

Faculty Development: experience-based learning and reflection-based learning in communities of practice

Il Faculty Development: l'apprendimento esperienziale e l'apprendimento riflessivo nelle Comunità di Pratica

Alessandro Versace

Associate Professor of General and Social Pedagogy, Department of Cognitive, Psychological, Pedagogical and Cultural Studies, University of Messina, alessandro.versace@unime.it

OPEN ACCESS

Siped
Società Italiana di Pedagogia

Double blind peer review

Citation: Versace, A. (2025). Faculty Development: experience-based learning and reflection-based learning in communities of practice. *Pedagogia oggi*, 23(1), 151-157.

<https://doi.org/10.7346/PO-012025-18>

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Pensa MultiMedia and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. *Pedagogia oggi* is the official journal of Società Italiana di Pedagogia (www.siped.it).

Journal Homepage

<https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/siped>

Pensa MultiMedia / ISSN 2611-6561

<https://doi.org/10.7346/PO-012025-18>

ABSTRACT

A community of practice is characterized by the existence of a mutual commitment among members who are interdependent by virtue of a common identity and who, in ever-changing ways, are able to experience and live socio-affective relationships and share work; responsibility is shared both in terms of the roles and tasks that each member holds or is required to hold, as well as in the planning of the activities to be carried out, and, finally, in the sharing of problems that arise during the work and further perspectives. Communities of practice, which find their full legitimacy within the framework of Faculty Development, thus give rise to forms of reflective intelligence that contrast with homogenisation, preferring the heterogeneity that finds its own freedom of expression and greater critical self-regulation in the uniqueness, originality and personal history of each individual and, at the same time, promotes an experience-based intelligence that favours greater individual awareness.

Una comunità di pratica si caratterizza grazie all'esistenza di un impegno reciproco tra i membri che sono interdipendenti in virtù della realizzazione di un'identità comune e che, in modo sempre differente, riescono a provare e vivere relazioni socio-affettive e a condividere lavori; la responsabilità è condivisa sia per quanto riguarda i ruoli e le mansioni che ogni membro riveste o deve rivestire, sia per ciò che concerne la pianificazione delle attività da svolgere, sia, infine, per la condivisione dei problemi che insorgono in corso d'opera e di ulteriori prospettive. Le Comunità di Pratica, che trovano una loro piena legittimità nel quadro del *Faculty Development*, danno così origine a forme di intelligenza riflessiva che si contrappongono all'omologazione, prediligendo l'eterogeneità che trova nella particolarità, nell'originalità e nella storia personale di ognuno la propria libertà di espressione e di maggiore autoregolazione critica e, al contempo, promuove quell'intelligenza esperienziale che favorisce una maggiore coscienza individuale.

Keywords: community of practice, faculty development, experience-based learning, reflection-based learning, sense of community

Parole chiave: comunità di pratiche, faculty development, apprendimento esperienziale, apprendimento riflessivo, senso di comunità

Received: April 5, 2025

Accepted: June 13, 2025

Published: June 30, 2025

Corresponding Author:

Alessandro Versace, alessandro.versace@unime.it

Introduction

Faculty development is not merely a concept, nor is it simply an expression through which to easily identify the different variables, the different knowledge domains, the many skills, the various competences that synergistically compose it. If in the Seventies (of the last century) it is characterized by indicating that process of growth within universities that, as its purpose, has that of promoting the development of professional skills, in the Eighties it is distinguished by its actions focused on supporting the professional development of faculty members, enhancing their transversal skills and academic institutions in responding to emerging needs. The Nineties marked a paradigm shift moving the attention on students; it is the moment in which, on the basis of Vygotskian studies, constructivism takes hold, placing learning, no longer teaching, at the central nucleus of education.

