

EMPLOYABILITY-ORIENTED CURRICULUM: STRATEGIES AND TOOLS TO TRAIN YOUNG GRADUATES. THE PRIN EMP&CO. PROJECT

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the impact of employability-oriented modules on the design, planning, and implementation of work transitions. It takes its lead from the PRIN EMP&Co project developed by the University of Florence in 2014–2017, and how its research protocol allows a mapping of the construction of employability during the Master’s Degree Course.

KEYWORDS: employability, work transitions, employability-oriented curriculum, PRIN EMP&Co project.

1. Introduction

Employers frequently complain that graduates’ standards are not consistent with their expectations (Fondazione CRUI 2016: 22), that they lack basic business knowledge and sense of measure in financial issues¹. Does this mean that higher education study paths are failing in their mission? At the same time, when talking to higher education teachers, they complain about a lack of knowledge of basic principles and of critical sense and reasoning, abilities that should have already been acquired during college years if not before.

One reason is linked to the concept of ‘transitions’ which are always difficult and disconcerting for anyone. In other words, most young graduates experiencing their first transition to work...

Will have a period of non-competence [...] because they will lack explicit and – especially – tacit knowledge of ‘what we do around here’: they will be culturally naïve, reliant on any explicit and formal declarations they can find, whereas the reality of communities of practise is one of tacit knowledge, ‘work-arounds’ and local practices. Second [...] the knowledge typically rewarded by higher education is quite different from [...] expert-like behaviour, that is likely to be more significant in the workplace (Knight, Yorke 2004: 14).

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¹ See data from the focus groups organized by the Board of Professors of the Master’s Degree in Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, and Pedagogical Sciences of the University of Florence with the Address Committee of the Master’s Degree whose members are the main organizations of the Tuscan social economy in the year 2017–2018.

This does not mean that higher education alumni lack the intellectual and cultural capital needed for work, but that higher education has been traditionally influenced by a different culture from that predominating in the job market, and it cannot always guarantee the kind of experience, or the social or intellectual capital needed, to acquire the tools to sustain employment and employability.

Employability is deeply intertwined with the kind of assistance that higher education can provide students with to prepare their transition into the workplace. For instance, Boffo, Fedeli, Lo Presti, Melacarne and Vianello (2017) have argued that a staunch new relationship between higher education and work can help graduates in their first job since placement is considered the result of an educational process that starts a long time before. It is through traineeships, work-based and work-related didactics, developed in synergy with higher education, that students can strengthen their employability given that all these practices help the construction of a business-like, professional culture and a knowledge of the job market within the relevant curricula and programmes.

2. Higher Education, the Zone of Proximal Development, and the engagement of students with the world of work

The contexts of higher education and of work, as mentioned before, can involve different ways of learning and teaching and result in various competencies, such as the transfer of knowledge and skills from one context to another: the so-called 'skill of transfer' (Scribner, Cole 1973; Bridges 1993).

Several scientists have noticed the importance of educational programme design in the development of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978) and of cultural practices (Leontiev 1978). Indeed, Vygotsky defined the Zone of Proximal Development as: «the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance as collaboration with more able peers» (Vygotsky 1978: 85).

In other words, the concept highlights how a pedagogical structure and pedagogical guidance help learners move beyond their ZPD and improve their competencies. This outlook suggests two different insights.

On the one hand, learning in a formal context, such as higher education, can be improved if the skills and knowledge are embedded within a social context that is essential to learning. For example, if students solve real-world problems, they will be accomplished in a way of thinking that will enable them to understand the cultural practices that can occur in a specific context, i.e., the world of work.

On the other, this outlook marks the importance of the involvement of adult educators in instructing young people, in the development of their ZPD. Those who guide and support learners can participate in and influence their process of learning through a dynamic educational relationship.

It is in these terms that Lave and Wenger saw learning, as «a relational matter, generated in social living, historically, in social formations whose participants engage with each other as a condition and precondition for existence» (Lave, Wenger 1991: 95) and as a participation process that «can be neither fully internalized as knowledge structures (within individual minds) nor fully externalized as instrumental artefacts or overarching activity structures» (Lave, Wenger 1991: 51). At the basis of learning is always a relationship that influence the learning process and this «is always based on situated negotiation and re-negotiation of meanings in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction – indeed, are mutually constitutive» (Lave, Wenger 1991).

