

# BOOSTING ENTREPRENEURSHIP CAPABILITY IN WORK TRANSITIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** Work personalization within cognitive capitalism (Alessandrini 2013) demands universities to certify competences that can promote new forms of employability (Boffo, Federighi, Torlone 2015), connected to global network innovation (Steiner *et al.* 2013). Personal entrepreneurship becomes the heuristic promoter of career changes (Federighi, Torlone 2013). This enables individuals to ask new questions, to provide innovative solutions, and to create endeavours that can extend the current limits of knowledge, or define new ones (Costa 2014). *Methodology:* The research analysed variables and, by doing so, strengthened entrepreneurial competence (Morselli, Costa 2015; Costa, Strano 2016) from an enabling perspective, involving more than one hundred people going through a career change (Sen 2000). Based on a mixed method (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado 2015) the research was developed over four phases: 1) *Self-assessment* (Pittaway, Edwards 2012) of entrepreneurial attitudes; 2) *Recognition* (Federighi 2014) of emerging competences from global innovation networks; 3) *Reflective thinking* (Mortari 2003) and switching in terms of awareness (Mezirow 2003); 4) *Capability* (Sen 2006) of opportunities and resources for the instigation of entrepreneurial action (Costa Strano 2016). *Results:* The data observed show that during career changes the development of competences is positively linked to age, education, and experience, above all when combined with enabling processes. As for entrepreneurship, training contexts in the service industry prove strategic, even if still too focused solely on the technical-informative dimension. Furthermore, the results show that entrepreneurial training (Pittaway, Edwards 2012) becomes competence that can promote action starting from resources/opportunities in various career changes (Costa 2014).

**KEYWORDS:** entrepreneurship education, capability approach, agency, university education, work, education policy.

## 1. *New forms of work representation within work transitions*

Nowadays, work is being traversed by profound transformations following changes in demographic factors and production systems, along with digital transformations that require new skills to operate as efficiently as possible (Federighi 2014) within these new innovative contexts (Costa 2013). Novel technological and production processes (smart economy, open innovation, Industry 4.0, Shared Economy) have transformed (Alessandrini 2016) the inner performance value of skills into

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'Ability/Competence to Act' (agency) thus relaunching a new training and social deal (Learnfare) in which the educational system is the starting point to empower development based on people's talents (Costa 2016).

Consequently, the intention to strengthen our students' employability brings new responsibilities (Ajello, Morselli 2016) to Universities, since social inclusion and citizenship are now related to employability (Bohlinger *et al.* 2015). Hence the need to identify new opportunities for our students along with new environments of activation which mean work-based learning. These processes can then support those progressions of consequential transition (Federighi, Torlone 2013) which imply an identity change: the feeling of turning into a new person thanks to the spread of knowledge. When managing these collateral transitions<sup>1</sup> (Engeström 1996), the young student will have the sensation of being uncertain, of being continuously on the move, and of experiencing new identities and new relationships. It follows that the university, within the current paradigm of cognitive capitalism, cannot address only technical and economic environment demands. In conjunction with this, it needs to promote the generation of a transformative identity among its students: a mix of abilities to seek, give meaning, and share. The link between transition and employability is no longer driven by a simple functional and productive logic, but is characterized by a stochastic, unforeseen process, capable of crossing the boundaries of action between university and the job market, mediating between personal and collective senses.

## *2. From competence to enablement: the value of agency*

Work transitions in the post-Fordism period have been described as a protean career (Hall, Mirvis 1994), and a boundaryless career (Arthur, Rousseau 1996). The adaptable career (Protean) is a theoretical model which describes the role of individuals in a self-directed running of their own career. Those who implement an adaptable career have a strong locus of internal control. They firmly believe in their ability to control and govern events and are individuals with strong adaptive skills, able to manage processes of professional and organizational learning.

Capability Activation (Sen 2006) in support of employability, thus becomes an expression and result of a reflective and recursive investigation process, able to engage peculiarity in the variety of contexts and systems of actions in which students will be non-passive performers of their own

<sup>1</sup> According to Engeström (1996), knowledge acquisition is the outcome of an active and constructive process, a path based on a strategy, on a form of control of the wide process of the codification, transformation, and storage of information.

transition, leveraging their own inclinations (aptitudes, motivations and desires) and talents. This is why students' employability value is now the result of social awareness, participation, responsibility, and an ability to think: the basis of the processes of action. Agency not only expresses the mere possession of practical knowledge – to master different situations – but embodies the aptitude of willingness to perform an intellectual activity that begins from action. Furthermore, agency expresses the leaning to learn when at work, by combining thought and action, thanks to a flexibility that becomes a cognitive plasticity which supports individual capabilities (Sen 2000). Overcoming the perspective of neo-liberal culture, flattened by the functional need of a university caged in by the job market, it is obligatory to recover a new vision hinged on the generative and creative freedom of the student when it comes to learning in the workplace. Enabling agency is linked to students' ability to use different resources, preferences, aptitudes and values, to design their own future (Morselli, Costa, Margiotta 2014).

