrative, political, local, national and international framework of reference”¹ (Boffo, 2016, p. 1; cfr. also Alessandrini, De Natale, 2015; Mulder, 2017). At international level, the OECD promoted the Program Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations – DeSeCo –² (Rychen and Salganik, 2003), which provided the theoretical framework for the definition of the European Recommendation on Key Competences, adopted by the different European countries with a view to the process of reforming education and training systems. The European Commission also published other guidelines for the development of competences, such as Rethinking Education³, New

1 Translated by the author.

2 <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/definitionandselectionofcompetenciesdeseco.htm>, retr. 30.7.2017.

3 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/multilingualism/rethinking-education_en, retr. 17.7.2017.

Skills for New Jobs⁴, The Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs⁵ and the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan⁶, while the ESCO⁷ portal and the Skills Panorama⁸ portal – by Cedefop⁹ – are dedicated to monitoring skills¹⁰. The Europe 2020 strategy stresses that the development of knowledge, skills and competences is a condition for economic growth and employment, with the aim of improving entrance to and progression in the labour market, facilitating the transitions between the phases of working and learning, fostering geographic and professional mobility. We can state that the European Community and the other related bodies, both European and national, are doing work which, as pedagogists, we can define pedagogical, both in the creation of a vision of society, human being, and education that society must give, in the concrete design of public policies, of education devices, of monitoring and in the evaluation of what is proposed.

In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council approved the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. 'It aimed to contribute to the development of quality, future-oriented education and training tailored to the needs of European society. It provided a common European reference framework on key competences for policymakers, education and training providers, the social partners and learners themselves. Furthermore, it hoped to support other related policies such as employment and social policies and other policies affecting youth. According to the recommendation, key competences for lifelong learning are those all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. Key competences are therefore relevant for all education and training sectors (schools, vocational education and training, higher education, adult learning) as well as non-formal and informal learning. Key competences should be acquired by: Young

4 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=88&eventsId=232&furtherEvents=yes&langId=en>, retr. 17.7.2017

5 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/digital-skills-jobs-coalition>, retr. 17.7.2017

6 <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/promoting-entrepreneurship/action-plan/>, retr. 17.7.2017

7 <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/home>, retr. 25.7.2017.

8 <http://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/content/our-mission>, retr. 25.7.2017.

9 <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en>, retr. 25.7.2017.

10 Osservatorio Università-Imprese. Le competenze Trasversali per l'Higher Education. Fondazione CRUI. http://www2.cruil.it/cruil/quaderno_osservatorio_1.pdf, retr. 25.7.2017.

people at the end of their compulsory education and training, equipping them for adult life and adults throughout their lives, through a process of developing and updating skills". "The Key Competences Recommendation sets out eight key competences, each being a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The eight key competences are: Communication in the mother tongue; Communication in foreign languages; Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; Digital competence; Learning to learn; Social and civic competences; Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and Cultural awareness and expression. Many of the competences overlap and interlock. Transversal skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, initiative or problem solving are present throughout the framework". "The Key Competences Recommendation has been broadly accepted by Member States and stakeholders. During the last decade, it has influenced national policy development in different education and training areas, contributing towards competence-based teaching and learning across Member States"¹¹.

In recent years, the topic of the transversal competences and soft skills needed for professions, required both by Europe and by the productive world¹², has exploded, outlining a context where different definitions of transversal competences and soft skills are present. The CRUI Foundation has also published an interesting document¹³ in which these topics are examined. It is underlined how the term competence has been understood in different ways at international level. In 2016, the European Commission issued a new Skills Agenda for Europe¹⁴, which emphatically stresses the centrality of competences, especially digital and entrepreneurship competences, conceived as presuppositions for employment and innovation in the digital economy and society. The European Commission has defined a framework relative to the key skills in which competence is con-

11 "To further promote a shared understanding digital and entrepreneurship competences, the Commission developed two additional frameworks: European Reference Framework for Entrepreneurship and Framework for Developing and Understanding Digital Competence in Europe". https://ec.europa.eu/education/initiatives/key-competences-framework-review-2017_en, retr 4.8.2017, translated by the author.

12 https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/skills-development_it, retr. 4.8.2017.

13 Osservatorio Università-Imprese. *Le competenze Trasversali per l'Higher Education*. Fondazione CRUI. http://www2.cruil.it/cruil/quaderno_osservatorio_1.pdf, retr. 4.8.2017.

