# Profiles and opinions of disadvantaged students starting a narrative course to promote learning to learn in the context of a transnational project[1].

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Abstract

The frame for this paper is a European funded project which aims to prevent university drop-out of students who need support to fulfill their educational potential because of disadvantages caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances. The project promotes acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn at the university level by developing and implementing a training course focused on narrative tools. This narrative methodology is aimed at sustaining the development of a reflexive competence, based on the process of mentalisation of learning experience on the part of individuals. The project target group consists in nontraditional students, enrolled in the second year of a university degree, who have passed less than 50% exams and can be considered as disadvantaged students.

This paper focuses specifically in analyzing some of the characteristics and profiles of the nontraditional students participating in the first cycle of the training course (n= 30). We present the results of the analysis of both the entry form (necessary to apply for the course) and the form to evaluate the initial situation of the students about reflective/mentalisation competence.

Results show that the attending students feel frustrated because they think they lack of the capabilities to success in the university. Their critics to the university as an institution are addressed to the lack of attention it pays to meet their special needs. As a consequence, their ways of dealing with the difficulties they encounter are, somehow, "defensive": put more effort or sacrifice and become

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resigned. However, reading beneath their answers, we are inclined to think that they show certain agentivity in order to overcome their difficulties. Their positive attitudes towards the course is a sign that they have not so far given up, and that they are searching for new ways to develop a positive academic career avoiding future drop-out.

## Introduction

The frame for this paper is the European funded project INSTALL, within the sector Erasmus Multilateral Projects / Lifelong Learning Programme, which aims to prevent university drop-out of students who need support to fulfill their educational potential because of disadvantages caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances. This project is being developed in five European countries, with universities from Naples (Italy), Bucharest (Romania), Seville (Spain), Aarhus (Denmark), and Maynooth (Ireland). The project promotes acquisition of the key competence of Learning to Learn at the university level by developing and implementing a training course focused on narrative tools. This narrative methodology is aimed at sustaining the development of a reflexive competence, based on the process of mentalisation of learning experience on the part of individuals. Mentalisation, used until now mainly in the field of psychodynamic therapy, is a kind of reflection understood in a broad and complex sense, including (besides the rational dimensions of reflection) awareness about own mental states and feelings of other people.

The INSTALL project has two main objectives:

- to provide university students with new competencies to be used during their educational path at University as well as in the world of work, and to provide innovative models of teaching and learning, useful to acquire key skills. This means aiming at a more flexible education, inspired by concepts such as fairness and excellence in line with the demands of the European Commission;
- b) to prevent the drop-out phenomena through innovative ways of narrative mediation. The goal is to enable disadvantaged students to fully reap the benefits of higher education in a lifelong learning perspective. The narrative mediation course aims at developing and enhancing the Learning to Learn key competencies.

The project target group consists in nontraditional students, enrolled in the second year of a university degree, who have passed less than 50% exams and can be considered as disadvantaged students. The concrete aim of the project is to develop, test, fine-tune and validate the innovative Narrative Mediation Path methodology, which consists of a course of six sessions, offered to 20 non-traditional and disadvantaged students in each university, focused on four modules: metaphoric, iconographic, written narratives, and bodily sculptures A first cycle of deployment of the methodology was recently implemented in the five universities members of the partnership of the project. In the coming months it will be developed a second cycle of the same training course to assure the quality of the final version of this technique, before being offered for dissemination at the European level.

This paper focuses specifically in analyzing some of the characteristics and profiles of nontraditional students participating in the first cycle of the training course, which was offered twice, in order to reach students of morning and evening turns. In total 30 students attended this activity. In this paper we will concentrate in the analysis of both the entry form (necessary to apply for the course) and the form to evaluate the initial situation of the students about reflective/mentalisation competence (filled in during the first session, before starting the course), always in reference to the 30 students who participated in this training.

## Some notes on narration and mentalization

As a training instrument, narrative tools encourage the production and appropriation of knowledge, make the learning of basic techniques of qualitative research easier, allow the applying of disciplinary knowledge to social and close personal contexts, and have a great motivating strength. Due to all this, life stories are useful for the creation of motivating learning contexts, focused on the lives of students and favouring a level of education able to integrate cognitive, emotional and social dimensions. These methods have much to contribute to teaching in matters of social sciences such as cultural anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, pedagogy, psychology, social work and communication, and beyond these disciplines.

Experiential learning and communicative interaction constitute the base for learning and change (Steiner, 2003; Naranjo, 2004). Through learning, the learner symbolically travels from dependence to autonomy, from passivity to activity, from selfishness to altruism, from self-rejection to self-acceptance, from imitation to originality, from narrow interests to broad interests (Fraser, 1995). In this perspective, sharing autobiographical writings and accounts out loud in small groups often promotes support and understanding as participants reflect on their lives, in an informal atmosphere of free exchange (Biesta et al., 2011; Dominicé, 2000).

