Chapter 9

Students' perspectives on INSTALL training in Spain: Achievements and challenges

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Introduction

This chapter is located within the Spanish context of the INSTALL training. We reflect on the various ways in which the training has promoted a change in the students' identity as a basis for improving academic achievement. For this purpose we take into account two different points in time that help to lay down whether a positive evolution in achievement is generated through the INSTALL training, and what the specific areas in which this evolution occurs are.

The first time point is the beginning of the training and we present the profile of the Spanish students that participated in its first round, based on questionnaires and written

texts completed at the moment of starting the training. This helps us to approach the underachieving and at-risk students starting the course by identifying their needs and the special conditions that hinder their achievement at the university.

The second point in time in which we focus our analysis is six months after finished the INSTALL course. Here we adopt a different perspective as we revolve around the reflections and experiences of three specific students. Based on follow-up in-depth interviews and using a narrative style, we intend to give answer to a series of questions that dig into the relationship between student identity and academic performance. More specifically, we analyse the influence that the INSTALL training has had on rebuilding those identities and improving academic achievement.

We explore the conceptions of self and experiences of these three students through the presentation of a short biographical account for each. The chapter then moves on to analyse the different identities that emerge in these accounts, underscoring their common features (e.g., they are all imbued with fear and a sense of being different). But each of them highlights a distinctive element that is not present as markedly in the others: being inferior to peers, using/dropping masks to cover/uncover differences, and fleeing and isolating from peers.

Hereafter we sketch the diverse paths through which these students are seeking to generate more positive views of themselves through the reflexive competence of mentalization that is so pivotal in the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) model.

A brief note on the data collection procedures

The development of the INSTALL training was monitored by means of multiple data collection procedures, which include semantic differential scales, satisfaction questionnaires, reflexivity scale and others, as stated and documented in other chapters

of this book. Among all of them, here we select the ones that we consider that best suitthe specific objectives of this chapter.

Hence, to identify the characteristics and profiles of the 30 students participating in the first cycle of the training course[1], we concentrate in the analysis of both the Entry Form and the Academic Reflexivity Form, filled in during the first session, before starting the formal course.

The *Entry Form* (EF) included data on personal, educational, social and economic background of the students and their family, mostly in closed responses. All students applying for the course had to fill up this form before beginning the training. The *Academic Reflexivity Form* (ARF) asks for written and open comments about the following issues: key-words related to university; feelings during the first months of the university experience; changes in those emotions over time; main factors that have influenced the university performance; difficulties encountered at university and ways of dealing with them; factors that have influenced performance regarding unsatisfactory experiences taking an exam or similar evaluative event; and aspects that influenced, according to the students, the lecturer's behaviour in the assessment of student's performance. This tool will be described with more detail in chapter 10, and was used in the four countries to measure the development of reflexivity. Here, we perform another type of analysis of the students' answers to the form in order to better understand the process of identity construction of the self, instead of measuring the reflexive competence of mentalization. Hence, we carried out a content analysis of the open-ended answers as narrative texts in order to identify the main topics that emerged in relation to identity.

As to the impact of the course on the academic experience, we use information gathered through follow-up open, in-depth interviews that have been discussed in the previous chapter. Six months after completing training, we interviewed a number of participants

who volunteered to reflect upon their training experience and its impact on their own. Each interview was conducted in a supportive atmosphere and took about one hour long. By using an open-ended set of questions, we encouraged each student to look back and reflect on the influence the INSTALL training was having on them after completion. All data were recorded and then transcribed. We present here three of these interviews with a special focus on these students' constructions of their own selves as students. We have interrogated our own data by asking questions such as: Who am I? How do I see myself as a student? How the INTALL training has helped me to gain a new insight on this core questions?

Under the auspices of the narrative turn operated in the social sciences, we approach narratives as a tool for representing and advancing self and agentivity (Freda, 2008; González-Monteagudo, 2011). Identity as a discursive construction involves an understanding of self that is only possible as a product of narrative: the way we understand and represent our identity depends on the discourses we create about our relations and ourselves.

From this perspective, both individual and group identities are built upon a process of differentiation. Identity formation may therefore be best represented as an active process of individuation based of the establishment of limits in relation to context, rather than a simple collection of features. These limits can be understood as boundaries (Castoriadis, 1995) within which individuals and groups create their own order and reality and define their own particular interpretive systems.

In accordance with this social-constructionist approach, we understand identity as an open, relational device that, like the narrative thread, evolves over time (Ricoeur, 1996). It does not exit, therefore, beyond representation (which is fundamentally self-biographical, even when it refers to a group). Exploring these constructions implies

analysing the meanings that emerge whenever an individual – a group of students in our case – interrogate themselves about who they are, what they do, and what they want to be (Hatch & Schultz, 2004).

