

# SUPPORTING INFORMAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNSHIPS

Claudio Melacarne (*University of Siena*)<sup>\*</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This paper addresses several critical issues relating to the organization of internships at universities, dealing above all with ‘curricular’ internships, i.e., those apprenticeship experiences included as mandatory in university courses. Starting from the idea of ‘informal learning’, the paper shows the strong connection between new workplace needs and the potentiality of pedagogical and reflective approaches in designing internship experiences.

**KEYWORDS:** higher education, reflective practices, informal learning.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, universities have been called upon to respond to numerous invitations: the new targets involved in higher education, the invitation to internationalize study courses, the request to work on students’ acquisition of soft skills and, not least in terms of importance, the need to adopt teaching strategies that can foster dialogue and cooperation between formal knowledge and professional knowledge, both in person and online. University education is thus urged, with increasing weight, to configure itself as an ‘expanded’ place capable of integrating teaching methods and techniques that support the students’ learning process beyond the classroom walls and the physical spaces of the university (Walton, Matthews 2017).

For example, many studies suggest that it is no longer enough to train students by transmitting organized knowledge. The importance of socializing the new generations to established cultural or scientific knowledge is not in discussion. Timeless, general, and universal knowledge is accompanied by a further need to examine the knowledge generated in specific local situations linked to temporal events.

Several studies have highlighted four general types of discontinuity between academic learning and the nature of cognitive activity outside universities, schools, and formal educational contexts in general. These contributions can help identify certain aspects of the concept of knowledge that universities still share with a good part of the school system, for example (Bertagna 2006).

\* Claudio Melacarne, PhD, Associate Professor of General and Social Pedagogy, Department of Education, Humans Sciences and Intercultural Communication, University of Siena, Italy. Email: claudio.melacarne@unisi.it.

Universities focus on individual performance, while outside mental work is often shared socially. Universities aim to encourage thinking without support, while mental work in everyday life usually includes cognitive tools. University courses often cultivate only symbolic thought, while daily mental activity is directly involved with objects and situations. Finally, there is a tendency, even in higher education, to teach skills and general knowledge, while outside, specific skills for an individual situation dominate (Resnick, Levine, Teasley 1991).

As much research has shown, in Italian universities the dominant form of learning is individual, and students are judged by what they do for themselves. The main part of the activity is constructed on individual work: home study and individual interventions in the classroom. Many activities outside the university are, by and large, shared socially; in the same way, work always takes place within social systems, and the ability of each person depends very much on what others are doing. At university, the greatest merit is directed at activities of 'pure thought', what individuals are able to do without the external support of textbooks and notes, calculators, or other complex tools. Universities, like schools, tend to value independent thought, without the use of material and cognitive tools. In contrast, most outside mental activities are intimately connected with tools, and the emerging cognitive activity is formed and dependent on the type of tool available. In the professional world, thinking is connected to the material world. University learning is essentially based on symbols, with the risk that connections with real events and objects may be lost. Finally, the university is mainly anchored to the objective of teaching skills and generic, widely usable, theoretical principles. Generality and transferability are the added values of a higher education and, to be competent in the professional world, people must develop appropriate forms of knowledge adequate to the situation.

Therefore, a broad range of data leads one to think that what people do at university is difficult to transfer to external practical contexts, and suggests that both the structure of knowledge and the social conditions of practical activities may differ more from what is achieved through formal education than previously thought (Resnick, Levine, Teasley 1991: 69).

What do these differences suggest about the relationship between universities and competence in work and daily life? At least two considerations: on the one hand, the need to discuss possible strategies to contain and reduce what many studies define as 'the encapsulation of scholastic learning', i.e., the problem of 'academically' training first-class students who, however, are unable to transfer what they have learned at university into daily practice. On the other, the opportunity to appreciate practice as a combination of knowledge and ac-

tions and to pose the problem of learning the knowledge intrinsic to actions. In the first case, we are faced with a problem of transforming university teaching. In the second, of supporting and designing curricula or settings in which students can ‘learn from experience’ or ‘learn by doing’, supporting informal learning both inside and outside university experiences.

Marsick & Watkins (1990) dedicated some of their most extensive research into describing, defining, and developing a more comprehensive understanding of informal and incidental learning within organizations. The authors start from a comparative description. In contrast to formal learning, informal and incidental learning refers to the natural opportunities for learning that occur every day in a person’s life, when the person controls his/her learning» (p. 350). Marsick categorized the types of informal and incidental learning to include: self-directed learning, social learning, mentoring, coaching, and networking, learning from mistakes and trial and error» (p. 350). Watkins developed a theoretical framework or model to understand how the process of informal learning takes place. Thus, Watkins defined incidental learning as a “sub-category of informal learning [...] a by-product of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organization, trial and error experimentation, or even formal learning” (Marsick, Watkins 1990: 12). Informal Learning means reaching out to the person in the next cubicle and cultivating relationships through networking, coaching, and mentoring. It also takes place in varied self-directed ways by reading reports, newsletters, and memos, and by conducting research.

