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Conclusion: higher education, participation and change

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Education, and in particular Higher Education, are recognised today as the principle vehicles for social and economic development (Altbach, 2014; Benneworth & Cunha, 2015; Salas, Velasco, 2014), and an instrument for the promotion for a sustainable future (Axelsson, Sonesson, & Velasco, 2014). On the other hand – as is affirmed several times in the various chapters of this publication – the impact of globalisation and the sudden societal and institutional changes that characterised the end of the twentieth century have made it undeniably clear that a thorough review is needed of the aims, methods and structures of our didactic and educational systems.

Focusing on higher education, it is recognised by many authors that:

an academic revolution has taken place in higher education in the past half century marked by transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity. Comprehending this ongoing and dynamic process while being in the midst of it is not an easy task. Arguably, the developments of the recent past are at least as dramatic as those in the 19th century when the research university evolved, first in Germany and then elsewhere, and fundamentally redesigned the nature of the university worldwide. The academic changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are more extensive due to their global nature and the number of institutions and people they affect (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009, p. iii).

The modernisation of post-secondary education is therefore greatly needed, both in Europe (Higher Level Group, 2013) and internationally (Khalifa & Sandholz, 2012). Against this setting of complex and extensive debate, the need for didactic reform (in teaching methods, learning environments and evaluation) is clear. A glance at the literature on this topic will reveal that real, effective transformation will only be possible when we have the courage and strength to *overcome barriers and to cross boundaries*. These same barriers and boundaries have long characterised academic education and they were once used as one of the most effective sources of production and transmission of knowledge, but today they have become real obstacles in creating an educational system appropriate for the twenty-first century. It is, therefore, a matter of undertaking this *crossing*, which Monica Fedeli addresses briefly in her chapter “Coinvolgere gli studenti nelle pratiche didattiche: potere, dialogo e partecipazione”, and the other authors examine specific elements of this crossing in greater depth, proposing their interpretations. These “crossings” can be defined as the following:

- first of all, these crossings between *theoretical knowledge* and *practical knowledge*, with the resulting clear refusal of epistemological hierarchies and the creation of a synergetic relationship between them;
- *those aimed at overcoming the distance between teachers and students*, redefining the respective positions and roles within educational contexts and reimagining educational relations and the relationship between teaching and learning.

Finally, those that *open universities* and formal educational institutions to *the outside world*, with the consequential regard for integrative and untraditional education plans.

It is within this new framework that Higher Education must achieve its three main missions: teaching, research and continuous education. This publication has dedicated multiple and different interpretations to the subject of these three missions, but with a shared authors’ “active vision” of post-secondary teaching and learning (Bochicchio & Di Viggiano, 2012; Freire, 1973; Little & Williams 2010; Lizzio & Wilson,

2009). It is, however, true that the chapters of this publication focus more on the discussion of teaching and education, than the function of university research.

As the co-editor of this book I intend to respond to this imbalance in this conclusion, which I will dedicate to some reflections on research. Nevertheless, I will take a specific viewpoint on research, that of an excellent instrument for educating and *empowering* students, examining the transformative potential of active approaches (Butcher & Maunder, 2014; Hickey & Mohan, 2004) through a brief presentation of some models and experiences regarding the position of students as researchers “in” and “of” educational environments, with the aim of becoming true “agents of change” (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Fielding, 2001) in their own learning environments.

1. — Involving for learning: *Students as Researchers*

The value of research as an effective way of educating students has been documented since the nineties, although relevant literature on the matter is scarce, particularly literature relating to universities. The authors who have written about it, endorse *Students as Researchers* (SAR) approach as valuable epistemological form, referring in particular to its potential for involving students in study, students’ greater satisfaction regarding teaching activities and their perceptions of their progress in the relevant disciplines (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Butcher, & Maunder, 2013; Willison & Kerry, 2007).