Indeed, as clearly explained by Mezirow's transformative theory, the role of the adult educator is that of a facilitator of metacognition processes, or of a facilitator who can enhance learners' ability to reflect on themselves, on cognitive processes, and on social, cultural, relational processes and assumptions. The relationship that the educator is able to create and maintain with the adult learner is as a mentor/friend where it is «the mentor trying to help the friend decide how to deal with a significant life problem that the friend may not have yet clearly identified as the source of his or her dilemma» (Mezirow 1991: 223). In this way, educators help adult learners identify and critically reflect on the epistemological, social, and psychological assumptions on which their beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions have been built. These constitute the 'meaning schemes'. Moreover, educators can help learners to transform their meaning perspectives (sets of related meaning schemes), to test them through participation in reflective dialogue (Mezirow 1991). «Learning may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action» (Mezirow 1990: 1).

In other words, the transformation of the adult is realized, as Mezirow claimed, in correspondence with deep reflection linked to moral development. And at the right moment, when the learners' capabilities allow them to function as self-directed learners, then the adult educators' job has been properly done, since self-directed learning is among the most relevant skills that can be learnt (Mezirow 1985). Indeed, we can affirm that the role of adult educators, or facilitators, runs out when they are able to support adults, to stimulate them in their self-education, in their will to develop their capacity to reveal the prejudices and preconceptions of the social, moral, and economic orders that affect individual perception with respect to need.

3. *The engagement of Higher Education students with the world of work*

In broad terms, there are a lot of ways in which higher education can support students' learning. For example, if we think about Knight & Yorke's approach (2004: 199), we can plan to work on: 1) The students' approach to learning in general, 2) The students' approach to studying a specific task, 3) The learning environment, i.e., if it is filled with possibilities for learning, 4) The internal consistency of the curriculum, i.e., its design.

Indeed, learning is not only developed following specific instructions to acquire knowledge, but can be fostered in traditional higher-education and non-formal settings, although, as Goodyear remarked:

we should recognize that we cannot influence directly the learner's cognitive activity [...] the best we can do is help set up some organizational forms or structures that are likely to be conducive to the formation and wellbeing of convivial learning relationships [...] Thirdly, we must recognize that the learner has freedom to reconfigure or customize their learnplace (Goodyear 2002: 66).

The success of learning can be even greater if the subject of study is taken as a site for a more generic kind of learning, a learning for life, that takes place within a study curriculum. This opens up the possibility of reflecting on employability (Yorke 2006: 3) which can be enhanced through a wide variety of facilitating practices, such as:

- Employability through the whole curriculum;
- Employability in the core curriculum;
- Work-based or work-related learning incorporated in the curriculum;
- Employability-related module(s) within the curriculum; and
- Work-based or work-related learning in parallel with the curriculum (Yorke, Knight 2004: 14-20).

These practices can be adopted in the study plan as embedded placement models that can lead to learning, enrich students' CVs, and develop their employability. Indeed, these practices can foster students' learning *for*, *at* and *from* work and thus make sure that employability is *caught*, rather than *taught*. Furthermore, they all allow internal processes of self-education that can happen intentionally when encouraged by facilitators or adult educators, as experiences that «combine the acquisition of knowledge, the construction of sense, and the transformation of the Self, and that are developed within social practices throughout life»² (Biasin 2009: 70).

² Translation from the original Italian version made by the author of the paper.

According to Harvey (1999: 2) embedded placement activities can:

- take the form of one optional or compulsory activity;
- be organized as single block placements (thick sandwich) or multiple block placements (thin sandwich);
- last one year, or one semester, or shorter periods.

These forms of contact with the job market should be the common response that higher education and academic programmes offer in the face of claims that there are skills shortages and gaps, that students are not prepared for the world of work and are not equipped with the ‘right’ skills. Indeed, these could bring the subjects taught at a higher education level closer to what employers want now and will need in one or two years’ time, when Master’s Degree students show up on the job market as new graduates.

