Student Beliefs on Educational Responsibility in the Epistemology Course of the Master of Education, Communication, and Digital Citizenship at the University of Ferrara

Le credenze degli studenti sulla responsabilità formativa nel corso di Epistemologia della Laurea Magistrale in Formazione, Comunicazione e Cittadinanza Digitale presso l'Università di Ferrara

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to understand the attitude of the students of the Course of Epistemology of the Master of Education, Communication and digital Citizenship (University of Ferrara) around the concept of responsibility, in order to start a metacognitive process. For this purpose, a questionnaire was completed and analysed following a qualitative approach. With Margiotta, we believe that convictions around the implicit beliefs influence students' approach during the processes of knowledge's construction. As a result, it is useful to know these representations in order to formulate a formative proposal more efficient because more aware of elaborative and receptive features of our young interlocutors. There is a correlation between cognition and implicit epistemology, this research would make explicit some of its fundamental structures around the perception of own responsibility in self-study.

Lo scopo di questa ricerca è comprendere la postura degli studenti del Corso di Epistemologia della Laurea Magistrale di Formazione, Comunicazione e Cittadinanza digitale (Università di Ferrara) intorno al principio della responsabilità nell'apprendimento per avviare un processo metacognitivo. A questo fine, è stato somministrato un questionario analizzato alla luce di un orientamento metodologico qualitativo. Con Margiotta, riteniamo che le convinzioni intorno alle credenze implicite condiziona l'approccio degli studenti nei confronti dei processi di costruzione della conoscenza. Di conseguenza è utile conoscere tali rappresentazioni al fine di formulare una proposta formativa più efficace in quanto più consapevole delle caratteristiche ricettive ed elaborative dei nostri giovani interlocutori. Esiste una correlazione fra cognizione ed epistemologia implicita, questa ricerca ha voluto rendere esplicite alcune sue strutture fondamentali intorno alla percezione della propria responsabilità nello studio.

KEYWORDS
Implicit Epistemology, Knowledge, Educational Responsibility, Metacognition, Learning
Epistemologia implicita, Conoscenza, Responsabilità Formativa, Metacognizione, Apprendimento

Higher education / Alta formazione

1. Introduction: from the question to the answer

> «Here's my secret. It's very simple: it is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye. It is the time you lost for your rose that made your rose so important. It is the time I lost for my rose. Men forgot this truth. But you don't have to forget it. You become forever responsible on what you took care. You are responsible of your rose. I am responsible of my rose» (Saint-Exupéry, 1943/2015, p. 110, Auth. trans.)

Today more than ever studying the anthropology of the new generations is really important in order to analyse the specificity of their educational needs and, on consequence, to elaborate an efficient formative proposal for the challenges of the contemporary world. The research we present aims to identify some guidelines concerning juvenile mindset. We are living through a systemic crisis that transforms relations, skills, codes, and values. This is an epoch-making crisis, somewhat subterranean because of its connections to implicit epistemologies (Annacontini, 2014, p. 89). In many ways, it is easy to look for the responsibilities of this sense of loss (Bencivenga, 2020) within society, school and family (Chomsky, 2004; Galli Della Loggia, 2019). Together with our students, we reflected about the responsibility of the learner.