Great attention was given to this matter by Kincheloe and Steimberg (1998) almost two decades ago. Widely-published authors underline the fact that if education is aimed at supporting every individual to contribute to the world that surrounds them, this should allow students to have a sense of being participators in that world. It should therefore prepare them to assume the mantle of researchers within the context of learning and teaching in such a way that they know how to read their world, in order not only to understand it but to change it. The authors affirm in their publications that the easiest way to teach is certainly to provide students with answers to questions that “experts” have asked, which are normally far

from the context in which the learning is taking place. However, education cannot be reduced to the process of information passing from teacher to student. Instead the students themselves must gradually question the generally accepted bodies of knowledge and produce “alternate bodies of knowledge” (p. 4). The purpose of this kind of education is to produce students who are able to critique mainstream knowledge and institutions, understand the effects of power relations and privilege among themselves and others and work towards a more just society.

Referring both to Deweyan epistemology and Freirean pedagogy, the authors maintain that the path through education should lead students to acquire the capacity to produce knowledge, an awareness of the relationships between power, hierarchies and privilege that characterise cognitive production and social reality, and make them proponents of fairer institutions.

One particular approach to *Students as Researchers* has been proposed, and widely investigated since the early 2000s, within the setting of the *Student Voice* movement (Cook-Sather, 2002; Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013). This mostly has been investigated within schools¹, but more recently experiences have been made within the university context (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2014).

Since its birth in the nineties, the perspective of *Student Voice* has held the opinion that in order to study and better understand schools and educational processes it is necessary to pay greater attention to students’ point of view, legitimising their full participation in debates and initiatives relating to education (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Throughout the development of this perspective, a debate has also arisen surrounding research methodology, with the intention of creating spaces for real and effective integration of students’ views within research: students, involved in educational studies, no longer as research “objects”, but rather as subjects, co-researchers, collaborators in the formulation of the questions that are to be examined, partners in collecting

1 See for example the special issue of *Educational Action Research* September 2007, 15(3).

and interpreting results and sometimes also lead researchers, “in” and “of” educational environments; to make themselves agents of change within these contexts (Grion, 2014).

The initiatives aimed at involving students as researchers “in” and “of” their own learning environments have been interpreted as forms of *intrinsic learning* (Bahou, 2011), in addition to be ways of improving the teaching/learning process and the education structure investigated. In fact, while the initial focus of SAR projects was on interdisciplinary research, in many cases universities have since begun to support students in didactic research. It is therefore generally a case of having projects in which students are required to investigate phenomena relative to educational processes and contexts, with the goal of locating problems and/or pursuing changes. The management of research can be taken on by teachers in collaboration with students, or even by students themselves more or less autonomously².

From the perspective of *Student Voice*, the SAR approach is particularly valued for its potential for offering to students a central position within teaching/learning and the possibility to experiment agency and autonomy within educational institutions. As Bragg and Fielding (2005) state, proposing one of the first models of SAR, these contexts promote “‘partnerships’ in which students work alongside teachers to mobilize their knowledge [...]. It seeks to develop amongst students and teachers a sense of shared responsibility for the quality and conditions of teaching and learning” (p. 111).

Although the literature only represents a small number of SAR projects carried out in universities, I maintain that these projects could (and, by their nature, should) offer largely ideal environments for using research as a teaching tool and a form of empowerment and professional development for students. It is, indeed, ...in this way that for some years the progressive increase in SAR and *Students as Change Agent* projects have been documented (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey & Jenkins, 2009).

2 An interesting SAR model and a series of cases studied within Higher Education are offered by Healey and Jenkins 2009, whose publication is recommended for further reading.

As Cook-Sather (2014) reveals, such projects lead to a “fundamental conceptual shift from the notion of students as a passive audience for the research output of individual academics, to the idea of students as active stakeholders in a research community” (p. 139).

2. — Creating the ability to change: Students as Change Agents

One of the messages – which all authors seem to share – relates to “change”.

