

HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORK-RELATED LEARNING FROM PROFESSIONALISM TO PROFESSIONALITY

*Maura Striano (University of Naples Federico II)**

ABSTRACT: Within a complex economic, political, and social scenario that requires high-level competencies as well as increasingly active citizenship, the European and international agenda for higher education needs to be renewed and re-articulated according to new goals and priorities. Higher education should offer students the opportunity to develop aptitudes and acquire advanced but flexible competencies and skills that go beyond mere professionalism and instead focus on the development of a sound professionalism.

KEYWORDS: professionalism, professional epistemology, work-related learning.

1. Introduction

The European Commission has recently pointed out that higher education plays a unique role in the economic, political, and social development of member states, in view of the dramatically changing scenario, within which demand for highly-skilled and at the same time socially-engaged people is both increasing and changing.

As stated in the *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education*, in the immediate future, half of all jobs are projected to require high-level qualifications; additionally, jobs are becoming more challenging, complex, and flexible.

Within this scenario, Europe needs more high achievers who can be entrepreneurial, manage complex information, think autonomously and creatively, use resources, including digital ones smartly, communicate effectively, and be resilient.

In parallel, countering the growing polarization of European societies and a distrust of democratic institutions calls on everyone – including higher education staff and students – to engage more actively with the communities around them and promote social inclusion and mobility (EU 2017).

This requires an overall reframing of higher education curricula according to specific educational objectives, considering either the necessity to sustain students in the development of aptitudes, compe-

* Maura Striano, PhD, Professor of General and Social Pedagogy, Department of Humanistic Studies, University of Naples Federico II, Italy. Email: maura.striano@unina.it.

tencies and skills that qualify them for any kind of job, or to reduce the increasing gap between high and low achievers.

Every student should be acknowledged and valorized on the basis of their talent and not of their background, and actively engaged in their learning project which should include the implementation of basic skills (literacy, numeracy, digital competence) as well as the development of transverse skills (communication, learning-to-learn, entrepreneurship, problem-solving...).

Moreover, students should be equipped with tools useful for a full and effective engagement in economic and social life, to cope with the challenges and requests of a fluid and flexible occupational scenario and of a highly complex political and social situation at both local and global levels.

2. Higher Education from professionalism to professionality

If we analyse and compare higher education curricula for specific professions, we can see that they are designed according to a clearly identified professional profile, characterized by specific funds of knowledge and competencies that are to be acquired and implemented on both theoretical and practical levels.

Degree Courses such as Medicine, Psychology, Pharmacy, and Educational Sciences, offer students both classroom courses, seminars, and workshops, as well as an internship experience in specific professional contexts or a practicum, which is mainly designed to relate knowledge and practice through the observation of an expert professional and a progressive engagement in professional practices with the supervision of a tutor.

This approach is oriented by what Evans (2008: 7) defined as 'professionalism', a reference concept that delineates «the content of the work carried on by the profession, as reflected in accepted roles and responsibilities, key functions and remits, range of requisite skills and knowledge and the general nature of work-related tasks» and incorporates shared elements of professional culture and practical knowledge.

Within this framework, professionalism provides us with an idea of professions that is mainly oriented by reference to a continuous procedural pattern becoming a professional essentially implies the acquisition of advanced and specialized forms of knowledge that require to be operationalized in specific tasks and roles, and practised and internalized in order to build up professional expertise that can be observed and evaluated according to a performative approach.

Accordingly, the learning experiences that make up the curricula are organized following a theory-practice linear sequence, and the

students are progressively engaged in professional practices within a protected setting where they are progressively accompanied towards the profession they have chosen through a guided training in professional tasks and performances, according to a common frame of reference. Professional expertise is learned through observation, and the imitation of professional practice and supervision by an expert performing a regulative task, and not an epistemic one.

When engaged in experiences of professional practice, students are therefore trained to acquire specific professional behaviour, but are not accompanied in the development of a specific professional epistemology characterized by a special way of using and implementing the funds of knowledge they have had access to during their studies, and of constructing new empirical forms of knowledge within the practices, deeply influenced by ideologies, attitudes, and ways of thinking and understanding.

In point of fact, the reference to 'professionalism' in higher educational curricula does not make room for a crucial element in the development and interpretation of a professional identity, which is what Evans, referring to Hoyle (1975), defines as 'professionalism': an ideologically-, attitudinally-, intellectually-, and epistemologically-based stance on the part of an individual, in relation to the practice of the profession to which she/he belongs, and which influences her/his professional practice» (Evans 2002: 6-7). The focus is on procedures, tasks, and performance, and not on perceptions, reflections, and understanding, which are crucial in the development of a well-expressed and well-grounded professionalism.

Learning is not therefore understood as a circular process but as a linear one, and the focus is not on the epistemological dimension that grounds professional practice, but on the performative and procedural dimension of the practice.

Students are not asked to elaborate and incorporate their knowledge into a specific form of agency sustained by a definite epistemology, but to apply and transfer their knowledge to specific situations through performances guided by defined protocols and routines, and this is extremely risky in long-term professional outcomes.