Recent research has suggested that the scenario students will have to face as new graduates in the very near future will be characterized by certain major phenomena:

- mismatching of competences still widespread
- transition to employment lasting at least one year (Boffo, Fedeli, Lo Presti, Melacarne, Vianello 2017)
- individuals expected to be more responsive and flexible regarding technological change (Institute for the Future 2011)
- higher education institutions considered more accountable than in the past in terms of contributions and efforts to the training of individuals and the spread of knowledge among future generations of workers, since research into the processes of teaching and learning have demonstrated their impact on employment and employability (Boffo, Fedeli, Lo Presti, Melacarne, Vianello 2017) even though criteria to evaluate good quality at a global level are missing.

Difficulties in training graduates able to find consistent jobs in the short term have stimulated Italian universities to reflect, research, and work on employability and work-related activities, including projects, case studies, unconventional dissertations, and programmes that can foster a closer link between employers, higher education, and students. These are not only projects in the field of social sciences, but in the educational field. The latter are those that interest us.

4. The PRIN EMP&Co project and the EMAE curriculum

The PRIN project was conducted between 2014 and 2017 at the Universities of Padua, Florence, Naples Parthenope, and Siena, with the aim of fostering new strategies, methods, practices, and theoretical constructs

of higher education that could support students and young adults during an employment emergency, as a response to the socio-economic crisis. The project worked on designing higher education modernization strategies to support students' employability and learning processes required by the job market (Boffo, Fedeli, Lo Presti, Melacarne, Vianello 2017: XI).

The part of the research conducted at Florence University focused on the main research questions: How do young people look for a job? How do they approach the transition to work? How do they build their employability during their university studies? The research group limited the field of investigation to a smaller group of students in comparison with the general project: students enrolled in the Master's Degree study course in Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, and Pedagogical Sciences (LM57-85) of the University of Florence, aged between 23 and 29.

The research yielded two main considerations.

The first refers to the idea that the construction of a professional career should be thought about, reflected on, and prepared during the university course, and thus that employability itself relates to the years that precede leaving higher education. The idea therefore is that to intervene on employability means working on learning, on the curriculum and the competences that students will have acquired by the end of their study path, which will support them in their professional path.

The second relates to the crucial importance of care for subjects and their educational processes. Care should become not only the foundation to construct formative pathways or career guidance services, but also the key to reading transitions as care pathways that start within university courses. Studies have demonstrated that courses at a higher education level are still too theoretical and have little to do with the world of work (Yorke 2006; Wright 2013). Academia is not heading in the direction suggested by Dewey in his *The School and Society* (1899) and *Experience and Education* (1938), i.e. the connection between experience, work, and education, even though this should be the basis of every educational study course.

The distance between what Academia should do and what it is actually doing is so great that it led the Florence research team³ to work in this direction, following the valuable results of the SALM⁴ research performed in 2013-2014 within the study course (Boffo 2015: 147-168).

³ The University of Florence research group was coordinated by Prof. Vanna Boffo (Head of the research team) and included as members Prof. Paolo Federighi, Prof. Giovanna Del Gobbo, Prof. Francesca Torlone, Dr Gaia Gioli.

⁴ The European SALM research project was conducted to study the issue of the employability of young students aged between 16 and 24 in the social and tourism sectors. The University of Florence team members were Prof. Paolo Federighi (Head of the research team), Prof. Vanna Boffo, Prof. Francesca Torlone (Boffo, Federighi, Torlone 2015).

The PRIN project has developed a pedagogical instrument that puts employability in a close connection with preparation for the transition to work, with the development of skills and tools required to look for work on the job market.

The qualitative research performed adopted the case-study strategy (Mortari 2007), while focus groups and semi-structured interviews were the survey techniques chosen and realized following a longitudinal approach.

The data collected involved 10 groups, 110 interviews, and 52 graduates interviewed between June 2014 and November 2016: 39 from Florence University, 2 from Padua University, 9 from the Julius Maximilian University of Wuerzburg, since all these Universities share the same EMAE Master's Degree curriculum in Adult Education and an international comparison was therefore possible.

