"I see students' digital practices as an extreme impoverishment": The Non-Use of the Competences Framework and Stigmatisation of Technology of Italian Secondary School Teachers

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Abstract

The research aims to explore empirically the competences-based teaching and assessment practices of 19 Italian secondary school teachers through a focus group methodology. The meeting was the starting point for a professional training course on inclusive learning design using multimodal digital environments, i.e. social network sites and the Web 2.0. Results show that the competences-based framework adopted at an institutional level more than one decade ago did not impact the knowledge-based teaching and "intuitive" assessment practices of participants. These conclusions advance the understanding of the weak relationship between educational policies and teaching practices in the Italian context. Furthermore, interesting limits toward pedagogical and digital innovation in secondary school emerged. In particular, the learning practices of young people in social network sites and Web 2.0 were identified as the most influencing factor on the perceived detachment between participants and their students. As a consequence, teachers stigmatised these technologies, revealing marked tensions while introducing ITC and innovative digital pedagogies based on new forms of learning.

Keywords: Competences-based learning; Secondary School; Assessment; Digital Pedagogies; Innovation; Teacher Training.

1. Introduction

Despite the competence-based approach for the design and assessment of educational programs and activities has been established as shared basis of all the educational systems in the European Union for more than 10 years, the effectiveness of this educational paradigm still lacks of solid empirical confirmation (Lassnigg, 2017).

To contribute to fill the gap in the Italian context, we explored the competences-based practices of two groups of secondary school teachers. We collected data during the first meeting of a professional training course that focused on inclusive learning design for dyslexic young people. Indeed, previous research revealed the potential of multimodal digital environments, such as social network sites and the Internet, to promote participation for dyslexic teens (Vezzoli et al., 2017). On the basis of these results and following empirical investigations, we are co-designing with teachers a new pedagogy based on dyslexic young people strengths, taking policies and established teaching practices into account.

Results reveal that the competences-based framework fostered at an institutional level did not impact the concrete teaching and assessment practices of teachers. In particular, a general confusion on the meaning and application of the "competence" concept resulted in a *knowledge-based learning design* and "*intuitive*" *assessment* of its outcomes. These results advance the understanding of the real impact of both European and Italian educational policies on teachers' practices, and they foster the development of future research and training courses that aim to translate policies into teaching practices effectively. Furthermore, teachers appeared suspicious about introducing technological and pedagogical innovations at school. The most important factor of tension was identified in the digital practices of teens in social network sites and the Internet, interpreted by participants as the cause of the perceived detachment between teachers and students. This contribute to the educational technology agenda, opening further questions on the limiting factors of new digital pedagogies in the Italian context.

2. Background

According to the European Union, competences are knowledge, skills, and attitudes that, in the specific case of the eight fundamental "key competences" for longlife learning, will help learners to find personal fulfilment and, later in life, to find work and take part in society[1]. They are traditional skills such as communication in one's mother tongue, foreign languages, digital skills, literacy, and basic skills in math and science; and horizontal skills

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/competences_en

such as learning to learn, social and civic responsibility, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness, and creativity. Welcomed for their potential to enhance connectivity between the school and the workplace (Wesselink et al., 2009), the approaches based on competences re-opened theoretical debates and empirical investigation on the relationships between knowledge and its application, and more broadly between theory and praxis (Everwijn et al., 1993).

In 2009, Gordon et al. explored how the 27 Member States of the European Union developed and updated their approaches to education and training reflecting the intention of the EU framework published 3 years earlier (Gordon et al., 2009). The authors concluded that most of the Member States had created policies that would "*move their school systems from being predominantly input led and subject-oriented towards curricula which include competences, cross-curricular activities, active and individual learning, as well as a focus on learning outcomes*" (p.79). Three main innovations emerged from their analysis: new curricula, guidelines and textbooks/documents at a national and institutional level; new assessment tools for learning outcomes and evaluation tools for the implementation (e.g. Baartman et al., 2007); and training schemes for teachers and senior managers, such as the teacher training course we consider in this paper.