Faculty development originated mainly in Canada and the United States in the Seventies and generally indicates the set of activities and actions aimed at innovating the roles of university professors within academic communities and, in this sense, its birth aligns with the very first efforts made to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching proposed in the field of higher education, in particular that of healthcare education (Lampugnani, 2020, p. 27). In our 21st century it leaves the Anglo-Saxon area to gain international recognition. Faculty development also expands thanks to awareness in relation to the changes inherent in the academic context and the role that higher education has in the rapidly changing social, cultural, economic and civil scenario (Silva, 2022, pp. 15-19). The invitation coming from scholars in the sector is to focus on continuous professional development of teachers, particularly in the pedagogical dimension (Sorcinelli, 2020, pp. 21-22) with the aim of creating meaningful professional learning opportunities for teachers (Beach et al., 2016), a need highlighted both by the *Guidelines for the professional development of teachers and strategies for evaluating teaching in universities published by the ANVUR Quarc Docente 2018* to increase the level of qualification and evaluation of university teaching, and by the *Permanent Laboratory on teaching* within the CRUI which has also provided for a working group on the topic of Learning and Teaching (Committee for University Teaching Innovation, 2020, p. 11). Faculty development is therefore born, essentially, to reflexively answer the demands for change and, in this sense, didactic innovation should not be considered as a “trend” to attract “the public” but “as a reasoned response to the evolution of the concept of knowledge and learning” (Lampugnani, 2020, p. 32). This aligns with the concept of deuteron-learning (learning to learn), which implies learning no longer in a “laboratory”, as behaviorists had feared for years (Mecacci, 2019, 172-223) but a learning centered “more on form than on content, on context rather than on what happens in the given context, on the relationship, rather than on the people and phenomena that are in relation” (Bateson, 1972, p. 191 in Cisotto, 2002, p. 62). Therefore, the development of teaching quality becomes central to promote effective learning outcomes for the purposes of professionalizing preparation and it is crucial to also focus attention on three complex nodes that are connected to each other: the integration of technologies, methodological and design quality, the combined development of hard (technical disciplinary) and soft (transversal) skills and, furthermore, to advocate their synergy in university education with the aim of promoting more complex learning, possible, however, only if the ways, tools and contexts of action are deeply rethought (De Rossi, 2022, pp. 15-16).

1. Teaching professionalism between knowledge and skills: CdPs in Faculty Development

Faculty development presents different crucial themes, including that of developing in *faculty members* the essential skills to face a professional role, promoting a *self-evaluation* to support motivation for change, encouraging a work-life balance, spreading a mindful use of technology, finding the organizational time to complete the set objectives (Silva, 2022, p. 23). The acquisition of specialized and transversal skill by the teacher, linked to work and professional realities, requires the didactic world to decline its didactic offer and the *World Economic Forum*, for example, raises the issue of indispensable skills for the 21st century

dividing these between what is necessary to know (*foundational literacies*), the skills that we can define as specific and linked to one's professionalism (*competencies*) and transversal skills (*character qualities*).

Critical thinking, *problem solving*, creativity, communication and collaboration skills, adaptability, initiative, resilience, leadership, social awareness are just some of the abilities that, according to the World Economic Forum, are necessary to access the world of work (Lampugnani, 2020, p. 34).

Hence, the idea that faculty development to “teach how to teach”, to “teach to teachers” must materialize in specific programs designed not only for research but also for the acquisition of skills and knowledge in the field of teaching. In essence, it is an approach that aims to professionalize university teaching, recognizing that the ability to *communicate* (etymologically from *communis*, “common”) is a distinct and equally important skill compared to the ability to do research.

