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**Competencies and Abilities:  
Innovative Learning Environments and Life Skills**

edited by Vanna Boffo and Mauro Palumbo

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# Educational contexts and biographical learning methods for skills analysis

Paolo Di Rienzo <sup>1</sup>

## Key Words

Biographical Methods, Experiential Learning, Competence

### Abstract

*This contribution presents a reflection on educational experience gained during workshops on qualitative methods in the building and recognition of learning acquired in non-formal contexts, named Educational Biography Workshop.*

## 1. Introduction

Experience presents itself as a fundamental characteristic of learning and education (Dewey, 1949), referring to the relationship, in a dialectic dimension, between theory and practice in the processes of knowledge and learning (Alberici, 2008), to the importance of socio-professional contexts (Pontecorvo, 1995) and participation (Lave & Wenger, 2006) which contribute to characterizing learning processes. This background allows us to conceive competence in its generative (Schön, 2006), procedural (Ajello & Meghnagi, 1998), metacognitive (Pellerey, 2002), proactive and strategic values.

In its purely experiential dimension, learning, based on the knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience, has an unstated dimension devoid of certification and empirical evidence (Evans, 2007): there is, then, an unstated sphere that needs to be verbalized in order to underscore the knowledge mobilized to carry out certain activities.

On these bases, also of empirical evidence, it is necessary to define educational contexts and appropriate methods to provide tools suitable to allow the non-formal and informal dimensions of the cultural, cognitive and competence profile of each person to be reconstructed, analysed and valorized.

In this way, the settings of an intervention can be defined, with workshops that borrow activities from biographical practices. Narration and reflection on reconstructions of experiences of educational and professional life allow us to recognize and verbalize this knowledge, even of the tacit kind, which, although not recognized by a formal title, is part and parcel of a person's knowledge and can thus be spent within the current university system.

In the light of the experiments carried out, biographical methods can favour the process of recognizing prior learning, and at the same time acquire greater self-awareness. This involves strengthening the motivation to become involved in a project for professional development and optimizing study programmes through customization and individualization of the educational offering.

## 2. Biography Workshop theories and reference methods

The Educational Biography Workshop is a context in which learning acquired through experience takes shape in a reflective manner (Mortari, 2003).

The action in practical contexts incorporates a cognitive process of creation and cognitive construction, which remain in the shade with respect to the threshold of awareness of the subject acting. It therefore becomes necessary to question oneself on the premises of the action and reflect on the experience to reveal the pre-



conceptions and basic assumptions as well as the cognitive elements incorporated in the practice, to build, in short, an epistemology of practice (Schön, 2006). This learning reflectively from experience is typical of the transformational approach of education since it promotes a questioning stance not only on the contents of a task or a practice but especially on the prospects of meaning that filter our actions, therefore on the conditions that govern our undertaking (Mezirow, 2003) in a large dimension of an ecological type that does not separate, but puts the constituent parts in contact with the contexts of liaison and relationships (Bateson, 1984). From the point of view of the project, then, the workshop is set up as an educational system that promotes the acquisition of qualitative methodologies of a biographical-narrative type and the reconstruction of previous experiences in a possible interpretation of the building and recognition of acquired knowledge.

This is technically, speaking out, in the form of a biographical narration and critical reflection by the subjects who recognize themselves as actors in the process of meaning making in a psycho- and socio-constructivist sense (Telfener & Casadio, 2003).

Reality is the result of constructive processes, both individual and collective, and represents one of the many possible worlds populated by experiences and the interpretations of these experiences. From this point of view, knowledge is conceived as the point never definitively acquired of the repeated process of developing developments. In the cognitive organization of experience, a process of exchange, negotiation, and the social sharing of meanings also come into play.

For these reasons, the terrain on which reflective-transformative education moves (Striano, 2001) is that of the creation of learning contexts suitable for the dynamics of the recursive relations of the building of meanings and which are characterized by an interest in the epistemology of “living systems”, for the attention of social networks. This is a fundamental attitude of the educational system/context that concerns the change in “syntax” (epistemology) of the questions and answers: from “what it is” to the “how”; from the absolutist objectification of the product to the recursive dynamic of the process.

Educational processes of a transformative type do not take place by simple induction or through automatic transfer of new scientific constructs, but are constituted because someone is willing to question the reference assumptions, to carry out an exercise of meta-epistemology, as Gregory Bateson would say.

In a social constructivism context, the qualitative methodology provides devices of a reflective, biographical and narrative type (Cambi, 2002; Demetrio, 1996; Dominicé, 2000), which focus on a subject’s ability to bring meaning to what they do in the contexts they act in, and that valorize the action of individuals well beyond mere effectiveness and efficiency. The exercising of cognitive, metacognitive and biographical reflection allows the construction of mental models, the modification and replacement of conceptual structures, the recognition of areas of attention, the definition of cultural and competency profiles.

