

## COMPETENCIES BALANCE WITH ADULT STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY

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### *Abstract*

*The article reports the experience of the laboratory of competencies balance at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Foggia.*

*It will be analyzed the peculiarities of the service in a university contest, with users that have specific and different justifications. Particularly, the laboratory aims to the acquisition of a greater consciousness by the user of possessed knowledge/skills and those to acquire.*

*Next to the description of the service, it will be presented the work of the scientific research, in academic field, on the theoretical models about the practice of the Competencies Balance*

### **1. The subject of this article**

This contribution was presented in one of the parallel sessions of the International Conference IAIEVG, "Guidance and Diversity Research and Applications", that took place in Padua from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2007, specifically in the session entitled "The competencies balance between constraints and opportunities".

During the meeting I presented a research-intervention experience relative to the activation of a laboratory of competencies balance for university students, in particular adults, at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Foggia (Italy).

As an introduction I would like to give some information about the University of Foggia, a university of recent institution – it has been independent

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since 2000- that constitutes, together with the University of Bari and the University of Lecce, the university net of Apulia, a southern region of Italy. At the moment, the University of Foggia is made of 5 faculties - Agriculture, Economics, Law, Letters and Philosophy, Medicine - that are divided in various degrees, of first and second level, with the addition of masters and specialization courses, doctor's degrees and specialization schools.

Just because of its recent institution, the University of Foggia decided to invest on services for teaching, promoting those connected to orientation, both on the level of research/experimentation (thanks to various projects financed at a regional and national level) and on the level of teaching practice, with the activation of some services as the laboratory of competencies balance. The experience of this laboratory can be defined as "good practice" of the University of Foggia both on the level of research and on the level of teaching experimentation:

- on the level of teaching experimentation, this experience led to a service available for those final-year students, or students with a degree (in particular adult employees who have started to study again, with the idea of lifelong learning), motivated to activate a reflection about the competencies (personal, formative and professional) they already possess, to evaluate their possible use in the formative or in the professional system and, at the same time, to have these competencies as an opportunity to promote new competencies;
- on the level of university research, the activation of this laboratory of competencies has determined a strong and constant reflection on some key-concepts of contemporary teaching knowledge, to plan new pathways of theoretical and applied research in these scientific fields. Among these, as an example, we remember the beginning of a new research project on the theme of strategic and cross competencies.

If the students consider this laboratory of competencies balance as a moment that aims at promoting in adult students abilities of self-evaluation and control of their own professional and formative pathway, they can consider it as a good opportunity to be aware of their own competencies, aiming at building or re-defining their own professional, formative and personal identity.

At the same time, the laboratory of competencies balance enables us to run new research ways, in order to single out and better specify the nature and practice of these services when referred to university students. As this is a university, I'd like to point out that the added value of these studies is offered to the students a better university teaching quality – through the widening of orientation and formation activities. It is offered to various students who represent a good opportunity of a theoretical investigation on the themes of orientation and formation as adults, with the aim of creating an exchange about these themes between teaching and research.

In addition, the experience here presented is connected to some national research, made in cooperation with other teams of university research, about the

subjects of adult education. Among these, I would like to mention the Prin research (Projects of relevant national interest) in the academic years of 2004-2005 and of 2005-2006 with the title “Reception, first orientation and types of the teaching offer for adult students joining new rule courses” made in cooperation by the Universities of Foggia, Lecce, Firenze and Roma 3 (this one with the function of national coordination).

The research aimed at monitoring the condition of adult students at university (a new and very interesting phenomenon of the last years, made more evident after the reform of the university cycles that started with d.m.509/1999 and continued with d.m.270/2004) in order to re-think and re-plan university teaching starting from a new idea of the whole orientation and formation system in the adult age.

As we said, the Laboratory of Competencies Balance is a service that started with the aim of offering specific activities of personal orientation for students at the last year or already graduated, with special reference to adult students. The service was addressed at first to students of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, then to the students of all the faculties of the University of Foggia, with the idea that is now made real thanks to agreements with the municipality and the Province of Foggia- to make it available to all those who ask for it.

The laboratory has been active since the academic year 2004-2005, with the aim of applying and using a method, the competencies balance, to a specific context as that of a university centre. We should remember about this point that the competencies balance is a method that, referring to a theoretical and generally conceptual idea, is made concrete in a variety of practices that are different according to the context, the objectives and the people the intervention is addressed to. The laboratory of balance needed a long “preparatory activity”- never really concluded because it is continuously revised- both from the theoretical point of view (studying and investigating models and good practice), and from the teaching point of view (research, revising and making the material personal), and from an organizing point of view (choice of spaces, facilities, getting documentary material and books, etc.). Since July 2007 we have entered our name in the European Federation of Competencies Balance and Professional Orientation (FECBOP) with the aim of going on with all further steps, which is the accrediting of our structure as an official seat of competencies balance.