14 <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/EN/1-2016-381-EN-F1-1.PDF>, retr. 1.8.2017.

ceived in functional terms, i.e. as “the ability to mobilize personal resources to achieve objectives adequate for social or work contexts”. In some passages of adaptation, competence levels have been introduced – a concept used as a synonym of skill – based both on the level of formal education¹⁵ and on the nature of the work to be done. “The adjective transversal is also not agreed on, as being understood in some contexts as transferable between economic sectors and/or occupations, in others as “non-disciplinary”, independent of the specific formative pathway. Although the use of the terms “competence” and “skill” is not agreed on, in many contexts the two terms are used without any distinction. The key competences for permanent learning are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the Context (2006/962/CE)”¹⁶. The key-competences described above by the European Community are connected to seven topics: critical thought, creativity, initiative, problem-solving ability, risk assessment, decision-making and the capacity of constructive management of feelings. The competences are considered fundamental for full integration and participation in the labour market, education and training, social and civil life, with mobility and transferability, as they are useful for the different social fields and work contexts. They are considered, pedagogically, an object of learning, highlighting the conditionings operated by the different models and educational concepts implicit in the European policy decisions.

In Italy, Anvur¹⁷ has introduced in recent years TECO¹⁸, an experi-

15 Cfr. International Standard Classification of Education 1997 (ISCED 97).

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/Annexes/educ_uoe_h_esms_an2.htm, retr. 1.8.2017

16 Osservatorio Università-Imprese. *Le competenze Trasversali per l'Higher Education*. Fondazione CRUI. http://www2.cruil.it/cruil/quaderno_osservatorio_1.pdf, p. 10, translated by the author, retr. 4.8.2017

17 Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca. www.anvur.it

18 “The transversal competences which are measured in the TECO test (ability to reason critically for the solution of a problem or to make a decision, ability to represent and transmit a given fact and to learn new knowledge linked to environments not necessarily connected with the particularity of the scientific subject which is the subject of the individual formative pathway) are those capable of guaranteeing flexibility and adaptation by individuals to professional and personal changes which intervene in the various phases of the life cycle. In addition, these competences are not monitored or assessed by the universities precisely because they are not the object of specific courses but are part of that intangible background which each teacher should pass on through the teaching of his/her subject”. <http://www.anvur.org/attachments/article/248/Rap->

mentation of the assessment of the effective outcomes of learning of a general nature by Italian final year undergraduates between 2012 and 2013 through the TECO test. “There are both formal and substantial reasons. Amongst the former, the rules, the practices and the agreements at the level of the EU have a particularly important role. Substantial reasons are those expressed by the various stakeholders interested in improving the learning outcomes of our universities: companies that are increasingly asking universities to check and promote competences of a general nature (problem solving, critical thinking, communication skills), as well as specialized ones; families who increasingly understand that the future employability of their children is linked to these competences, considering the speed of technical progress, the necessary mobility to which they will be subject in terms of sectors and places of work, the tests of adaptability in language and culture which they will have to undergo in the world of globalization”¹⁹. A single test which is the same for all university courses of study has been developed, to assess all students uniformly, as the general competences have been deemed by their very nature as independent of the specific field of university study, but dependent on how students study rather than on what they study²⁰.

porto%20TECO%202014.pdf, p. 11, retr. 1.8.2017, translated by the author. Recently, on 7 April 2017, Paolo Federighi – con Vanna Boffo – of the Department of Education and Psychology of the University of Florence organized a workshop in Florence with the support of ANVUR, aimed at “verifying the interest in starting a pilot project of applied pedagogical research on the assessment of processes and performances of students and our courses of study (L19). The aim is to conclude the day’s work with some indications on the ways in which to implement, in some of our courses of study, a pilot experiment that allows understanding how to structure a device aimed at creating a coherent relationship between observing competences at the start, improvement of the potential of the didactic pathways, observation of the outcomes of learning at the end of the courses of study, times and quality of the placement. After the various seminars that analysed the previous experiences of assessment, expressing both criticisms and appreciation, we would like to try and discuss, in the field of applied research, verifying the possibility of starting a pilot project that allows reflecting on the device and instruments in support of the perspectives of development and aims that the TECO-TECOD project is asked to achieve” (Letter of invitation, 7.4.2017).

