

THE ‘SECOND LEVEL’ EDUCATION PROFESSIONAL: A TRAINEESHIP PROGRAMME FOSTERING A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT: In this chapter, we outline the process that led to the development of the current traineeship programme – *Tirocinio Formativo e di Orientamento (TFO)* related to the Master’s Degree Course in Education at the University of Milan-Bicocca. We focus particularly on the interconnection between developing professional competences and addressing the issue of employability.

KEYWORDS: ‘second level’ education professionals, traineeship, employability, professional skills.

1. Introduction

On the introduction of the Master’s Degree Course in Education at the University of Milan–Bicocca in the 2008–2009 academic year, its regulations already included a practical training component. This initial provision was based on feedback received from the students of the former Master’s Degree Course in Educational Counseling and Research, who had forcefully emphasized the importance of including a component which up to that point had not been part of the academic programme, and whose function was to give students insight into the role and functions of the ‘second-level’ education professional in real-life educational settings and allow them to compare their academic learning with the educational practices encountered in specific workplaces. By ‘second-level’ education professional we mean

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a professional who is trained to act as a supervisor, trainer, evaluator, coordinator, or counsellor in the field of education, and who has therefore acquired a 'second-level' perspective on educational work.

A time of 150 hours was allotted for practical training activities during the Degree Course, and the academic staff with responsibility for this component immediately began to reflect on how to structure and present the training placement, initially opting for a focus on educational research.

The theoretical and epistemological view underlying this initial strategy was that research is an instrument that fosters a heuristic, critical, and transformative approach to educational work and the way it is thought about, organized, conducted and evaluated in education services (Ground 1992; Schön 1993; Mortari 2007; Fook, Gardner 2007). The first edition of the traineeship, labelled "research-training activity", was initially the responsibility of individual lecturers teaching on the Degree Course and was tied in with the undergraduate thesis that the students were required to produce under the regulations of the Degree Course.

After some years, the Degree Programme Board and the Review Board concluded that this model was no longer satisfactory, among other reasons because the students were finding it difficult to complete their research activities and theses on schedule. Thus, in the 2013–2014 academic year, a pilot tutoring service was introduced. The students who opted to avail themselves of this service were assigned to a training group, with a tutor whose role was to support them and monitor their progress through the research-placement programme (via face-to-face meetings on campus and on a virtual platform, following a blended-learning approach). The experimental service was constructed from a set of assumptions regarding the students' characteristics. The students were expected to be able to identify their research questions and strategies and to draw on their academic knowledge to inform their decisions and analyse the data collected. Students were also assumed to be:

- accessible: present on campus, or available virtually;
- appropriately active: self-sufficient; not merely passively following instructions and absorbing contents;
- responsible for their own course of studies: able to make their own decisions;
- professionally oriented: aware of their professional and personal aspirations, and interested in the world of educational work.

Subsequent monitoring of the pilot service suggested that this representation was over-idealistic and continually challenged by the students' actual characteristics.

From April 2014 to July 2015, the pilot service was used by 85 students, who were divided into six groups and supervised by three tutors. One of the tutors coordinated the entire service and had responsibility for setting up and managing its online component.

Continuous monitoring of the pilot service by the group of tutors and the representative of the Degree Programme Board with responsibility for the traineeship component, showed that it had had a disorienting and “displacing” effect on both the students and the tutors.

It was deemed necessary to conduct a critical review of the description of the student that had informed the design of the experimental service: in the context of research carried out by two students for their theses, data was gathered on the thoughts and reflections of both students and tutors, and accordingly the traineeship programme was once more revisited and redesigned. In the 2015–2016 academic year, a new programme was launched, labelled *Tirocinio Formativo e di Orientamento (TFO)* or *Traineeship and Guidance Programme* which was no longer optional but compulsory for all students, and was informed by the experience and observations of the preceding years.

Under this new programme, students were to be divided into work groups, each with a dedicated support tutor, and invited to orient themselves in the world of professional educational work by first studying the figure of the second-level education professional, before then going on to conduct research and documentation activities in an educational service setting with a view to exploring the professional education roles being implemented there. Subsequent participation in seminars delivered by experienced education professionals would allow them to further explore key aspects of educational work. Finally, in the light of these experiences, the tutors would guide the students to reflect on their own professional identity with a view to producing a self-assessment of the skills acquired to date, areas for improvement, and potential future actions, on the basis of which to define their personal professional development plans for entering the workplace.