The educational project focuses attention on approaches that rely on qualitative methodologies of a narrative type, wherein the biography of the subject fully enters the communicative process, constituting the tool and the terrain to create the pattern of meanings that regulate the relationship. This is a dynamic process in which all the parties become involved, firstly, the individual, the educator, and then the group, with the aim of allowing the subjects to carry out that work of critical reflection to repossess their own competencies.

### 3. Workshop courses

The reference framework is given by the importance attributed to the valorization of competencies and the recognition of individual learning in the different forms and locations in which it is acquired. In fact, the possibility to link together and give value to the whole complex of multiple learning experiences represents the necessary condition for the recognition of the educational and constitutive role of continuing education as a life experience.



The purpose of the instruction concerns the development of qualitative methods of self-analysis of competencies, and involves many planes, from the cognitive to that of the motivational and relational type. In this way, we can identify first-level learning objectives relating to content, in terms of knowledge, methods and tools for the biographical analysis of competencies in adulthood; and second-level objectives, designed in the same way as deuterio-learning (Bateson, 1984) amending the learning conditions with a transformative significance on the premises of subjects' meaning (Mezirow, 2003).

The Workshop takes place on a double plane: the narrative work on the reconstruction of educational experiences supports reflection on the assumptions of knowledge, which it initiates in some ways, since it is propaedeutic to the responsible and constructive disposition of the subjects involved.

The course lasts three months and is organized in a blended form, including both classroom work and distance activities on a special e-learning platform. Study materials are supplied to participants that constitute the basis to inspire reflection and comparison on the themes treated in the classroom, thanks to the use of communication tools (forums, chatlines, messages). Network environments can allow development of circular communication and the growth of shared knowledge in the working group.

Both in the classroom and at a distance, by adopting a methodological approach characterized by recursive references between theory and practice, the communication emphasizes the competencies distributed throughout the learning community, which is oriented towards the community of practice model (Alessandrini, 2007), including alternation between experiential moments and moments of conceptualization and systematization of the knowledge built up. Of importance is the ability to facilitate collaboration between individuals or groups to achieve shared objectives, as well as the building of social skills aimed at problem-solving and conflict management.

Consistent with the considerations and objectives referred to above, the educational project focuses on two areas:

- a. the building and sharing of meanings, relevant to the problem of learning how to learn and unlearn, in order to understand the assumptions on which the cognitive process is based and to modify the reference patterns;
- b. biographical reflection on educational experiences relevant to the problem of analysis and self-analysis of competencies to rebuild and recognize the learning result of non-formalized experience.
- c. The course is divided into two distinct but mutually complementary phases that refer to the thematic areas indicated above.

#### A) Cognitive filters and the building of meanings

The activities developed in the first phase of the Workshop pursue the objective of facilitating reflection on the personal approach to knowledge, to understand the usual strategies of learning processes and foster a constructivist interpretation.

#### (B) Self-analysis and recognition of tacit knowledge

The analysis of knowledge acquired and developed in many contexts of life through non-formalized educational experiences, cannot overlook a reflective, dynamic social process, open to potential and proactive, which lets the subject speak out (Alberici & Di Rienzo, 2010) and that relates to an area of complex formative communication.

The biographical method foreshadows a context of formative action that favours, based on individual and group communication in oral and written forms, self-observation and the interrogation of the subjects on the



meaning of their practices, their destination, the possibility that unexpected effects may arise from them and, ultimately, on identification of useful experience to compile a learning dossier.

The narrative interview is therefore identified as a tool to start and facilitate biographical reflection: the themes identified to conduct the interview do not concern explicit and objective behavioural responses, but knowledge linked to the overall biography of the subject, the ways of acquiring knowledge, the contexts of use.

In the next step, the educational carrying out of the reflective processes aims to reconstruct the experiences and verbalization of learning they involved, through a learning table.

Based on the interpretation made by adults during their path of biographically reconstructing educational experiences, the learning table serves as a formalized summary of various kinds of knowledge acquired in a variety of situations. The structured nature of the table itself, based on predefined criteria such as, amongst others, chronological order and a distinction between learning contexts, represents the need to give shape to the learning, making it describable and to a certain extent in line with a typical logic of institutionalized educational contexts.

To promote the final reflective summary, participants must draw up a description of personal theories that represent the practice of a reflective rationality, the product emerging from the overall path drawn up in a critical and transformative form. Ultimately, these are explanatory models of the phenomenon observed and analysed.

The personal theories retrieve local logic and let it speak, logic relating to intra- and inter-subjective contexts in narrating experiences. This is a reflective, critical non-harmonizing rationality, in a divergent word: a local humanistic logic of a reflective/transformational type, empowering/enabling (Di Rienzo, 2012), aimed at the development of individuals as social actors, and human development as a whole.



## Notes

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