19 http://www.anvur.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=248&Itemid=568&lang=it#, retr. 15.7.2017.

20 For an analysis of the results, cf. *SPERIMENTAZIONE TECO. Valutazione e diagnosi sugli esiti degli apprendimenti effettivi di carattere generalista dei laureandi nelle Università di Napoli Federico II, Lecce, Messina e Cagliari*, Roma, 11 marzo 2014; completed and reviewed on 30 September 2014. <http://www.anvur.org/attachments/article/248/R~.pdf>, retr. 30.7.2017.

2. The competences for the education professions: the legislative proposal

A great deal has been written in the field of education, from both a theoretical and a methodological and empirical point of view, on the characteristics of educational and training work, as well as on the skills and competences of the educational professions²¹. One particular contribution has been made, and continues to be made, in the educational field, by the SIPED work group²² “Education and training professions for the recognition of competences in a national and European context. Education degree courses towards the Europe 2020 strategies,” in particular thanks to the thought and action of Paolo Orefice and Silvana Calaprice (Orefice, Carullo, Calaprice, 2011) – who currently coordinates the group together with Piero Crispiani –. Calaprice is also the current representative, at the National Conference of Heads of the Departments of Education, of the Coordination of three-year and five-year degree courses for education professions. As is well known, thanks also to the impetus of this work group, a law dedicated to the world of educators and pedagogists, approved by the Chamber of Deputies and currently being discussed at the Senate, has been proposed. This is Law no. 2443 ‘Educators and pedagogists’²³, in which the competences required for the profiles of educator and pedagogists are specified and on which we are concentrating here. The bill states that: “The professional socio-pedagogical educator and the pedagogist operate in education, training and pedagogy, in relation to any activity carried out formally, non-formally and informally, in the various phases of life, in a perspective of personal and social growth”²⁴. The objectives of the “European strategy adopted by the Council of Europe meeting in Lisbon on 23 and 24 March 2000 on the development of formal, non-formal and informal lifelong education for European citizens to make the European space of the knowledge-based society advanced and competitive, democratic and inclusive” with the strategic framework for

21 It is not possible to remember here all the important contributions of the many Italian scholars of the educational field. Only as examples, we can nominate: Franco Cambi, Piero Bertolini, Riccardo Massa, Enza Colicchi, Paolo Federighi, Isabella Loiodice, Lilliana Dozza, Paolo Orefice, Silvana Calaprice, Aureliana Alberici, Franco Blezza.

22 <http://www.siped.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/18-Calaprice-Crispiani-PROFESSIONI-EDUCATIVE-E-FORMATIVE-PER-IL-RICONOSCIMENTO-DELLE-COMPETENZE-IN-AMBITO-NAZIONALE-ED-EUROPEO.pdf>, retr. 15.7.2017.

23 <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/00980756.pdf>, retr. 20.7.2017.

24 Translated by the author.

European cooperation in the sector of education and training (ET 2020)²⁵ are thus pursued. The educator and the pedagogist operate within a specific professional code, using methodologies specific to the profession, with people of every age, especially in education and training; in schools; in social-health and health, limitedly to the socio-educational aspects; in socio-welfare; in parenthood and the family; in cultural, judicial and environmental fields; in sport and movement and in integration and international cooperation. The professional socio-pedagogical educator carries out his/her tasks with regard to the planning, the design, the implementation, the management and the assessment of educational and training actions performed in education and training services and systems, both public and private and in the third sector. At the same time, he/she contributes to the design of the aforementioned services and systems, as well as the educational actions addressing the individual subjects.

The professional socio-pedagogical educator “is in possession of the knowledge and competences relative to the qualification as per article 7” – which refers to the knowledge and competences declared by the specific degree courses –, carrying out education and training activities such as the design, the planning, the implementation and assessment of education and training actions and treatments for the individual in the different contexts and services mentioned above. In addition, he/she accompanies and facilitates the learning processes in the fields of continuing education and vocational training; he/she offers support in work placement; he/she contributes to outlining education policies, including through collaborating on the planning and management of network services in the local area and the implementation of integrated systems, aimed at the management and development of human resources, implementing the European guidelines of developing competences²⁶. In turn, “the pedagogist carries out activities of design, planning, organization, coordination, management, monitoring, assessment, counselling and supervision of the pedagogical quality of the public or private services and systems of education and training. He/she also carries out pedagogical actions addressing the individual subjects” The pedagogist is in possession “of the knowledge and competences relative to the qualification as article 10” – which refers to the knowledge and competences in the specific degree courses –, practising education and training activities such as planning, coordination, implementation and assessment of educational and training actions and management for the

25 <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/00980756.pdf>, retr. 20.7.2017.