The starting point: Who are the students in the INSTALL training and what needs do they have?

Thirty students filled in the entry form. All of them can be labelled both as non-traditional and underachieving students, as this was a criterion for the selection. Table 9.1 shows their main characteristics.

TABLE 9.1 HERE

As showed in table 9.1, many students presented at the same time two or more of the characteristics usually associated to non-traditional. The most frequent case was students of first generation who also declared to have low economical incomes. But also there were some mature students having family responsibilities. In general, the profile of students applying for the course fit quite well the requirement of the methodology to be implemented: students whose personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances might derive in underachievement and educational disadvantages.

Regarding their educational experience and trajectory in the university, the average of exams that they had passed is 48.81%. It means that they had failed more than the half of examinations so far taken. But it is somehow surprising to note that their average mark in the secondary school –whatever the path they had taken- was 6.08 points, more than one point above the minimum mark for entrance in University (5 points). So, many of them were not "bad students" in their previous educational experience. In spite of this,

30% of them, so 9 out of the 30 students, declared to have abandoned at least one university degree before entering in the current one.

These students were facing many difficulties when studying at the university, as stated in the entry form. These difficulties are given here in frequencies instead of percentages as each student could describe more than one difficulty: problems with exams, especially tests and practical exams (8 students); organisation of their personal study time (7); lack of study techniques (7); lack of concentration (6); memory and difficulty to keep things on mind (4); lack of a previous base (4); lack of expression ability (3); and other difficulties, such as understanding teachers, lack of time flexibility, lack of motivation and similar issues (18 students).

In addition, the *entry form* contained a scale with several Likert-type items, which was intended to approachthe initial motivation of students regarding the training course. Results showed good, high motivation towards the course. It is particularly notable the fact that they showed high agreement with the first item, which reflected that they had a poor assessment of their academic performance. The three most relevant items (scale between 0 and 5) were:

- *I think that my academic performance is poor* (Mean: 4.10).

- *I think that I could benefit from a course on the competence of Learning to learn* (Mean: 4.83).

- *I think that my academic path would benefit from a course* (Mean: 4.87).

Students' perceptions on their university experience were also explored through the ARF. In what follows we discuss in some detail the core themes that spring out of the content analysis of their written answers.

When asked to think about the set of words that best describe their view of University, students' choices navigated through a very similar sample of both positive and negative terms. Most students associated a meaning of personal and professional projection with the word University. Terms like "future", "dreams", "opportunities", and "freedom" were among the most repeated in participants' texts. They also conveyed the word University a meaning that impinged upon their personal capabilities, particularly those that demand a prominent investment and involvement from them. "Effort", "responsibility", and "self-improvement" were commonplaces in their answers. Still a significant amount of them saved a word or two that denoted their urge to socialize: "friendship", "colleagues", "coffee", "travelling". But over a half of students depicted their view of University in ambivalent terms, adding to the rather benevolent constructions that represent the former examples other expressions that suggested feelings of angst and frustration, like "difficulty", "overwhelming" or "chaos".

A similar but most striking ambiguity surfaced when students were asked to describe the early months of their university experience. Here a fundamental tension coexisted in most of their accounts that revolved around wish-fulfilment on the one hand, and emotions like grief, fear or despair, on the other. The joy of making a dream come true – access to higher education – was tempered by the disillusionment of not being personally up to expectations. This sense of failed expectations run through several of their texts, and can be analyzed into two subthemes: a sense of paralysis and a self-identity of difference. Many of these students expressed frustration, impotence and lack of confidence as they realised that University requirements did not fit well with their perceived capabilities or possibilities at that moment. They also saw themselves as somewhat different from their peers in terms of abilities or opportunities, sometimes coupled with a feeling of loneliness

and displacement. One of the students defined herself as "a snail" that could only progress at a slower rate than their classroom mates.

Though some participants reported a certain mitigation of these negative emotions as they evolved in their university career, a significant amount of them still retained these angst feelings and, in some cases, even pointed out increasing levels of frustration. These latter students seemed to have fallen into a defencelessness spiral they cannot get rid of. But even those students that acknowledged an improvement in their emotional experience of being a university student still restrained bittersweet emotions towards an institution that does not meet their individual differences.