A rigid protocol was followed by every researcher, regardless of the role played: interviewer or observer, and the venue, Florence, Padua, or Wuerzburg. Indeed, every interviewee had the same interviewer for the entire longitudinal process, and each interviewer followed a specific recursive grid for every interview and focus group. The grid was organized in four main areas aiming at investigating: 1) Volitions, 2) Competences, 3) Channels, 4) Expectations (Boffo, Gioli, Del Gobbo, Torlone 2017: 165-166) in order to map the process of constructing employability in university curricula. Indeed, this was adopted during the focus groups to help students raise their self-awareness and facilitate reflection before the interview, while the interview was conceived as a moment of educational evaluation of the employability process, based on reflection, interpretation, and self-education.

The four fields of reflection set out to identify the youth trends towards work, the working directions desired by the graduates, and thus the families and professional figures considered consistent with their volitions. The life perspectives and aspirations area investigated the actions performed by graduates to plan their life and professional projects, while the reflection area focused on channels that helped the mapping of implicit strategies adopted to sustain transitions, namely: channels, networks, services, tools, educational and training activities in which the students participated to ease the transition.

To observe all these elements means to understand the choices made by young people and the processes that lie behind them: to head in one work direction rather than another because of deep knowledge of one specific economic sector rather than another.

Between April 2015 and April 2016, the student-researchers who took part in the SALM project in the academic year 2013-14 discussed their Master's thesis and joined the PRIN project as graduates. They were asked to answer the grid questions included in the PRIN Project research pro-

tocol and the results were interesting, especially since some of the graduates interviewed remarked on the importance of their participation in the SALM project for their ensuing job search and transition to work (Tab. 1).

Table 1 – Characteristics of the subjects of the PRIN EMP&Co. research project. [Source: author's own]

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Sample size</i>	<i>Dissertation year</i>	<i>Students' participation in employability-oriented didactic activities within "Foundations of Adult and Continuing Education" and "Research Methodology: Basic and Applied to Education and Training"</i>
Sample no. 1	6	June 2014	No
Sample no. 2	3	November 2014	No
Sample no. 3	3	February 2015	No
Sample no. 4	10	April 2015	Yes - 1
Sample no. 5	5	June 2015	Yes - 2
Sample no. 6	3	November 2015	Yes - 2
Sample no. 7	1	February 2015	Yes - 1
Sample no. 8	8	April 2015	Yes - 6

Indeed, within the SALM project, they were asked to conduct interviews and case studies with the most significant and relevant figures of the social sector, such as Chairs/employers/HR managers/Managing Directors, within the *Foundations of Adult and Continuing Education* course held by Prof. Paolo Federighi and *Research Methodology: Basic and Applied to Education and Training* held by Prof. Vanna Boffo in the first year of the Master's Degree in Adult Education, Pedagogical Sciences and Lifelong Learning in the academic year 2013-14.

The teaching and learning approach followed in the classes was designed to promote the development of employability, consistent with the adult education profession and practice in the Tuscan social economy. Students were guided in their understanding of the main professional profiles and related titles, skills, and competences, along with the main organizational models and employment contracts adopted within social economy organizations, to help them identify the main targets to be addressed at the end of their study path.

The main results of the interviews are shown in *Educational Jobs: Youth and Employability in the Social Economy* (Boffo, Federighi, Torlone, 2015: 147-168) but what is interesting to highlight here is the possibility given to students to become the main actors in directly and actively acquiring knowledge of the job market and becoming wholly responsible for the investigation. Indeed, they were asked to: 1) identify the actors to interview, 2) contact them by email and telephone, 3) interview them

to obtain information regarding the roles and functions they would find in their organizations, 4) transcribe the interview, 5) analyse the interview results, 6) interpret and 7) evaluate the transcript of the case studies.

Their actions took place in a context that enhanced their authentic learning, i.e. learning from real-life situations, based on the assumption that they would benefit more from authentic and problem-based learning, rather than from traditional classes, and could therefore become more employable in the long term. Moreover, the student-centred approach encouraged their active involvement through an organization of work based on small groups, a little intervention by the teacher-facilitator, and a major focus on students' experiences, analyses, interventions and resolutions of problems and critical circumstances.