The Latin verb *respond o,* first person present indicative of *respond re*, does not mean 'I answer' in the dialogic-communicative sense but it means 'I answer for it', 'I take charge of it', 'I am responsible as individual or subject'. Being a person is the condition for answering, as an ontological and necessary fact, but also formulating questions that need answers is inherent in our own nature. This is the thought that activates itself, even if it hesitates because of the complexity related to the act of replying. It is the thought that decides that taking care is the characterizing factor of both external and internal experience, and of both individual and social life because the responsibility is the condition of freedom. The responsibility to care for the others is the other side of the motivation to study that makes us responsible about what we are learning. The mental attitude is the same because there is a relation between cognitive and social behaviour (Gramigna, 2021). Not by chance Ricoeur (1990/1993) translates the concept *respect* with *recognition*. He identifies a difference between *dem* and *ipse*: the former symbolizes the self and depends on the peculiarity of the ego, while the latter has a distinct structure that finds its purpose in the *recognition of being ordered*. Here, this particular type of Self appears suitable for recognizing the other and also enables the other to be treated as the object of care. Placing subjectivity at the centre of the investigation presents a delicate issue, aimed at fostering a hermeneutics of the Self and a vigilant understanding of the dialectical relationship between the Self and the Other. The human subject is discontinuous, as demonstrated by the compresence of *dem* and *ipse* and, as Ricouer puts it, *saying 'Self' is not saying 'I.'* at the same time, the '*Self like the other*' should be changed into an extreme signifier: '*Self as the Other.'*

In this context, it is important to mention an extract from the Myth of Er by Plato that concludes *The Republic*. The soldier who came back to life twelve days after the death made Fate Lachesis say: "Virtue knows no master. Your respect or contempt for it will give each of you a greater or a smaller share. The choice makes you responsible. God is not responsible" (Plato, 2000, 10.617e). Er, who visited the world beyond, affirms that until the Fate cuts the thread of existence, the subject is able to construct their own life project, more or less virtuously, in full autonomy. Responsibility is individual, and divinity imposes no limits, thus personal failures cannot be justified by an adverse destiny.

The 'titanic' hero Prometheus became a symbol of human progress, particularly the symbol of the technical solutions to daily problems. At the beginning of the myth, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and bestowed it upon humans. However, humans were unable to manage the present and did not assume their responsibility towards it, using fire merely as a tool. This fact mirrors the unsettling image of the current ecological crisis. Marcuse (1967) wrote that Prometheus, the catalyst for the arduous and progressive construction of Western society, had to give way to Orpheus and Narcissus, seen as the perfect synthesis for achieving peace, liberating time, and harmoniously reconnecting with divinity and nature. The utopia of a fully conscious responsibility emerged in this way: "To the degree to which the struggle for existence becomes co-operation for the free development and fulfilment of individual needs, repressive reason gives way to a new *rationality of gratification* in which reason and happiness converge" (Marcuse, 1955, p. 224). It can be deduced that repressive reason, devoid of ethics, is not responsible; in this thought there is no humanityonly power and wealth. The *other* reason, which seeks to converge with happiness, is indeed ethical but remains in the realm of dreams.

The research is situated within this cultural horizon.

2. The research project

2.1 Aim of the research and identification of the problem

The investigation presented here aims to understand the subjective assignment of meaning exercised by students regarding their own choices and responsibilities during the learning process. We are referring to an epistemological belief with evident ethical implications. The objects of study presented here are students' opinion about the nature of knowledge, its construction, its sources, and the role played by students during the learning process. These implicit convictions, which act upon the ways of thinking, influence not only the self-study approach but also the perception of the sense of responsibility towards the exam results at the end of the research activity.

The link between implicit beliefs and explicit choices about self-studying, such as the connection between the theory of knowledge and learning attitude, is intrinsic to the structuring processes and inherent to the demarcation and composition of knowledge construction processes. This serves as the initial assumption. In fact, we think that the capacity to reflect on one's mental categories is the prerequi-