When asked to reflect upon the main reason that may impinge upon their academic performance, participants pointed out both internal and external factors. There was a general thread in their discourses that concerns the particular conditions that affected their lives at the time: most notably, their family responsibilities and/or their working arrangements. Some of them reported further personal factors that related more closely to personality traits or dispositions: lack of self-confidence, lack of persistence, poor study skills, and so on. As for the external factors, a number of students identified course plans or traditional teaching as important barriers for their academic progress. When asked to reflect on this latter sort of obstacles, the list of factors reported increases considerably: syllabuses deemed too large, teaching based on traditional lecturing, lack of comradeship among students, absence of continuous assessment methods, insufficient guidance provided by the institution, inflexibility towards students who work either full-time or part-time.

Finally, strategies to deal with all these difficulties were poorly identified and defined by participants. Thus most of them referred to "effort", "sacrifice" or "resignation" as the main resources they turned to in order to overcome or mitigate their underperformance.

In summary, the profile of students applying for the course fits quite well the requirement of the Narrative Mediation Path. They all can be considered as at-risk students to some extent in the sense that has been described in Chapter 2 regarding to the fact that their social, economic and cultural circumstances could potentially hinder their academic progression. At the same time, many of them reported to have had a good school trajectory that did not continue the same when they started higher education. Some of them had previously abandoned a degree and all are delayed students. Though they spoke about many "academic" problems (like exams, poor study skills, traditional and non-flexible lecturing), there are other psychological, relational and personal factors, such as feeling of isolation, poor self-concept,...) adversely affecting their progress at the university.

The final point: How did the INSTALL training influence the academic experience?
Among all of participants who volunteered to reflect upon their training experience through follow-up in-depth interviews, we select here three cases that illustrate the impact of the course on their academic experience. The analysis of their experiences and narratives will provide insight in relation to INSTALL achievements and challenges.

Exploring discursive constructions of self
In this section an outline is presented of the experiences and perceptions of three students on their academic performance as expressed in the interviews we held with each of them. What follows is an attempt to capture their construal and portrayal of themselves as students 'at risk' through the use of different identity metaphors. In this section we have decided to use the present tense to better convey the deep meaning of personal experiences.

Paco: Sense of difference as fear of failure

Paco is studying Finance and Accounting in the University of Seville. He describes himself as a student that had normally performed well at school until a certain point in his life when he began a cycle of underperformance and low expectations. Looking back on his academic career he has just now began to envisage some of the factors that contributed to forge a self-image of failure and a feeling of being "bad and clumsy".

He acknowledges having a great potential academically speaking, but cannot conceal a feeling of unhelpfulness as a university student. As he speaks of his personal and academic experience over the last years, signs of what might be termed a "split identity" show up. This becomes evident, for instance, in the gap between his current self-concept as a student and an idealized past of academic achievement:

"I am a person who could have succeeded at University, as I did before in my early years at High School. But there was a moment (at High School) when I started getting lower marks than expected, and (my father) was like: 'ugh'. And that 'ugh' meant a whole world to me. And then I tried studying, and that 'ugh' came again. But it was no longer his 'ugh', it was mine".

Behind a façade of autonomy, he admits he is needy and dependent on his family's support. And he realizes that this assimilation of unfulfilled expectations – partly induced by his father figure – "made him small". As he reflects on his academic progression, he notices how he has become involved in a pattern of underperformance and low expectations that has distanced himself from his aspirations as a university student:

"When I enrolled for my undergraduate degree I was feeling a lot like becoming a university student. And you might say: 'Well, you have not proved that to be true at all'. But the truth is that I do not know why I have not been up to expectations. Well, I do, I have just realized. But in that moment I did not know why I was failing, I could not find an answer."

But these contradictions he undergoes do not deal exclusively with his past and his present as a student. Paco denotes too a separation between who he is as a person and who he is as a student. He remarks this idea because he acknowledges that you can know who you are as a person, but you may be confused as for who you are as a student. The patterns of defencelessness he has learnt within the academic context are a by-product of his fear of failure, as he himself points out:

"Now it seems to me that I had a fear of failure, and that fear has led me to actually fail from the very start".

As we explore later on, the INSTALL experience has helped him to overcome this dissociation between past and present as well as between personal and academic dimensions.

Benito: Sense of difference as hiding behind other self
Benito is studying Medicine. He applied for the course at a moment in his university career in which he was feeling very depressed. In spite of his efforts and trials, Benito was failing over and over again.

When Benito was a child he was told that he was gifted. This has become a main cause for concern in his life ever since. As a gifted student, he has always lived this condition as a handicap and thereby has tried to conceal it. Hiding his true self from view is a core theme as he recalls his tortuous wandering through university: trying to hide his tribulations to those who might expect too much of him, and trying to hide who he really is to those who only get to see a fake representation of himself.