In the current panorama, a paradigm shift seems to be emerging, a transition from knowledge to competencies since it is believed that, didactically, information is transferred from teachers to students, without moments of re-elaboration of it. If this process does not make the content lose the heuristic value it possesses, it does not even contribute to the growth of an aware public (Zanetti *et alii*, 2021, p. 72). In reality, knowledge and skills are used only for the purposes of the functioning of the economic machine in a dimension that is characterized as *neoliberal* (Baldacci, 2021, p. 138) – unlike *liberalism* which is an ethical-political category that underlines the role of individual rights (Baldacci, 2022, p. 23) – and, in this sense, they echo that mechanistic idea, of a cognitive nature, which considers learning as a process of “storage” in the mind of a subject (Cacciamani, Ligorio, 2010, p. 64). From many sources, however, it has long been emphasized that knowledge should not be “encapsulated” (Engström, 2004, pp. 155-156) because such a way of understanding learning is typical of that *banking education* that transforms the word into alienated and alienating verbosity (Freire, 2011, pp. 57-58) and, in fact, even from a psychoanalytic angle with Fromm it is possible to assert that

students who make own the existential modality of having will attend a lesson hearing the teacher's words, grasping their logical structure and meaning [...]. But the content does not become part of their personal system of thought, enriching and expanding it; on the contrary, they transform the words they hear into agglomerates of crystallized ideas or into complex theories that they passively store. [...] They must neither produce nor create anything new (1976/1977, pp. 48-49).

One of the aims of the University, therefore, is to teach students to form themselves autonomously and, moreover, autonomy, emancipation, independence, the development of critical thinking are, in fact, more than skills, cardinal principles of education. The actions present in faculty development, in fact, contribute to the maturation of different attitudes and beliefs in the university teacher through conceptual structures capable of giving order and meaning to models of action and behavior implemented, often intuitively, by teachers. This process allows dialogue between different individuals, favoring the emergence of communities of subjects that can become an opportunity for dialogue both at an intra-institutional level and at an inter-institutional level. Therefore, there are several aims that faculty development intends to pursue, such as the promotion of teaching skills, the reorganization of curricula according to the paradigm of skills and the creation of communities of practice (Lampugnani, 2020, p. 28). CdP (Communities of Practice) are

groups of people who share an interest, a set of problems, a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and experience in this area through continuous interactions [...]. These people do not necessarily work every day but meet because they recognize value in their interactions [...]; they discuss their situations, their aspirations and their needs; they reflect on topics of common interest, explore ideas and act as a sort of sounding board [...]. Communities of practice are not a new idea. They represent our first social structures based on knowledge since men lived in caves (Wenger, Der-mott, Snyder, 2002/2007, p. 44).

The community of practice, in this sense, finds a wide echo in the thought of F. Tönnies, for whom the community (*Gemeinschaft*) is a living organism based on the feeling of belonging and shared participation inspired by intimacy, gratitude, sharing of languages and habits and common experiences (1887/2011). From this perspective, the acquisition of knowledge and of skills became a shared and allied responsibility from which a greater awareness of one's own work emerges to configure itself as a community

of discourse that finds in the dimension of intersubjectivity another possibility to give a new physiognomy to the teaching/learning process. In the context of socio-constructivism, in fact, it is possible to note how knowledge is considered “the result not of a transfer process but [...] a process of active construction by all participants in the educational context” (Ligorio, Spadaro, 2010, p. 101). Communities of practice, therefore, are spaces within which concreteness is expressed and, therefore, they are dynamic and adaptable, they evolve based on the needs of those who create them and those who participate in them. They are characterized by a continuous exchange (Maino, Maino, 2024, p. 12) and, in the reality of faculty development, faculty members can contribute through their curiosity, their experiences and their skills to collaborate to the increase to possible personal and professional growth. Active participation, in fact, as highlighted by significant studies and numerous research conducted within contexts that have had *situated learning* as a framework, generates both individual and group benefits, strengthening the sense of belonging and group identity. Perception of similarities, interdependence, feeling of being part of a reliable and stable structure (Sarason, 1974) are the first elements that define a group that is characterized by its *sense of community* and that, in the McMillan and Chavis model, finds a broader scope. In the opinion of these authors, in fact, the sense of community fully describes the feeling of being part of a community because it represents the social fabric where people live concretely, face specific problems, individual and social factors are intertwined. It is the link between the subject and the group, the set of relationships that unite people and shared territory. In this sense, even the school can be interpreted in this way (1986) and, from the school fabric, it is possible to spread this model because, in the core of faculty development, we witness a dialogue of a Buberian nature, where there is the meeting of the *I* with the *You*. We are therefore witnessing the emergence of a community of subjects that goes beyond the neoliberal approach because Communities of Practice