This paper aims to describe how internship activities could increase students’ employability (Boffo, Federighi, Torlone 2015), supporting informal learning processes and organizational learning.

## *2. University, workplaces, and social knowledge*

Higher education systems have undergone a momentous change that has irreversibly transformed its nature, goals, and scientific, educational, and organizational practices. In Europe, and particularly in Italy, new working scenarios and new knowledge needs have underlined the critical factors and contradictions of university curricula and governance strategies that are all too often fixed on a theoretical-disciplinary logic. Repeatedly, there is no parallel attention to pertinence with outgoing professionals, when there is a need to give the right amount of room to all the disciplinary areas in the courses. It is not difficult to trace experiences planned more on self-referential than workplace-oriented criteria. Thus, the

challenge of producing important, relevant knowledge for social, organizational, and working contexts becomes increasingly vital for universities, on top of spreading investigative strategies that can produce located knowledge.

There is still a significant gap and much misalignment between the world of work and the university, as there is between the university and students' need for personal and professional development. Planning courses that can intercept emerging, challenging learning needs in relation to current working scenarios by talking with stakeholders, are further commitments that characterize current academic policies. Some aspects of the new university set-up could be summed up by a few dichotomies: *user-client*, *general-located*, *vertical-transverse*.

*User-client:* Students are no longer merely subjects using a service, but are the possessors of wider, more complex interests than in the past. Parents' expectations, students' professional ambitions, personal attitudes, and critical factors and fragilities all contribute to people's expectations from university. More so than in the past, universities today must respond to questions of knowledge, but also of care, support, specialization, and integration. If we look at the profiles of current university students, we find that they have partly changed their status. They have become student-clients, with more awareness of what the organization must guarantee in terms of learning and services; they have different learning needs, have knowledge-gathering tools that can give value to services through universities' national and international rankings, they pay more attention to a balanced evaluation of the costs and benefits (taxes vs. occupation, distance from home vs. services offered, cultural vivacity vs. safety).

*General-located:* Those who work in university environments know that it is not easy to change the attachment that teachers have to an idea of general and universal knowledge, that can suit any course or any classroom. Many academic communities share unique meaning systems where a view of education as a job of knowledge delivery remains central and where the student's learning is mainly seen as an individual process independent of any kind of social involvement. From a view of knowledge as a skill that must be exercised and then evaluated in a decontextualized way, the idea that knowledge is *located* and therefore anchored in contexts, practices, and material and immaterial located restrictions, becomes central.

*Vertical-transverse:* Both the economic world and the European Union (EU), have supported various initiatives to help development of transverse skills that are useful for staff to carry out active citizenship projects and increase social inclusion and employment. Essential tools in these directions were the identification of key skills

in 2006, and a European reference framework on qualifications and academic certificates in 2008. The university is thus impelled to plan programmes that can support the acquisition of strictly specialized or technical-professional abilities, and 'soft' or 'transverse' skills.

Like any other organization, the directions of innovation that are taking over Italian universities are not straightforward (Raelin 2000), or even expected. Alongside routines that have difficulty in changing, are promising views that interpret the university's priorities in diverse ways, by cohabiting and expanding. New awareness has emerged from: a) the use of research as a transformational and collaborative process; b) the enhancement of professional knowledge; c) the professionalization of knowledge; d) training professionals whose skills are not simply rooted in knowledge of the subject, but also in the students' own informal learning. Knowing how to work in a group, problem-solving, knowing how to face improvisation and uncertainties that are a part of working practices, being a leader or more simply, an ability to write a report, are just some of the skills that universities are trying to offer across the board to the subject sectors and specific professional areas.

These new areas of interest outline promising openings so that universities can learn from their own experience and from the kind of critical incidents that occur and have been experienced in recent years. It could be said that we are in a phase in which universities are questioning the instruments, routines and premises that govern their strategies: governance, research, teaching, and relations with the world of employment. We have seen are still seeing a critical, reflective validation process (Boud, Cressey, Docherty 2006) for systems of meaning and activities embedded in the university organizational system (Yorks, Marsick 2000). Who can plan a course today without taking into consideration an outgoing professional figure, asking what the organizational routines contain that no longer works? Planning requires that the leadership, and often the entire academic community, question its own usual methods for working and interpreting problems.

Urged on by university reform and the changes in economic contexts, new spaces for discussions have opened up that have required the adoption of different codes for speaking, sharing, and resolving problems that are apparently no more than 'technical'. Students and their families have become more central in teaching-learning processes. What was routine a few years ago, is today the subject of negotiation, for identifying attractive professional profiles, and for planning sustainable study courses that can offer an education in a position to win over clients, research commissioners, and project partners.