The Narrative Mediation Path is based on the psychological concept of mentalization that is the ability to understand oneself or someone else's mental state. Mentalization, also known as reflexive competence or reflexive function (Fonagy, 2002; Allen & Fonagy, 2008; Meehan et al., 2009), at a university level, allows individuals to becoming aware of their and others' mental state (thoughts, beliefs, emotions, wishes, motivations) and recognize, elaborate and modulate emotions throughout the learning process. Mentalization is key to empower individuals to strategically use cognitive actions related to mental states (interpret, reason, anticipate, remember, codify, etc.), effectively communicate and interact with others.

According to Fonagy (2002), mentalization is an imaginative ability in the sense that it allows people to imagine and interpret the mental states of themselves and the others. As a function and not a personality trait, mentalization is a competence and can be developed within and through interpersonal relationships. Reflective competence/mentalization allows the individual to connect mental states to behaviours, and, in the child, it begins to develop at the age of 3/4 years, when the child understands that his/her parents' actions are motivated by mental states. Its development can take place only within and by means of secure attachment relationships with parental figures or figures with an important caring function (well known as caregivers). However, mentalization can be developed, enhanced and promoted, even

during the lifetime of an individual, within meaningful relationships with substitute caregivers, such as teachers, significant adults, educators, therapists, etc. Mentalization, then, has a strongly interpersonal connotation, because it develops within relationships in which the caregiver plays an extremely active role, and because reflecting means also understanding the mental states of others: reflection, in fact, is not complete without the analysis of the mental states of others.

The studies in this field have focused on mentalizing interventions with children who are victims of bullying and, in general, people with a previous experience of violence and abuse within the family and school who have a shortfall in their mentalizing ability (Fonagy et al., 2009). These authors have emphasized the important role of mentalization in improving the processes of learning, and have demonstrated, through extensive research, that the development of mentalization in children participating in mentalizing training at school has fostered an improvement in learning processes and a consequent increase in their school performance. In fact, through the creation of a trust relationship (= mentalizing) with a mentalizing caregiver (such as a teacher trained in advance in the theoretical and methodological assumptions of mentalization), the student is offered a substitute/safe relationship where he/she can see himself as an individual capable of "producing" not only aggressive, but also adaptive and mentalizing behaviour. The teacher or trainer offers the child/student a secure base when he/she helps him/her to reflect on his/her and others' mental states, that are the basis of his/her dysfunctional behaviour, and to grasp possible alternatives to his/her actions.

Despite the large number of studies and interventions carried out in the education and training context, studies aiming at promoting mentalization in an academic context are rare. In particular, the study of Padykula and Horwitz (2011) focused primarily on methods to measure the reflective function of social work students in the academic context. They stated that it is possible to measure mentalization using indicators such as empathy and the interpersonal skills that are considered as important components of mentalization and competences that social work students are expected to acquire during their university training.

Due to the paucity of research and mentalizing interventions in an academic context, INSTALL aims to be an innovative intervention which compensates for the lack of studies on the reflective function in the academic context. INSTALL allows the student to access the possibility both of mentalizing his/her personal way of participating in university education, and of developing a reflexive competence that allows him/her to learn to learn in a way which is strategic and adaptive in relationship with the context.

## Method
### Data collection
Data for this paper have been collected through two instruments: a) The *entry form*, which includes data on personal, educational, social and economic background of the student and her or his family, mostly in closed responses. All students applying for the course had to fill up this form before its beginning; b) The *form to evaluate reflective/mentalisation competence*, that 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 influences the university performance; difficulties encountered at university and ways of dealing with them; factors that have influences performance regarding unsatisfactory experiences taking an exam or similar evaluative event; and aspects that influenced the lecturer's behavior in the assessment of student's performance.

Here we present a summary of all the information gathered, focusing on the characteristics of the students, as well as the difficulties encountered at university and the ways of dealing with them.

## Results

Thirty students filled in the entry form. All of them can be labeled as non-traditional students, as this was a criterion for the selection. Table 1 shows their main characteristics.

| CHARACTERISTICS | PERCENTAGES |
|---|---|
| SEX | Women: 46.67%          Men: 53.33% |
| AGE | Older than 25: 40% |
| NATIONALITY | Non-Spanish: 6.67% |
| WORK | Working: 33.33%<br>Full-time: 10%   Partial-time: 10%   Seasonal: 13.33% |
| CHILDREN | Yes: 20% |
| DISABILITY | Yes: 16.67% |
| FIRST GENERATION | Yes: 70% |
| ECONOMICAL BACKGROUND | Low: 60% |

Table 1. Social, cultural and economical characteristics of participants

As one can deduce from table 1, many students presented at the same time two or more of the characteristics usually associated to non-traditional. The most frequent case is students of first generation who also declared to have low economical incomes. But also there are some mature students having family responsibilities. In general, the profile of students applying for the course fits quite well the requirement of the methodology to be implemented: students whose personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances might derive in an educational disadvantage.