From the interview analysis, the PRIN EMP&Co researchers were able to identify the positive impact of the methodological choice made: on the one hand, the active involvement of the students within the SALM research project allowed them to acquire new tools, knowledge and skills; on the other, the research protocol helped PRIN graduates to perform a critical self-analysis on the channels used for the active job search and the professional career and personal life, and understand how the work done in previous years had helped them to plan and design the transition.

With regard to the part of the interview dedicated to evaluating the channels, the students' answers showed that the two employability-oriented modules, Foundations of Adult and Continuing Education, and Research Methodology: Basic and Applied to Education and Training, allowed them to learn a great deal, although not everybody remarked this (Tab. 2).

Table 2 – Percentage distribution of students' answers regarding the channels and usefulness of employability-oriented modules within the study curriculum. [Source: author's own]

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Sample size</i>	<i>Active participation in employability-oriented didactic activities</i>	<i>% Students' awareness on learning outcomes from employability-oriented didactic activities in Foundations of Adult and Continuing Education and Research Methodology: Basic and Applied to Education and Training</i>
Sample no. 4	10	1	100%
Sample no. 5	5	2	100%
Sample no. 6	3	2	0%
Sample no. 7	1	1	0%
Sample no. 8	8	6	33%

In every case, the interviews allowed students to look back at their study path and the learning activities undertaken: there was a clear sense of usefulness and wellbeing deriving from participation in the educa-

tional experience, and this suggests that the graduates were highly appreciative, perhaps because they had had time to reflect on the past. Or perhaps because, when facing the real work world, they were obliged to fathom and find all the channels, networks, and tools that would be useful to accelerate the transition process from university to their first job. Reflection can be considered an essential element of work-based learning and employability-oriented learning activities.

The PRIN researchers identified several differentiated paths based on the commitment to memory of the student-researchers involved in employability-oriented didactic activities within study courses.

From the comparison, what emerged clearly is that the presence of a clear professional identity developed during the study years thanks to personal reflection on the subjects and didactic approach, work experience, and awareness in relation to the channels possessed, can deeply impact the result of transitions (Tab. 3).

Table 3 – Impact of employability-oriented modules for the strengthening of professional identity. [Source: author's own]

Graduate – The initial idea, before I enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy, was to take my BSc and then enroll in the Master's; then in view of the changed situation ... I was never going to enrol in the Master's Degree Course in Philosophy because of the quality of the path. I looked around and I looked at what was happening inside there [Department of Education and Psychology]. I met Prof. Boffo, if I'm not mistaken, in October... no, in May 2012, and she pointed me towards the supplementary examinations that I needed to do to pass from Philosophy to the Adult Education Degree Course, then I attended Professor Federighi's class in 2012 and then... I just took my Bachelor's Degree, and enrolled in the Master's programme without any obligation.

Interviewer – You said that at a certain point... «I would like to continue in the field of education» Why? Did you think of Philosophy as being bent on teaching?

Graduate – Yes, I thought of it as being bent on teaching or, in any case, for a following placement in a company... or for the integration between a Bachelor's and a post-grad certificate; this was my initial idea, in short.

[...] *Interviewer* – Then, if we reconstruct the professional profile you built on this path, your initial idea was to become a teacher, at least at the very beginning...

Graduate – Yes, but my work experience... first in Rome and then in Brussels, in the last year, had a significant impact on changing my perspective...

Interviewer – Then your professional identity started modifying itself...

Graduate – Of course.

Interviewer – How do you see things now? How do you...

Graduate – But I like to say, I can see... my professional identity as a whole. I've worked in the field of politics, then in the structuring of policies and negotiation, in short, in everything that happens behind politics. In fact, I chose to shift my attention to different studies that focused more on the precise dimension of training policies. I began to remodel my future professional interests when I started attending Professor Federighi's class, when he spoke of training policies, the relationship between educational and working systems and the whole framework of... policies and strategies and measures, in other words.

Equally supportive, the participation in empirical work done within a specific module/project designed and carried out or planned within a

research project of larger dimensions, such as a European project. This is especially useful for knowledge of the geographical and economic context where graduates live (Tab. 4).

