



A holding for university's students in Venice

Uno spazio di accoglienza per gli studenti dell'Università di Venezia

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ABSTRACT

Considerando da un lato il concetto di Winnicot di spazio accogliente, e dall'altro la problematica della giovinezza non soltanto come età della transizione verso l'età adulta, ma piuttosto come un'età con specifici bisogni, desideri, motivazioni, questo articolo introduce l'esperienza di un ufficio regionale della città di Venezia, cui ruolo è il supporto ai diritti dell'istruzione superiore. Lo stesso copre un'ampia offerta di servizi fra formazione, career counseling e attività socio-culturali per il tempo libero, coprendo tre elementi basilari delle condizioni di vita degli studenti universitari, con particolare attenzione alle transizioni fra formazione e lavoro.

Following Winnicott's concept of holding environment on one side and considering the young not only as an age of transition to adulthood, but rather as an age with its specific needs and desires on the other side, the Regional Body supporting the Right to Higher Education in Venice offers a wide range of services between educational training, career counselling and leisure, thus covering the three basic elements of the life condition of students, with particular attention to the training for the transition to work.

KEY WORDS

Youth, informal learning, leisure, educational policies
Gioventù, apprendimento informale, tempo libero, politiche educative

1. The variegated world of the young

It is well known that not only does the young's own image, but also the image adults try to supply them with often contain essentially bipolar representations. This image tends to typify or epitomize to the utmost the social-cultural profile of young generations. Undoubtedly one of these dichotomies is represented by the pair "uniformity/diversity". It represents both the young person's need to fit in the base groups (a peculiar need of youth behaviour and attitude) and their impulse to have a marked individuality, by trying to be the centre of attention, by breaking the rules, highlighting at the same time the wish of exploration and of self-assertion.

Actually, research (e.g. Istat¹ 2001, Censis² 2002, Iard³ 2002) has illustrated the se-

- 1 Istat is the Italian National Institute for Statistics.
- 2 Censis is the Italian Social Studies and Research Institute.
- 3 Iard is a Cultural and Educational Research Milan-based Foundation.

veral aspects of Italian society and of the behaviour models, particularly as regards the world of the young. As a result it is difficult to analyze and identify widespread characteristics able to adequately interpret such a “difficult age”, often in fact called “X or unknown generation”. With the failure of traditional social groups or associations, individuality has emerged together with the “loneliness”, as Bauman (1999) correctly maintains, with respect to choice and priority of values, pertaining both ideology, ethics, culture, aesthetics or the mere necessities. However, over many years of guidance and counselling in the services of Esu Venezia⁴ we have understood that, beyond the complexity and plurality of the world of the young, all the young people we have met strongly feel they belong to the condition of a university student, as if it were a sort of overriding identity, a collective blend able to interact with each student’s personal identity rather than cancelling it.

These observations have encouraged Esu Venezia to think of and implement an integrated many-sided service model, able to meet as much as possible the needs of the “many-sided” university student. The purpose of the integration is to create a balancing moment among the three basic elements of the complex multifold life conditions of the students: education, vocational training and cultural and associative activities, so that the Esu service becomes a sort of hinge between the world of tertiary education and the actual experience of university students’ life.

Esu Venezia has been enriching and modulating its services in time, often in collaboration with universities, schools and other interested institutions. It provides on the one hand suitable material and non-material services to meet the many-sided students’ request mentioned above and on the other hand the rights of students, which the Italian Constitution comprises among the fundamental rights of citizens.

The “rights-of-students” service package offers an articulated range of activities both as financial support and as specific services aiming to promote equal opportunities. In addition, in line with the regional policy, Esu Venezia has taken particular care in providing facilities improving life conditions, exchange and meeting among students (halls of residence, students’ restaurants, computer rooms, common rooms for meetings and parties, theatres for performances, films, etc.).