"My parents have always held high expectations for me, which did not help at all. So I felt downcast, I was like: 'if I tell them this [that I am failing] they're gonna be disappointed in me'. And that's why I felt as though I was locked up, and so did I with my friends".

His words are riddled with the language of long kept secrets, as implying a process of personal liberation that is only beginning to burst. He defines this process as one of reconciliation between his long-term motivation (becoming a doctor) and his short-term agenda (attending to lectures and passing his exams).

Metaphorically speaking, he would describe his situation prior to the training as that of being inside a narrow room with a rope tied around his waist against the wall. The doors were shut down but not locked with a key. His INSTALL training did not result in the rope being broken, nor did it open the door for him. But it showed him that he could get his body untied and get away:

"The course has allowed me to see that the rope can be broken and that the door is indeed already open".

Clara: Sense of difference as negation of fulfilment

Clara faces the difficult situation of being studying a degree against her will due to family pressure. The tears she shed during the interview we held warn us that this is not just circumstantial: it is her own personal drama.

Ever since she was child Clara was very good at languages. After high school she applied for a degree in French language – her inner wish. But her parents did not approve of her choice and made her apply for a degree in finance and accounting instead. It was – according to them – a much wiser decision in terms of employability. But Clara has always disliked economic- and law- related subject matters. This becomes apparent in the extra effort she has to put in order to pass every single exam she takes. And on top of that, she is still recovering from an operation on her back that prevented her from taking her first-semester exams.

Bringing to mind her university experience, Clara can hardly speak as she tries to hold back her tears. Her words are reflection of long-restrained grudges, and at times she finds it hard not to blame on her parents:

"What I cannot understand is why they have never supported me so I could study what I really wanted. How come they've never said to me in these three years in which they have seen me suffering beyond words: 'Come on, let's do it'".

But hers is not a discourse full of reproach. Overwhelmed by the burden of the high expectations her family placed on her – as the first member aspiring to complete a university degree – Clara strives to make sense of the internal contradictions she experiences: quitting could mean a step forward to pursue her dream, but also would leave her with the feeling of letting her family down. But this is a false crossroads she has to

decide upon, as there is no decision to be made by her. Almost uncomplaining she defines her situation as an uphill struggle to finish her degree, in the hope that she will be able to study languages later on.

Having experienced the INSTALL training has helped her cope with all these setbacks and contradictions. Most importantly, she highlights the training group as a valuable context of peer support and mutual identification. Remembering other students' testimonies, for instance, gave her strength during her illness –a period of convalescence that she remembers as one of the most difficult in her life, when she could hardly read or study for over half an hour. For her it is mirroring in her peers' difficulties, which encourages her to keep on trying, as it helps her mitigate her angst and solitude feelings. Therefore the most relevant thing she has learnt is to do with an important finding in her life: she is not alone, although the circumstances that contribute to her suffering are unique to her.

Becoming acquainted with reflexive competence: From awareness to reconstruction and beyond

Behind these three stories there are different biographical trajectories and life experiences that make them unique. But if we explore them in terms of the impact that the INSTALL training experience has had on these students' personal and academic lives, we still can find some commonalities. These three students, much like their peers in the narrative group, applied for the INSTALL course in the hope that they would develop better study habits or find out some innovative method to approach exams. None of these expectations were met. But along the way they learnt something they already knew.

Taken together, their retrospective account of their INSTALL experience suggests a number of benefits that might be having a direct or indirect impact on their academic

performance: they have changed their self concept and image as students; they have improved their ability to analyze their own academic path; and they have developed patterns of autonomy and integration. Relatedly – and most importantly – these three students have engaged in a process of mentalization that has allowed them to reflect – at different levels of depth – on core issues of their identity as students.

Paco has become more aware of the several gaps that pervade his "split identity": an academic path imbued with past successes and present sense of failure; the seemingly insurmountable distance between his intellectual capacity and his actual achievement; the multiple contradictions that separate his self-concept as a student from his self-concept as a person; and ultimately, his cravings and his aversions.

As a result of his involvement in training, Benito experienced an emotional expansion that has opened up new faces to a dimension of himself he kept away from view. In his case, the reflexive, dialogical nature of the course enabled him to share thoughts and fears in a non-threatening environment. The INSTALL course gave him an opportunity to open up and share all kinds of emotions. The role of the trainer was crucial for this in his experience. Taken together, all the sessions have enabled him not only to identify "the focus of the problem" (in his own words), but also to develop strategies to "grasp it". The impact the INSTALL experience has caused on him can be found at different levels: physically, he has lost weight and started to build healthy habits in his daily life; psychologically, he has been receiving professional help to overcome the problems derived from his condition as gifted; and academically, he has improved his overall performance.