26 *Ibidem*.

person, in the fields and services identified by law. He/she also operates in exploring, coordinating, observing, analysing, interpreting and developing a pedagogical “functional assessment”, forming one of the contributions in multi-specialized teams. It is his/her task to plan, design, coordinate, manage and assess continuing education plans and services and systems of professional managerial education, to implement and coordinate actions of educational guidance and continuing guidance, also in the perspective of counselling, of skills assessment and help for work placement. The pedagogist offers a qualified contribution in cooperation to define education policies, both in the form of consulting for planning and managing network services in the area and for the implementation of integrated systems for the management and development of human resources and for the development of competences, and in that of the coordination of local educational and training services²⁷.

3. A clinical-pedagogical reinterpretation of soft skills for the education professions

In both the educational context and in the normative context there therefore exists an invaluable capital of reflection and reinterpretation regarding the complex topic of transversal competences and soft skills for the various professional profiles as well as for their acquisition in the formative pathways which prepare for them. Certainly, all the work of identification and clarification of the skills and competences necessary for the educational professionals has been fundamental to emerge from generalization and from a certain difficulty in specifying both pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical work. As has been asserted several times, educational work has to do with all the vital processes which it deals with (Mortari, 2013; Riva, 2004; Fadda, 2016): it supports them, it encourages them, it revives them, it monitors them and so on. The great risk that can be glimpsed in the process under way, although important, of systematizing, in the general and then in the sectoral contexts of skills and competences, as well as the very characteristics of educational work, is in the presumption of engineering existential flows and processes, with the relative illusion that, with this rationalizing operation, they can really be controlled and governed according to the direction defined by the various European commissions, then applied by the member states of the European Union.

27 *Ibidem*.

Certainly, many critical voices (Ball, 2012) have now been raised to point out that, as the aims are presented, the political-cultural-social directions of the European directives, enacted at national level, seem too oriented towards a neo-liberal model which values above all categories such as success, socio-economic success, the interests of companies and industry in general (Landri, 2016)²⁸.

From a clinical-pedagogical point of view, here we want to underline the importance of the work of analysis and development by the European work groups on topics that are central for the sustainability of our society, the well-being and quality of life of citizens but, on the other hand, there is the need to look more clinically – as Massa would say (1993; cf. also Riva, 2000 and 2004), in the wake of Foucault (1998) –, i.e. more closely, at the object of analysis considered. We can observe how the objectives, the skills, the general, transversal, citizenship competences and social rights are continuously proclaimed yet, at the same time, mental closure, racism, violence, destructiveness, social injustice, religious, ethnic, cultural sexual and gender discrimination are not forgotten at all. Arbitrary violence, wars and acts of terrorism are exploding everywhere, including in the European area and in Brussels, at the very heart of power of the European Union. From this evidence, before everyone's eyes, we can deduce from it that the concrete ways through which the aims of socio-economic-cultural policy are implemented are not adequate (Panarello, 2012). An evident gap blatantly emerges. We can state that there is no connection with what Varela, Rosch e Thompson (1991) defined as 'embodied cognition', the phenomenology how the individual is rooted in the heart of the experienced world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964-68), Massa (2004) as the 'educational materiality', psychoanalysis, from Freud onwards, as 'emotional, projective, transference dynamics', the method of Group Relations (Perini, 2015) as 'group dynamics in the system, emotional mechanisms of defence from anxiety' and so on. Anyone who does research, counselling, supervision with groups of educators or with families or with people in their contexts of life and work, knows very well that there is, at present, an enormous difference between the objectives declared and what is concretely carried out and implemented. For example, the educators in communi-

28 For example, one of the key-points of the European Pillar of Social Rights "stresses the interdependence between economic and social policies and acknowledges that the European economic and social model is based on the shared understanding of the importance of increasing employment, social progress and productivity" <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.soc-opinions.38841>, retr 3.8.2017.