2. Esu guidance, counselling and educational services

With the creation of a specific centre, C.U.OR.I.⁵, other kinds of intervention have developed along with the above types of services. These interventions aim to guarantee equal opportunities on a non-material personal level, as well as the training and accompaniment through transitions in a student’s life. Also here we have tried to give a new shape to the traditional offer of separate though adjoining services, within a centre (drawing on Winnicott’s idea of a holding environment) devised as a space able to hold the students’ varied and “global” demand.

C.U.OR.I. can be defined as a “holding space for university students”, containing a space for information and guidance for the choice of either educational or career training, guidance counselling, counselling on the analysis of personal/professional expertise, sessions to improve study strategies, a small library and a small room with Internet facilities to access databanks on training, grants and to enter on-line CVs.

4 Esu Venezia is the Veneto Regional Body supporting the Right to Higher Education.

5 CUORI is the Orientation and Information University Centre.

Students come with different question typologies and find an answer in the continuum between information and counselling.

The centre is organized as a neutral environment as opposed to the world of school, education or university. In addition, since it is characterized by a variety of guidance activities, it aims to support and to accompany a student during this crucial phase of transition from high school to university and from there, over a slow process, to the world of labour and of adult life. The young university student, late adolescent or young adult (Scabini, 1995), is indeed faced with a series of new phase-specific tasks: adapting to a different reality, made of new education, new organization, new institutions, often a new geographic and cultural environment and to tackle the task of fitting into university, prior to the future fitting into a profession, “resetting” the representation of him/herself as a student, as an offspring, as a schoolmate and more generally of him/herself as a person.

In the process of acquisition of the psychosocial role of university student, some issues concerning relationships come up: the relationship between the Self and the world, taking the shape of the relationship with the knowledge-object, the relationship with the institution with authority and the relationship with the peer group. On the basis of the inner landscape and of the family expectations and investment (affecting the estimation of university studies, the planning of a person’s future and the definition of “success” and “failure”) the subject has to face the new developmental tasks with different modalities and levels of success.

C.U.OR.I., “as a bridge between past experience and future projects, between the former household and new dwellings, between the need to be supported and the longing for independence, can be experienced as a space where to make a new thread in one’s own personal ‘story’. Here, the young person through the process of integration, whereby existing connections among the different aspects of the Self are established and expressed, is encouraged to think upon his/her origin and can find support for the individuation process and for his/her development as a person” (Luderin, Maione, 2001).

In addition to guidance, tutoring and study, career or psychological counselling, C.U.OR.I. has developed an important formative service, particularly regarding two areas: 1) courses on study strategies and 2) techniques and strategies for job search.

Regarding the former, C.U.OR.I. periodically organizes big or small group meetings (12-15 students) as well as individual sessions.

3. Entering university: training on study strategies

A student entering the world of university has to learn how to organize his/her time and study and also to modify the study method previously used, becoming more autonomous and aware. In time, a student learns the codes of a new language and gradually becomes a “strategic student”, while adopting a positive attitude toward study. The change involving the university student does not only regard the new study modality, different from high school, but also his/her social life. In fact, university life entails new relationships, new teaching system, being able to manage a new world.

Sessions aim at helping students to learn about the processes implied by study, to improve their skills and attitudes, to autonomously manage their cognitive and emotional resources to fit the task to be faced. The focus is on the individual, appreciating his/her intersubjective differences and personal potentials. Therefore the aim is optimizing university experience by finding a personal study method, which is not

meant as a set stereotypical technique, rather as a personal achievement of a practice which results from experience and from a creative process.

Looking for a suitable study method means *learning to learn*, that is developing the meta-cognitive competence: being able to tackle a problem, focusing on a correct strategy, considering whether one's resources are still suitable, whether they can be positively adjusted or if there's need to create new ones. For this perspective it is essential to be the protagonist of the own "knowledge", to acquire a strategic attitude and to be aware of the learning process. As a result, the student becomes flexible in the use of specific techniques or attitudes functional to each task.

