Accreditation of prior experiential learning and vocational education.

University and trade unions engagement with lifelong learning

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Abstract

The contribution focuses on the issue of accreditation of non-formal and informal learning in the field of vocational education. It presents a research carried out on the accreditation of prior experiential learning, acquired by adult learners or workers who decide to return within university. The research is focused on the informal and non formal competences of trainers employed in trade unions. From the analysis of post-experimentation, it emerged that qualitative tools have the function to support the process of prior experiential learning recognition. These approaches place the learner at the centre of the educational process, and at the same time can represent an experience of the acquisition of new learning strategies and a new way to plan personal educational and professional development or discover tacit motivations, so as to exercise an active citizenship.

Keywords:	Schlüsselwörter:
recognition of prior learning.	vocational education
lifelong learning	trade union

1   Introduction

The current context of European policies gives a renewed and improved relationship between lifelong learning and social and economical development (Field, 2011). Higher education can and must offer a concrete and immediate answer for an intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Adult learning and education are an element of lifelong learning strategy (Griffin, 2009). That strategy assigns a key role at higher education institutions, such as the university. As settled in European studies and literature, it is important to re-think the role of the university in the broader social context, for an effective change in lifelong learning challenge to overcome poverty and unequal development and to promote social justice (Rubenson, 2009; Slowey, 2011).

The university has been defined as a community for advanced knowledge creation and for the instruction of an elite group of youth. Besides, the university can often be perceived as an exclusive institution that does not always engage with communities. Some people can find that they do not suit academic learning. They can feel that universities are inaccessible. Some of them may have been socially excluded from formal education in the past.

However, since the 1960s, many universities and higher education institutions have questioned this belief, starting from a number of social issues. These international issues and trends reflect the changing demographic patterns, the educational needs of workforce and the growth of knowledge in a learning-based society. On these basis, universities have redefined the relationship between the university, the adult learner and the society (Kasworm, 1996, 665), developing a particular policy, program, instructional delivery system, strategy

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supporting access and participation, often defined in terms of extension university education, university adult education, outreach program, open university, extramural university.

Due to its recent development, as pointed out by the European University Association, in the Universities Charters on Lifelong Learning (2008), universities are actively pursuing the evolution toward University Lifelong Learning (ULL). ULL is located in a higher education institution typology 'that relates to a broad underlying mission as it pertains to lifelong learners' (Morgan-Klain and Osborne, 2007, 73), aimed to promote an equity dimension in lifelong learning policy discourse. Rather than selective instruction solely focused on young adults, ULL reflects the shift model characterized by an emphasis on key aspects of changes: widening participation, on one hand, and performance, flexibility and accountability, on the other (Gallerani,Di Rienzo, De Carlo 2017; Morgan-Klain and Osborne, 2007).

University has to cooperate with the local surrounding context (such as stakeholders, companies, trade unions, etc.) to foster active policies and actions for a more sustainable employability. Employability means not only the ability to find a job. It also means the ability to know how to maintain, improve and/or change it, whether as a free choice or because individuals are forced to by restructuring processes due to the economic crisis or due to the perverse effects of globalization.

Historically, trade unions were the major institutions in the field of adult and lifelong education, concerning labour and workers education. At the international union level, education had emerged as a priority in the 1950s and the 1960s. The reason for this can be found in the need to educate union members to participate in their trade unions and to make effective use of their services. This was achieved through focusing on the trade unions key priority: education of union workplace representatives (Holford, 2009). Their basic goals, collective and individual ones, were the development of service skills and knowledge, within the workers' organizations, for the achievement of the unions' broadest institutional, social and economic objectives (Whitehouse, 1989, 350).

The development, the form and the content of union education have evolved considering the need for workers' organizations to face more complex challenges. Once, work was lifelong and of crucial importance to define the identity of an individual. Recently, work has become a path of entries and exits where men and women must face mobility, impermanence and flexibility. This means the start of dangerous processes of social exclusion and individual distress. The new courses of union education originated in the 1980s from the political and economic changes in the learning society and in the lifelong learning discourse, which modified workplace industrial relations (Holford, 2009).

2   The role of the university in enhancing new competencies for workplace union representatives: an action research project

2.1   The research project: accreditation of prior experiential learning in vocational education context

The research was developed by Roma Tre University in an Italian Post trade union context (Slp Cisl). Slp Cisl addressed the University a request for the recognition of competences acquired by thirty people employed by the Italian Post. They had been elected as workplace union representatives and were interested to become trainers of trade union educational programs.