If students are not accompanied and sustained in the construction of a 'professional' profile, or in the development of 'professionalism', they are not likely to be fully engaged in a professional role that reaches apical levels, nor be satisfied with it.

The development of sound professionalism requires a deep analysis and exploration of the cultural and ideological grounds that have sustained the choice of a determined profession; reflection on individual attitudes, idiosyncrasies, and preferences, but also on the 'social representations' that individuals and groups have about that profes-

sion, over and above an active engagement in forms of thinking and understanding that are strictly connected to it.

One thing to consider is that there is a significant division in higher educational curricula between those oriented towards the acquisition of knowledge, competencies and skills useful within a specific professional field of practice (clearly defined and delimited) and those that are mainly oriented towards the acquisition of knowledge, competencies and skills that are not tailored to a specific professional role or practice, but provide students with tools that can be used in various professional contexts, other than the ones previously referred to.

Within this framework, Degree Courses such as Literature, Philosophy, and History are not organized according to this framework, but offer students the opportunity to become engaged in various cultural experiences and to reflect on them in depth at seminars or workshops, but without being directly engaged in any kind of professional practice.

Consequently, students may have the opportunity to develop various kinds of competencies, but the curricula do not specifically focus on the acquisition or empowerment of what have been identified as the 'key competencies' for lifelong learning.

Moreover, students are not accompanied and sustained in making use of their knowledge or in building up more advanced and sophisticated forms of knowledge within possible working situations, and are therefore not sustained in the construction of any specific kind of professional epistemology.

Finally, they rarely confront experiences that support the development of aptitudes, competencies and capabilities which are the basic fabric for an active, participatory, and reflective engagement in any professional role or in public life.

This calls for a profound reframing of higher education curricula, which should offer students the opportunity to explore their 'calling' and vocational orientation, but also their own cultural and personal resources, not only through dedicated services but throughout their curricular activities and experiences.

Moreover, to help them construct a professional epistemology, students need to be accompanied to learn through confrontation and reflection on practical issues and problems emerging from the field, with the contribution of experts who do not provide procedural models to observe and imitate, but offer a professional point of view highlighting how professionals normally frame and view situations.

The whole higher education curriculum should therefore be re-organized from within, focusing on the interconnection between theory and practice, curricular disciplines, and practicum, with the

aid of mediating instruments such as workshops, seminars, and on-line platforms that let students engage in the development of either a professional epistemology or a professional identity, both oriented towards the development of sound professionalism.

The main challenge to face is to build up a significant and useful interconnection between knowledge and practice within the learning processes of higher education curricula, and this requires the reframing of curricular contents, learning materials, learning approaches and instruments, as well as learning settings, through a meta-curricular approach.

3. Thinking and learning to connect knowledge and practice

According to a traditional approach, within higher education curricula, the relationship between knowledge and practice is a linear one: knowledge anticipates and prepares practice, and practice is the field of application of ideas, models, theories previously acquired and elaborated within a classroom setting, and individual or collective study experiences.

In professionalizing courses, the practicum experience arrives late, and is mainly conceived as a field experience, somehow disconnected from the academic courses, even when it is sustained by a learning project supervised by both an academic tutor and an external one, which often offers students the possibility to collect data and materials to be elaborated for their final dissertation.

The practicum experience is rarely anticipated and prepared within those academic courses that engage students in forms of academic thinking and learning and not of professional thinking and learning.

A first challenge is therefore to engage students in forms of professional thinking and learning (which require a specific epistemic positioning) within academic courses in order to build up a significant learning continuity within the curriculum according to a circular and nonlinear pattern.

A second challenge is to offer curricular and disciplinary contents highlighting their practical and professional implications with a specific focus on contextual and situational references, which implies a reconstruction and reorganization of learning materials in different forms, using distinct languages and supporting tools.

A third challenge is to make use of elements and materials emerging from professional practice to build up significant learning situations which also implies the engagement of professionals in the construction, elaboration, and offering of learning materials to be used within academic contexts.

Each curricular discipline, even the most theoretical, has a meaningful relationship with life and professional practice and this must be explored in depth and emphasized to offer students meaningful learning experiences.

In fact, each discipline is the organized and systematic by-product of processes of inquiry developed to achieve a better understanding of specific phenomena and situations, as well as to solve problems and to act on the surrounding environment to bring about significant changes, and this root is the key for an epistemic re-positioning of the students towards the disciplines they encounter on their academic pathway.

An inquiry-based approach to academic disciplines is therefore particularly effective in helping students in constructing, reconstructing, and reorganizing their cultural background, which works as a platform that sustains further academic and professional learning.

Moreover, through interiorization of the pattern of inquiry, students learn to master increasingly articulate and sophisticated cultural and practical challenges, since this pattern frames either their approach to and use of new forms of knowledge, or their professional commitment.

By engaging the students in problems emerging from genuine practical and professional situations presented by senior students or by professional testimonials in the form of case studies, it would be possible to prepare the practicum experience in advance, and create a circular connection between academic and professional learning.

This approach to academic disciplines is particularly significant within liberal study curricula since it highlights the possibility of engaging the students in the development of transverse abilities and competencies (such as problem-finding and problem-solving competencies...) which is the basis for future experiences in a *lifelong lifewide learning* perspective, and plays a key role in any kind of professional occupation.