The meetings have been organized in two phases: a phase of self-evaluation and a phase of training of the underlying learning mechanisms. The first phase has moments of self-knowledge and self-evaluation, stimulated with questionnaire expressly made to reassess a personal approach to study. A good study method cannot boil down to a set of techniques – just consider the widespread research on demand of mnemotechniques ensuring success –, it is instead something involving the whole person with his/her motivations and relations (see Trentini, 1995). Therefore, it is necessary to accompany a student to become aware of him/herself, before encouraging changes of method which will affect the whole person.

Not only are the techniques at stake or the lack of them, but also the models underlying the dynamics of learning, of motivation, of inclusion/exclusion with respect to a new social framework, of success/failing and of issues connected to self-esteem, to holding roles, to growth and acquisition of new social roles. All these dynamics come up in the student's behaviour and attitude. Therefore we believe that the support to difficulty in study or in relationships should focus on both sides: on the cognitive and on the affective side, on the behavioural and on the symbolical dimension, on the individual and on the institution.

The students discuss in a group about their skills and limits, about self-knowledge and cognitive styles. They reflect upon the reason why they registered university in the first place, on the goals they want to attain, on the way they organize time and space for their study, on what they blame for their academic failures or give credit for their success (a lecturer's mood, their own efforts, etc), on what learning processes they make use of (concentration, listening, reading, memory...), how they reorganize what they have learnt (notes, schemes...), how their mood affects their study (see Legrenzi, 1994). Students perceives very clearly that they cannot have right or wrong solutions beforehand, that the goal of the meetings is to form an accurate idea of their own study method and they feel free to express their observations.

The second phase entails a deepening of the issues linked to the learning process (see Benjafiel, 1992). A model and guidelines are suggested for efficient learning and achievement of good results. Each student is asked to reflect upon these issues and to rework them on the basis of the ideas drawn from the first self-evaluation phase.

A detailed discussion deals on:

Cognitive Issues

Attention and concentration: in the lecture room, on books;

Memorization: storing, revising, mnemotechniques;

Comprehension: understanding information decoding language, visual representation, analysis of contents, final summary;

Organization: drawing up a calendar to plan the time to de-

vote to study, to entertainment, setting priorities;

Lecture tools: notes, schemes, recordings;

Reading: the phases of efficient reading;

Dynamic Issues

Motivation and attribution: the reasons for the choice made;

Anxiety for exams: emotivity during study or at exams;

Self-esteem: over-esteem or under-esteem.

The above issues are experienced by the students in the group or in the lecture room. The group modality enables participants to compare themselves to other people sharing same life or study experiences. It is a situation of mutual support where it is possible to elaborate experiences in a realistic and positive way. In addition, participants may learn about and experiment alternative modalities to deal with their problems, thus receiving and taking over ideas both from their peers and the facilitators, with modalities and perspectives previously unknown in the family or school environment (Luderin, Maione, Tortorella, 2000).

4. Training for the transition to work

Regarding the transition to work, in the light of the present employment situation, of the increasing relevance of cross competences, of the changes occurring in tertiary education (university reform) and in the vocational training services, we have decided to focus our efforts particularly on graduate students looking for work. Therefore, we have devised a pattern of activities centred on the individual, with the aim to enable the transformation of a person's resources and potentials into efficient actions, aimed to get an employment.

Looking for work requires a perspective that takes into account both the requirements of the labour market and a person's competence and interests. Henceforth, we believe that providing suitable techniques and methodologies or detailed information is not enough in most cases. In order to be successful in the job search, a person has to set off his/her own resources into an active, forward attitude, based on the knowledge of themselves, of their values, strengths and weaknesses, which means drawing up a personal and professional balance. It is also extremely important to learn about all the elements of the context and of the interlocutors regarding private or public institutions (Tortorella, Cristante, Luderin, 2002).

For these reasons, the facility where we work – C.U.OR.I. – collaborates with the university guidance service and with the province job centres. Focusing on the subject/person entails a certain flexibility in the modules and in the starting point for the job search. Activities range from counselling for getting information on a business to the making of a business plan or the planning of a work placement.