site for initiating metacognition processes and reasoning about values. Based on this, the attempt is twofold: firstly, to promote reflective and transformative competences, and secondly, to explore the nature of both cognitive and value orientations of our students. The meanings assigned to Educational Responsibility and, more broadly, to Education by students are likely different from those assigned by teachers (Biscaldi, 2018), as students' self-study behaviours depend on the socio-cultural context created by new technologies. In such an environment, individuals begin to develop their own identity and cognitive activity processes. Therefore, it is important to understand students' beliefs regarding their own mental configuration. Specifically, it is the implicit epistemology, that is, the meaning assigned by students, that influences learning dynamics. The cognitive self is shaped by students' attitudes towards learning, motivations, the value attributed to education, and expectations of achieving educational goals (Zohar & Dori, 2012). Consequently, reflecting on these implicit learning structures is crucial because our ideas about mental processes impact knowledge construction, cognitive strategy development, and even memory itself. Implicit ideas, even when not fully aware or characterized, influence our learning approach. Hence, it is strategically important to understand the value we assign to our behaviours when studying. Identifying and analysing the elements that characterize implicit epistemology is fundamental for guiding knowledge construction processes in both teaching and learning. Gardner (2004) explains that both phenomena lead to resonance, that is, the conviction (or lack thereof) to achieve an efficient knowledge. However, the cognitive operations play a dominant and potentially decisive role in learning difficulties.

2.2 Objective of the research

The objective is to understand how students perceive the formative successes or unsuccess, where they place the responsibility of them and in which measure. So, we tried to elicit an introspective attitude, that would promote the awareness around learning processes both implicit and explicit. The investigation aims to analyse our students' mentality in order to intercept their intuitive ideas around a very important question both for the degrees they've chosen and for the job they would like to dedicate to.

2.3 Contents

Consequently, we tried to highlight the beliefs, not always conscious, concerning the sense of responsibility in training and education. In particular, we identified these foci:

1. The relation between learning result and didactic activity;
2. The relation between learning and effort;
3. The relation between expectations and motivation.

These are interconnected topics grounded on their educational implications. The invitation we delivered to students represents a first essential self-reflection process of an applied hermeneutic practice. Starting from their implicit ideas, students wondered about the deep sense of educational responsibility. Subsequently, the questionnaire was analysed.

2.4 The epistemic framework and the theory of reference

Drawing from both cognitivist and constructivist epistemologies, our model is grounded in a qualitative approach. This approach is further enriched by the application of hermeneutic activities. Such a foundation was pivotal both in the initial formulation of our project and in the subsequent organisation of activities, which encompassed posing questions, facilitating discussions, and encouraging self-reflection. Throughout the research process, we, as researchers, felt compelled to delve deeper into reflecting on the context. At the conclusion of the course, this reflection was also extended to include the students.

The first scholar who undertook a systemic study on epistemological beliefs is Perry (1968). He postulates that, during the learning process, changing the configuration of implicit ideas is equivalent to gaining a higher level of competence. Ideas are mental constructs produced by intelligence. Intelligence does not merely create these ideas, but actively works to organise, reconfigure, combine, and modify them. More recently Magolda (1992) showed the correlation between learning styles and epistemological implicit assumptions, and also the consequent expectations towards oneself, peers and instructors. In fact, ideas can be changed because they are built upon concepts, narrations, theories, and competences. They are plural constructions because they correlate designated entities.

The relation between learning and competences was analysed by Dewey (1938/1997) and still represents a frame of reference for this research. Other relevant scholars are Gardner (2006), for his reflections on the education of the mind, and, above all, Margiotta (2015), for his research on metacognition. For metacognition with think about the capacity, that each of us has, of thinking oneself as intentional agents able to monitor his own mental states, both thoughts and emotions. This is the prerequisite to identify the relation between mental representations and cognitive behaviour. The purpose is to help our students to think, in order to educate them to the reflective thinking. As Margiotta explains: "training in a reflective perspective means allowing the trainee to investigate the problematic nature of life experiences, starting from the contexts, to build meaning and 'learn from experience', where learn means *learn to think*" (Margiotta, 2015, p. 112).

