

How to encourage soft skills in the classroom by a work-related assignment: an Italian experience.

Abstract

Within the framework of modernization of higher education systems in Europe, universities are invited to go beyond a knowledge-based perspective, focused on disciplinary approaches and to be more concentrated on encouraging *soft skills* to deal with today's complex and unpredictable career paths (European Commission, 2013). The literature about *Work-Related Learning* (WRL) and *Work-Integrated Learning* (WIL) offers research evidences about the contribution of work-related experiences to the development of *soft skills* (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011) and the development of knowledge and professional competencies (Hughes & Moore, 1999; Subramaniam, & Freudenberg, 2007). The paper presents an Italian work-related experience developed within the course of "Organizational Intervention Research Methods" which involved 22 master's degree students. The work-related assignment will be described as well as the content analysis process of the 22 collected texts and the findings about the development of soft skills recognized by the students.

Keywords: soft skills, work-related learning, higher education, teaching and learning methods.

Theoretical framework

Within the framework of modernization of higher education systems in Europe, universities are invited to go beyond a knowledge-based perspective and focus on disciplinary approaches that encourage *soft skills* such as critical thinking, teamwork, taking initiatives, and problem solving, which are all crucial skills necessary to deal with today's complex and unpredictable career paths (European Commission, 2013). Furthermore, the Higher Education system must recruit incorporate teaching staff, students, graduates, labor market actors, and stakeholders, in order to develop more effective teaching practices which could mend the gap between study and work (European Commission, 2013). Some European documents (Commission of the European Communities, 2009; European Commission, 2011; Technopolis, 2012) suggest strategies and approaches of dialogue and cooperation with businesses as well as the modernization of curricula with regards to teaching and learning methods. These suggestions are made in order to promote employability, entrepreneurship, and to encourage knowledge transfer between Higher Education institutions and companies.

This focus on teaching and learning methods as well as cooperation with the world of work, refers to *Work-Related Learning* (Dirkx, 2011) or *Work-Integrated Learning* (Abeysekera, 2006; Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010; Gardner & Barktus, 2014). Also defined by McLennan & Keating (2008), as a teaching and learning approach which, "has the potential to provide a rich, active and contextualized learning experience for students which contributes to their engagement in learning" (p. 4).

The literature review on *Work-Related Learning* highlights the main goals of *Work-Related Learning* experiences. Among them include, the development of *soft skills* (Atchinson, et al., 2002; Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011) such as: social interaction (networking), self-management (time-management, personal planning), learning and adaptability, problem-solving, conceptualize and analyze, work in teams, speak to an audience (to prepare a presentation), search for information (read databases, surf the net), write essays (or a CV, a letter of presentation), and the ability to identify and define professional goals (understand the different roles and the needs of the organizations) (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011). Another central aspect of WRL experiences consists of helping students explore possible career options and job opportunities. The work-related activities allow the students to define active and practical strategies of research, offering professional situations which are relevant to their university studies (Subramaniam & Freudenberg, 2007). Research on work-related programs have shown a development of knowledge and of professional competencies (Hughes, & Moore, 1999). Moreover, this development of professional competencies is due to the opportunity to link knowledge (content and theories) that students learn in class to experiences outside in a professional environment (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011). Furthermore, as Sambrook states, "work-related learning can be greatly enhanced by developing organizations as learning cultures, by increasing motivation to learn, by clarifying responsibilities for learning" (2005, p. 115).

Despite this research evidence, there is consistent lack of literature methods and instructional approaches for faculty to foster connections between Higher Education and the world of work as well as theory and practice. For example, few methodological directions are available on how to develop work-related strategies in class. Questions are raised, such as: What are effective ways for instructors to promote connections between course contents and related professions? How instructors can propose and support activities in cooperation with organizations related to their teaching?

Methods

Under this theoretical framework concerning *Work-Related Learning* and its contribution to the improvement of soft skills, a work-related experience was designed within the course of "Organizational Intervention Research Methods" (a study program in Lifelong and Continuing Education) in accordance with a big enterprise of the

Veneto territory. This course was created to allow students the opportunity to spend time in a workplace relevant to their program of study and career aims. Additionally, this opportunity will give students experience with completing particular assignments in a professional environment.

The 22 students attending the course were asked to analyze the organizational culture of a Venetian enterprise, starting with observations of the organizational spaces through the means of the provided observation grid (Munari, 2013). Collaboratively, instructors and organizations arranged constructive visits that would allow students to learn objectives. At the end of the visiting experience, the students had to complete two different tasks: a) working in pairs, they wrote a report concerning the observed organizational culture; b) each student wrote an individual text based on their own personal reflections about the work-related experience in order to explain the individual strategy that he/she had decided to observe (How? What? From what? Alone? Or with the support of a colleague?). Additionally, the reflection encouraged students to think about strengths, difficulties, challenges, and feelings.

This paper focuses of the content analysis of the individual texts, submitted online by the students, at the end of July, 2015, through the Moodle Content Management System. The same assignment will be repeated next June-July, 2016 in order to collect new data.

A qualitative content analysis of the 22 collected individual texts was analyzed using the software Atlas.ti 7.0, in order to explore the students' reflections as well as more precisely, their connection to the improvement of soft skills. Starting from the Hermeneutic Unit (composed by the 22 texts), the research group generated 50 codes, related to 143 selected quotations focusing on *soft skills* mentioned by the students and referred to the above mentioned literature.

Findings and conclusion

The qualitative analysis is in progress but current findings present seven families that correlate to soft skills identified in the literature about WRL: 1) Emotional skills: according to the students' opinions the work experience was full of emotions. Positives include excitement, astonishment to visit real organizations, and curiosity. Negatives include anxiety and uncertainty. 2) Lifelong learning skills: students spoke clearly regarding their behavior, the learning experience, and their willingness to learn from it. In fact, one student mentioned: "I positioned myself like a person who needed to learn a lot of things, in front of the company; it means that I listened to them actively and with humility". 3). Integration of learning: students described the experience as a way to integrate their learning in terms of: connecting theory and practice, combining past and present learning, and the transferability of learning into the professional context. 4) Reflection (Eames & Bell, 2005): students' reflections were related to the observational and to the learning experience. 5) Self-management (Freudenberg, 2011): according to the students, the experience encouraged self-management skills, in terms of deciding how to observe, choosing the right strategy, preparing themselves to complete the assignment. 6) Time-management (Coll et al., 2009): students worked in a strong manner with time management, in order to complete their task in an appropriate way. 7) Teamwork skills (Burchell et al., 2000; Freudenberg, 2011): students expressed different ways to manage the work while working pairs during the collaborative work-related experience. Students were able to build teamwork skills such as cooperation, comparison, sharing, team decision making. Overall, the presentation will discuss the findings and provide considerations to instructors on how to foster work-related teaching and learning methods in the classroom. This will enable students to learn essential soft skills that can be directly applied to the world of work.

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