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Pedagogical concerns and market demands in VET

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Challenges of Pedagogy of Work and VET Research: a Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper discusses on ten challenges surfacing in the landscape of pedagogy of work and VET researches, with reference to the most relevant international surveys and with a special regard to VET field. One of the main issues in this landscape is the problem of cooperation between companies and school, the concept of competence for Vet education, the professional education for Vet teachers, “career change” trough Vet training.

Keywords

adult education; vocational training; pedagogy of work; adult competences; dual system

1 The Notion of Work: a Pedagogical Perspective

Pedagogy sets itself as an important component of the “culture of development”. In this connection, ascertaining whether certain aspects concerning changes in the way people work — either at a conceptual and practical level — and the manner today’s work culture can be supported and addressed by pedagogy is crucial in the present analysis. This is particularly the case when devising strategies to further professional and social development. Work thus plays a major role in human development while gaining civil and educational values, which are dependent upon cultural and geographical factors in one’s social history. Work lies at the heart of the “social question” which currently has been given momentum. This is particularly the case if one considers factors such as business relocation and the supremacy of finance over economics, which set the conditions for ongoing inequalities worldwide, to the extent that in some countries rights such as freedom and democracy are jeopardized. In this connection, reference has frequently been made in the West to the concept of “erosion” of social capital, with the middle-class which now face hardship and social imbalance which might endanger civil coexistence.

If one were to reconstruct, yet ideally, the historical and semantic characteristics through which the concept of “work” has been referred to as a source of humanization over the years, mention should be made of figures such as Augustine of Hippo, Benedict of Nursia, Comenius, as well as Rousseau, Locke, Fröbel and Hessen. Yet this effort, albeit fascinating, is beyond the scope of this paper and priority will be given to other questions.

The notion of “work” has been investigated during the nineteenth and the twentieth century by scholars with different educational background —economics, sociology, labour law, and so forth — who examined a wide range of topics which formed the base of modernity. Among other topics are the relationship between individuals and social groups, the forms of power and authority in socio-organizational contexts, delegation systems and management structuring, workers’ safeguards and rights.

An overview of the modern concept of “work”, if cursory, calls for the following question: at which point has “work” become the driving force of society in conceptual terms? In order to provide an answer to this question, mention should be made of a fundamental



economic theory. It was Adam Smith in 1776 who explained the wealth of nations by considering the ratio of productive workers out of the total population. This novel approach was illustrative of the central role of work in society, as opposed to the traditional feudal system which was still in place in British society at the time of his writing.

The growing importance placed upon the notion of work throughout 1800 and 1900 in proto-industrial society represents a unique phenomenon, chiefly if one considers individual behaviour. As pointed out by the German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, “industrial society is in all its aspects a society based on salaried employment”.

With time, the concept of “work” has also become the subject of a special area of investigation in human and social sciences, where social pedagogy broached the main anthropological and educational aspects.

In the last thirty years, a number of significant changes in the regulation of the employment relationship — e.g. de-standardisation — led to the establishment of certain “drivers”: the gradual decline of the Fordist system of production, the emergence of the networking system, and the consolidation of information and the knowledge economy. Accordingly, changes in the notion of “subordination” and a review of work hierarchies — particularly in large-sized enterprises and the public sector — have turned into the key components in today’s world of work. Another main element which is worth mentioning is the rise of numerous contractual arrangements, the growing relevance of self-employment, as well as the increase in precarious work, which can be found particularly in those sectors marked by low levels of protection.

Echoing Bauman and his famous metaphor, the uncertain nature of employment has become an endemic aspect of the “liquid society”. Factors such as temporariness, uncertainty, and vulnerability, are increasingly characterizing the interaction between work and the individual. Indeed, the emergence of more flexible forms of work places upon the individual clear responsibilities and assigns him more bargaining power which thus far has been the preserve of external entities, such as trade unions and social partners. The Italian labour market is particularly fragmented and certain ongoing trends can be seen, viz. increased unemployment levels for a qualified workforce, high rates of precarious work, if compared to stable employment, noticeable differences in terms of employment at territorial, sectoral, and geographical level, chiefly between the North and the South.

The question at hand that needs to be addressed by scholars of social science and pedagogy is to what extent the foregoing transformations affect the anthropological perspective underlying the notion of “work”, on which dignity and identity are premised.