Hence, a concept of competence is outlined as something with a potentially high generative and transformative power. Its implementation provides for the construction of a reflection about its own structures of thinking. Self-hermeneutic and self-reflection are those technologies of self-determination that Foucault (1988) had already partly explored (see also Salmeri, 2021). Moreover, Bateson (1979) showed that the epistemological structure of our reflection defines

the questions we wonder for and the procedures we use to find the answers, to build the solutions for the problems, to elaborate new ideas, to teach and to learn. The epistemic framework that sustains this research draws on a hermeneutic conception of knowledge, and conceives of it as a relational, multidirectional, and transformative process. The constructivist and cognitivist theory of learning is placed in this scenario. In this regard, Bruner (2000) maintains that language and narration are instruments of the mind and that is why narration in the most natural form is not just a form of telling but also of knowing. In this way, the intelligent thought takes its first steps. Any kind of learning is considered a construction because it operates a structural modification of the complexity and depth of mental representation. Bruner (2000), again, efficiently highlighted the problem of 'intuitive convictions' about learning, reporting the relevance of the conditioning that common sense plays in educational processes. In short, we believe it is beneficial to teach individuals how they form representations during the learning process. For this reason, is important to reason with students about their ideas of knowledge, learning, and responsibility.

2.5 Methodology

The questions presented in the questionnaire focus on the relation between students' mental representations of the world and the anthropological context in which they are immersed—a context that is analysed starting from its constitutive relational dynamics. Therefore, our method of analysis, even if it uses quantitative data, refers to a qualitative structure that considers the numeric data in a systemic relation with the identified context (Poletti, 2020).

The sample includes 24 students of the course, which corresponds to the 80% of the registered ones. Females are prevalent, with 21 out 24 (87,5%).

2.6 Activities

In the context of the Course of 'Epistemology of formation and technology rationality,' which is part of the curriculum of the Master's in 'Education, communication and digital citizenship' (University of Ferrara), a workshop was organised to perform the 'self-hermeneutic' exercise. This was the assignment:

> «Assign a value from 1 to 5 for each proposed affirmation, considering that 1= 'I totally disagree' and 5= 'I completely agree'. Then, write a brief comment that explains your score. The framework within which this questionnaire is proposed is 'the responsibility in education'».

The survey included nine items:

1. Instructors are the main responsible for unsuccessful learning.
2. Academic teaching: whether it is efficient, whether it requires a substantial self-study effort.
3. Instructors' expectations are too high.
4. Instructors are able to interpret our needs.
5. The instructor is competent if (s)he is able to motivate students.
6. Explanations are effective if they reduce the need for further self-study.
7. Generally speaking, university didactics are old-fashioned.
8. Tertiary studies are fundamental in our formative experience.
9. Communication between us and instructors is fluid and efficient.

After explaining the epistemological sense of metacognitive practice in relation with epistemic values and ethical values, we gave the questionnaire with open and close questions. Then, we discussed in class the answers and gradually monitored the ensuing practice, stimulating students to generalize strategic learning in different situations. During the discussion we invited students to recognize the mental steps during self-study practice and, in general, during the learning process. That was done in light of the declared motivations and perceptions about responsibility in education.

2.7 Attending results

The results of the research will consent us to activate self-reflection competences around critical topics about learning processes and social relations. These competences will be important in order to make explicit the prejudices, the convictions, the representations, and in order to help to problematize the educational implicit assumption.

2.8 The evaluation

The evaluation of this investigation is based on these criteria:

1. Coherence between objectives, prerequisite and used categories.
2. Congruence between these elements and the possibility of their reassessment.
3. During the writing of the research design, in fact, we clarified the epistemological prerequisites even implicit of the procedures that we used for the formulation of the questionnaire, its administration, its documentation and the analysis of the information. For this purpose, we evaluated, step by step, the operational congruence of our heuristic behaviours in the light of a dynamic and reticular system.

In the light of this test, the positive evaluation, induced us to present this report for its publication.

3. Description and analysis of the results

Analysing data, it emerges that, across all nine items:

- 17,13% of the respondents chose Answer 1.
- 27,78% of the respondents chose Answer 2.
- 27,78% of the respondents chose Answer 3.
- 18,98% of the respondents chose Answer 4.
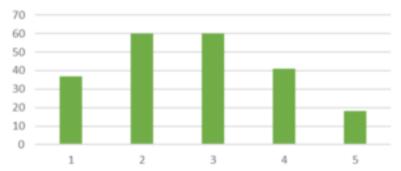- 8,33% of the respondents chose Answer 5.

