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Research Article

Soft Skills Identification for Guidance and Job Placement: Presentation of the Project UNIMC (Macerata University) for Soft Skills

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Abstract

The issue of recognition, validation and certification of skills, especially those developed in non-formal and informal fields, is becoming a current topic for all educative institutions, including University. Soft skills is a psycho-sociological term relating to a cluster of personality traits, social abilities, communication, language, personal attitudes that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills complement hard skills which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities. In Italy the legal framework on skills is led by the Legislative Decree n. 13/13. According to the Decree, University should assure the effective implementation of lifelong learning through guidance and counselling services. The University of Macerata (UNIMC) has been involved from a long time in the field of soft skills with many activities, formal as well as informal and non-formal. A system to recognize and validate them has been experienced in the last years. The objective of the paper is to describe the designed procedures aimed to the recognition and validation of soft skills such as *observation*, *active listening*, *communication in small group* and *problem solving*. Each skill was operationalized through the identification of specific indicators to recognize three level of expertise: *basic*, *intermediate*, *advanced*. Moreover several tasks were tested in order to identify a set of activities useful for the aim of a kind of formal recognition.

The presentation will illustrate the tested settings and some results.

Keywords: Soft Skills; Lifelong Learning; Informal Learning; Non-Formal Learning; Guidance; Job Placement; Counseling; Skills Certification System

1. Introduction

The issue of recognition, validation and certification of skills is becoming a current topic for all educative institutions, the main aim being to promote *lifelong learning*, which is defined as «all

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learning activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences in a perspective of personal, civic, social and employment growth» (Bertagna et al., 2013).

We are interested in soft skills, considered as a psycho-sociological cluster of personality traits, social proprieties, communication, language, personal habits, and friendliness, that characterizes relationships with other people (Le Boterf, 2013). Unlike hard skills, which are specifically related to a specific task or activity, soft skills are related to the personal abilities to interact effectively with coworkers and customers and are broadly applicable to different kind of performances, both in and outside the workplace (Rey, 2003; Werquin, 2010).

Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. Transferability is the main difference from the hard skills, a soft skill being more transferable than a hard skill. Due to their added value, it is important to identify them and certify that they are available to be used (European Commission, 2009). In the last period a Pilot Project aimed to the identification, validation and certification of soft skills was made up at the University of Macerata (UNIMC).

We will discuss the contents, the phases, the results and the issues of this experience.

2. The Pilot Project “UNIMC for Soft Skills”

For the reasons illustrated above, the issue of identification, validation and certification of soft skills is developing a current topic under different perspective. As soft skills are not often formally trained, to have them recognized is particularly useful for people without any formal education (neet, drop out students, etc.) or workers in mobility (Isfol, 2012). To have a certificate of their soft skills allow graduated students to apply for a job becoming competitive as well and being included in human resources selection because of their transversal competences (European Commission, 2012).

Considering the long term commitment of the University of Macerata (UNIMC) in the field of skills assessment, both in formal and non-formal learning activities, a research team from UNIMC Orientation Office introduced a Pilot Project called *Unimc for Soft Skills* (Nicolini and Pojaghi, 2006; Nicolini and Lapucci, 2009). The aim of the project was to design and plan formal procedures able to identify and assess different soft skills such as: group leadership, observation procedure, negotiation of conflicts, problem solving, communication management, group working (Nicolini and Lapucci, 2011).

3. First Phase of the Pilot Project – Identification of Soft Skills

The first phase of the Pilot Project was dedicated to the identification of a list of soft skills previously trained during formal and informal activities (Winterton et al., 2005; Goodman and Dabbish, 2011), selecting the four listed below:

- Observation;

- Active Listening;
- Communication in small group;
- Problem solving.

As a theoretical reference, the definition of the four soft skills employed in an experienced and knowledgeable way was used, as in the following declaration:

3.1 Observation

An expert approach in observation consists in to able to distinguish between data that can be directly observed in the description of a phenomenon - such as actions, words and non-verbal behaviors - and items that can only be deduced because belonging to the inner world of the subject observed - such as thoughts, feelings and intentions. Furthermore, the competent observer fits the times and places where the observation takes place, taking care to discuss own comments and being aware of own point of view.

3.2 Active Listening

A good expertise in listening is characterized by the ability to select among an amount of information the most significant ones in relation to the objective of communication.

3.3 Communication in small group

An expert approach to communication in small group is distinguished by the ability to clearly express opinions and emotions, avoiding to minimize, to trivialize or to make fan of other's ideas and frame of mind, also offering recognition to other's ideas. Also, it allows to change own attitudes based on the discussion in group.

3.4 Problem solving

To have a good expertise in problem solving means to be able to process the different information available to identify answers to the problems encountered, sometimes also in an original way. Also, it permits to transfer learned strategies, adapting them to new contexts. Finally, an expert approach is characterized by the ability to use an overview able to take on the problem from an outside perspective.