In today’s world it is difficult to predict how the future will look and change is often upon us more quickly than we are able to catch up with it (Whitaker, 1997). Faced with such a landscape, our ability to adapt to change seems a priority; a priority to which has been given significant attention, offering a series of ideas founded on a solid communication and exchange between theoretical descriptions and experiences of didactic practice. Based on long discussion between the many and diverse voices of the authors of this book and their students they explored the relative of possibilities of change which are perceivable, achievable and desirable in post-secondary Italian higher education.

I maintain, however, that against the backdrop of today’s social-historical and cultural setting, an additional reflection on the role of “change” is also being made in relation to the didactic objectives of academic education. It seems to me that the ability to follow and face change must also become a priority for students, and therefore a didactic objective fundamental to educational institutions, in particular at post-secondary level. Thus I would like to make a last, brief mention to some experiences which are facing this great challenge on an international level. Among those most developed (Healey, 2013; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014) were those conducted by the University of Exeter (UK) and by the University of Western Australia which, since 2008, have been offering students similar projects named *Students as Change Agents*.

As clarified by Dunne & Zandstra (2011), promoters of the Exeter experiment, the two institutions set out from the idea that:

Despite the genuine attention to students feedback and the effort of the university to engage with students, there is a “missing element” – and that is the direct involvement of students in actually bringing about change. There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that ‘listens’ to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes (Dunne, 2011, p. 4).

In this, they have planned spaces in which students can assume a more “incisive” role within the university as true agents of change, called upon to conduct didactic and organisational research, to highlight the problems and identify solutions relating to educational activities.

At the University of Western Australia, various groups of students were given the task of researching problems that they identified within the subjects that various faculties were proposing. On the basis of this initiative, the university established that the undergraduate students involved should be insured authentic research experiences within a program supported by academic staff. Furthermore, students were encouraged to develop research competences easily transferable to their own disciplines. At the end of this project the students presented the results of their studies in research papers and at conferences dedicated to this purpose, in such a way that they took on the role of promoters and leaders of change. Examples of some of the projects are presented in Figure 1.

Project Title	Research Methods	Research Participants
Student and Staff Perceptions of Email Expectations and Criteria: What Are They?	Student and staff online email survey	Across faculties Students: 649 Staff: 48
Breaking Down the Classroom Walls: Looking at the Relationship Between Educators and Students Within the Context of Indigenous Pedagogy.	Observations of students and staff in a unit over four months, Focus group interviews	Students—Indigenous and Non-Indigenous: 12 Indigenous educators: 3
Forging Ties During Transition: First-Year Students and Social Support.	Online email survey	Across faculties Students: 258

Figure 1
Examples of projects conducted by students with the supervision of staff at the University of Western Australia.
 Source: Sandover Partridge, Dunne & Burkill, 2012

Similar procedures were adopted at the University of Exeter, whose staff went as far as developing, after some years of experimentation, a model that outlines the manner in which the students' challenges can be integrated into the process of institutional change (See Fig 2.). The model has enabled the faculty in Exeter, to be deeply focused on their formal engagement with students, the different forms that this can take, and where responsibilities lie. As Dunne and Zandstra (2011) state, this is a framework for four different, but equally valid, approaches in which students can engage and be engaged with their learning. It helps to show how there are differences in the ways that students are encouraged to engage with the University in improving their experiences, and the extent to which they can be proactive in bringing about change. Having a voice is important for students, «but may remain a passive experience in comparison to being given the opportunities to drive and lead change initiatives. Hence our emphasis is, in particular, on the more active forms of participation of the lower segments of the model, without devaluing the importance of the other areas» (2011, p. 18).

