



Employability & Competences

Innovative Curricula
for New Professions

edited by

Vanna Boffo

Monica Fedeli



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– 8 –

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VANNA BOFFO
MONICA FEDELI

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THE ROLE MODEL WITHIN PROFESSIONAL TRAINING. THE COMPLEXITY AND FLEXIBILITY OF EDUCATION PROFESSIONS

*Giordana Szpunar (Sapienza University of Rome), Barbara Barbieri
(University of Cagliari)**

1. The training of professionals in the third millennium

Nowadays, it is commonly agreed that the remarkable changes in social and labour organizations over the last decades have resulted in an increasing demand for professionals with high cognitive flexibility, able to constantly re-align their skills and upgrade their competences (Bauman 1999; Beck 2000a, 2000b; Forti, Varchetta 2001; Rullani, Vicari, 1999; Weick 1995).

In this context, training – especially the training of professionals – has started to question its own meaning and nature, dramatically rethinking them. In fact, the training of professionals can no longer give practical competence a professional dimension, relying on systematic and scientific knowledge to provide an instrumental solution to the problems: professionals must be able to reflect and act within ever-changing and unpredictable contexts, using their knowledge and skills in a flexible and effective way.

From a mere pedagogical and cultural point of view, it is necessary to analyse the most suitable training–didactic models for the development of reference prospects and schemes, as well as appropriate methods and tools for the training of ‘reflective professionals’ capable of developing the ‘artistic skill’ increasingly required to manage the ‘ever-changing’ work contexts.

Despite the knowledge of the scenario where the future organizational players are going to be acting, the academic world still struggles to regard the academic path as the ideal place for the accomplishment of tailor-made professional projects, thereby slowing down the entry of young graduates into employment (Zucchermaglio 2007).

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This scenario has led the reflection on training to believe that apprenticeships organized during studies might offer an opportunity to experience the future profession chosen by the students. Basically, an apprenticeship can be considered a shift from learning to doing/acting, the moment when the knowledge accumulated turns into the specific skills of that activity. However, this kind of apprenticeship is not an actual step towards employment – indeed, this is not its aim: it should instead trigger a transformational learning process where students begin to perceive themselves as future professionals, turning the knowledge gained into crucial skills for their profession. Therefore, learning still plays a key role at this stage, even though it is intended for the construction of a professional role, instead of acquisition of the theories underlying a certain profession. Apprenticeship allows students to become familiar with a professional role, under the guidance of a tutor (situational factor/social support), whether formal or informal (business/in the work context/application). In fact, during this learning process, students should ideally become acquainted with the work practices of their profession under careful supervision. Thus, practitioners should benefit from specific training (Lave, Wenger 1991; Alastra, Kaneklin, Scaratti 2012) being personally involved in the activities of a practice community (Wenger 1999) and have direct experience of the constant evolution and unpredictability of the world of work within a simplified and controlled professional context, through preliminary planning and scrupulous supervision (Schön 1987). This would help them apply the knowledge acquired to practical professional situations with an evolving (Mezirow 1991) and reflective (Schön 1987) perspective.

Consequently, the achievement of professionalism is very complex. It requires the identification of effective teaching strategies no longer based exclusively on traditional content transmission models. As already stressed, most professional behaviours are learned through practical experience (Kenny, Mann, MacLeod 2003.) Professionals build their professional background on the job, taking inspiration from and interacting with more experienced colleagues and tackling their work experience day by day: in point of fact, successes and failures teach us ‘the way’ (Bourdieu 1980; Vino 2001). The role-modelling process begins precisely during the academic educational path as well as within didactic experiences and apprenticeships through observation of the practices typical of that specific educational/work environment and the behaviour of experienced professionals. However, reflection on academic education lacks the study of role modelling in the sense of a process which dramatically influences the construction of a professional identity through observation and reflective imitation, while offering some interesting opportunities (i.e. apprenticeships, and tutoring and mentoring services).

2. *The professional identity of educators and the importance of role models*

Nowadays, the stratification of the meanings underlying the concept of education is found in the common assumption that education has a procedural dimension covering the whole of life and all ages, including the various growth steps and difficult moments that characterize the construction of our personal identity. The onset of new individual needs and the resulting expansion of social policies and educational services have widened educators' scope for action. Furthermore, the educational context can be regarded as a highly complex and dynamic system featuring a series of relational processes only partially predictable and operationalizable (Mortari 2009).