## **2. Service Organization**

Together with the Office Placement and with the Orientation and Tutoring Area, the University of Foggia decided to invest on this service, giving us a special seat, in big rooms and with good equipment, containing an “area” dedicated to the carrying out of balance (with the adequate privacy), an “area” with an internet point to carry out research on the net, an “area” for documents (with subscriptions to newspapers as “Il Sole 24Ore” and material about job offers and applications and

about formation courses). In the first months of balance activation, the University also financed the initial formation of the team members of the laboratory, giving some of them the opportunity (in particular, two researchers who made the first balances) to follow formation stages in some centers where there is a good experience for competencies balance, as for example the Centre for Job in Imperia, to follow directly the psychologist of the Centre while making some balances, as well as to have the opportunity of the presence of some experts at the University of Foggia.

In addition to this, the laboratory is a seat for training of the students who follow the courses of “Science of Continuous Formation” and of the students of a master in Planner of formation in the European area. As you can see, these are linked and coherent activities, with the aim of qualifying the courses of higher education through the re-planning of the formative offer, more adequate to the characteristics of the students and to the peculiarity of the formation needs for which they ask the institution. From this point of view there is another service offered by the university course, called “club of degree thesis students”, with the objective of promoting a dialogue between students and teachers to face better the final thesis, to analyze the difficulties in carrying out this job and to verify the necessity for the students to link the themes of their thesis with the training experience. From this viewpoint, it was easy to detect the formative importance of the thesis as a very precious opportunity to “experiment” in job organization, which together with a specific competence relative to the “technical” aspects, also requires high planning competencies and ability of critical thought. The meetings concentrated on experience and methods connected to the preparation of the thesis. The approach was mainly interdisciplinary and laboratorial, in the sense that teachers of various subjects were involved and gave great importance to the moment of dialogue and sharing of experiences among final year students and between them and their tutors.

### **3. The “Philosophy” of the Laboratory of Competencies Balance**

The central idea that determined the activation of this service was to give the students (particularly adult students) a method to find out competencies, professional and personal abilities, needs, personal wishes, using this information to trace and “set” the possible personal, formative and professional mobility, starting from the recognition of the acquired competencies through life experiences. The initial motivation of the laboratory came basically from the fact that we noticed that adult students often enrolled the courses but they didn’t really understand the reciprocal productive link between their own professional experiences and the course they were starting. The balance experience was felt in most cases (as it is documented in the already mentioned research Prin), as an area where they could learn and “almost discover” the ability to “take care of themselves”, starting from the awareness of those “interior” forces that everyone of us possesses but of which we are often unaware.

For this reason, the experience of the competencies balance emphasized the narrative dimension of the service, using some instruments considered as “reflexive practices” aimed at promoting in the addressees of the service a meditation on their own specific condition (workers, students, people looking for a job, unemployed, etc.) and consequently to become aware of their own needs.

The “micropedagogic approach” (Demetrio D., 1992) made through the autobiographical practice, brings to the surface “latent concepts” (Massa M., 1992), i.e. often forgotten knowledge, changes, people are not aware of, and gives the opportunity to make sense and to spot a direction and determine the transformative effects with reference to your being and acting in the world. In this way the approach acquires a clear, explicit and defined formative valence.

For us the balance method is a formative act, as it is aimed not only at analysing – aseptically- the knowledge and possessed professional abilities but also at rendering a person able to use his own resources strategically to make a life change, developing adaptation forms to the continuously changing context, giving value to the past dimension and to the future.

The first balances pointed out the strong inner motivation that takes adult students to start again their formative pathway.

In other words, the students that decided to make their competencies balance have all said they entered university to enhance their competencies not only to get a career progression, but as an answer to their personal wish to enhance their professional profile and so to get their self-realization.

For some of them, the balance was (according to what they said) the possibility to be again at stake professionally, “to focalize, for each past job and formative experience, on the *strong* strategic and cross competencies to be used, at the end of one’s formative pathway, in the job world”. What is very interesting is the specific quality that often emerged in the already mentioned Prin research, both with reference to the greater difficulties that women continue to experience to carry out their family, job and university studies, but also in the more rewarding experiences, determined by a return to study, that lead women besides to be more critical even in the evaluation of the service quality to teaching given by university.