2 The future of work

Attention to the future of work is becoming more and more central in common people feelings. New luddite fears coexist with rosy predictive hopes facing a technologic race speedup, told by media in an ordinary yet sometimes bloating way, thus causing *Orwel-style* fantasies. A *cultural* answer is definitely as essential as a compass in this scenario. New concerns, caused by the 2008 socioeconomic crisis, determined a different and more mature awareness of the *meaning of work to young people, women and over-50s*. Changes in productive assets and in socioeconomic international geography gave birth to a new mindset approaching the subject of work. As a matter-of-fact, a “genetically modified” work can be no longer easily classified and its so-defined “anthropological value” pays now special attention to subjectivity, and positive orientation to relationship; new opportunities can be locally generated, respecting a needful dignity of work as a fundamental share of human living (Alessandrini, 2017; Gessler, 2017). Pedagogy of work finally is a pedagogy exploring new solutions and promoting empirical research as a method to patrol approach and educational practices. It is a

dynamic, future-oriented *pedagogy* continuously realigning itself and its link with all other human sciences. Conceptual framework is related to many authors (Dewey, Wenger, Schön, Billet, Gessler, etc.). Work and education to and with the work have an apical role within the framework enabling human development, beyond the prominence of quantitative growth and efficiency and function values.

We can clearly outline five different interpretations, or rather, five different narratives of contemporary work's transformations (Alessandrini, 2017).

Table 1 Five different narratives of contemporary work's transformations

Multiculturalism of work
A new hybridisation of and in the work
New work territories (<i>smart working, crowdfunding</i>)
New job training
New semantic items

3 Ten challenges for a new Pedagogy of Work

An essential element of the aforementioned “attitudes” is the awareness that sustainability is vital for a desirable future, that the subject of individual's freedom and self-determination can characterize the future feelings of people towards work experience (technologies can give a relevant contribution through the planning of business models).

Due to the increasing amount of *hybridisation* of the different kinds of work – thus making instability and insecurity prevailing – *human rights safeguards* are paramount, as well as the possibility of gaining access to a respectable work and to the guarantee of a concept we can refer to as the *humanization* of work.

The following list represents the main challenges of work pedagogies (Alessandrini, 2017):

Table 2 The new challenges

The generative work
The dual system education
The <i>smart work</i>
The <i>open innovation</i>
The talent <i>promotion</i>
The growing polarization conflict
The cognitive knowledge new mapping
The long term employability
The skills intelligence
The human development and <i>sustainability</i>

4 VET Research as a Focus of Pedagogy of Work

What are, then, the fundamental transformation processes related to training needs and the effects on vocational training for young people? VET research is one of the more relevant topics of pedagogy of work, among others like the issue of dual systems and the school-to-work transition. Other subjects are “how-to-solve” the problem of NEET, the comprehension of future (Industry 4.0) skills, talents promotion and new professional needs, the empirical research for a professional identity/competences, etc. The main issues in this landscape are the problem of cooperation between companies and schools, the concept of competence for VET

education, the professional education for VET teachers, “career change” through VET training.

The OECD survey for Italy has outlined a proposal of re-launching VET role in our national context. This perspective aims to overcome an articulate vision on VET as a second chance for students. A reading of vocational training in this sense is consistent with the need to improve the training courses to work, not only as an opportunity of placement but also as a value orientation to the working dimension. Recent data show that employability for VET students is better than for students from other sectors.

From September to November 2017, Cedefop conducted a questionnaire survey to understand the various concepts and glossaries in the different European countries, precisely in order to understand differences that cannot be eliminated (also because historically “sedimented”) and to act accordingly in European policies. The researchers have been able to elaborate some tables in order to show the reader the variety of approaches and research trends in European countries. Different conceptions emerge, some linked to the so-called general education, others to the theme of apprenticeship, others to the theme of lifelong learning (ILO, 2017; ONU, 2015). These conceptions enable the Italian researcher to analyse the conceptual latitude of the research on VET and to grasp elements addressing the current Italian phase of renewed interest on this issue compared to the experimentation of the “alternanza” in the schools. There is also a new interest at the academic level on the theme of work-based learning and dual systems (Marcone, 2018).

International research does not show a “best way” in VET (Moreno Herrera, 2017; Perini, Kamarainen, 2018): there are substantial approaches’ differences in Europe and therefore the need for a mutual comparison for the researcher. The fundamental theme is how to interpret the concept of “professional knowledge”, even at level of theoretical frameworks. According to some lines of research, this knowledge is contextual and holistic: it identifies itself in a complex of “physicality”, intellectual comprehension skills, values, imitative skills, but above all integration of experience with individual thought (Billet, 2017; Engestrom, 1987).

The hope is that in Italy the interest in VET studies will be renewed according to approaches also linked to the epistemological dimensions of learning from practice and according to the comparative logic between the models and the good research practices in Europe.

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