ties, day centres, the different types of support services for abandoned minors or children removed from their families, for the disabled, for drug addicts, the prison experience, abused women and the victims of violence against women, illness and old age, immediately have to come face to face with powerful situations of life. They have to cope with with sorrow, fear, anguish, anger and aggressiveness of the users, their need for dependence and their fear of it, but also with the strong attraction of seduction and management of the erotic and sexual dimension that is always at stake between human beings, between genders and between variegated sexual orientations. Educators who work with early childhood and adolescence have to reckon with the primary needs of children, with the efforts of identification and separation from the family of adolescents, with the expectations, demands and anxieties of parents, with the strong emotions generated by the constant, including corporal, contact with the subjects in education (Riva, 2004). We could go on for much longer, going further into the topic, describing its trends, bringing to light the topics, the experiences, the unsaid actions, difficult to express aloud and which very often are unconfessable and unmentionable, the emotions that the world considers negative because they have to do with the range of affects connected with anguish, anger, hatred, rancour, the thirst for revenge, jealousy and envy, humiliation and pain.

These are the emotive experiences which, when reading and rereading the cold and detached texts of the European guidelines, we do not know and cannot understand where they can be situated, how they can be connected, to which linguistic hook, crack or gap (Morin, Ceruti, 2013) they can be attached. These European guidelines are then translated into national legislation which often are dropped without an explanation of the general framework of reference on to the world of broad-spectrum education services automatically, rationally, with a technical-engineering and managerial style of writing which does not take in the depth of vital experience, the emotional and corporal importance, the emotional fatigue, the existential burden of the responsibility of managing users and services. The stake then becomes the real sustainability – a now pragmatic term – of the European and national objectives and policies. Effective sustainability means that, in the first place, the enormous difference between what is declared, proclaimed and laid down by the political guideline and what really takes place on the level of concrete educational reality, has to be acknowledged. Only if the authorities, the groups of experts, the technicians and the political deciders, accept stopping for a moment to analyse this invalidating difference, can decisive steps be taken in the direction of a sustainability that is not only of appearance, a slogan identified as a vari-

able in itself – the residue of a positivist conception of science applied to society – that completely excludes from sight and consideration all the rest that is not included in that rational, technical and engineering segment of representation of reality. Let us take, for example, even only one of the competences considered central by the European recommendations: entrepreneurship. It cannot be developed only through lessons, even conducted with innovative and participatory didacticism and various exhortations to be entrepreneurial. The dimension of entrepreneurship has to do with the history of the subject's education, with the amount of autonomy that parents, educators and teachers legitimized and allowed, with the adults of reference having reckoned with generational envy and the Freudian Oedipal transference; as well as with the parents' capacity to provide self-esteem to young people through constant reflecting and recognizing the value of their actions, thoughts and attitudes. Fundamental is the adult capacity to take on the onus of the emotive responsibility of accompanying youngsters in existential events, helping them to tolerate the long periods of waiting, of planting, the long periods of maturing the growth processes, whether of the personality or of the feats the youngsters undertake. We could continue at length in looking for a language, words, writing that tries to humanize – as is said – the question of laws that concern social life and education.

4. The formative pathways for the soft skills of education professions: a cultural revolution of the design of the formative offer and integrated didactics

The New skills agenda for Europe²⁹ (2016) states: “Acquiring skills is a life-long process, both formal and informal, and starts very young”. “Beyond looking for the right occupation-specific skills, employers are increasingly demanding transferable skills, such as the ability to work in a team, creative thinking and problem solving. This skills mix is also essential for people considering starting their own business. Yet too little emphasis is usually placed on such skills in curricula and they are rarely formally assessed in many Member States”³⁰. “Tackling the skills challenges will require significant policy efforts and systemic reforms in education and training”³¹. The

29 ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15621&langId=en, retr. 31.7.2017.