### *3. Supporting Informal Learning in Internship Experiences*

Regardless of the theoretical options at stake, the university needs to answer several questions. How does one learn a profession in the current cultural and social climate? What knowledge does a professional called to interact with current work scenarios need? How to train a professional who will need to change jobs many times? How to re-design learning paths that allow the acquisition of skills useful for insertion into multiple and uncertain professional worlds? The link between universities and the professional world, in addition to calling into question the meeting/exchange between these two universes, also requires consideration of the university's relationship with employment.

The problem that prompted and fuelled the survey set out below arises from the realization that training professionals who are capable of living in new work scenarios is a commitment that challenges us as university teachers and decision-makers within university governance systems. Managing and organizing effective internship experiences can be a first effective response to the new needs of businesses and students, the latter often being involved in potentially promising activities with little attention to the monitoring and support processes implemented by universities.

This paper addresses several critical issues relating to the organization of internships in university education, dealing specifically with 'curricular' internships, i.e., those apprenticeship experiences included as mandatory in university courses. Not surprisingly, the increasingly widespread instances of innovation in university teaching testify to the crisis of a teaching model centred mainly on lessons, and on the idea that meaningful knowledge must be conveyed by the teacher. In other words, teaching based only on symbolic mediators, where one speaks, and the others listen, that lacks the active participation of students in knowledge construction processes, and where research is not a widespread educational tool. Today more than ever, professionals are primarily required to be problem-solvers, to produce that situated knowledge useful for acting in certain contexts.

Within this new framework, internships are increasingly:

- An educational opportunity, thanks to the chance offered to everyone to study and interact with work practices while attempting to situate the knowledge gained in university studies.
- An opportunity to learn practical knowledge. Through internships, knowledge and learning should be situated in a context of authentic experience.

- An opportunity for socialization and participatory knowledge of working situations.
- An active orientation tool, given that they allow direct knowledge and experience in a work context and thus help students make future career choices.

Today, these are an integral part of various study courses to be carried out with the support and accompaniment of a tutor. Beyond a general appreciation of internships, we are now coming to terms with an experience which, over time, has revealed structural problems.

#### *4. The pedagogy of workplaces and learning processes*

Internships play a key role in helping students enter current professional scenarios (Matthew, Taylor, Ellis, 2012) and in supporting the acquisition of real skills. Much of the knowledge that is useful for students in practising a profession and entering the ‘swamp of professional practice’ is, in fact, only partially obtainable from formal educational settings, in a classroom or through participation in workshops and seminars. Despite the significant overhauling of university teaching through the adoption of more participatory and active approaches (Fedeli, Giampaolo, Coryell 2013), for example by promoting students’ acquisition of soft skills or instrumental learning, practical knowledge remains embodied in the professional community and only through special training instruments can it become a resource for people and communities (Wenger 1998; Fabbri 2007).

It is from this perspective that internships included in university curricula have been considered the most promising placement tools to meet the supply and demand of work, to foster the development of professional identity and acquire tools useful for solving business problems (Billett *et al.* 2008).

How can students be given the ability to confront and solve problems similar to those they will encounter in life and the workplace? How can students entering professional communities that are not ‘naturally’ configured as learning contexts be assisted?

From an analysis of national and international literature, there are two paradigms that have laid the first foundations for envisaging an up-to-date interpretation of how students learn during the internship experience. The first has its roots in studies of learning as a social phenomenon. The second comes from research fields that are more careful to emphasize the critical-emancipatory dimensions of learning processes.

### 5. Situated Learning as informal education

In some empirical research conducted in collaboration with Wenger, Lave (1991) described some everyday practices of several groups and individuals with the intention of highlighting how learning is not merely a process of participation, but also involves certain social aspects and restrictions imposed by the community. For example, he describes how young Mayan girls often have a ‘midwife’ relative who introduces them to the expertise necessary for performing this task. Some women become midwives by participating in the practices of the ‘experts’, mothers or grandmothers, observing and implicitly learning what to do during childbirth, about the remedies and cures to provide in case of illness, the expectations of the new-born’s parents, the social scripts that legitimize this practice, the nursing practices for newborns that are the responsibility of the community or caregivers. In this sense, we are using the term ‘situated learning’ to go beyond the definition of ‘learning-by-doing’, of *natural learning*. Lave uses this construct to reveal that ways of thinking about and solving problems and the use of complex forms of abstraction are linked to the specific environment in which individuals live, and are connected to the particular context in which they occur and are realized. It is not possible to become midwives in the Mayan communities analysed by Lave without legitimization by the community and without the support of an expert.