Figure 1. Distribution of answers given by students.

As the diagram shows, scores 2 and 3 occur more frequently than the others. In light of this, we can say that students preferred to give scores that did not imply a complete agreement or disagreement. Answers to items 6 and 8 are an exception to this rule.

In the first case (item 6), students expressed their complete disagreement about the correlation between effective explanations and less self-study time. It is important to underline that, even if the majority of the students assigned a value of 1 to this question, their comments were not always in line with the radical stance taken in the questionnaire. As illustrated in the following section, many students, even if they recognize the indispensability of the study, believe in most cases that explanations should "encourage to study" or should "motivate to study". In this sense, even if they assigned the lowest score to the item, they identify a sort of correlation between the efficacy of the explanations and the self-study effort. We hypothesize that there is a slight difference between the impulsive answer expressed through item scoring and the idea participants had about the survey's topics. This makes it possible to observe the participants' implicit beliefs.

In the second case (item 8), students expressed their complete agreement in considering the university experience as fundamental for their individual growth. This item received only one score of 3 and all other scores ranged between 4 and 5. This shows a correspondence between scoring and comments, because all students agreed university experience was important. In fact, they maintained that university "is important for specializing and finding a job", or that "tertiary education opens up new scenarios".

4. Discussion

The relation between Learning and Personal Responsibility does not clearly emerge during the initial activities proposed to students but, in general, it emerges that the responsibility of learning failure is distributed between students and instructors. All participants understood the meaning of both concepts, noticing their abstract nature, identifying responsibility as a phenomenon that depends not just on the ability of the instructor but also on the instructor's structural lack of time: "instructors forget that students attend more than a course and ask them to work hard and, in this way, they force students to use shortcuts to achieve their objectives, which is different from an in-depth self-study". Anyway, most participants benignly observed that "responsibility for failure in learning cannot be assigned solely to the instructor. Students should deepen their studies". In the majority of cases, it is an equally distributed weight: "I think that the responsibility for failure should not be mainly ascribed to the instructor, but it should be also ascribed to the student". Anyway, there are also those who assert that the negative result of an examination "sometimes is due to a scarce preparation of the student".

If the instructor is able to understand the students' needs, the examination will have a good test result: "sometimes instructors are helpful, open to comparison and to listening to the students' needs, whereas sometimes the instructors' interest is just a matter of convenience, as they continue using inefficient strategies of teaching-learning". In this case, for example, the whole educational responsibility is attributed to the instructor. If, in such context, the role of university Professor shares most of the responsibility, "the role of the student is diminished and loses degrees of autonomy".

From the open-ended answers emerges that Responsibility and Learning are different processes but in relation each other. However, respondents displayed no awareness of the educational implications of this relation. Everybody, in different ways, said that there is a connection between the two concepts: "Both students and instructors have to motivate the counterpart, with the aim of enriching each other". The connection is acknowledged, because there could not be an efficient learning process without due responsibility; however, that is not epistemically justified and no reason is give as per why the instructor should convey motivation: "in my opinion—says a participant—if the instructor is competent it means that (s)he is able to explain topics trough examples, correlations, concrete current events [that are] closer to the students['s experience]".

Therefore, respondents agree students' motivation should depend on the instructor's preparation:

> "I think that being able to motivate students is really important. I think that this is an aspect that is ignored too often because a lot of instructors think they just have to do their own hour of lesson and stop there. At the same time, I cannot pretend a good instructor's preparation and formation does not matter to me".

Again:

> "Among the features of the good instructor, in my opinion is important to be able to motivate students, because is important that who will face to the educational world could rely on motivated and optimistic instructors, that can instil confidence in the educators of tomorrow".