At the C.U.OR.I. centre activities are organized into modules geared to provide information as well as formation and individual counselling. The activity of counselling or information can be triggered in any module (e.g. from an enquiry on names in a specific area, or from a request of help to write a CV). Once a subject's request is met and information on the centre activities is provided, a subject may ask for more information modules, "leave" the service or ask for individual counselling, consisting of interviews with an operator in order to devise a career plan.

All activities belong to a specific "Spazio Professioni" (Career Space), where the

student can make use of a self-access multimedia room with job ads, specialized magazines, guides and other materials.

An important formative element is the meeting with experts from the various professions and careers, talking about their experience.

Since 1996, C.U.OR.I. has been working on a training programme facilitating an active conscious attitude in the job search in undergraduated and graduated students. In fact, we are convinced of the importance of motivation and value attribution for success in job search. Moreover, small group workshops help creating an atmosphere of mutual support to help overcome any difficulty met in the course of the search.

For three days we discuss on “attitudes” seen as the expression of the experience of the own Self and the future, visible in one’s actions and ways and very different from self-marketing, which is restricted to the instrumental components “of the best way to sell yourself as a product”.

The discussion deals on the labour market (local and beyond) and its transformation; the new approaches required in job search; building one’s resources, values and career priorities; knowledge of ways and channels of job search; instruments of selection, both from the point of view of the employer and of the personnel officer. We enact role-playing of job interviews, simulating cases which involve all participants in the group.

At the end of the course participants draw up a questionnaire providing a feedback for the operators to progressively adjust the instrument/workshop and to assess its subjective efficacy.

The most appreciated element of our workshops appears to be the role-playing of a job interview. Job interviews seem to be one of the most worrying moments for recently graduated students, engendering anxiety for the unknown. Enacting a realistic situation in a group helps students facing emotional issues, not easy to handle unless in a protected environment. Students receive a feedback on their relational style and become aware of their weak points.

Apparently the function of the workshop is to provide a student with a reference framework, a sort of starting kit as well as to strengthen their self-guiding skills (ranking second as “useful”). These data support the link to the attachment theory to understand the various transitions, including the transition from student to worker (Fedora, 2002).

Since we work in Venice, between water and land, we suggest a water image. Whereas a fixed bridge connects two fixed shores, a floating landing place allows lagoon boats to land and leave. A stable and secure basis at this stage of life is not so fixed, instead it floats and holds at the same time. In Venice landing places does not belong either to land or to water, but share features of both thus training to keep one’s balance during rough crossing. (Luderin, Franceschini, 2001).

5. EsuCulture: not only study

Beside these guidance and training services, Esu Venezia has offered many young undergraduate or recently graduated students the opportunity to actually test themselves against the building of their own professional project within the Esu facility. The Esu, in fact, is an agency mainly composed of young people. They offer their recently acquired education, competence, efforts, motivation, wish to continue their education and training, all in all an extra something which makes the Esu service a friendly environment, ready to interpret the need of the world of students, just left by most

of them. There are senior tutors for tutorials, recently graduate psychology trainee students, young collaborators or advisors and students' associations. The latter are sometimes made up by undergraduate or graduated students who are asked to autonomously run some of the Esu services: libraries, study rooms, recreation centres, information desks, newspapers, study travels, language courses or even particularly relevant services such as the "Cerco Casa" (Accommodation Desk) – an attempt to make supply and demand of student accommodation meet in the problematic Venice market – and the EsuCulture service.

The latter service has been specifically devised to supplement the basic issues of the above mentioned material and information/formation support. Its actions aim at promoting an "other" sort of training, different from the "higher" education provided by university.

We refer to the project of combining the traditional offer of training and services with proposals aiming to support students' aggregation, as well as the young creativity. Whereas Arthur Rimbaud spoke about *oisive jeunesse* (idle youth), Venice university students taking part in the various proposals of EsuCulture centre prove instead to be experiencing a youth which is not at all idle. On the contrary, after many other artists and poets, they might be taking advantage of their otium (idleness) and loisir (leisure). Among their study obligations and the problems (rather than the joys) of their age, they have time to devote to creative moments, to write up and to realize a project.