Through the way of balance students could trace their formative and professional biography and also develop basic competencies to an orientation and formative self-orientation process. We refer here to the abilities of problem solving, decision making, sense of self-efficacy, self-awareness and awareness of the others. All these metacognitive and metaemotional competencies can be useful resources to create new and more consolidated knowledge, thus helping an individual to recognize and later to apply adequate behavior, strategies, habits that are useful for a more efficacious knowledge process and to develop control and strengthening

abilities of the cognitive performances and a general ability to interact with the world.

We could note how students started to activate empowerment processes, project and participation processes, above all through a new and better autonomy and responsibility towards their own actions.

Narration as a knowledge and hermeneutical way made the balance course an experience that strengthened and in a sense redefined the identity of adult students, driving them through a subjective analysis of their own competencies (of course, some experiences were more successful, others were not).

Generally, the narrative approach that characterized the balance enabled the students to become aware of their role and of their strong and weak points.

As Franco Cambi said, narration can be defined as “the golden access way to the world”, to learn how to read and know it, in spite of the “confusion” of experiences, situations, knowledge and values that determine reality. It is a way to learn how to control it, critically and consciously (Cambi F., 2002). In this sense, the possibility to tell about themselves was for the students an opportunity to be together in and out of themselves, to create a distance that enabled them to activate processes of self-observation, analyzing themselves also in evolution of the faced changes, in the importance of the decisions made, asking themselves about what was before and after the choices and the transformations they wanted or suffered.

We could represent the balance pathway as one of the suitable instruments to give an individual the opportunity to enter his own emotional and cognitive world and at the same time to give it a form, thus producing meaning and above all “wishes” for success and personal growth. In this sense, the competencies balance is a real instrument of empowerment, i.e. of promotion of individual emancipation; “empowering” people means making them aware of the resources at their disposal and among these, to recognize those that are accessible and functional to the fulfillment of their need. This awareness, in a laboratory of balance, is encouraged during the talks that the student has with the balance experts- who also possess their own personal and professional experiences- who, acting as scaffolding, not only help the student in the process of “re-emerging” of experiences that can be considered “policontextual”, but also help him to hold a job interview, to know how to look for the information that can be useful to find one’s way in the job world.

Generally, through the ability of telling themselves and the other all that “constitutes” a balance, students could re-think of their personal formation and job experience also to give a new context to learning, to make an activity of re-building of their formative pathway.

From the experiences made in Foggia up to now there are three conditions that are essential to a competencies balance:

- the basic idea of a competencies balance is that it is an intentional pathway. The free assent of the student and the motivation process connected to it constitute a guarantee of conscious and active participation of the subject as well as of the respect of the “formative contract” signed with the competencies balance expert: this one states the aims, way, methods to be used, the mutual tasks (duration and time stages) and responsibilities (what I can offer, the way you commit yourself). The reception phase is particularly important, when it gives the opportunity to verify how consistent the services and the subject’s needs are: in this phase, the balance expert informs in a clear and complete way the subject about the meaning and methods of the competencies balance device, leaving also a wide place to intervene with questions and possible explanations, getting with certainty the voluntary assent of the balance subject.
- The awareness that a competencies balance is not an assessment instrument: this means that it doesn’t help finding a job. A competencies balance experiment came to an end for this reason: the subject had wrong expectations. It aims at strengthening in the subject the ability to look for a job or to enhance his job condition, to arrange action strategies that are efficacious and coherent, to think about making one’s projects for the future true. For us, its aim is basically formative one. This formative dimension is strongly connected with the project dimension: through the competencies balance the students developed project abilities as having aims, choosing, having preferences, being able to use and transfer their own abilities.
- The awareness that a competencies balance is not a psychotherapeutic instrument: a competencies balance expert must never work on the deep personality of the beneficiary or let him think that through this method psychological difficulties can be faced.

#### **4. The Balance Instruments**

While presenting the instruments used here, I’d like to say that the work team made and is making an activity of revision/integration/ contextualization of the balance instruments that were used.

In particular they are the formative contract, the balance dossier and the synthetic document. For these three instruments there are no absolute and invariable reference models: in the case of Foggia, the instruments were not specially created for Foggia, but they are the result of the scientific comparison with three important national experiences: the Experiment 2000-2005 ISFOL with the title *competencies balance*, the experience of the Job Centre of Imperia and the experience of the laboratory of competencies balance of the University Roma Tre. The documents that were carefully read were a valid reference, filtered and interpreted through the autobiographical method as the epistemological reference model to run the orientation practice.