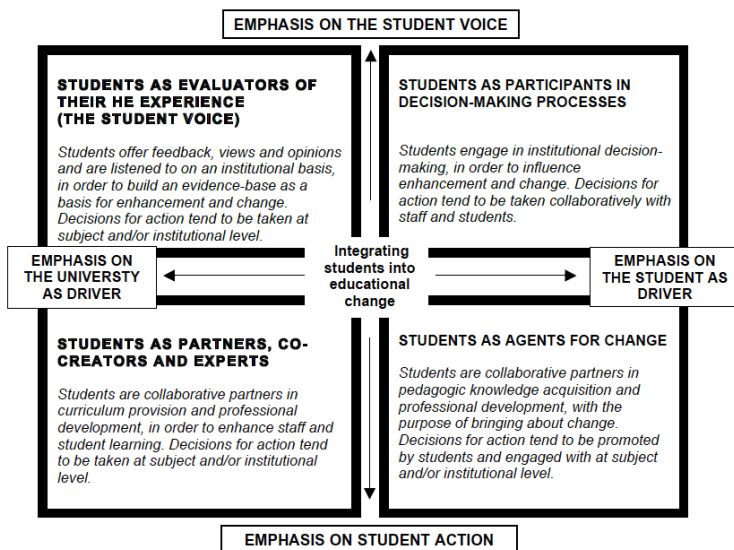


Figure 2
The model developed by the University of Exeter for the *Students as Change Agents* approach. Source: Dunne & Zandstra, 2011

These two studies, evaluated by Sandover Partridge, Dunne & Burkill (2012), present much evidence that shows the success of similar initiatives in strengthening the involvement of students in research and in the implementation of new post-secondary educational processes. Analysing the results obtained by the comparison of the two studies, the authors themselves (2012, p. 38) reveal that these initiatives have the potential to:

- involving students in research on learning and teaching, listening to the student voice in new ways,
- putting students at the center of their educational experiences,
- actively engaging them in what matters to them,
- empowering them in their learning and career choices, and
- offering an opportunity for important institutional learning and possibilities for promoting change.

I maintain that it is to this type of challenge that Italian universities, which truly need to reform effectively, should now be looking.

3. – Conclusion

The book which we present here is inspired by contexts similar to those discussed above. Our intention was to consider some of the best experiences conducted internationally, offering the reader some areas for reflection – expressed in the various sections that make up this publication – from which they can draw ideas for possible innovation in teaching in Italian universities.

As this was our intention, we called to our aid some of the most internationally distinguished voices on the matter. We want to conclude by thanking our foreign colleagues, Joellen Coryell, Patricia Cranton, John Dirkx, Alison Cook Sather, and Edward Taylor, who agreed to join us in taking on the challenge of constructing an image of the larger picture, to portray an “Italian way” for didactic innovation in universities. We’d also like to thank all our Italian colleagues who offered their theoretical contribution and shared their experiences of teaching and of didactic improvement so that we could achieve our aim.

Finally, we hope that this publication can act as a significant incentive towards being more open to international developments, so that we can rethink carefully and effectively the teaching-learning environment in Italian universities.

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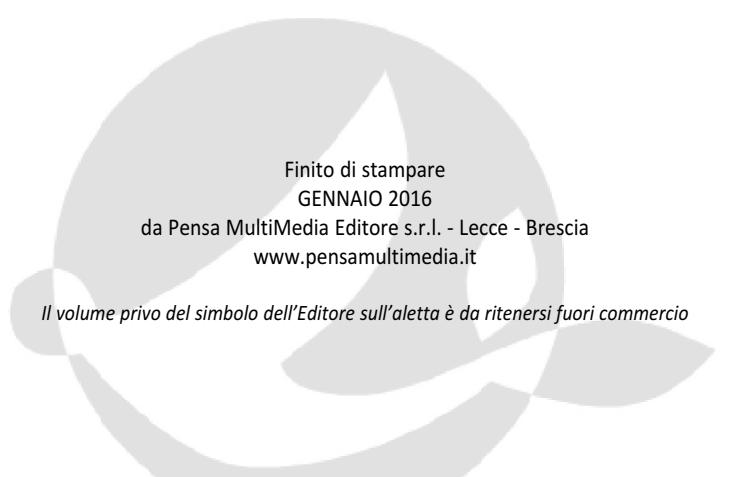
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