30 Ivi, p. 4.

31 Ivi, p. 3.

debate and the European recommendations on competences still leave some questions open, which cannot be solved simplistically, with fast and engineering-like technical solutions: “Which transversal competences are to be developed? With which instruments? How can pathways to develop them be put into the system in university structures?”³². “One of the challenges emerging in European Higher Education systems is to support the activation and spread in university pathways of education activities capable of supporting the acquisition of those competences considered strategic to boost the employability of students (Cleary, Flynn and Thomasson, 2006) and to develop the competences of active citizenship of young adults (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32006H0962>)”³³. Reference is made to the term “non-disciplinary competences” (NDC) indicating “competences, skills and features that related to the personality, attitude and behaviour rather than to technical or formal knowledge”³⁴ (Gopalaswamy, Mahadevan, 2010), subsuming in this definition some of the constructs most widespread and formalized in specific literature, in international and national taxonomies, such as soft skills, transversal competences and key competences. The needs of the world of business, institutions and national and international agencies, such as OECD³⁵ and ANVUR, have driven in the direction of increasing third-level training including with respect to NDC. On the one hand, there has been an attempt to identify the most suitable instruments to understand whether degree courses effectively allow students to acquire NDC. On the other, the action “has concentrated in parallel around the problem of which methodological and organizational devices university can adopt to help students in acquiring these competences (Denecolo, Reeves, 2013). While recognizing that a part of these are learned in informal contexts (Eraut, 2004), universities are also driven by several forces to be concerned about offering opportunities that can help students increase their future ability to be active citizens and professionals with the highest possible level of employability”³⁶.

32 Osservatorio Università-Imprese. *Le competenze Trasversali per l'Higher Education*. Fondazione CRUI. http://www2.cruil.it/cruil/quaderno_osservatorio_1.pdf, pp. 1-2, retr. 4.8.2017 translated by the author.

33 Ivi, p. 61.

34 Ivi, p. 62.

35 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), <http://www.oecd.org/about/>.

36 Osservatorio Università-Imprese. *Le competenze Trasversali per l'Higher Education*.

The learning setting takes on a central role, as does the idea that NDC can be developed if “the conditions to actively experiment forms of thought and actions similar to what happens in daily life” (Resnick, 1995)³⁷ are recreated in the formal contexts of education. There is reflection on how a teacher can foster problem-solving or critical thought during lessons or, alternatively, in ad hoc designed activities. There is questioning on which online instruments are most useful in the classroom to stimulate the acquisition of these competences. The core of the problem is certainly: how to teach transversal competences inside the curricular lessons as well? At stake there is therefore the central topic of innovation in university teaching. We have to ask ourselves “how to design curricula in such a way that they also support this type of learning? The problem in this case is to understand which is the most suitable organizational device, the architecture of curricula”³⁸ able to give rise to effective actions supporting the acquisition of NDC. A number of approaches have been developed, including the parallel offer – with respect to the educational activities for the award of the qualification – of activities and courses for the development of NDC, guaranteeing this way a more flexible, structured and cross-disciplinary teaching. Another approach has followed rather the path of working on existing practices in an integrated way, trying to qualitatively change the teaching methods, without increasing the offer of courses. It is effectively deemed that NDC cannot be separated from the acquisition of other technical knowledge. “From the point of view of the student’s learning process, there is no separation between ‘what is learned’ and ‘how it is learned’” (Treleaven, Voola, 2008)³⁹. The NDC represent dimensions on which work has to be done jointly with respect to a content, as they refer to the use that a subject makes of them in a given context. Learner-centred in the classroom methods are considered resolved rather than starting parallel experiences. “Problem-solving is part of the ways with which a student tries to find a plausible solution to an uncertain problem and, in doing so, needs to be able to access specific knowledge, having the knowledge relative to the context, to experience and see in the process the effects of their action, to validate together with the others an idea (Engeström, 2001). In this perspective, more than distinguishing be-

Fondazione CRUI. http://www2.cruil.it/cruil/quaderno_osservatorio_1.pdf, p. 62, retr. 4.8.2017, translated by the author.

37 Ivi, p. 63.

38 *Ibidem*.

39 Ivi, pp. 65-66.

tween disciplinary competences and ‘transversal’ competences, the term “situated knowledge’ is preferred, understood as the use that is made of knowledge (Wertsch, 1998). This would allow students to exercise a technique, content or knowledge in a learning setting (the classroom, the laboratory etc.) managed and organized by the teacher as a space for the exercise of know-how rather than of know-what”⁴⁰.