Accordingly, students' motivation should be a instructor's responsibility: "not all instructors know the students, so they don't try to understand their needs". A good instructor is the one who creates motivation to study on one's own when that is missing; respondents claim: "the capacity to motivate is the main competence of the instructor, but it is not the only". In short, an instructor is good if she can clearly motivate students and make them develop a desire to study autonomously in a degree that they have chosen themselves: "The explanation is efficient if it makes it understandable the reason why is important studying a specific argument."

Hence, we may deduce that the motivation to study is an ingredient that is obtained with the participation to the Master's degree, and it is not a prerequisite of it: "in my opinion the instructor who is able to motivate students, is an expert and excellent instructor, because student often needs to be stimulated by instructor." If instructors are not able to reawaken the desire to study autonomously in adult students that choose to attend a Master's, they fail to meet expectations. From this, we can deduce that students started their university degree without a clear motivation, which is expected to be fuelled by prepared instructors.

Given such conclusion, one might ask what could be done. Here is a recommendation from the open-ended answers:

> "It is important to recognize one's own limits. If an instructor commits five out of ten, he cannot demand a ten out of ten answer from the learner. A student has to be stimulated and accompanied toward the continuation of his work and toward autonomy".

The test results depend on the instructors' engagement and competences. In fact, respondents claim: "For sure the instructor's competence is an incentive. Curiosity is a muscle that must be trained to innovation. Instructors must grow and direct this muscle so that it never switches off." Aside from the creative use of the metaphor of the muscle—which, if uttered in irony, would be an admirable rhetorical feat—it is surprising that, during a university research, it is a common opinion that students should be trained to strengthen their own curiosity—implying that curiosity is not very high to begin with. This appears as an attempt to deputize autonomy both in terms of learning responsibility and in terms of motivation, which is the interest that here is trivialized as 'curiosity.'

In this order of ideas, students skate over their responsibility: "Sometimes the starting position is paternalistic; the instructor focuses on predetermined objectives and he leaves little room to the sedimentation of new methods, he does not take into account the human dimension and the progresses of the students." Alternatively students shift the focus to a sort of "sharing:"

> "Unsuccess is never attributable to just one factor, but it is consequence of concatenation of events and situations acted by lot of people. The responsibility can't be associated just to instructor, because he isn't the only participant to the process of learning, the student has equal responsibility on values, diligence and openness".

Moreover, a participant claims: "The responsibility of learning failure must be ascribed both to the instructor and the student because of the missing commitment and the missing depth of the studied contents during the lesson". It is therefore suggested that educational responsibility is shared, but it is the instructor that must take the biggest share in it: "I would define competent an instructor who is able to share her own study experience and his past with her students, stimulating them to do the same, in order to make students feel listened and free to participate in class". Another respondent concurs: "Self-studying is necessary to complete classroom explanation, to enrich and deepen it. Classroom explanation completes self-study, while self-study completes the explanation". That is, again, in line with another collected response:

> "I think that when scholastic unsuccess occurs, such as a bad mark after a test… I think that the instructor should try to understand the reason why the student failed in that assignment. On the other hand, it is necessary to discern who gets a bad mark because he did not study enough from students who, on the contrary, have tried but failed. Anyway, in these situations, the instructor should reflect".

In only one case it is believed that this occurs at university: "In most cases, responsibility is ascribed to the student, obviously. University success exclusively depends on the student, the instructor should transmit knowledge, he should not necessarily guarantee the students' success". Consistently, the same student further affirms: "The motivation should be already inherent to students. Students study for their well-being, not for the sake of instructors themselves. If a instructor is motivating, that is an added value, but it is not necessary".