As regards Italian secondary schools, at a national level competences are defined as the fundamental mission of education (Italian Eurydice Unit, 2014), and they are structured in four *cultural axes*: languages, mathematics, science/technology and history/social studies. Competences are also the basis for building learning pathways aimed particularly to acquire the key competences that can help students in adulthood and for lifelong learning (Italian Eurydice Unit, 2014). In this context, we ask if and how these frameworks and guidelines are used by Italian secondary school teachers. In addition, our second aim is to understand the perceived strenghts and limits of the educational paradigm.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

We organised a professional training course with the aim to co-design inclusive didactic activities. The course was part of a bigger research project on innovative digital pedagogies for dyslexia. We contacted the technical secondary schools in the Veneto region that had participated in a previous research on the learning opportunities promoted by multimodal digital environments for teens with dyslexia. The teachers working in these schools were invited to take part to the course for free. Furthermore, given that one of the schools involved acts as inclusion centre for secondary schools in the East side of the region, this

school promoted the course to its contacts. Participants were selected through a criterion sampling (Patton, 1990), and our inclusion criteria were:

- Teaching to the first and second year of secondary technical school (students aged 14-16);
- Being involved in the science/technology or history/social cultural axes;
- Being familiar with the competence-based frameworks for teaching and assessment.

In order to facilitate the participation of teachers, the same course was organised in both the main schools taking part to the research, one of which is located in the city of Venice, while the other in Portogruaro, a village in the country. At the end of the recruiting process, 19 teachers agreed to take part to the course, 9 in Venice and 10 in the area of Portogruaro. 10 of the 19 participating teachers belong to the science/technology cultural axe, while 9 of them teach historical/social subjects.

3.2. Data collection

Four meeting took place after school classes, and they lasted 2 hours each. To answer our research questions, we considered the first meeting exclusively, that focused on the concept of competence, and its use in the European and Italian document that are currently the basis of the Italian educational system. In particular, the meeting was structured as focus group (Morgan, 1997) guided by one researcher, who used the European and Italian documents as starting point for the discussions on established teaching and assessment practices. The same procedure was applied both in Venice and Portogruaro. The meetings were audio-recorded with the written consent of all the participants, for a total of 4 hours of recordings.

3.3. Analysis

The recordings were transcribed for analysis. The first author of this paper carried out an inductive thematic analysis following a systematic coding process as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis initially yielded 8 codes categories that have been organised in themes according to the research aims. Then, the analysis has been repeated iteratively to ensure that the themes expressed the full dataset. At the end of the process, 3 themes emerged:

Theme 1: **"Knowledge" is "competence"** captures a general confusion on the meaning and application of the competences framework. Indeed, the educational paradigm is used as a new frame for the well established knowledge-based teaching practices of participants.

Theme 2: **Assessing intuitively** focuses on the participants' established practices of assessing "intuitively" the competences developed by their students, when this form of assessment is required by the school, thanks to the self-assessed experience of teachers.

Theme 3: **Perceived detachment** describes participants' perceived differences between their teaching practices and the students' digital learning practices. In particular, the latter were perceived as negative, hasty, and superficial.

4. Results

4.1. "Knowledge" is "competence"

When discussing the European documents that describe the framework of competences with participants, a shared terminological confusion revealed conceptual misinterpretations, and their following concrete applications, of the "new" educational paradigm. For example, competences were described as "*abilities that students use*" or as "*capabilities... or abilities. They are synonyms*". According to teachers' words, this paradigm based on "*things that students do*" limits the duty of schools to educate a good citizen, by promoting concrete, practical skills to be applied in technical fields of work. One teacher described the situation of his school with the following words: "*In technical schools, studying Latin or Dante's Comedy is not considered as important as doing... gaining technical skills. However, I believe that the mission of the educational system should be to form students as people through humanistic knowledge.*" In general, competences were perceived as secondary to knowledge, both in humanistic and scientific areas: "*It does not make any sense to understand what a competence is if we do not know what knowledge is. I say <I know something> and then I apply that knowledge*".

When applied to the assessment of students' tasks, the descriptive framework of competences was used by many participants as a translation of the numerical evaluations assigned to the tests of knowledge. For example, two teachers described their assessment practices in this way: "*After the assessment work, we translate the mark in competence*", and "*Once I decide a particular mark, I extrapolate the criteria from it*". Whether knowledge or technical ability, the assessment process appears the opposite of what it should be.