Therefore, education professions, in particular, mostly act within unique, ever-changing and unpredictable working contexts. The large variety of professional contexts requiring the presence of educators leads to an extensive branching of its operational features, which vary according to the recipients of the educational activity, their age, and specific needs, as well as to the preventive, promotional or rehabilitation purpose of the same action.

Education professions involve various skills connected to their multidisciplinary profile, which help shape the operational representations and models underlying the professional activity but cannot enclose all the pedagogical knowledge required by these professions. *Knowledge, the knowledge of how to do and the knowledge of how to act* – intended as the box containing the necessary technical-professional tools – must complement and integrate the *knowledge of how to stay* within contexts and relations with a hermeneutic-transformative perspective.

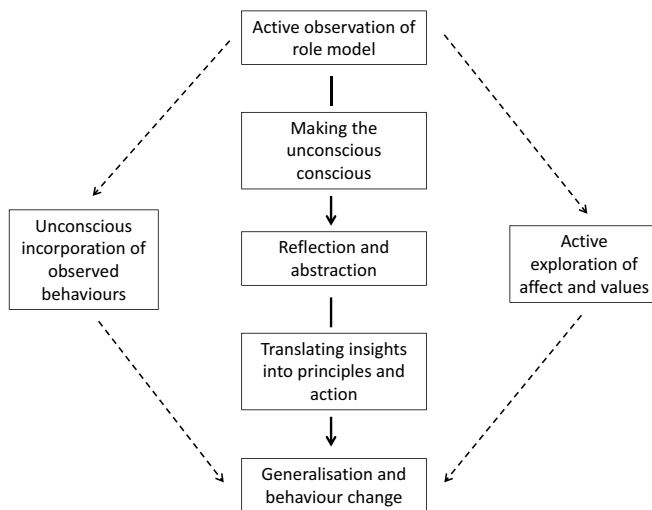
In this dimension, the Role Model acquires immense importance, since it is considered an example and a guide to give shape and meaning to the process leading to the construction of our professional identity.

From a sociocultural point of view (McInerney, Roche, McInerney, Marsh 1997; Kerka 1998), in fact, role models are applied by those professionals who – mostly unintentionally – help the student understand the many facets of their profession within specific education and work situations through observation, imitation, reflection and abstraction, thus promoting the construction of their professional identity (Cruess, Cruess, Steinert 2008).

In this scenario, role-modelling acts as an important educational and training strategy, as largely underestimated as it is (Kenny, Mann, MacLeod 2003; Cruess, Cruess, Steinert 2008). The role modelling process (Fig. 1) shows how the establishment of professional behaviours largely depends on the relation between a greater or lesser degree of voluntary imitation and a reflective elaboration of the behaviours observed. It is a social and critical process leading to the assessment

and co-construction of content, which urges students to interpret an experience and assign a meaning to it. Any reflection on the behaviours observed alters (processes, creates, rejects, confirms, questions) the meaning schemes currently used in relation to the integrated role model and, through the generalization of the conclusions, changes the meaning perspectives and the behaviours enacted (Mezirow 1991).

Figure 1 – Role-modelling process. [Cruess, Cruess, Steinert 2008]



In this learning framework, the professional reference (business or academic tutors, teachers, etc.) chosen by the students is a crucial element for at least two reasons: on the one hand, he/she represents the role model who acts as an example during the students' approach to the professional role; on the other, he/she triggers the reflection process and raises awareness of the experience, thus favouring ascent of the incorporation of the behaviours observed from the subconscious to the conscious level, in addition to the resulting transformation of intuitions into principles and actions.

The ability to become aware of the behaviours observed and to reflect upon them is fundamental for the efficacy of role modelling. In fact, the reflection *in the action*, *on the action*, and *for the action* (Schön 1987) allows future professionals to turn implicit contents into explicit ones (Cruess, Cruess, Steinert 2008), thus redefining their personal, social, and professional world (Brookfield 1986). Reflection on the past experiences and behaviours observed is also important for the transformation of observations into concepts through a generalization process (Kolb 1984).

Consequently, learning through role models relies on a complex combination of conscious and unconscious actions, involving both observation and reflection. The active reflection on the process allows learners to turn unconscious acquisitions into conscious thoughts and transform the latter into principles and actions (Crues, Crues, Steinert 2008; Benbassat 2014).