tend not to give themselves productive tasks and to base their interest on mutually beneficial exchange. All the people who take part in can benefit [...] from what is made available. For this reason, opportunistic and extractive attitudes are not appreciated. A Community of Practice is not a work group (it does not have predefined productive objectives) and it is not a training path with a transmission approach [...]. It is rather a learning environment [...] that fuels enriching interactions in terms of broadening the horizons of practical and theoretical knowledge (Maino, 2024, p. 23).

The setting created through a Community of Practice implies a new characterization of educational action and, also, of the teaching practice itself in the school and university fabric since it is constituted as a basis of knowledge and not as institutional engineering; no more sectoral ritualisms to promote aseptic knowledge but commitment to configure processes that optimize the way in which educational knowledge is used (Cappuccio, Maniscalco, 2020, p. 233); in this sense the learning environment becomes *experiential* because the faculty members of a CdP can deploy their resources and *reflective* because this action allows to raise levels of responsibility, autonomy and competence.

2. Experiential-based learning and reflection-based learning in Faculty Development

The didactic angle used in the analysis of the school or university system allows to understand how both change and innovation advance in terms of transformation. The change to which we refer is related to the transfer of the focus of teaching to that of learning, from content-based and notional-based teaching to the heuristic one and from transmission practices to participatory ones (Fedeli, 2022, p. 52). The proposed approach, the one related to the CdP, considers that faculty development has a series of activities that it can propose, from those of a formal type based on individual learning, to those reflective and those centered on learning by doing (Lampugnani, 2020, p. 28). The approach proposed through the Communities of Practice is characterized by having as a constituted trait a *thematic field* that structures the identity, a *community* seen as a social context of learning and the *practice* that has in itself the peculiar knowledge that the community develops and this

means that, on the side of the *thematic field (domain)*, it is necessary to identify the theme or themes that constitute the object of strategic interest and around which the actors associate with each other and build their identity; at the same time, around those themes, it is necessary to promote the “birth” of the *community* by encouraging mutual trust between participants and, finally, on the *practical* side, it becomes crucial to highlight and enhance the “productivity” of the community, that is, everything that in terms of new knowledge [...] the group manages to achieve from time to time (Lipari, 2007, p. 27).

The CdPs, therefore, are contexts within which a group of people share tools and ideas, not rigidly defined and which emerge from *experience*, *reflection* on activities and the active participation of members in the community. In relation to this last point, it is appropriate to underline that in the Communities of Practice there are integration paths that see the new members, previously located peripherally, now at the center of the community thanks to greater involvement; in *faculty development* could mean that this new paradigm, indicated by the acronym LPP (Legitimate Peripheral Participation) (Lave, Wenger, 1991/2006), offers the space for every faculty member to be involved in the learning process. Legitimate peripheral participation is not a teaching method, but rather an analytical tool. It serves to understand how people learn in different contexts through methods, historical periods and social environments. Rather than focusing on abstract theoretical concepts, LPP focuses on the conditions that favor or hinder learning.

Communities of practice, therefore, are contexts within which learning is rooted in experience, both as a starting point and as a final application. Experiential learning promotes greater individual awareness, an increase in social skills and comparison within a group gives life to a community of practices that can become a setting within which the faculty member learns through a process of planning and integrating different points of view and information with other faculty members. Experience-based learning is updated in order to make a difference with “encapsulated” learning and must be considered as the possibility of seeing social actors sometimes as students, some other times as teachers, in the idea of an interchangeability of roles to thus bring out and/or strengthen individual and group responsibility: “It is not enough to insist on the necessity of experience, nor even on activity in experience. Everything depends on the quality of the experience that is made” (Dewey, 1938/2014, p. 13).