This can be evinced from the poems submitted to poetry contests or in the art work exhibited at painting or photograph competitions, from theatre or film productions or film clubs, concerts or students' parties very often organized around specific themes.

With this service, Esu of Venice has been trying to offer all Venice students, as well as its trainees or collaborators, a sort of training place to put themselves to test, "a chance to practice their creativity, to give shape to their projects and wishes and to come out into the open" (Capalbo, Serrajotto 2002), possibly out of the usual literary or artistic awards.

The actions proposed by Esu, with the support of Veneto Regional Administration, did not simply aim to publish the usual anthology of young poets or the usual exhibition of young artists, photographers or budding filmmakers, instead they have been an invitation, however modest, to encourage the creativity of the young. Such creativity, though said to be important, is instead very often restricted to few selected people. Sometimes it simply consists in uncontrolled techniques of wordiness or piles up of private experiments in home desk drawers or computers.

The students are asked to take part in the various cultural, formative or recreational activities proposed by Esu in collaboration with the university, the regional administration and other institutions in Venice, as a further opportunity to develop their talents and to experience the unique years of university study in a deeper and personal way.

In this respect EsuCulture, which is also run together with two students' associations, collaborates with the city's university and cultural institutions (Venice Biennale, theatres like "La Fenice", "Malibran", "Goldoni"...) and has become a reference point for all Venice university students. In fact, these as well as other cultural associations can find supply and communication services and financial support.

EsuCulture periodically organizes cultural or recreational events - sightseeing tours, meetings, parties and entertainments. There are performances, concerts, film clubs, awards and contests, study travels, free or low-cost courses (I.T., languages,

dance, drama, etc). The Far East Service is a very interesting facility for students of Asian languages, a meeting point to exchange experiences on study sojourns, stages or work opportunities in the Far East. Here students can use a satellite television and become familiar with Oriental life and cultural models.

The “A. Nardocci” Multipurpose Centre offers students’ associations photocopying facilities (2.000 free copies per year), a telephone and fax service (2.000 free units per year), with secretary office run by a students’ cooperative which provides practical assistance.

The students can use computer facilities both at the Multipurpose Centre and in the Esu Halls of Residence and find updated materials on cultural or recreational events, announcements for competitions and grants at the Information Desk.

6. Conclusions

The necessities of the young, particularly regarding culture or recreation, represent a practice which actually has a role in the building of their identity and expresses their personality. It comprises their lifestyle and the symbolic use of free time or rather “set free” time as some sociologists (Belloni, 1995) name this new space holding a variety of activities which cannot be simply considered mere *loisir/leisure*.

Further, the necessities – which we generically define “cultural” – are the evidence of the above mentioned fragmentation of the world of the young and of the homologation effect of fashion processes. On the one hand these seem to encourage the young toward “individualization” and the expression of their own growing identity, on the other hand they seem to be conditioned by class differences, as regards both economical and socio-cultural aspects (Bourdieu, 1979).

Indeed, “consumer democracy” seems to hold true mainly for material necessities (car, mobile-phone, MTV, spectacle frame, booze, pub, etc), rather than for “non material” necessities, “still sensibly different as regards the possibility of access to them or individual tastes” (IARD, 2002). All that represents a sort of challenge which C.U.OR.I., as any information and guidance agency, is called to face.

The condition of the young has always been a period of transition, of waiting, the result of a sort of free area between adolescence and adult age. Today, as a matter of fact, free time, entertainment, travelling, the show business and cultural necessities seem to be marked by the customs of the world of the young. The latter means both the market target group and the set of collective behaviour, lifestyles, with their underlying life philosophies. First of all “juvenilism”, sweeping away almost all Western society, with positive or negative results.

We believe that the actions suggested by educators, guidance operators, facilitators to the variegated “galaxy” of the young and of the students are crucial. The young experience a privileged period in their lives in which they build their culture and their competence, shaping a basis for the relevant choices for their own future and for the future of the community.

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