Last but not least, the framework of competences appeared as "*only theoretical*" and "*not feasible*". During these 12 years, the framework has been interpreted and promoted in different ways by different research groups and scholars, who usually organise professional training courses on teaching methodologies in Italy. For example, one teacher expressed her disappointment for two different teaching methodologies she is coping with in two training courses she is attending, both grounded on the competences framework. "*I don't know which one is better, I see similarities between them but they do not say precisely <do this, do that>, they only talk about learning design and frameworks.*"

4.2. Assessing intuitively

The conceptual confusion described did not generate any change or development in the established assessment practices of teachers. Indeed, when certificating students' competences, teachers assessed mistakes numerically and, if requested, they reflected on their criteria only at a later stage. For example, two teachers working in the scientific area declared: *"We look for mistakes in the procedure, we do not have a framework. Each one of us works as he or she thinks it's best."; "For example, I follow criteria I've never written".* This reveals the lack of any kind of shared assessment rubric, even within the same school. Moreover, it fosters subjectivity and opacity of assessment.

One of the participants declared that in one occasion she tried to apply the European and Italian guidelines: *"When I applied that rubric, the final assessment was more accommodating. Therefore, I continued with my method. I translate everything into numbers, avoiding descriptive evaluation".*

4.3. Perceived detachment

Throughout the first meeting, a number of criticisms about students' digital practices in social network sites and the Internet emerged, revealing enormous differences between the perspectives of teachers and their students. For example, one participant highlighted the impossibility to foster autonomy in his students: *"If competences involve autonomy and responsibility, they should also say how to do it! It's impossible to foster these important dimensions because young people live with a continuous, incessant control by adults and teachers. They live passively with their phone in the hands. 10 years ago it was easier, but now it's impossible for teens, especially within the Italian context."*

The digital dimension of teens' life emerged as the most influencing factor for the perceived detachment between teachers and students. The former struggle to really *know* their pupils due to different ways of communicating: *"Sincerely, I don't know if nowadays there are solid values in pupils of 14-15 years old. It's difficult to know, they are always with their phone…"; "We can't propose collaborative work with our students, we can barely keep them in class"; "There is a huge detachment between us and them, enormous!".* The latter mainly communicate through multimodal literacies (Jewitt, 2005) in digital social spaces: *"For example, if I write a long message in our Whatsapp group, they don't read it! They need a short text. This habit of communicating through images make you avoid text. However, it's going better with vocal messages, they listen to them".*

Nevertheless, the attitude of some teachers toward visual literacy and its potential for the participation of dyslexic teens (Vezzoli et al., 2017; Vezzoli, 2017) was extremely negative: *"I see their digital practices as an extreme impoverishment. My pupils would never say <Let's read that book> but <Let's watch the movie>".* Another participant expressed a

strong judgement: *"To me, we are forced to use these technologies, we are obliged to adapt our teaching to the lowness of our students"*. Indeed, the difference was labelled as incompetence: *"They don't know how to write, how to think. They study superficially and fast because they have to do something else."*

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper aimed to explore if and how the framework and guidelines of competences were used by Italian secondary school teachers. Furthermore, our second goal was to identify the perceived strenghts and limits of the educational paradigm of competences.

Results revealed that 12 years after the introduction of the competences framework, the practices of teachers do not reflect the change of paradigm. Indeed, despite all the participants declared that they had attended different training courses involving competences-based learning design, this did not impact their teaching and assessment practices. One of the reasons of this phenomenon was identified in the different perspectives and methodologies promoted by different scholars in their teacher training courses, creating confusion. To the best of our knowledge, the this is the first research that investigates this issue in the Italian context. Further studies will examine in depth the causes of the lack of impact of the educational framework in the Italian political and cultural context. In particular, as regards assessment, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) pointed out that the practices of assessing intuitively creates opacity in the relationships between teachers and students, and it excludes any possible use of assessment as formative tool.

The relationship between young people and their teachers was perceived as particularly difficult due to the pervasive digital practices of teens in social network sites and the Internet. This emerged as the most influencing factor on the perceived detachment between participants and their students. Indeed, participants struggled to know and work with their students, accusing technology to be the unique responsible of all the difficulties they are experiencing with their pupils. Despite there are evident pros and cons in importing digital practices from informal to formal contexts (Crook, 2012), this stigmatisation created a barrier against the design of a new pedagogy that have the potential to foster participation and learning for young people (Vezzoli et al., 2017). Indeed, factors such as teacher's self-concept, attitudes, motivation and needs are considered crucial to the integration of technologies in education, together with teachers' computer self-efficacy (Paraskeva et al., 2008). Further analysis will consider all the data collected during the training course, with the aim to understand in depth the teachers' attitutes toward digital innovation at school, with a particular focus on the learning opportunities offered by multimodal digital environments.

Contributions of the authors

The first author of the paper wrote the sections 1, 2, 3 and 4. The second author wrote section 5 and provided useful feedbacks to improve the other sections.

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