Learning is synonymous with participation in practices in which it is possible to learn by observing how more expert people perform a task, in contexts that ensure both a relationship and the possibility of gradually participating in the experience. From this perspective, learning a business, acquiring a skill, or developing abilities, involve a process of participation, of becoming a member of a community. This means that learning is situated in the social interaction area, in life contexts. Thus, the use of the situated learning construct does not seem applicable to all experiences, since it implies a gradual insertion into a practice characterizing a community which, in turn, depends on the willingness of the community itself to facilitate access through legitimization. The most important contribution of this focus was that it highlighted that learning is a process connected to social conditions of accessibility to knowledge embodied in practice.

More recently, the ‘situated learning’ construct has also been associated with the term ‘apprenticeship’, used as a metaphor for describing learning processes that do not necessarily take place in work contexts, but in different social contexts, from the family to the peer group, and from schools to non-profit organizations (Pontecorvo, Ajello, Zucchermaglio 2005).

Apprenticeship is an important emerging construct, because it has emphasized that it is not enough ‘to participate in an experience to learn’. Social and environmental factors come into play that can hinder or support the entry and participation of a novice into a community. For example, Wenger and Lave identified at least three success factors for participation to generate learning in an organizational context:

- A member of the community must legitimate the novice to take part in ‘non-trivial’ practices.
- A member of the community must take responsibility for supporting (explaining, illustrating, describing) the practices in which the novice is participating.
- The learning trajectory must be organized starting from simple tasks to arrive at increasingly complex engagements.

Apprenticeship can be described as a particular form of participation in the life of a community that can also be configured as an opportunity for learning a) if the novice can legitimately take part in those significant work practices that are central to, and characterizing of a community (Lave, Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998); b) if the novice is supervised by an expert (Rogoff 1990); and c) if the novice is put in the condition of gradually entering into the complexity of the experience and, above all, can find training spaces to reflect on the work practice (Mezirow, Taylor 2009; Fabbri 2007). Apprenticeship is that particular form of participation through which a novice learns a profession by observing and taking part in an activity managed by one or more experts (Lave, Wenger 1991). These studies suggest that we should not look at internship merely as an application experience.

Internship as an experience that takes place in a work context, it is not automatically an experience for professional growth. The problem is not only that of not letting our students experience insignificant forms of participation (making photocopies, dealing with administrative matters, handling routines with low innovative value), but of providing tools to study work practices, to become increasingly central in organizational routines, to intercept the most promising paths within the organizations hosting them.

Staying within the apprenticeship metaphor, internship becomes an experience organized by someone (the University) to allow students to experience a situation that ensures legitimate and peripheral participation. Internship is an opportunity for students to pass from the status of novice to that of a semi-expert, through involvement in increasingly complex work practices and educational tutorship (Bellingeri 2015). However, no student can be left alone in the organization of these experiences of entry, stay and exit from organizations,

and certainly not if this experience is part of an educational offering in a university course.

#### *6. From low skills to critical reflective thinking*

The *reflective approach*, albeit starting from different theoretical and empirical studies, shares some basic assumptions with the *participatory approach*: learning is a form of participation, is a social phenomenon, and is generated by routines or patterns/perspectives of meaning. However, the adoption of a reflective approach to the study of work practices, educational practices, or training intervention methodologies, introduces a further distinction. This not only means participating in a legitimate and peripheral way that makes an experience a learning opportunity, but is an opportunity for the person to reflect on the experience afterwards that makes any experience a potential learning opportunity. The reflective approach, especially in its critical-emancipatory guise, shifts the focus from ‘experiencing’ to ‘reflecting on it afterwards’.

It is by reflecting afterwards that it is possible to become aware and learn to understand how we acted, why, and with respect to which of our convictions (Mezirow 1991). The literature provides many suggestions and indications useful in promoting reflective learning. Three seem particularly interesting:

- Constructing settings capable of ensuring a positive dialectic.
- Adjusting the commitment required from people to the limits of the context, the organization, or the professional community.
- Allowing broader reflection on the experience, including the emotional reprocessing of the experience (Mezirow, Taylor 2009).

In the light of these considerations, internships become an experience which to design afterwards reflective activities useful for students to validate their epistemic, socio-linguistic, and psychological perspectives: What did I think on that particular occasion? Why did I express that opinion? With respect to which personal convictions did I act? How did I feel? What sources did I use to form that idea?

Studies dealing with reflective practices suggest paying particular attention to both support aimed at facilitating the gradual participation of students in internship experiences, and educational supervision aimed at students’ acquisition of perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, personal, open, and emotionally available to change and reflection (Mezirow 1991). Also, and especially in this case, no university student can autonomously succeed in pass-

ing from pre-critical to critical forms of learning solely through the internship experience. There is a need to design settings in which the experience can materialize in awareness, reflection, and validated forms of thought.

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