Consequently, the development of youth entrepreneurship – as an enabling tool – becomes fundamental within educational systems. The role of education in promoting entrepreneurial skills (an entrepreneurial mind-set) has become increasingly significant in recent European strategies for employment and the strengthening of qualifications (EUCIS-III 2013). The term 'entrepreneurship education' has been defined as a set of knowledge, skills and aptitudes aimed at making individuals capable of 'turning ideas into actions', considering the possibilities and relationships in which they are involved at work but also in social contexts (hence the more appropriate term of 'intrapreneurship'). A spirit of inventiveness, a proactive attitude, creative thinking, entrepreneurship (European Commission 2006), ability to take and manage risk are the core of those intangible strategic skills (Loiodice 2009) that activate students' enabling agency, beyond the value of each individual skill acquired (Costa 2014). Entrepreneurship has been defined as one of the eight key European competences (European Commission 2006), so important that the Entrepreneurship Action Plan 2020 (European Commission 2013) indicates education and training as supporting axes to fund entrepreneurial development. Furthermore, most recent European documents reiterate the need to make education and training systems a growth laboratory for the entrepreneurial mindset of youth (European Commission 2016).

Entrepreneurship Education (Mwasalwiba 2010) in Europe is mainly compared, even if in a restricted way, with the simple technicalities that are the basis of 'doing business'. However, talking about 'Entrepreneurship' (Morselli, Costa 2015; Costa, Strano 2016), could be the way to overturn this logic, re-thinking entrepreneurship not as a mandatory skill to find or perform a job, but as a rich ability to realize an individual's own development. Educating with this perspective, therefore,

goes beyond the technical and economic outlook and becomes an acting aptitude that qualifies transformative thinking (Mezirow 2003). Entrepreneurship competence (Bohlinger *et al.* 2015) becomes the ability to combine and re-think those scenarios and new possibilities that arise from the social and working context experienced by students during their lives. From this point of view, therefore, educating in terms of entrepreneurship means generating in students an authentic entrepreneurship agency (Costa, Strano 2016) within the perspective of a lifelong learning culture, increasing the levels of social awareness, participation, accountability, and thinking ability (Siebert, Walsh 2013).

### 3. *The research: context, phases, and methodologies*

This research has been included in the framework of the overall action that C.I.S.R.E. (International Research Centre for Education and Advanced Studies) of Ca' Foscari University of Venice has been pursuing on entrepreneurship education over the last years. The experimental action took place in 2015-2016 during some courses on entrepreneurship held at a Training and Entrepreneurial Development Centre in the Triveneto region, which saw the participation of several organizations, universities, institutions, and social partners.

The main aim of the research was to recognize and clarify the correlation between entrepreneurship agency and professional (and personal) youth development, trying to rethink adequate areas within tertiary education that could transmit the entrepreneurship value, better linking the university world to the job market and enhancing the heutagogic dimension (Canning 2010)<sup>2</sup> of the enabling process. This would empower young people's freedom of choice, the ability to manage their own lives according to the future they have planned, valuing the experience with a critical approach and as an opportunity to create an alienation between past experiences and future scenarios.

The concept of entrepreneurship education led the research to develop its own training tool to enrich the concept of entrepreneurship (Strano 2015, 2017). This tool consists of four 'activation areas' and sixteen 'enabling skills'<sup>3</sup>, which can subsequently allow the adoption

<sup>2</sup> The concept of *Eutagogia* exceeds that of andragogy since it broadens self-directed learning practices, through which young people and adults actively develop necessary learning skills to meet their needs (Canning 2010).

<sup>3</sup> These skills are not technical skills, but intangible and strategical (Loiodice 2009), able to cross different areas of activities and subsequently support the acquisition of further technical skills.

of specific operating choices (Sen 2000, 2006)<sup>4</sup>. The four ‘activation areas’ were placed at the capability level (Sen 2000) namely: the Identity Area (Demetrio 2003; Mezirow 2003), the Practice Area (Costa 2013; 2016), the Relational-Intersubjective Area (Alessandrini 2012; Rossi 2011) and the Organizational-Institutional Area (Nussbaum 2012; Margiotta 2012).

Using this training instrument, the experimental research analysed several variables (context and development), and thereby strengthened the entrepreneurship competence (Morselli, Costa 2015; Costa, Strano 2016) from an enabling perspective (Sen 2000; Nussbaum 2012), involving more than one hundred people who were going through a work transition. Founding the research on mixed methods (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado 2015), the process covered four major phases:

- 1) Self-assessment (Pittaway, Edwards 2012; Di Francesco 2015) of entrepreneurial aptitudes;
- 2) Recognition (Tessaro 2011; Federighi 2014) of emerging skills;
- 3) Reflective thinking (Mortari 2003) and awareness transformations (Mezirow 2003);
- 4) Capability (Sen 2000, 2006; Nussbaum 2012) of opportunities and resources for entrepreneurship activation (Costa, Strano 2016).