The path, implemented for the first time in the 2015–2016 academic year, has been further refined in the current academic year, including focus group discussions conducted with the students at the end of the full year of operating the TFO.

Given this background, we now focus on the interconnection between identifying and developing professional competences on the one hand and dealing with employability issues on the other, since these factors come into play in the TFO Traineeship and Guidance Programme.

2. *Traineeship programme and employability*

In the learning society, it is becoming increasingly vital to preside over the transition from academic training to the learning that takes place in work settings (Stokes 2015). The relationship between university training and learning on the job poses a key challenge for all higher education and implies that there is a constant and continuous relationship between knowledge and knowledge in action (Cambi 2004), such that any structured experience may become a source of learning (Mortari 2003).

The market seems to require flexibility and entrepreneurship (OECD 2015) for everyone taking their first steps outside the university towards professional contexts. Individuals are increasingly considered responsible for their professional projects and are requested to imagine, project, and realize their career autonomously.

Universities are requested by policy makers to take a stance in relation to these issues by implementing educational processes with clear pedagogical theoretical frameworks and coherent actions. This means not only focusing on the relation between competences and knowledge (Dozza 2012) but also developing a general approach, critical and productive at the same time, in relation to issues such as employability, entrepreneurship, flexibility: namely all those competences considered key factors for future (OECD 2015).

Flexibility, for example, can be considered on the one hand as a fundamental disposition to acquire but, on the other, as a concept that is questionable. Various critical voices have highlighted the risk of a passive adaptation to the market's rules and requests (Sennett 1999).

Flexibility is often connected to employability, a concept that represents one of the principal areas in which the difficulty of academic institutions and professional sectors in engaging in constructive dialogue is most visible. The underlying cause of this is their contrasting views of what it means to combine academic knowledge, critical thinking, and professional action (Stokes 2015).

The current mainstream interpretation of the concept of employability emphasizes individual responsibility for constructing the 'right' competences to enjoy a satisfactory professional career (Field 2006). This is what we might term a merely 'adaptive' interpretation of employability, according to which, once an appropriate profile has been developed, the careers market will automatically respond positively. This social representation is still very widespread and should be borne in mind since it frequently implicitly informs the attitudes and expectations of university students. Alongside or overlapping with this adaptive perspective, we increasingly find a representation of *employability* as more proactive. This more recent interpretation is

being promoted by leading international organizations (OECD 2015) that dictate the education agenda and policies of their member countries; it calls for an active approach to employability and *self-placement*, so that not only is it necessary to adapt but also to construct suitable spaces for the exercising of one's profession.

While on the one hand this way of looking at employability helps to overcome the illusion of an academic curriculum that can provide automatic access to the job market, on the other it shares one of the greatest risks of the *lifelong learning* paradigm, that of an increasing trend towards individualism (Dozza 2012; Biesta 2006). But what do we mean when we refer to new professional possibilities? Does pro-activity still risk being interpreted merely as an updated adaptation to market needs? Different researches (Yorke 2006; Boffo *et al.* 2017) show the possibility of interpreting the notion of employability not in an instrumental and reductionist way but enhancing its learning potential. If we do not consider employability only as an individual ability to be promoted among students it could, in fact, become a category able to activate reflection on the educational setting activated (e.g. classroom didactics, fieldwork, etc.). In this sense, it could also represent an interesting lens through which to activate reflections about how universities create relationships and dialogues with external stakeholders (for example, the organizations that host students during traineeship programmes).

The notion of employability can be described, within this framework, as a meta-competence that emerges from a specific context in relation to the ability of the academic actors (professors, traineeship tutors, students) to contribute, on the basis of their own role and their own characteristics, in enhancing reflexivity about the professional world.

At the same time, the notion of entrepreneurship can be interpreted through the representation of an 'entrepreneur-student' – as suggested by a much-criticized utilitarian strand (Fairclough 1993) – but also with the meaning of critical thinker, able to analyse the professional scenario and take a stance. This entails avoiding some illusions that the word 'entrepreneurship' fosters (e.g. the focus only on individual abilities to meet market needs) in order to structure aptitudes and practices that can deal with what really takes place in professional contexts, and particularly in educational ones.