Table 4 – Impact of employability-oriented modules for the acquisition of new knowledge, channels to support active job searches. [Source: author's own]

Interviewer – And who assisted you, if there was someone who helped you... and if there was no one, what did you do to search for recipients, businesses, communities, services to apply to?

Graduate – In Florence I had done... I had participated in a project during the course held by Prof. Boffo and Prof. Federighi. We'd done a project that allowed us to get to know all the situations at the cooperatives that operate in Florence and then I already had a list... no, I didn't only have a list, I also had a description...

Interviewer – Because this was a European project...

Graduate – Yes, exactly. Yes, yes. And in fact, that was very useful, despite the fact that it was 18 credits when I had to have 6, but it was really very useful. Actually, it was very useful from the beginning, because this opportunity we were given, we received it only in that module, then...

Interviewer – You, then the world of cooperatives... cooperation in the social economy... did you know about this or not?

Graduate – No, no. No, at the level of «I really know companies that operate in Florence and the professional profile that is being sought by these associations» no, absolutely not. It was really useful.

Interviewer – Because you then gave your attention to this type of job offer, didn't you?

Graduate – Yes, yes.

At the same time the reflexivity can be guided by the University, which can assume a key role when offering career services inspired by an empirical research project.

5. Final remarks

All over the world, young people contribute to the development of society in many ways: as active workers, entrepreneurs, active citizens, and agents of change. Notwithstanding the fact that their potential is often not fully realized because the jobs they are employed in do not match their qualifications and aspirations. As a result, many young people face elevated levels of personal and economic uncertainty (ILO 2017: V).

Ever since high-level skills became the basis for being competitive in a global environment, the role of higher education has taken on a fundamental role. Higher education is critical in this effort, since it not only helps young people acquire the desired values, technical and soft skills that make workers attractive in the job market, but is considered the engine of innovation, entrepreneurship (Almalaurea 2017: 30), and productivity. Indeed, it realizes its full potential when it can change flexibly to job market needs through a set of tools and methods (curricula, didactic

approach, etc.) that can be adopted to allow students to become employable and responsive to the economy (Almalaurea 2015). It can thus be a key driver for both individual and societal growth. Indeed, when considering the transition from higher education to the world of work, we cannot help considering that a difficult transition has long-lasting consequences not only on young graduates but on the whole of society, and the future of work itself.

This has led us to initiate a link between the higher education system, curricula, and graduates' personal attributes, hence their employability, employment and work, i.e. their transition into the working life, and businesses.

What the University of Florence has done within the SALM and PRIN projects, especially in reference to employability-oriented and work-related learning – where 'work-related' refers to activities different from pure academic subjects (Knight, Yorke 2004: 104), goes in this direction.

The research offers a deep insight into the university world, thanks also to the methodological approach adopted that allows us to interpret the lives of graduates, their desires and thoughts, their perceptions about the study curriculum. Above all, they were able to understand, from a longitudinal perspective, the professed and objective impact of the efforts made to modernize the Master's Degree in previous years.

Despite the many positive elements associated with the innovative methodological and didactic approach adopted, the implementation of an employability-oriented curriculum is still viewed as a challenge by many institutions and researchers. For instance, it entails significant effort on the part of academic professors and staff supporting the students, who are asked to play a role that is quite different from that of a tutor or subject expert, a specific kind of training, plus major involvement by employers, academic staff, and tutors, and so on.

The initiatives described were undoubtedly excellent, yet they could be perceived as isolated cases or islands, should the quality of the mainstream curricula be perceived at a different level by the students. Moreover, excellent initiatives often reach only those who can grasp them and who choose to be reached by them.

It would be important to champion a similar path at every university, although this would mean:

- 1) at an institutional level, new modules and programmes being proposed with a specific effort on developing students' employability;
- 2) at an institutional level, employability becoming an issue and concern for every work unit, i.e. educational research group, career service, and administrative unit, plus every academic department and role;
- 3) employability being a part of every programme presentation;
- 4) at a departmental level, employability being the main constituent element of every handbook, website, and assessment criterion;

- 5) every programme and every teaching moment being devoted to explaining to students – and teaching staff and professors – what is meant by employability and its importance in the transition perspective.

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