Clara has started to see his personal suffering in a new light. One of the most important things she learned in her INSTALL training was that she is not the only one with troubles. Indeed, when asked to sum up all her experiences and learning in INSTALL she uses a

sentence like "*You are not alone; there are more people like you*". Although this emotionally-laden account of her appraisal suggests only surface levels of reflexivity, it is an important step forward in her own identity work. And yet she reports some improvements in motivation as a result of her INSTALL training. She feels more confident to ask questions in a lecture, to visit teachers for guidance, and the like.

To sum up, our analyses of these narratives depict three different identities of what might be termed as students "at risk". These three identities share some core elements (they are all imbued with fear and a sense of difference). But each highlights a distinctive element that is not present as markedly in the others: being inferior to peers, using/dropping masks to cover/uncover difference, fleeing and isolating from peers. By drawing a brief portrait of these stories, we have attempted to sketch the diverse paths through which these students are seeking to generate more positive views of themselves through processes of reflexivity and mentalization that are pivotal in the NMP model.

Conclusions

This chapter has presented the main characteristics of the potential target students for INSTALL training. As shown, all of them were students with personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances that could derive in academic underachievement and even dropout. In fact, some of them had previously abandoned other degree, and the percentage of the subjects not passed was high. An important factor to be considered is their low academic self-concept, perceived not only in their answers to the scale, but also in their written reports regarding their experience at the university. As a whole, they felt frustrated because they thought they lacked of the capabilities to success in the university. This made them consider themselves as "different" to their mates. Their critics to the university as an institution were addressed to the lack of attention it pays to meet their special needs.

And maybe for it that their ways of dealing with the difficulties they encountered are, somehow, "defensive": put more effort or sacrifice and become resigned. However, reading beneath their answers, we are inclined to think that the data here presented show certain agentivity of the students in order to overcome their difficulties. Their positive attitudes towards the course is a sign that they had not so far given up, and that they were searching for new ways to develop a positive academic career avoiding future drop-out. The further analysis of the narratives of Paco, Benito and Clara not only reinforces this initial assessment, but also provides some insight on the achievements and challenges of INSTALL training, discussed here from a more general perspective, considering its potential benefits as well as contextual factors of the training to be deepened in future interventions (Lavié-Martínez, González-Monteagudo, Padilla-Carmona & Freda, 2014). Among the achievements, it is remarkable the improvement of the image students have of themselves. Hence, the course has helped them to rework on a more positive view of themselves as university students and to be aware of their capability to transform their own academic career.

Secondly, we have appreciated an increase of the capacity to analyse their own academic career. They are able to think more positively about themselves, partially because they have now more tools for both self-analysis and evaluation of the social and academic environment. They can more clearly discern the elements that seem to be affecting their academic performance, and how much personal control they can exercise over these elements to improve their academic path.

Thirdly, there has been a trend to the development of patterns for integration and autonomy in their role as students. In general, they confirmed they are taking a more active role as students, making use of support services and other devices that previously did not used to consider. Similarly, their attitude in class is more participatory. And,

beyond academic performance, also they feel more integrated into the social dynamics of the university.

Finally, as trainers of the INSTALL course, all of us were very impressed by the fact that benefits and positive results of the training have been produced in a short period of time, as this intervention was developed through six weeks. From this viewpoint, the INSTALL training has been validated as a beneficial tool in relation to the cost of the intervention. Thinking on future and next steps to be planned based on INSTALL approaches, we consider now some challenges of this training. In some narratives, the role of the trainer appeared to be a relevant issue for students rebuilding their identities. As a consequence, it is important to provide a good training for potential trainers as they might be involved in to some extent « therapeutic » process that normally requires training in psychology that they might not have. It is important that the trainer acts as an accompanying and facilitating person, but she also should foster students' reflexivity. These questions are the focus of chapter 11 of this book.

In our project we followed-up the students who participated in the training only to evaluate some issues and undertake some interviews six months after finished the course. But beyond these specific follow-up activities we consider useful, for future interventions, to extend the scope and range of intervention of the INSTALL training. After six months, the course results seem to persist over time, but it is important to ensure its effects, in next editions of the course, by promoting face-to-face meetings among INSTALL students that would be useful both to detect any backward step as well as to reinforce students' determination if needed.

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Footnotes

[1] The INSTALL training in Spain was conducted through two cycles and a total number of 48 students participated in it (30 in the first cycle and 18 in the second one). Chapter 10 will deal with the outcomes of the training in these 48 students of both rounds. Here we only used information and data from students in the first cycle as we were interested on deepening in their narratives so that we could get some insight for the deployment of the second round of training.