Experience-based learning is a way of learning through a form of practical wisdom (*métis*) and can improve Communities of Practice because it considers the person in his entirety giving considerable importance to action. Kolb’s spiral model reflects well what has been said; in the author’s opinion, in fact, there must be a continuous learning process that includes *concrete experience* (living the experience in the “here and now”), *reflective observation* (understanding the specific case), *abstract conceptualization* (identifying the general principles underlying the case) and *active experimentation* (applying the general principles in new learning situations) (Moon, 2012, pp. 119-120). Experience, therefore, is transformative if it is rooted in that educational action that uses practices to promote both individual and collective intelligence and, in this sense, “if it is true that one learns by swimming, then the art of thinking is learned by thinking and it is essential that it is a thought rooted in experience” (Mortari, 2017, p. 48). The interweaving of subjectivities in communities of practice gives rise to comparison, to research and to the cognitive, affective-emotional and relational processes that emerge are the result of different intelligences that reveal themselves within a context that makes possible every form of reflection that, today, takes on a leading role in the learning dimension. In fact, as demonstrated by the particular emphasis that is being placed on faculty development, the need to oppose to homologation with learning models based on a heterogeneity that reveals in the uniqueness of each subject their own freedom of expression. Reflection transforms learning from a simple memorization of facts to an active process of understanding and interpretation and thus offers an approach to learning that is not superficial but profound, that is, qualified by an intentionality that seeks sense and meaning, determining not only a reflection on the action (after the action has been performed) but also in the action (thinking while acting) (Schön, 1986/1993) and “thoughtful people are attentive [...], ponder, deliberate” (Dewey, 1910/1965, p. 145) and, even if one is not born as a member of a community, he can become one by seeing in the other one’s a travelling companion.