The research project focused on the idea that lifelong learning perspective emphasizes learning as an ubiquitous process, which takes place throughout the lifespan and across a variety of life contexts. Moreover, to become a lifelong learner new competencies are required; first of all, the ability to learn continuously after the initial educational phase and across a variety of contexts of which educational institutions are just one among many (Di Rienzo, 2014).

A lifelong learning perspective gives value to all kinds of learning, whether it is formal, non-formal and informal. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning forms a cornerstone in the lifelong learning strategy (Author, 2015). Valuing new competences becomes crucial in a lifelong learning-oriented system, including higher educational institutions, such as universities. The new economic scenario emphasizes individual learning and the different ways and places where it occurs (Alberici, 2008; Di Rienzo, 2012; Morgan-Klain and Osborne, 2007).

There is a growing attention within educational and work institutions towards non-formal and informal learning. The international debate, more and more centred on competences acquired not only in formal education, but also at work, in voluntary activities and in life experiences in general, focuses on the development of pathways between the formal education systems and the non-formal and informal learning systems (Author, 2015).

The making of a lifelong learning resource system requires theories and methods in order to establish procedures for the recognition and validation of previous knowledge. It is a key element to facilitate physical and professional mobility within educational and work systems (Author, 2014; Evans, 2007). For adults, in particular, the possibility to benefit from such pathways between the different systems has a main positive effect on motivation and on participation in lifelong learning activities (Author, 2014). Learning outcomes should be recognised and valued, regardless of where and how they are achieved. Such themes are developed and systematised in the European Guidelines for the Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning (CEDEFOP, 2009).

The national normative framework includes the recognition of non formal and informal learning as a strategic tool for the valorisation of human resources. There is also a general interest to take a broader approach providing the implementation of new technology-based tools (Di Rienzo, 2014).

From the 1950s, Italian Workers Trade Unions Confederation (Cisl) has been engaged in education, meant as fundamental for working-class organisations. Cisl had also pressed for an educational reform, regarding both quantitative and qualitative aspects of education. With regard to the adult education field, Cisl focused on post-school education, directing the efforts mainly towards helping those whose educational needs were greater – that is generally working-class people who had left school at the minimum school age.

Since the 1980s, in the face of economics globalization and neo-liberal political agendas, Italian trade unions began to evolve a new strategy. Today, people's life is subject to unprecedented challenges. As for the Italian Post work context, the legal framework is changed, in terms of less collective bargaining power and gradual privatization of services. For instance, from the perspective of union lifelong learning strategy, 'key aims include the building union capacity to sustain and embed work on learning and raising demand for learning' (Holford, 2009, 145).

The changing job world requires new competencies for the union workplace representatives to face the lifelong biographic transition and the development of new carrier pathways. The new educational approach of Slp Cisl stresses services and support for members rather than collective bargaining power exclusively. In the new course of union educational strategy, programmes have to be tailored to the need of specific group of union members and forms of open and distance learning have to be adopted to take account of learners' needs.

This new course promotes an extension of competence-based profile of union trade trainers, elected as workplace representatives. Such trainers are viewed also as union learning representatives, meant as experts in learning processes for the personal development of union members, in relation to:
• Analysing knowledge and competencies acquired through life and work experience;
• Analysing learning or training needs;
• Providing guidance and information about personal development plan;
• Arranging learning or training;
• Assessing all forms of learning in direction of competencies certification.

Slp Cisl is called to face the changing job world, starting from the internal competences developed by practice of the professionals involved.

Redefining work and the new course of union education, therefore, requires the university to design new educational curricula and new professional profiles, based on 'the building up of study skills from scratch, using as primary materials student' (Caldwell and Roberts, 2003, 268), and 'moving outwards and onwards from personal experience' (Holford, 2009, 144).

It proves the importance of methods and procedures aimed to recognition of non formal and informal prior acquired learning.

According to that framework, the general purpose of the project, carried out in 2011-12, was the development of knowledge and competences related to tools and a procedure for the recognition of prior learning, acquired by thirty trainers of Slp Cisl through their life and work experiences. This general purpose was divided into the following specific objectives, aiming at:

1. Developing the analysis of fundamental themes about the process of recognising experiences and professional competences: notion of experience, of experiential learning, of competence, based on constructivist models and a reflexive approach.