3. Exploratory research

The research introduced below was carried out in 2014 during the BSc and MSc courses in Educational and Training Sciences at The Sapienza University of Rome to investigate the characteristics of the role models chosen by the future educators, either in the academic context or during apprenticeships.

The sample consisted of 34 students and graduates from The Sapienza University of Rome – 31 women and 3 men – of whom 12 were attending the 2nd and 3rd year of the three-year Degree Course in Educational and Training Sciences, while 16 were students on the Master's Degree Course in Pedagogy and Educational and Training Sciences, who had already taken their BSc while 6 had taken both their BSc and MSc and were working in the educational field.

Internship is mandatory during these courses. Consequently, all the individuals involved in the research had done one or more apprenticeships. The most widespread sector was in services for early childhood, chosen by 12 people for their apprenticeships. The others were distributed among group homes (6), universities (5), museums and educational institutions (5), residential, semi-residential or day-care facilities for people with mental or physical disabilities (4), prisons (1) or hospitals (1).

Out of the 34 subjects involved in the research, 14 were working on an occasional or ongoing basis. In particular, 5 people were tenured or substitute teachers at early childhood education institutes, 2 were baby-sitters, 1 was a swimming instructor, 1 an elderly caretaker, 1 a part-time waitress, 1 a shop assistant and 1 a support teacher. Thus, 12 out of the 14 workers were operating in educational areas.

Students and graduates were divided into 5 focus groups made up of 6–8 participants each. The focuses were presented by two experts and lasted about 3 hours.

The focus group was used as an exploratory tool, since it helped understand the unconscious aspects of motivation and behaviours with reference to a specific issue (Krueger 1994; Morgan 1998); furthermore, the flexible, interactive, and dialogic nature of this tool allowed the individuals to express ideas and feelings which would not have emerged otherwise during an interview (Stagi 2000).

More specifically, the focus groups were intended to redefine the students' convictions about the characteristics of a good educator, as well as helping them identify any 'reference' people during their educational path or apprenticeship experience who acted as a model to construct their own professional identity, thus recognizing the characteristics necessary to become a role model.

The outcome of the focus groups was written down word for word, and examined using a conventional analysis approach.

The issues the students faced during these focuses included a definition of 'efficient' educators as well as a description of the reference subjects met during their educational path or apprenticeship.

The first question was: «What comes to your mind when I say, "efficient educator?"». This question proposes to redefine the convictions of the Education Sciences students regarding the characteristics of an efficient educator.

The second question was: «Try to recall your academic and apprenticeship experience. Now try to remember the people who had a major impact on your personal and professional growth path». The general stimulation and the specific stimulating questions (*Who is he/she? What are his/her personal features and professional skills? What was the most important lesson that you learned from this relationship?*) aimed to analyse the kinds of professional who acted as reference models helping the students construct their professional identity during their educational path or apprenticeship.

4. Representations of the professional identity of educators

Analysis of the first issue discussed within the focuses shows the complexity of the professional role of socio-cultural educators. In fact, this kind of profession has ill-defined boundaries and opposes any attempt to stabilize and systematize it, more readily acting as a prototype and example of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the current employment market.

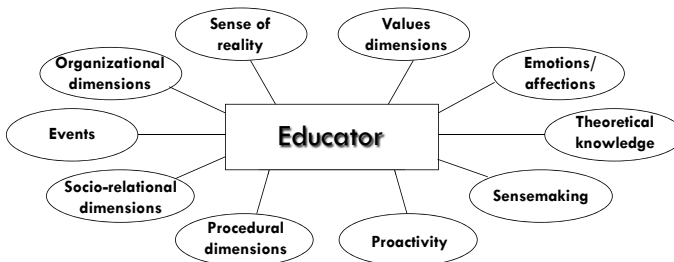
The factors that undermine the profession of educator – thus weakening its social and legal recognition, as well as its perception of the construction of identity – are several and act at various levels. The diffusion of the educational needs of modern society, the various kinds of subjects expressing these needs, the expansion of the intervention scope of education professionals, their growing tasks, the quantitative and qualitative complexification of the interpersonal relations to be managed in the work context (organization, customer, multi-professional team, users, families), the lack of a specific and well-defined scientific background lead to the definition of an ever-

changing constant professional profile (Szpunar, Renda 2015; Tramma 2008; Maccario 2009).