References

- Baldacci M. (2021). Una scuola a più volti. Tempio, comunità o azienda? In A. Mariani. *La relazione educativa. Prospettive contemporanee* (pp. 125-143). Roma: Carocci.
- Baldacci M. (2022). Neoliberismi e pedagogia. *Metis Journal*, 7: 23-32.
- Bateson G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandrel (trad. it. *verso un'ecologia della mente*, Milano: Adelphi, 1976).
- Beach A. (eds) (2016). *Faculty development in the age of evidence*. Sterlin, VA: Stylus.
- Cacciamani S., Ligorio M.B. (2010). Modelli di comunità scolastiche. In M.B. Ligorio, C. Pontecorvo. *La scuola come contesto. Prospettive psicologico-culturali* (pp. 63-77). Roma: Carocci.
- CIDA (Comitato per l'Innovazione Didattica di Ateneo) (2020). Prefazione. In A. Lotti, P.A. Lampugnani. *Faculty Development in Italia Valorizzazione delle competenze didattiche dei docenti universitari* (pp. 11-12). Genova: Genova University Press.
- Cisotto L. (2002). *Costruttivismo socio-culturale. Genesi filosofiche, sviluppi psico-pedagogici, applicazioni didattiche*. Roma: Carocci.
- Cappuccio G., Maniscalco L. (2020). L'apprendimento generativo e il reflective learning nella didattica universitaria: una ricerca con studenti universitari. *Formazione e insegnamento*, 18(1): 232-246.
- De Rossi M. (2022). Faculty development e mainstreaming per la qualità. In M. De Rossi., M. Fedeli, *Costruire percorsi di Faculty Development* (pp. 15-30). Lecce: Pensa MultiMedia.
- Dewey J. (1910). *How we Think*. Boston: D.D. Heath & CO (trad. it. *Come pensiamo, Una riformulazione del rapporto tra pensiero riflessivo e l'educazione*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1965).
- Dewey J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York: Kappan Delta Pi (trad. it. *Esperienza e educazione*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2014).
- Engström R. (2004). Non scholae sed vitae discimus: come superare l'incapsulamento dell'apprendimento scolastico. In C. Pontecorvo, A.M. Ajello, C. Zuccheromaglio (eds). *I contesti sociali dell'apprendimento. Acquisire conoscenze a scuola, nel lavoro, nella vita quotidiana* (pp. 155-179). Milano: Led.
- Fedeli M. (2022). Lo sviluppo professionale del docente universitario Tradizione, potere e Collaborazione. In M. De Rossi., M. Fedeli, *Costruire percorsi di Faculty Development* (pp. 49-65). Lecce: Pensa MultiMedia.
- Fromm E. (1976). *To Have or to Be?* New York: Harper & Row (trad. it. *Avere o Essere?* Milano: Mondadori, 1977).
- Freire P. (1970). *Pedagogia do oprimido*. Figli di Paulo Freire (trad. it. *Pedagogia degli oppressi*, Torino, Gruppo Abele, 2011).
- Lampugnani P.A. (2020). Il Faculty Development. Origini e caratteristiche. In A. Lotti, P.A. Lampugnani. *Faculty Development in Italia Valorizzazione delle competenze didattiche dei docenti universitari* (pp. 27-40). Genova: Genova University Press.
- Lave J., Wenger E. (1991). *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (trad. it. *L'apprendimento situato. Dall'osservazione alla partecipazione attiva nei contesti sociali*, Trento, Erickson, 2006).
- Ligorio M.B., Spadaro P.F. (2010). *Identità e intersoggettività a scuola*. In M.B. Ligorio, C. Pontecorvo. *La scuola come contesto. Prospettive psicologico-culturali* (pp. 101-114). Roma: Carocci.
- Lipari D. (2007). Introduzione. In E. Wenger, R. McDermott, W.M. Snyder (2002), *Cultivating Communities of Practice. A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press (trad. it. *Coltivare comunità di pratica*, Milano, Guerini).
- Maino G. (2024). Coordinate: cosa (non) sono le Comunità di pratica. In AA.VV. *Comunità di pratica. Una guida per partecipare, innovare, trasformare* (pp. 15-25). Milano: Ledizioni.
- Maino F., Maino G. (2024). Introduzione. In AA.VV. *Comunità di pratica. Una guida per partecipare, innovare, trasformare* (pp. 11-14). Milano: Ledizioni.
- McMillan D.W., Chavis D.M. (1986). Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14: 6-23.
- Mecacci L. (2019⁶). *Storia della psicologia. Dal Novecento a oggi*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Moon J.A. (2004). *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning*. Londra: Routledge (trad. it. *Esperienza, riflessione, apprendimento. Manuale per una formazione innovativa*, Roma, Carocci, 2012).
- Mortari, L. (2017). *Apprendere dall'esperienza. Il pensare riflessivo nella formazione*. Roma: Carocci.
- Sarason S.B. (1974). *The Psychological Sense of Community: Prospects for a Community Psychology*. Oxford: Jossey Bass.
- Schön D.A. (1986). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books (trad. it. *Il professionista riflessivo. Per una nuova epistemologia della pratica professionale*, Bari, Dedalo, 1993).
- Silva R. (2022). *Faculty Development. Il docente universitario tra ricerca, didattica e management*. Roma: Carocci.

- Sorcinelli M.D. (2020). Fostering 21st Century Teaching and Learning: New Models for Faculty Professional Development. In A. Lotti, P.A. Lampugnani.
Faculty Development in Italia Valorizzazione delle competenze didattiche dei docenti universitari (pp. 19-25). Genova: Genova University Press.
- Tonnies F. (1887). *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Abhandlung des Communismus und des Socialismus als empirischer Culturformen*. Lipsia: Verlag di Fues (trad. it. *Comunità e società*, Bari, Laterza, 2011).
- Wenger E., McDermott R., Snyder W.M. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice. A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press (trad. it. *Coltivare comunità di pratica*, Milano, Guerini, 2007).
- Zanetti M.A. et alii (2021). Insegnare a insegnare. Dalle conoscenze alle competenze. In A. Lotti et alii (eds.), *Faculty Development e innovazione didattica universitaria* (pp. 71-81). Genova: Genova University Press.