In designing the TFO, therefore, we strove to achieve a middle ground by encouraging a constructive and creative approach that seeks to transform the notion of flexibility (a term currently grossly abused in the work context), redefining it as moving from merely adapting to the requirements of the context to cultivating a receptive and attentive outlook that is also critical-reflective and proactive. This has meant re-

jecting a pure ‘apprenticeship’ model and no longer offering training placements that almost exclusively involve shadowing qualified education professionals, as has typically been the case on undergraduate internship schemes in the past. Students tend to remain firmly anchored to the earlier model. The new model is underpinned by the conviction that the sensitivity and skills required by an educator to be constructively employed in an educational service, particularly, in a ‘second-level’ capacity, go beyond the transverse skills usually labelled as ‘soft skills’, such as group work or communication skills (Alberici 1999).

The tutors’ various interventions and their positioning with respect to the learning path of the students were thus designed with the aim of drawing out the link between the undergraduates’ future employability and their ability to identify, using the knowledge they have acquired, their own specific field of action, clearly define it, and communicate it to other professionals. In redesigning the training placement, we have also sought to bring to light the cooperative dimension of this programme: it is a truly collective enterprise that involves not only the students but also the tutors and the coordinator of the service in managing the relationship with the outside organizations that receive the students on placement. Implementing the new edition of the traineeship programme has often meant increasing the level of dialogue between the university and the host institutions and revisiting the partners’ mutual expectations. Indeed, the implicit expectation of the partner institutions is usually that they are taking on an ‘apprentice’ to be initiated in working in the field. Hence, they are generally taken aback by the proposed new format: a relatively small proportion of hours in the field (at least 55), a research perspective that questions functions rather than specific situations, an in-depth exploration of educational issues that in some cases have never been identified or addressed by those running the education service.

3. In the field: from disorientation to learning

Our experience with various groups of students over the past number of years suggest that very few students are capable of fully and consciously bringing to bear a truly ‘second-level’ educational perspective, or of seeing themselves as the active protagonists of their own training placement (Palmieri *et al.* 2015; Galimberti *et al.* 2016).

To address this issue, it is therefore desirable that the tutoring function comprises *ad hoc* individual and group training activities, delivered both face-to-face and via distance modes.

The decision to precede field work with a preparatory phase has proved to be particularly effective in this regard.

Prior to being sent on placement, each group of students, under the guidance of their tutor, is invited to reconstruct the figure of the second-level education professional (functions, role, knowledge base, training etc.). They do this by sharing their own previous professional experience (where present), reworking the knowledge acquired during their studies and engaging in exploratory, narrative, imaginative, and analogical activities designed to bring to light the many facets of the figure of the educator, as it has been formed in individual and collective imaginaries.

A blended learning approach is implemented, in that the work initiated in face-to-face sessions with the tutor is continued on the virtual platform *Moodle*, facilitating continuous interaction among the participants in the work groups and the collection of a large volume of documentary material that is then reworked and interpreted from an educational perspective. The examination of the material produced, reflecting on it, and seeking to identify its explicit and implicit educational meanings has proved to be a key learning moment during the TFO programme.

This phase of the programme has helped students stand back from the urgency of being in the thick of educational action, encouraging them to shift their perspective onto a more critical and thoughtful plane. This in turn allows them to call into question the image of the educator, deconstructing stereotypes, and ideas that are naive or over-idealized or merely consist of a list of duties.

In many groups, an interesting outcome was the students' newfound awareness of a significant difference between the figure of the educator portrayed in academic discourses, and echoed in the new draft education bill, or that emerges from one's personal imagery, and the concrete figure encountered in real life.

Becoming aware of this gap, and the group discussions that it elicited, impacted the students' perceptions of *employability*, encouraging an attitude of readiness to familiarize themselves with the educational services they will work with in the future and to offer an active contribution in terms of conducting enquiries and facilitating improvements, rather than expecting to consolidate the skills demanded by the different services by gaining experience in the field. In other words, a process of displacement was underway, whereby they had begun to abandon a concept of employability as passive adaptation to *one* particular work setting, to employability as a fertile and proactive presence in a given context.

Furthermore, choosing to give the students a mandate to conduct research, and not only to shadow the on-the-job activities of a professional educator bore the specific educational purpose of reinforcing this new stance; a courageous decision, not without its dangers

and rich with the potential for learning on the part of the students firstly, but also for the partner institutions and the tutor.