The traditional dichotomy between vocational and liberal disciplines and fields of study as well as between higher education curricula and programmes is no longer effective within current educational and political scenarios, which require students to be equipped with a set of transverse work-related competencies, not specifically connected to a pre-determined professional profile, but essential to help the students in finding their way in the future.

Work-related competencies are effective in identifying and detailing goals, in defining consistent sustainable projects, in testing and working out hypotheses within real-life contexts and situations and are sustained by a reflexive epistemology, which is the grounding of a sound professional engagement and a constructive professional development in any field.

Magnell (2016) highlights several approaches to include work-related learning in academic curricula: added on by someone else; added on by the profession; integration of teaching and learning activities and integration with added value. Each approach is connected to a specific but diverse understanding of the function of education for academia and of education for work outside academia, which include various perceptions of roles, types of work-related learning activities, and their integration in the standard curriculum.

Undoubtedly, the integration of teaching and learning activities and the integration with added value are particularly challenging, since they require a thorough reorganization of both the curriculum and the institutional organization.

4. Work-related learning and the construction of professional epistemology

In not providing meaningful work-related learning experiences, higher education does not offer students the possibility to build a specific professional epistemology (i.e. the way professionals use, reframe, and build knowledge) which is the core of any professional role. Moreover, there is the risk that professionalizing higher education might lead the students towards a positivistic epistemology of practice.

As Schön has highlighted in an analysis that can still be applied to current higher education scenarios, professional education is based on a positivist framework, which privileges the technical, the testable, and the objective, and separates ends from means while failing to train for the real problems of practice (Schön 1992).

Consequently, the epistemology of professional practice built into the very structure of professional schools and research institutions has been set forth as an exercise of technical rationality, that is, as an application of research-based knowledge to the solution of problems of instrumental choice.

Schön suggests reconsidering the question of professional knowledge referring to an alternative epistemology of practice, which takes full account of the competence practitioners display in situations of uncertainty, complexity, and uniqueness, and is mainly based on the capacity to practice reflection on and in action (Schön 1992).

Drawing on Schön, Kinsella (2010) highlighted the need for an epistemology of reflective practice based on a series of constitutive elements: a broad critique of technical rationality; a vision of professional practice knowledge as a form of artistry; a constructivist understanding of the processes of knowledge construction; acknowledgment of the significance of tacit knowledge for professional practice knowl-

edge, and, finally, the overcoming of body-mind dualism to recognize the knowledge revealed in intelligent action.

According to this framework, higher education should therefore be strongly learner-centred and focused on the necessity to engage students with real problems emerging from the practice contexts, making use of methodologies such as problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and role playing, in order to sustain them in the process of constructing a reflective professional epistemology, useful to build sound professionalism.

5. Developing professional identity through legitimate peripheral participation

Professional epistemology is one key element of a clearly defined and acknowledged professional identity, which, as Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006) point out, can be understood according to three different perspectives considering career and role transitions, socialization, and identity work.

Professional identities are therefore constructed and developed through the process of career building based on the distinct roles played within career advancement: this is not the sum of the roles, but an integration of the experiences and expertise connected to these roles.

As highlighted by Greil and Rudy (1983), the organizations within which a professional operates play a crucial role in the development and shaping of professional identities, bringing about significant changes over time to different degrees.

Lave & Wenger (1991) explored how, within organizations, 'communities of practice' progressively sustain individuals in the construction of a definite professional identity through processes of 'legitimate peripheral participation' that acknowledge and legitimate the entry of novice professionals into a specific field of practice.

Individuals struggle to actively construct their professional identity through an interactive and problematic process which engages them in highly demanding 'identity work' (Pratt, Rockmann, Kaufmann, 2006).

To be effective, this professional 'identity work' needs to begin and be carried out very early in the course of academic studies, which should therefore be arranged in forms and ways that sustain the students in focusing on and designing their own career path, prefiguring advancements and developments but also moments of crisis, change, and transformation.

Moreover, higher education should offer students the opportunity to develop a sound understanding of organizational processes as well as

getting to know the language, narratives, and funds of knowledge that underlie communities of practices within different professional traditions. This would lead students to approach a professional engagement based on a sound awareness of the conditions under which they come to actively participate in productive life.

There is, indeed, especially in Italy, a lack of preparation of graduates in relation to their professional identity, since this demands constant confrontation with professional experiences and professional contexts.

Moreover, the construction and development of a professional identity requires acknowledgment of the existential potential of the job as well as the acquisition of languages, categories, narratives, and 'war stories' that are the inner fabric of any professional adventure. This calls for a strong and steady relationship between higher education contexts and professional organizational ones in addition to a constant engagement of experienced professionals as mentors and tutors for future graduates to sustain their legitimate and progressive participation in professional activities and practices.

6. Conclusions

The main challenge for higher education today is to sustain students in both the acquisition of professional expertise, and in the development of a critical and flexible professional epistemology that cannot be separated from a professional identity, in order to sustain an effective transition from the academic to the working life.

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