

Chapter 40

Experiences of Cooperative Learning and Social Learning to Manage Test Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

In teaching environments, students that are in the same classroom do not always share the same basic skills. This is also true for ECDL classes. There is a big gap between those who have computers at home and can use them every day and those who do not. In the first case, kids can get distracted because they already know some of the materials and fail to see any new content. In the second case, intimidated by the comparison with more capable peers, learners run the risk of not feeling able to learn the subject. In this experiment, which involved 21 students from a class of the second year of a vocational school, a “short circuit” was put in place between students with different levels of basic skills in order to avoid loss of interest and increase the sense of self-efficacy necessary to take on any examination.

INTRODUCTION

Every moment of the assessment, oral or written examination that is, carries with it a load of stress (Paul, Elam, & Verhulst, 2007) that only with age and experience can be overcome. Some people never actually overcome it, and live with anxiety, which affects most of the choices they have to make in life, including ones that others consider trivial. ECDL exams are one of those moments in

which the student could easily fall into error for reasons due more to lack of mental preparation than to lack of knowledge of the actual subject.

I am a teacher in vocational schools in Trentino (Italy). The school trains students ages 14 to 17/18 years to allow them to enter the world of qualified work after three years of training, although it is also possible to continue the studies with a fourth year of specialization and a fifth “connection” year for those of them who want to

enroll in the University. Being so close to work, there are important opportunities for internships at local companies and there is also an important exchange of “feedback” and information with these companies in order to maintain human resources coming from vocational schools as close as possible to the companies’ demands.

The European Computer Driving License is a certification of the ability to use a computer at different levels of specialization. The examinations to be taken by the students at the school are 7 during the course of three years. At the end of the course, students receive a document that’s proof of their ability to use computers, which puts them in a favorable position at the time their resume is submitted to a company. The role of this European license becomes central when, in a job landscape where the usage of computer applications dedicated to management is increasing by the day, you want to recognize and certify who has the ability to quickly become an effective part of a company’s productivity cycle. The school gives the opportunity to achieve this certification for free, as long as each exam is passed on the first try. In case of failure, the student must pay a specified rate to take the test again. However, among the students in the ECDL class there is a substantial difference in the level of knowledge in comparison to other subjects. While an adolescent is rarely confronted with subjects such as history or literature outside of the school hours, computers are accessible to everyone and many come in contact with them outside the school environment. The group of students is thus very heterogeneous, from those who use computers all day, for example surfing the internet or preparing letters or prints for the family to those who have never used one, for different reasons (adverse economic situation, young foreigners who have recently moved and had no chance to access information technology in their country). The result is that while the first will probably hear things that they think they already know, the second will approach the subject almost with a sense of helplessness, worrying that

they may never learn such things. This chapter tells an experience that in addressing the issue of exam-related stress. Another goal is to find a way to facilitate learning for those who know less about the subject and at the same time not neglecting those who have already mastered it well. The activity was conducted primarily during school hours following a different approach than in traditional lessons. As for resources and tools, the teacher with the co-teacher in this classroom only needed a computer and a projector.

The work described below refers to an experience carried out in a Vocational Training Centre located in Trento, capital of the region Trentino Alto Adige. The region, and with it the two provinces, Trento and Bolzano, enjoys special autonomy since after World War II. This autonomy allows the regional administration to implement rules and regulations, within the boundaries of those national laws that apply across the provincial and regional level. This deeply affects the regulation system of schools in the area. Professional training (PT) is presented as educational system that takes account of the increasingly central importance of “education to citizenship” in addition to that of “professional training”, as a result of the changed economic and social framework, the emergence of new work organization models as well as recent national and European trends. Specifically, the PT aims to develop an educational, cultural and professional profile for young men, which is of equal dignity as the scholastic profile. The current path in PT fosters a professional preparation which, consistently with the requirements of the industry and local labor, is based on a strong cultural, linguistic, historical and socio-economic, scientific, and technological basis. Alongside the professional qualification, personal, social and cultural growth is promoted, with the perspective of developing citizenship skills and forming the person as a whole.

The audience is composed of a very diverse mix of students with different past educational experiences, family situations and social condi-

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