Chapter 29
Teacher Training and Digital Paths:
Revolution in the School – A Project for Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT

Innovative practices in schools are the outcome of a combination of factors, including the teacher's primary role in directing methodological and technological innovation. In order to make this happen, the teacher – as an expert and educational leader – needs a repertoire of specific skills that allow for critical and situated adoption of tools, processes and learning resources. This paper describes the educational structure and features of some online and blended courses intended for initial and continuous teacher training. These courses are designed to support teachers in acquiring strategic competences for their work. Starting from the experience of the University of Foggia, the authors intend to offer their perspective on the prominence of teacher training within the framework of school innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION: "HOW" AND "WHY" TO START FROM TEACHERS[1]

A great part of the scientific activity taking place in our Laboratory[2] is aimed at stimulating a debate and opening new possibilities for research on the critical importance of initial teacher training within the process of renovating schools. In recent years we have been attempting to apply pedagogical and educational ideas which have been accepted within scientific debate, but which are often difficult to put into practice. Digital skills, and in a wider sense media education, cannot be taught just as a discipline for teacher education. Following Kirsti Ala-Mutka's perspective (2011) the competences needed to be confident in a digital environment are diverse, such as ICT literacy focused on tools; Internet literacy

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focused on networks; information literacy focused on informative resources; media literacy focused on media formats and platforms, and digital literacy focused on ICT for personal life tasks and objectives (Ibidem). The teacher training courses, therefore, will leverage the potential of digital technologies and make available old and new languages, in order to provide a variety of experiences of active learning.

Although the use of user-friendly, integrated, and self-taught tools and environments might represent a valid starting point, technology itself does not provide either benefits or intrinsic outcomes within educational paths. For this reason we believe it is crucial to work on three dimensions:

- Creating courses and activities within digital environments that provide the opportunity to test real examples, to create products and to make concrete discoveries.
- Providing guidelines throughout the course by expert tutors/coaches, e-learning and media educators who are able to offer at the same time technological, pedagogical and disciplinary support.
- Adopting a platform for the sharing of experiences by the community of learners, which provides undeniable added value within the digital environment.

Points one and two above relate to the BLEC model (Modenini & Rivoltella, 2012) which, according to Pier Cesare Rivoltella enhances the value of blended education. This is due to e-tivities, i.e. online micro-activities that allow learners to operationalize their knowledge, and to the medium- long-term role of the coach in moving the teacher training from theory to practice (Rivoltella, 2013, p. 7; Limone, Pace & Rivoltella, 2014, pp. 168-169). In particular, the presence of coaches is pivotal to the success of teacher training, as they are key scaffolding figures.

Starting from these assumptions, this paper aims to describe the experience of planning online and blended courses which have been established at the University of Foggia since 2007 (as described in other works such as: Pace, 2013; Sannicandro, Cirulli, & Bellini, 2014; Vinci, De Santis & Schiavone, 2015). Specifically, we will describe the experience of our small University where the leading processes can be easily directed towards innovation. This allows us to base our initiatives of educational planning and theoretical investigation on the most recent scientific literature, while also being supported by everyday experiences. This environment fosters a recurring strategy of iterative design, which we consider a fundamental aspect of our research.

In this paper we describe the key elements which guide our planning activity, and which represent a wide framework that is open to several external and internal factors external and internal factors contributing to create the educational environment. Further, we briefly describe our experiences of planning educational projects within which our principles and guidelines on the use of technology more appropriately translate into courses that prioritize the process of knowledge-building. Such a process cannot exclude the pedagogical model, the learners' profile and needs, and the legislative constraints. Within this scenario there are still elements that we are investigating, and challenges to be overcome through a joint effort. As we believe the university should take its responsibility as a teaching and research centre, but also as a services provider for the whole society. So our commitment is to create learning paths which answer the real needs of education.

According to Patrizia Magnoler, within initial teacher training, the University plays a crucial role in shaping the transition from "being students" to "learning to become professionals in teaching" (2012, p. 369). With this aim, we work – among other things – to define a professional *habitus* grounded in skills which characterize the professional persona of the teacher, in view of self-education and self-planning by the professional self (Ibidem).

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