It is certain that following this path implies a cultural revolution in the very design of the formative offer and in the relationship between the various scientific disciplinary sectors. This means requiring the teaching body to be willing to change and transform their theories and practices used, by asking the professional communities in universities to start processes of critical reflectivity and to be oriented towards an integrated conception of teaching and learning (Lave, Wenger, 1991; Raelin, 2000; Fuller, Unwin, Felstead, Jewson, Kakavelakis, 2007). “Consolidated routines and teaching models not centred on the student or on problems remain embodied in the stories of learning of the teachers and in the didactic cultures of universities”⁴¹. The approach to the transformation of teaching practices can produce “a relatively modest organizational turbulence in terms of structural changes in courses. The greatest impact will be on the cultural and intangible dimension of the teacher’s work, in the repertoires of practice of the academic community. It is certainly a deeper change in the way of conceiving the organization and management of lessons”⁴². It has to be remarked that everything that has been described so far has always come under the disciplinary competence of the pedagogical field, which for some time now has made it one of its subjects of research, analysis and study. Having clarified the picture of the institutional debate, the specificity of transversal competences and soft skills of the education professions, which manage with pedagogical intentionality and educational design all the areas of the course of human existence, from birth to old age, in multiple contexts, has to be stressed: either in formal – school –, or non-formal – socio-education services, the world of work, vocational and adult education, – or informal – the family, social media and the web, for example –. These are contexts and ages of life with a high rate of full relationality, full of emotions, complex existential issues. Therefore, the formative pathways for the education of these professions require even more urgently a transformation of the pedagogical device (Massa, 2004), of the learn-

40 Ivi, p. 66.

41 Ivi, p. 67.

42 Ivi, p. 68.

ing setting, of the educational models and didactic practices proposed to the students by the teachers and university organizations as a whole, which is capable of making the students familiar with the profound complexity in the education profession.

Conclusions

At the end of this reflection, it has to be stressed how, from a clinical-pedagogical and, in any case, holistic point of view, the question of education on soft skills – and in general of transversal competences – is an essential question to keep society democratic and ensure the quality of this democracy, which needs subjects who are critical and aware of the rights and duties of citizenship. However, it is absolutely necessary not to fall into the risk of arbitrary dissociation of transversal competences and the specific disciplinary contents in general and, especially, in the context of the competences for the education professions. Indeed, the very specificity of education knowledge and work are such as to concern the management of the very forms of human existence, from early childhood to old age, from health to illness, from play to violence, from the individual to groups and the community. It is now equally clear that the very didactics of university teachers and the device of didactic organization of universities as a whole must open up to a cultural transformation, a change in mind-set, their traditional pedagogical model and education and didactic practices, whether explicit or implicit, in order to accept really posing the problem of how to interweave contents and methods, technique and didactics, knowing, knowing how to, knowing how to be, as used to be stressed some time ago. The learner and the groups learning must no longer be abandoned to their learning in solitude, according to an elitist, Gentilian and classist model, where disciplinary and transversal competences were acquired depending on the social and family backgrounds of the students. The role played by informal dimensions, connected with the personal and family formative history of the individual, as a founding base for the exercise of knowledge and competences of active citizenship, on both the cognitive and cultural, and on the emotive and relational level, is confirmed. This leads to the need and the importance of the investment in informal and non-formal training (society, politicians, citizens, families, cultural and sports operators, social media and digital technologies and so on) for the effective sustainability of training on transversal competences and soft skills even in formal contexts, such as school and university. Naturally, this does not mean that teachers do not have to reckon with the cultural and

mind-set revolution required by the needs for change and innovation in didactic forms and practices. To put it concisely, the aim here is to propose an integrated vision, according to which the change of education in formal contexts must be accompanied by an educational and cultural change in non-formal and informal contexts. In this sense, the reference to the European plan for lifelong learning, which hopes for a general plan for widespread continuing education, for citizens, parents, teachers, different kinds of professionals, operators in the public administration and so on, is really opportune. The wager however is to invest in a wide project of lifelong learning which is also life-wide learning but above all life-deep learning, attentive to the profound dimensions of learning and education, the embodied and existential emotive implications. The quality of collective life in itself is at stake, not only at the service of employability, now experienced as a restrictive instrument of a Europe subjugated only to the economic interests of financial and industrial lobbies. Promoting the quality of social life in common is one of the competences of the education profession, to which university formative pathways must try to prepare students, starting from a profound and complex reflection on how the very group of teachers as a whole can respond: first of all with self-reflection and self-assessment on how the Degree Course Board of which they are a part – which organizes and dispenses the specific formative offer – and on what the quality, including relational, of the academic life in it is like. University teachers also perform an education profession and therefore have to be trained to develop the typically educational transversal competences in the first place, starting from themselves, to then be able to foster it in their students.

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