In the first part of the dossier there are three subsequent autobiographical forms, each one page long with the title “My life and the people I love”, “How my idea of formation has changed”, “How my idea of working has changed”. The three forms are about very general questions, emphasize the importance of change, and enable the subject to investigate easily on the important moments of his life, to get a complete image of his own personality. As there were no direct questions, it was possible to avoid a disrespectful interference in personal affairs the subject may not want to talk about. The autobiographical forms were thought as the most efficacious instrument to know ourselves, being always aware that it is necessary, as Bruner points out in his studies, to create harmony between narrative thought and logical thought.

We should point out that, at the beginning, the analysis about the self was carried out through open answers. The problems that came later- as the collection of a lot of information that were difficult to be blended together and that were difficult to be understood in one meeting- made the work team substitute the questions with the biographical forms, that gave the opportunity to create a synthesis and focalize the aim, to blend the first part of the interview about knowing oneself with the analysis of competencies. The free talk creates greater openness and creates an atmosphere of greater familiarity between the expert and the subject.

The logical-analytical dimension is more developed in the second section of the analysis of competencies, where the questionnaire is organized around structured questions with an open answer. The collected results are translated in percentage relations that give the subject an objective image of the possessed competencies, of the competencies to be developed and of the competencies that must be completely acquired.

The last section of the dossier is about the creation of a hypothetical work project, based on the analysis of the biographical information and on their correspondence to previously identified professional profiles. The pre-planned form, given in the dossier, organizes the project dimension of the subject with the definition of aims, moments and resources at their disposal to develop all the necessary competencies to start an action plan aimed at finding a job. This is without doubt the most complex section to be set, both for the subject and for the expert, because in this phase there should be an answer to the specific questions of every competencies balance. The professional project represents the final issue of the orientation pathway.

Together with the balance, there are in the laboratory- very appreciated by the students- “ateliers” (workshops) on job interviews and on the creation of a CV. These two activities “complete” the balance pathway through the acquisition of specific techniques aimed at enhancing the knowledge processes and the entrance in the job world.

## **5. The Working Team of the Laboratory**

The working team is made by the coordinator (professor of Adults Education), some teaching and didactics researchers, a researcher for psychology, an expert researcher on the job world, and two researchers. There are also two graduated students who, after a training experience in the laboratory, possess a specific knowledge about the competencies balance. The most positive aspect is connected to the productivity of the team activity, that must be constant and systematic, to the possibility to be “face to face” to confront on the projective hypothesis and on the realization of the service, on the materials to be read, on the instruments to be used, on the contacts to have to get new information.

Having an approach based on telling- also in the work team- further qualified the activity of action-research: “telling” the respective experiences of balance make by the subjects, the communication of the acquired information and the sharing of the used instruments, of the final results, of the problems that came to the surface and the faced difficulties represented the most suitable strategy to give and find a meaning to the experiences and to enhance at the same time the personal ability to tell one’s own stories and to learn how to listen to the stories and experiences of the others. In this way the “professional journey” represented by the realization of this experience, that is giving us the opportunity to redefine the theoretical and practical bases of orientation and formation in adult age, is also for the work team an “existential journey” that is changing the very way of thinking and coming into contact with the group and outside it.

## **6. Prospects of Development**

Together with a continuous diffusion in the University of Foggia, this initiative is creating interest in the territorial boards. Some agreements were signed with the municipality of Foggia, in order to offer the opportunity of this balance service also to the subjects that ask for information to the “Informagiovani” counter of the Town Hall; with the Province (Job and Professional Formation Councillorship) there are some cooperation activities, also in connection with the formation activity of the operators of the Job Centres of the Province. Besides a research project was presented to the Job Ministry; it was aimed at the formation of a professional figure called “specialized educator/orientation expert for competencies balance”, in order to further define the professional profile of the balance operators, who are more and more present in the territorial structures whose activity is job orientation.

As we have already written, our motivations are connected to the awareness of the efficacious link between teaching and research. In this direction, the aim is to deepen the scientific reasons of the competencies balance practice starting firstly from investigation about the issues that are around the theme of competencies, as the rich (national and international) literature in the last years shows. It is the theme that “goes across” all the formative systems- connected to the school system and outside

it- and also creates a dialogue between formation and the economical-productive, social and political fields. This is aimed at making the relationship between formative and productive system easier, in a link of reciprocal knowledge and productive dialogue.

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