Regarding their educational experience and trajectory in the university, the average of exams that they have passed is 48.81%. It means that they have 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 took- is 6.08, more than one point above the minimum mark for entrance in University (5). So, many of them were not "bad students" in their previous educational experience. In spite of this, a 30% of them declared to have abandoned at least one university degree before entering in the current one.

Table 2 shows a first description of the difficulties they face when studying at the university, as appeared in the entry form. We will deepen in this topic when dealing with the answers to the *form to evaluate reflective/mentalisation competence*.

| DIFFICULTY | FREQUENCIES[2] |
|---|---|
| Problems with exams (especially tests and practical exams) | 8 |
| Organisation of their personal study time | 7 |
| Lack of study technics | 7 |
| Lack of concentration | 6 |
| Memory, difficulty to keep things on mind | 4 |
| Lack of a previous base | 4 |
| Lack of expression ability | 3 |
| Others (understanding teachers, lack of time flexibility, lack of motivation, etc.) | 18 |

Table 2. Difficulties declared by students in the *entry form*

Despite of their low performance and the difficulties they say to feel, they do not use the university services as much as might be expected. Table 3 shows the percentage of students using the different services provided by the University of Seville.

| SERVICE | PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE USED THE SERVICE AT LEAST ONCE |
|---|---|
| Service for disabled students | 6.67% |
| Tutorials | 76.67% |
| Canteen grant | 16.67% |
| Study grant | 26.67% |
| Accomodation | 6.67% |
| Guidance service | 16.67% |

Table 3. Percentage of use of the university services

Hence, tutorials are a resource that most students know and use while the special services for disabled or the guidance service are not so widely used.

Finally, the *entry form* contained a scale with five Likert-type items which was intended to know their initial motivation regarding the training course. Results are presented in table 4 and show a good, high motivation towards the course. It is particularly notable the fact that they show high agreement with the first item, which reflects that they have a poor assessment of their academic performance.

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[2]Frequencies, instead of percentages, are given here as each student could describe more than one difficulty.

| ITEM | MEAN |
|---|---|
| I think that my academic performance is poor | 4.10 |
| I think that I could benefit from a course on the competence of Learning to learn | 4.83 |
| I think that my academic path would benefit from a course on the competence of Learning to learn | 4.87 |
| I would like to participate in the training that this course offers | 4.93 |
| I really wish I was selected for this course | 4.97 |

Table 4. Initial motivation towards the course

Students' perceptions on their university experience have also been explored through an open-ended form which evaluates their reflective/mentalisation competence. 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 of the set of words that best describe their view of University, students' choices navigate through a very similar sample of both positive and negative terms. Most students associate a meaning of personal and professional projection with the word University. Terms like "future", "dreams", "opportunities", and "freedom" are among the most repeated in participants' texts. They also convey the word University a meaning that impinges upon their personal capabilities, particularly those that demand a prominent investment and involvement from them. "Effort", "responsibility", or "self-improvement" are commonplaces in their answers. Still a significant amount of them save a word or two that denotes their urge to socialize: "friendship", "colleagues", "coffee", "travelling. But over a half of students depict their view of University in ambivalent terms, adding to the rather benevolent constructions that represent the former examples other expressions that suggest feelings of angst and frustration: "difficulty", "overwhelming", "chaos".

A similar but most striking ambiguity surfaces when students are asked to describe the early months of their university experience. Here a fundamental tension coexists in most of their accounts that revolves around wish-fulfillment 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 – is tempered by the disillusionment of not being personally up to expectations. This sense of failed expectations runs 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 express frustration, impotence and lack of confidence as they realize that University requirements do not fit well with their perceived capabilities or possibilities at the moment. They also see themselves as somewhat different from their peers in terms of abilities or opportunity, 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 report a certain mitigation of these negative emotions as they evolve in their university career, a significant amount of them still retain these angst feelings and, in some cases, even point out increasing levels of frustration. These latter students seem to have fallen into a defenselessness spiral they cannot get rid of. But even those students that acknowledge an improvement in their emotional experience of being a university student still restrain bitter sweet 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 point out both internal and external factors. There is a general thread in their discourses that concerns the particular conditions that affect their lives at the time: most notably, their family responsibilities and/or their working arrangements. Some of them report further personal factors that relate 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 identify 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 full- or part-time.

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

## Conclusions

The profile of students applying for the course fits quite well the requirement of the methodology to be implemented. As shown, all of them are students with personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances that could derive in dropout. In fact, some of them have previously abandoned other degree, and the percentage of the subjects not passed is 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 feel frustrated because they think they lack of the capabilities to success in the university. This makes them consider themselves as "different" to their mates. Their critics to the university as an institution are 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 encounter 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 (as shown in Table 4) is a sign that they have not so far

given up, and that they are searching for new ways to develop a positive academic career avoiding future drop-out.

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