4. Second Phase of the Pilot Project–Soft Skills Operationalization

Using the definitions described above, the second phase of the project consisted in operationalizing the four soft skills, declining them in three levels of expertise, through the identification of specific indicators for each skill (Nicolini et al. 2009; Nicolini and Bomprezzi, 2011): basic, intermediate and advanced.

As an example, we provide the operationalization of the Communication in small group competence. In the Table 1 the indicators which identify the communication in small group of basic and advanced levels are illustrated.

Table 1 Communication in small group indicators

| In small group basic communication | In small group advanced communication |
|---|---|
| To remain mainly silent during the discussion | To take an active part in the discussion |
| To carry on own opinion only at once considering the opinions of the other participants | To propose and stimulating speeches, listening and taking into consideration the opinions of the other participants |
| To intervene with speeches not actually relevant to the group objective | To return the discussion towards the group objective to be achieved |
| To use a personal language or technical terms, without checking whether they are comprehensible to the other participants | To use a shared linguistic repertoire |
| To minimize ideas or frame of mind expressed by the other participants | To offer recognition to the thoughts and frame of mind of the other participants |
| To maintain the same style of communication during the group interaction, without measuring it in relation to others | To change the way of relating based on the feedback received by the other participants |
| To keep the speech for a long time | To intervene synthetically and clearly |
| To interrupt others in their speeches | To encourage others to participate and to support them expressing their point of view |

Following the operationalization just showed in the Table 1, the three competence levels of the Communication in small group skill are described as in the following list:

- *Basic*: the student mainly uses the elements of a basic approach within the communication in small group.
- *Intermediate*: the student uses the characteristics of both approaches, in a mixed way, within the communication in small group.
- *Advanced*: the student uses all or most of the indicators of an expert approach within the communication in small group.

5. Third Phase of the Pilot Project – Tasks Testing

In this phase, several tasks related to every skill were identified and then tested by the research team. This step involved the group of experts in a deep analysis of the different tasks, to arrive at a shared and convinced choice of the activities to be proposed.

After different pilot experiences, two tasks for each of the four soft skills were selected to be used in two different moments, as an in entrance and in exit assignment (Trincherò, 2013). The crucial passage of the project was the selection of the tasks able to ascertain the level of soft skills possessed by the participants at the beginning and at the end of different kinds of learning experiences. In fact, the two tasks selected for each of the soft skills need to be homologous but not completely identical, to ward off a sort of "training activity" effect, instead of an actual recognition of the soft skills acquisition (Le Boterf, 2010).

As an example, we briefly illustrate the entrance task for the Communication in small group skill. It consists in a discussion in small group to reach a common solution to an assignment, during twenty minutes. After informing the group about the activity to carry on, the development of the discussion within the group was recorded through a video camera. Simultaneously, two members of the research team took notes through a check list of the conversation and the exchanges within the participants (Bresciani, 2012).

The results of the proposed tasks were analyzed by each expert involved in the soft skills survey, using the indicators identified for this soft skill. Subsequently, the whole group of experts shared the results and discussed all doubtful cases, to arrive to a consensual assessment.

A document was sent by email to each student with the acquired soft skills degree declaration, using the three identified level (basic, intermediate and advanced). The document illustrates student's development, highlighting the skills owned in the entrance and in the exit task, with particular attention to the improvements. In addition, a file contained general explanations on the topic of soft skills and a focus on *Unimc for Soft Skills Project* was included.

6. Conclusions

The shift from an industrial economy to an information society means that many jobs now place in emphasis on flexibility. Soft Skills are important in educational curricula because they make the difference in the individual résumé. Soft Skills are not valued enough in the formal curriculum while they have a great value in the labour market (Field, 2005; Castoldi, 2009). Applying the Pilot Project, we reached some important results to be outlined. First of all we reached the goal to identify and operationalize a series of soft skills, declining indicators to recognize different levels of expertise. We also selected a collection of tested tasks useful to assess the different soft skills levels.

Providing for the first time the issuance of a certificate with the soft skills acquisition declaration, the Pilot Project reinforced the UNIMC commitment to promote the development of non-formal and informal learning. Next year the University of Macerata intends to intensify its role in lifelong learning. Specifically, *The Good Work Module* will be activated, in which conveying all the initiatives proposed or hosted by the University to develop soft skills. Students who will participate in one or more of the activities set out by *The Good Work Module*, can be seen certified the soft skills acquired. The certificate obtained can be used in the presentation of CV. The aim is to structure a stable system of recognition, validation and certification of soft skills acquired in each informal and non-formal experiences offered by University, launching an accredited University agency.

Furthermore, an Erasmus Plus Project called *SSIC - Soft Skills Identification and Certification* - was proposed by UNIMC to create guidelines for soft skills throughout the collaboration among European Universities, Research Institutions and Schools. The project aims to put together European researchers and experts, collaborating in an exchange of conceptual framework and good practices in their countries about the topic of recognition and validation of soft skills.

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