2.   Acquiring competences related to procedures and tools useful to the orientation phase of the recognition process.

3.   Applying biographical methods to the procedure for the recognition of prior learning, acquired by trainers of Slp Cisl through life and work experience.

The adopted methodology refers to the model of research-action, meant to deepen certain theoretical knowledge while analyzing a specific field of experience with the aim of bringing improvement. At the same time, the adopted methodology also focuses on the experience acquired by the people involved (Mertens, 1998). The project adopted learning-by-doing techniques based on a qualitative and narrative approach (Dominicé, 2000). These qualitative techniques, focused on the process of creating new meanings and re-elaborating one's own life and educational experiences, became deeply relevant in the context of the project. Indeed, learning intended as a change-process aims at the attribution of meaning to experiences, as stated by the Kolb theory (Kolb, 1984), which implies a constructive modality where individuals are required to participate, within contexts mainly characterised by the social nature of the practices carried out (Bruner, 1990).

The three objectives were developed in two different phases. The first training phase, related to No. one and No. two objectives, was characterised by non credit modular courses of learning, developed in a blended approach, attended by Slp Cisl trainers. The Moodle e-learning platform was organised to promote a dynamic learning environment, such as the forum and the wiki, and to achieve the learning objects related to the theme of the recognition of competences.

The following courses were delivered and carried out in forty-eight hours :

* Assessment in adult education: quantitative and qualitative approach;
* Methods and tools to recognise and validate non formal and informal learning.

The second phase of the action research, related to the third objective, aimed to apply methods of accompanying and guidance for the recognition of non-formal and informal trainer's prior learning, enabling each student to define a project of recognition of competences, which had to be coherent with his/her professional and personal experience (Pouget, 2007). These methods converge towards qualitative models based on the acknowledged relevance of experiential approach (Jarvis, 2004), and biographical approach where biographies are resources for development (Dominicé, 1996).

The above mentioned methods, besides being taken into consideration by specialized literature, have moreover been experimented in the last decade by the Laboratory of Qualitative Methodologies for Adult Education, within the Department of Science of Education at the University Roma Tre (Di Rienzo, 2014). On these bases, three research settings were defined: life history, the bilan de compétences and the e-portfolio.

The life history and the bilan de compétences settings provided methods conducted through mixed activities, modulated as on-site or online ways.

Life history referred to an accompanying activity, for fifteen hours, supporting the process of a dossier for the recognition of prior learning, of professional and experiential competences (Pineau, Le Grand, 2003). Life history as a research and training method in adult education deserves special attention. It implies dynamics, linked to the processes of being adults, which are always on going process. Dominicé (2000) points out that as we learn from our history analysis, we learn from ourselves. Formenti (2009) identifies several reasons contained in the educational autobiographical practices, which can be read as educational objectives and which are crucial in adult education. The age of the nine participants ranged from thirty to forty-five years old. Some of them had an initial trainees experience, while others were trade-union educational experts. Meetings were held in person, on a monthly basis and focused mainly on theory, while part of the meeting was devoted to debating the topics discussed. A practice online session followed up on a dedicated platform.

Used tools were:

•   the semi-structured interview;
•   the curriculum vitae (in Europass format);
•   the table of learning (an analytical description tool of prior learning);
•   the development of the participants profile.

The platform used allowed to maintain a constant relational component in the work group. In spite of the fact that it was involved in a predominantly individual activity, it was able to find an important and significant support and a shared participation setting.

The action research carried out using the French model of the bilan de competénces was articulated into six individual interviews, which lasted approximately ninety minutes each and involved nine participants for a total duration of twenty-five hours, including work conducted both on-site and off-site.

Among the tools employed, along with those that generally support the achievement of the specific goals of the bilan de competénces for adult learners, the following tools were particularly significant:

A Description of competencies;

B Competence portfolio;

C Education and training experiences;

D Knowledge and work;

E Review of the knowledge achieved until then.

The research setting on competencies e-portfolio involved eight participants. In the adult education, the competencies e-portfolio indicates a digital organized collection of diverse evidence and information of individual's achievements over time, in the form of dossier and personal file, covering the educational and professional history of a person and the competencies obtained (Klenowsky, 2011).