In the end, communication's quality should mainly depend on the instructor: "I think that it depends on the instructor and on the way we approach the instructor". It depends on the 'unjustified' superiority that, in the students' view, is not warranted by the role: "Sometimes [instructors] adopt an attitude of superiority, and they do not listen to students". This unjustified superiority depends on a wrong perception of the student; a student claims: "The communication between instructors and students is tarnished by different clichés and prejudices. The instructor is seen as a distant, unattainable figure. Because of fear and insecurity, the student does not communicate in a direct and constructive way". Lack of communication

should be ascribed to the extra-university tasks of the instructor. Respondents maintain:

> "Unfortunately, it often happens that instructors do not reflect upon their actions, ignoring students' questions and doubts. This happens because instructors are often occupied by extra-university tasks. Moreover, when the requests are listened to, there is no effort to understand and empathize with them".

In conclusion, again, the problem—if there is a problem at all—is ascribed to the instructor: "The communication between us and instructors, is often inefficient and non-existent. Instructors should make as commitment to develop the communication with the students, because it is their responsibility, and the quality of teaching depends on that". The student concludes with a statement that appears quite cryptic: "To me, this an indirect communication, so it has limits".

Concerning the effort implied by a task, no clear answers were collected, but respondents considered that instructors should facilitate the effort with its creativity: "I believe that academic teaching is efficient when it is structured to reduce the effort connected to self-study, [that is,] a didactic [approach] that is able to lead students to develop knowledge and personal skills. In general, it seems that the efficacy of didactics should be measured from the scarce effort put into self-study: "Personally I make less effort when teaching is efficient".

The quality of didactics seems inversely proportional to the invested effort "university didactics does not require any self-studying effort if it is efficient". There also those who discern effort and commitment, taking the sides of a good teaching experience that asks for diligence but is effortless: "Efficient didactics demand self-study that does not require effort, but reflection [and] elaboration of contents. It is a task, not an effort".

Eventually, the process is described as a sort of circular relation that does not identify the peculiarity of any process. Participants said: "The instructor paves the road", "Didactics, if efficient, should be followed by a deepening of contents on behalf of the student", and "Instructors should be competent also in [terms of] quality, clarity and in involvement.".

In most cases, after 30 hours of classes, activities and discussions, the research team ascertained that all of the students, although to different degrees of complexity, reflected on their responsibility in learning:

> "I think that the instructor has a fundamental role in students' attitude to self-study: an unmotivated and detached attitude can cause a repulsion toward learning. Anyway, failure is the result of many other factors: class community, individual predisposition toward personal responsibility, and past experience. I think that it would be interesting to reflect on concepts such as 'unsuccess': I think that the formative value of errors and failure is too neglected".

Hence, we can affirm that the suggested activities stimulated students to think about their mind, represent its characteristics and plan possible improvements. It worked as an explicit cognitive process by design that allowed everyone to articulate their own approach to self-study, together with the achievement of a clearer self-representation (Mentkowski, 2000). Our research shows that metacognitive exercises proposed to students made them more "aware" of their own degree of responsibility toward self-study with regards to the argument of teaching. It was detected that the prevailing tendency is to ascribe to instructors the whole responsibility of learning, motivation, and exam results.

We could ascertain that the proposed activities have revealed the students' elaboration of their ideas of responsibility, motivation, and learning. We also managed to confirm that this result has enriched our initial perception about the students' ability to reflect. In fact, contrary to what we expected, the interest of students toward a proposal that could result too abstract in relation to their need of concreteness has grown progressively (for the notion of 'concreteness,' see Rossi, 2011). In our view this result is to be attributed in part to the desire of assigning to others the responsibility of some challenges faced by students, such as motivation, exam failure, or lacking communication with the instructor. The important fact is that students could be led to re-discover the actual dimension of the course subject. At the end of the course, we could identify some important guidelines for a new cognitive anthropology of students who attend the Course of Epistemology during their Master's. In this sense we can affirm that the main goal of the self-reflection activities was achieved. Yet it is possibly telling of a fragile and confused generation that tends to outsource the responsibility of their own failures, and that does not rely on its own resources in pursuing personal formative objectives—which often appears to be poorly motivating in their own view.

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