The succession of these four phases furthered the entrepreneurial agency for the individuals involved thanks to the interaction of two important pedagogical concepts: self-awareness-vision and enabling-capability. They gave birth to «a recursive construction movement, through a complex mixture of actions and tools that continuously [returned] on individual’s agent function, outspreading the recognition of abilities and possibilities and, therefore, deploying the activating and enabling action» (Costa, Strano 2016). The tools chosen and elaborated to work within these pedagogical meanings were:

- a) GET2 test (General Enterprising Tendency 2 Test), of the University of Durham, oriented to predictivity, which investigates individuals’ potential entrepreneurial inclinations;
- b) The double-moment (survey and individual interviews) of QACEN (self-assessment questionnaire on entrepreneurship skills), designed by the research group; able to affect reflection and awareness processes, by carrying out a context analysis and revealing the consequent process of activation-enablement.

<sup>4</sup> Each skill was associated with five referential competences, which develop on progressive levels in terms of increasing degree of autonomy and responsibility (Tessaro 2011). These references help in defining the concept of competence.

#### 4. *The research: results and initial findings*

The survey results show that skills development and the strength of entrepreneurship during work transitions are positively related to age, education level, and experience (both work and personal experiences and social life), above all when the experience is related to enablement processes, i.e., processes based on critical thinking, context analysis and alternative options analysis (Sen 2000), to achieve personal goals.

The impact of education and, even more, of tertiary education on entrepreneurship development was identified through a series of results (even though these same results, not always so clear, opened up the long-standing issue of a tertiary education that needs to improve its orientation to the entrepreneurship concept):

- The QACEN survey protocol showed a clear difference in certain dimensions concerning the level of social participation and personal activation between those who had taken a Degree and those who had not: graduates showed very high values in all the dimensions investigated, while non-graduates showed very low values.
- Observing the GET2 Test, which analysed entrepreneurial dispositions through five large axes (need for self-realization, need for autonomy, creativity, aptitude for risk, locus of internal control), those with a Degree showed significantly higher values than those without one.
- Returning to the surveys carried out through the QACEN survey protocol, we would like to briefly convey these additional data:
  - observing the impact of different life contexts on entrepreneurship development, the contexts that had greater weight were professional and family ones, while scholastic and university experiences were less relevant;
  - thinking about the skills of the training instrument, the graduates reported higher values in individual competences linked to creative, innovative, and relational processes;
  - the radar chart, which plotted several profiles based on the levels of development of the sixteen training instrument skills, although reporting a general superiority of the graduates compared to the non-graduates in all four ‘areas of activation’ (Identity, Practice, Relational-Intersubjective, Organizational-Institutional), at the same time clearly highlighted that between these two categories there was not such a significant surplus in several competences, especially in those of the Practice and Organizational-Institutional areas;
  - with respect to the competence of the training instrument, competences of the Organizational-Institutional area stood out with the lowest development values, both for graduates and non-graduates.

### 5. Final remarks

Work personalization within Cognitive capitalism requires universities (Bohlinger *et al.* 2015) to categorize the skills needed to promote new forms of employability (Boffo, Federighi, Torlone 2015) in line with today's timeframes and innovative contexts (Steiner *et al.* 2013). The concept of employability competency (Alessandrini 2013) exceeds the purely performative dimension and becomes an ability to act: any student, before being competent to produce, must be competent to act and this is why universities play such a key role in empowering an entrepreneurial aptitude (Costa 2016). University education must know how to support these transformations, promoting in students (through teaching, mentoring and guidance) the ability to create problems and solve them, to solicit the certain from the uncertain, to cover different paths and to try out new solutions in their work transitions (Costa 2013).

Research has shown that educating towards an entrepreneurial mindset does not imply sticking to the linearity of economic theories and knowledge: universities should integrate competency and enablement, interpreting skills development as the functional element for agency enhancement. Furthermore, this kind of education should know how to: «Formulate new educational models focused on an individual's agency; re-thinking the paradigm of competencies relating to the concept of enablement; designing formative pathways that value individual, social and contextual complexities; focusing on work as a transformative process able to leverage the entrepreneurship agency» (Costa, Strano 2016).

Framing entrepreneurship development within this paradigm (Valerio, Parton, Robb 2014) requires the efforts of all university stakeholders to support and generate this precise, expansive variety of learning (Engeström 2001), the result of an intentional cooperation towards the co-generation that underlies the boundary zone (Konkola, Tuomi-Gröhn, Lambert, Ludvigsen 2007). In summary, it could be said that leading the sense-making of work transitions recombines the sense of employability competency, focusing the power of choice as a key expression of an individual's development (Sen 2006). Borrowing the words of Adriano Olivetti, from his book *L'industria nell'ordine della comunità* (Olivetti 1952: 21): «*The new economy we are imagining contributes to material progress and accompanies the individual while they perfect their personality and vocations*».

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