All these aspects have been stressed by the reflections and accounts of students and graduates. The professional contexts of their work or apprenticeship experiences are very different, since they range from early childhood services –the most widespread field – to group homes, schools, prisons, hospitals, residential, semi-residential and day-care facilities. The subjects looked after by the professionals varied greatly in terms of age and educational needs. The students and graduates were aware of this, and they believed that educators' skills and competences must take this complexity and unpredictability into account in the contexts and among the addressees of the service. The importance given to *creativity, the ability to adapt, face and manage different situations, to communicate and interact with various subjects, schedule and organize, plan and improvise* at the same time, *change action plans* and *successfully solve problems* are a clear sign of this awareness.

Generally speaking, the 'efficient' educator outlined by the analysis of the focuses is one who can rely on a theoretical training that must remain up-to-date (the educator is *experienced, informed, and conducts researches*), while knowledge is not regarded as a priority. According to the students and graduates, the construction of meaning referring to education professionals (Fig. 2) mainly includes personal aspects and transverse skills, precisely due to the remarkable variability of contexts, subjects and assigned tasks.

Figure 2 – Dimensions of an educator's figure.



Knowledge is backed up by the *knowledge of how to make and how to be*. The accounts show educators able to *train, take care, listen, support, accompany, help learn and understand, guide, stimulate, promote growth, provide tools, lead towards a target, foster autonomy, enhance the qualities and potential* of each person. This involves some personal features that turn education professions into a *mission* or *vocation* requiring a special *passion* as well as an *ability to see what others cannot notice*.

... *I intend education professions as a vocation requiring a certain attitude. Those who choose this profession must be able to help others...*

... *In my opinion, efficient educators are able to combine scientific and academic knowledge with an art, the art of teaching. Unquestionably, they cannot rely exclusively on formalized requirements, but must prove to be aware of their mission...*

Consistently, the skills and main characteristics of efficient educators are *empathy* as well as the ability to *understand others, actively listen to interlocutors, wait and see, reject prejudices, accept others' ideas while also reformulating their own assumptions, be self-critical, work with others and cooperate positively, be calm, patient, serene, sympathetic, kind, and respectful with others, authoritative (and not authoritarian), possess leadership skills, strength, resolution and impartiality.*

In view of the above, it is easy to understand the key role played by a role model for the construction of such a complex kind of profession, with special regard to the various stresses associated with it (individual, relational, professional and organizational).

5. *The choice of role models*

All the participants identified at least one reference figure met during their academic studies (professor) or apprenticeship (business tutor.) Basically, their accounts confirmed the literature dealing with students' assessment of the characteristics observed in positive models (Wright 1996; Cruess, Cruess, Steinert 2008; Fromme *et al.* 2010; Jochimsen-vander Leeuw *et al.* 2013). Moreover, the focus analysis showed that the meaning dimensions assigned by the future educators correspond to those attributed to recognizing the prototype educator (Fig. 2).

The first dimension, concerns *technical knowledge associated with the education professions (theoretical knowledge, value dimension, meaning dimension, socio-relational dimension).*

The result of this analysis is a skilful professional endowed with knowledge, great problem-solving and decision-making skills, and the ability to adapt his/her competence to the various contexts (*RM can manage time and different situations, solve problems, keep everything under control and overcome any obstacles and is open-minded*). However, special emphasis was given to the ability to guide and orient: basically, positive role models can orient, support, and promote critical reflection on practical actions. They are a *reference*.

... *The RM is a guide who identifies your talent and potential...*

... *directs your choices on the most appropriate path then allows you to gain experience...*

... He told me how to tackle some challenges... and helped me overcome my fear... of interacting with others...

... He provided me with theoretical tools [...] we studied many books and other things. But at the same time, at a practical level, he showed me the meaning, tasks, and missions of educators ...

Therefore, Role Models give confidence and credit and strengthen responsibility, are able to listen, accept others, interact with others as an equal intellectual partner but, at the same time, can maintain a distinction between roles, are always authoritative, are humble and make room for others, are passionate and are able to communicate their passion, can mediate and negotiate, inspire confidence because they keep everything under control and are able to overcome any obstacle and solve any problem.