The delicate phase of beginning the placement proper, although carefully planned, and carefully negotiated with the host services and supported by the tutors, has often required the students to deal with complex situations that are sometimes difficult, but potentially transformational.

Emblematic, for example, is the initial encounter between the student and their contact in the host organization, since this is when the trainee has the opportunity or obligation to reiterate the need for the presence of a second-level function in an educational service. This passage often bears the characteristics of an initiatory experience, in which trainees find themselves in a disorienting situation and must go through a series of tests: from the need to justify their mission within the host organization, by negotiating their research aims, to avoiding collusion with frequent requests on the part of the host organizations to carry out first-level placement activities. This is a process under construction, currently offering students interesting 'incidents' that can however, if well thematized, offer valuable opportunities for learning. The students, who expect to be 'accepted' by the placement organization often find themselves having to cope with scepticism about the possible value of their training assignment: «We have no second-level professionals here», «We have no educators here, what are you coming to observe?»; «We don't do educational work here, just entertainment». This is a moment that can be daunting, however, the cooperative bases of the traineeship module are designed to transform it – with the help of the tutor and the group – into a moment of reflection that allows the student to see beyond the immediate difficulty, and to lay the foundations for a meaningful experience within this particular service and for this particular service. The presence of a tutor who can receive and contain the students' discouragement, allowing them, nonetheless, to fully live out this experience of disorientation, and to draw on their own resources is especially important. It is hoped that one of the main outcomes for the students will be precisely that of acquiring the ability to identify, articulate and defend their knowledge, even in settings that do not immediately appear 'suited' to their professional profile.

3. Final remarks

In our experience, the TFO traineeship programme is increasingly proving to be a key space in which students can identify and experiment with applying the skills of 'second level' education professionals.

As we move forward with the programme, we plan to continue exploring the interrelationships between guidance, skills development, and employability. To this end, we are introducing a self-reflexive approach into the training placement experience on an increasingly systematic basis, and are also designing a cooperative enquiry project, with the participation of the students, to enrich our theorizing with the perspectives of those who experience first-hand the constraints and the opportunities inherent in the programme.

We interpret the construct of employability as a meta-competence to be developed, a framework within which to locate different possible kinds of professional activity. For trainee educators, seeking out the peculiarly educational dimension of the professional settings analysed on the placement programme means, at a different level, actively seeking to identify and legitimate a professional identity of their own. The challenge has been to encourage proactive approaches, given that trainee educators' future employability will depend on their capacity to identify, using the knowledge they have acquired, their own specific field of action, clearly define it, and communicate it to other professionals. At the same time, we aim to create a context that can enrich all the various stakeholders involved in the programme. In fact, while on the one hand, we aim to help students in approaching a future professional identity, on the other, and at the same time, we believe in the potential to enrich also the professional contexts that offer their contribution in this effort. This stance is based on the idea that promoting employability, entrepreneurship, and flexibility in students' curricula is not an effort related only to university: it is a process that can be activated by all the actors (students, university professors, traineeship tutors, educational services) involved in the programme. If students have the opportunity to explore their competences in relation to professional contexts, observing existing practices and processes, on the contrary, hosting organizations have the possibility to receive student researches: an analysis of part of their educational functions. We believe that this encounter can be generative: students do not only 'receive' training but play an active role, representing a fundamental opportunity to observe the existing practices and processes from another point of view, less experienced but, at the same time, potentially able to generate reflections. Professional contexts, in fact, are always at risk of fixing their practices in procedures and reducing the education complexity in linear organizational thinking: for them, the possibility to open up and listen to different point of views is fundamental.

All this learning potential is not assumed, sometimes it represents an ideal, and needs to be continuously monitored and interrogated through the feedback that emerges during the programme's various stages. This is not a painless process to trigger: a real interest from

professional contexts, as well students' ability to realize interesting and effective research cannot be taken for granted. Traineeship tutors have a key role in creating 'good-enough' conditions that can foster a constructive dialogue, attempting to deal with the feeling of not being recognized as interesting and valuable interlocutors that has occurred to both students and hosting educational services.

Adopting the stance described in this chapter has allowed us to construct and manage a traineeship that offers the opportunity to experience a wide reflection about what adult educators are, their functions, their employability in real situations, inviting students to adopt a critical and proactive stance, sharing their ideas with the larger systems (university, professional contexts) they will have to connect with in order to start or develop their career.

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