All the workshop activities have been carried out exclusively online. The used tools have been:

• the Moodle platform (forum, chat, personal messages, shared file area);

• the eXe-learning software (to process the e-portfolio);

• offline tools: e-mails and Skype conferences.

The role of the tutor was fundamental to accompany the whole process.

Workshop phases:

• information and guidance;

• preliminary activities (writing of Europass format cv and life story);

• processing of the e-portfolio (with eXe-learning software).

2.2 Conclusions

The action research reconstructed professional competences, with the support of technology and narrative approaches. It included internal-external communication systems, university teaching, curricula and procedures for the recognition of non formal and informal learning.

To monitor and assess the research outcomes, a structured questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice questions was used. From the analysis of pre and post tests, the following data emerged:

Narrative tools, such as e-portfolio, enabled to reflect on personal, organizational and institutional factors, which impacted training, work and also learning;

. Narrative tools had the function of guiding and supporting self-evaluation;

. The crucial role of meta-cognitive and transversal competences to support growth, personal development, professional project and employability in a lifelong learning perspective.

Life history represented an analysis and an auto-analysis method, finalized to get a sense of one's own educational, vocational and personal path and one's own results in terms of competencies acquired. It could be integrated in a bilan de compétences and, finally, it could be useful in the recognition of prior learning. Moreover, life history showed the transformative potential of autobiographical practices and, more generally, on biographical approaches (Mezirow, 1991).

The bilan de compétences proved to be a prerequisite to the recognition of learning taking place within workplace environments and was an effective tool to optimise the learning path. Developing higher awareness of one's self and one's skills, as well as personal and contextual constraints, together with enhanced motivation to get involved in a professional development project, were the necessary conditions to support individuals in the process of prior learning recognition.

The e-portfolio had a double value: assessment and guidance.

The e-portfolio examination offered useful information about the results and the level reached by the individual, who processed it. It enabled the examiner to express a more aware judgment based on evidences. But its particular value was to be an auto-learning tool, due to its guidance potential and developing reflection dimension. The e-portfolio was based on an authentic assessment and it was finalized to a significant learning. It interacted with the didactic planning, combined with practices for competencies acquisition and it finally required an active and conscious individual's participation.

The e-portfolio supported the participants on several levels:

• Personal level: it allowed them to become conscious of their own competencies; especially the tacit ones. It helped them to recognize their own value, resources, interests, and needs; to make clearer their own personal and professional developing path and, finally, to reorganize these elements in realistic objectives.

• Vocational level: it allowed them to re-write their own curriculum vitae in a more efficient way. It offered them the possibility to introduce themselves in an original way, giving visibility to their own professional results.

• Institutional level: it represented a starting base for recognition, validation and certification of non-formal and informal prior learning processes.

The individuals showed high level interest and participation in the activities. On several occasions, in both on-site and online classes, participants appreciated the benefit they believed they would have on a personal and professional level. Some of the assignment results showed a positive effect on learning and some of the individual choices made after taking part in the experiment (e.g. going back to the university) could be seen as a consequence of the autobiographical recollection process.

The use of qualitative methods, life history, bilan de compétences and e-portfolio, showed a positive correlation with a learn to learn competence, because the adult learners reinforced critical and proactive thinking, and their capacity of reflection on their educational and work paths/experiences (Alberci and Di Rienzo, 2014).

The research highlighted a very interesting scenario on the case histories and features of these trainers - workplace trade union representatives- who chose, out of the established rules and times, to go through the opportunity offered by an educational path. They acknowledged an unprecedented resource of personal empowerment and, therefore, strategic resources to give sense to their lives.

The results confirm the need for this new emerging demand of emancipation, empowerment and active participation in the university life. This means a need for the adoption of individualisation practices in the educational pathway, so as to increase the decision-making power of adults entering the university, and their positive self-image in the society as a whole. These approaches place the learner at the centre of the educational process, and at the same time, when addressed to adults, can represent an experience of the acquisition of new learning strategies and a new way to plan personal development or discover tacit motivations, so as to exercise an active citizenship in a more conscious and powerful way, becoming actor and author of his/her own educational, professional development and in all aspects of their lives. Fostering active citizenship means first of all giving fair opportunities to this peculiar audience (adults often workers) to access the university and to recognize and assess their prior informal learning.

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