The second dimension of Role Models as evidenced by the literature (Wright 1996; Wright, Wong, Newill 1997; Wright *et al.* 1998; Elzubeir, Rizk 2001; Wright, Carrese, 2002; Cruess, Cruess, Steinert, 2008; Fromme *et al.* 2010; Jochemsen-Van der Leeuw *et al.* 2013) deals with the profession-related knowledge of 'how to be' (value dimension, meaning dimension, socio-relational dimension, affectivity, design intentionality.)

The outcome of the focuses can be summarized by the account of one of the participants, which mentions most of the features highlighted by the interviewees, in different words, but with the same content:

(The RM) is authoritative, empathic, passionate. Passion is necessary...

Role Models act as a true example of education professional, since they help understand, stimulate, enhance our potential, explain, and guide us along our path. Therefore, as educators, they are respectful, enthusiastic, pleasant, easy, calm, straightforward, helpful, self-confident – but without being dogmatic – sensitive, human, empathic, cheerful, strong, resolute, charismatic, steadfast, able to find positive characteristics, let go, and motivate.

... (RM) has dramatically changed my life [...]. I was guided by her example and was encouraged by the strength that she gave me. During the apprenticeship she came to the facility only once, but she was always there for me. I could see her everywhere, with her attitude and ability to involve me in the activities. [...] Her behaviour, teachings, competence and expectations and the texts that she suggested were always mirrored in my experience [...]. She could find a potential in me of which I was not aware...

... (RM) guided me by showing me how he was able to construct his professionalism and career. Somehow, this cooperation enhanced my creativity and my ability to develop an idea.

... I spent a lot of time with this person, who helped me make my own decisions. He did not supplant me, but taught me how to manage my choices for my career and future.

The third dimension of role modelling includes the physical and symbolic places of the educational process (organizational or procedural dimension, events, reality elements and value dimension.)

The context and the place are crucial aspects for the focus participants. It is possible to assume that the role model would act in a different way in another context. The place is described as a *home*, a *familiar location* (both well-known and cosy), *quiet*, *tidy*, and *protected*.

Thus, the place is the privileged context where the role model urges to *reflect in the action*, *on the action*, and *for the action*, thus allowing the future professionals to reinterpret their experience, promoting the transformation of experience into professional skills. The places are the framework within which the organization, process management, teamwork, complexity, and unpredictability of this profession are experienced.

6. Final remarks

In line with the literature on role modelling, the focus analysis stresses that positive role models and the places intended for learning are key throughout the whole educational process, thus influencing the personal and professional growth of future professionals. Students, in fact, select and choose the characteristics of their reference models, by internalizing a mix of values, behaviours, attitudes and competences consistent with the ideal image of the profession. Sometimes the model chosen does not carry out the specific professional role assigned to the future educators. Teachers are often regarded as reference models thanks to their personal and professional qualities, which are identified, internalized, and then projected by students onto their future profession.

The accounts of the participants show the important support function played by role models for the students at various levels.

First, the role model stimulates the ability to interact with action-related knowledge, thus promoting the learning processes associated with space and the willingness to reflect on concrete professional practices.

Then, the role model helps the students recognize and reinterpret the unconscious processes underlying the construction of their own professional identity, manifesting motivations, skills, implicit aptitudes and fostering orientation and professional choices.

In order to promote and support positive modelling processes, the institution must be characterised by an organizational culture oriented towards the development of reflective practices, the definition of spaces and times intended for the re-elaboration of the stu-

dents' educational and didactic experiences, intended as a relevant moment for the construction of their professional and individual career (Zuccheromaglio 2007; Salerni, Sposetti, Szpunar 2013) and the 'growth' of interpersonal relations (Cruess, Cruess, Steinert 2008). In other words – being a multidimensional instrument applied to the place where theory and practice meet – the educational and training potential of role modelling could be promoted, developed, and enriched by reflective dimensions and personal elaborations, as well as by the activation of some pedagogical models and patterns sharing some significant aspects with it, such as cognitive apprenticeship, situated learning, and reflective practice (Kenny, Mann, MacLeod 2003).

Eventually, for role modelling to be used as an effective teaching strategy and to reduce the impact of negative models, it would be necessary to identify and, if necessary, to train professions featuring those characteristics that students tend to seek in their reference models. This would promote an informed support to the modelling process, thus enhancing the positive results (Wright 1996; Jochemsen-Van der Leeuw *et al.* 2013).

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