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Situated Teaching and Democratization of Tertiary Education. A Framework for Practices

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A Framework for Practices

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ABSTRACT: *In the last few years the experiences of 'participatory' and 'situated' teaching and research conducted in the classrooms of the universities have multiplied. These experiences involve students, researchers, social workers and citizens with a view to carrying out and sharing a process of democratization of knowledge resulting from negotiation and enhancement of different perspectives. These actions aim at developing social change while taking students close to people who are usually distant, towards inaccessible stories and places. This work indicates some of the theoretical and contextual assumptions in which the dimension of participation joins the academic world, offering examples of field experiences carried out in recently developed areas of tertiary education, and defining the main devices of action, including several forms of 'co-teaching' (shared teaching with 'experts by experience').*

KEYWORDS: *Participation, Democratization of knowledge, Situated teaching, Co-teaching*

Introduction

This work arises from the reflection of three scholars of different disciplines on a common question on social 'positioning' – their relationship with the worlds surrounding the classrooms – of professors and researchers through the choices they make in the interweaving of teaching, research and third mission. One wonders whether the perspective of 'participatory' and 'situated' teaching, of which we will present some characters and models, can offer a framework to

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analyse some of the different experiences in progress and to bring out their political potential.

We tried to find an answer to this question first of all by focusing on the historical evolution of the university and its mission, starting from the emblematic history of two Degree courses that we considered as a favourite observatory in order to describe the enlargement of the social base of tertiary education: *Scienze del servizio sociale* [Social work sciences] and *Scienze della formazione primaria* [Primary education sciences]. We decided to focus on these courses of study as university contexts because they have 'academicised' some types of knowledge which were considered less noble in the past, exclusively attended by women, related to social care and childhood, and also because since their very beginning they have provided for the contribution of a variety of forms of expertise from professionals and people holding direct experience of those discomfort phenomena we have been dealing with. In these academic contexts teachers have a first-hand experience of the potential, but also of the energy required to manage a latent conflict that is based on some elements we deem to be quite interesting: the social class of students attending these courses; the mixture, willing to force a de facto separation, of academic disciplines and knowledge and the so-called professionalising disciplines and knowledge; the dialogue with communities in order to describe and construe different forms of social discomfort whose meaning is hardly accessible; and last, but not least, the burden of an academic tradition tending to devalue some types of knowledge more than others.

This contribution develops some considerations on the history of these learning paths and submits some teaching experiences which take on a dimension of social conflict and difference as meaningful and important elements not to be 'removed' but rather to be 'dealt with' as teaching pillars.

Within this approach, we focus on a set of experiences useful to give shape to some models of 'participatory' and 'situated' teaching based on social de-fragmentation, that is aiming at mixing different social groups featuring different background, power, and language and bringing different *expertise* to the objects of knowledge. Such teaching experiences – exploratively and qualitatively analysed – allow us to think upon conditions of a possible change in the academic teaching leading to a participatory approach.

The first paragraph by Vincenzo Schirripa deals with the introduction of educational and social knowledge in the academic world from an historical per-

spective, based on the expansion of the social base of educational systems. The second paragraph by Vincenza Pellegrino addresses 'situated' and 'participatory' teaching which is currently developing within such educational frameworks, and defines it as a structured involvement of different social actors directly involved in the analysed issue, as a device to 'counter-target' knowledge. The third paragraph by Tiziana Tarsia further details these issues and points out that teaching modalities involving students, users, and social workers as one can be considered as processes able to trigger both individual and social change.

1. Teachers and social workers at university: two cases of ambivalent democratization of specialist knowledge

In this work we analyse the cases of *Scienze del servizio sociale* and *Scienze della formazione primaria* courses to give evidence of the specificity of the composition of university classes by social class and of the ambivalence of academic legitimization of what is considered applicative knowledge, that is that knowledge that in some courses is achieved starting from mixture and connection of professional knowledge. Such contexts are therefore assumed as emblematic cases of the academic transition we are willing to deal with.

Scienze del servizio sociale stem from the reform of what is known as 'three plus two' (D.M. 1999 n. 509), superseding the legislation of special purpose schools of 1982 within which social work schools [*Scuole di servizio sociale*] fell. *Scienze della formazione primaria* (1996-98) supersedes the four-year high-school diploma in education which was sufficient to teach in elementary schools; it is a qualifying restricted-access degree which is established as a one-cycle master's degree in 2010 (D.M. n. 249). With the slow formalization of new educational, social and health curricula – from 2017 also nursery educators (0-3 years) must have a three-year degree – universities have increasingly taken on contents that were left out. The complaints of the last century – corporatist but mainly militant – against the devaluation of knowledge related to social work, care and childhood may seem to have been satisfied. But if this can be seen as a recognition, it is although an ambivalent one.

The conflicting consequences of this expansive process on legal systems, contents, procedures, the social assortment of work environments tend to set-

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tle by tacit adaptation on already operating schemes, for example the differentiation of courses by 'ease' and prestige. Those we are talking about are job roles that refer to an extensive meaning of the term 'profession' (Hughes, 1984; Tousijn, 1979): they were born as roles for women or they take shape by femininization; they enjoyed overtime of an ambivalent or poor recognition – just think of the comparison between *maestri* [Primary education teachers] and *professori* [Secondary and tertiary education teachers], the latter having studied more and handled more prestigious objects of knowledge. Tertiarization of high-school diploma in education did not solve this dualism but merely translated it, by reproducing on a different scale a model making the knowledge of the discipline fit the psycho-pedagogical-didactical knowledge. Contrarily to *maestri*, many *professori* are not familiar with psycho-pedagogical knowledge due to their previous studies or due to their unwillingness to focus on it in some subsequent learning – more extensively to recognise and thematise the care contents of their jobs.

The '*maestre* at university' oxymoron (Schirripa and Tognon, 2019) is still affected by a model dating back to the eighteenth-nineteenth-century for which the combination of low social class background, modest studies and maternal quality is an accepted rule while the combination between social distinction, good studies and high professional qualities is an appreciated exception: the task of pushing this polarization upwards is now therefore assigned to a suitably prepared high-school diploma in education.

A keyword in this context is therefore 'separation': still today, the subject matters characterizing high schools of human sciences – anthropology, pedagogy, psychology, sociology – are hardly found in other upper secondary schools. The pedagogy that is cultivated in the university has settled in a secluded circuit; the early *Scuole di servizio sociale* too have been able to count on the separateness from the university system to grow up as original educational contexts (Facchini and Tonon Giraldo, 2010); it would be interesting to understand to which extent this approach led to a specific sociology for the social work, along with a specialist didactics for social work careers (Tarsia, 2019).

Scientific literature, historical sources and narrative provide a broad palette to evoke what has been observed until now with respect to the social background, the cultural preparation, and the different reputation of *maestri* and *professori*, social workers and other professionals whom they work with, as well

TAB. 1. *Processed from www2.almalaurea.it, XXI survey (2019). Graduates' profile 2018*

	TOTAL	L-39	LM-85BIS	L-19	L-36	L-40	L-10
Number of graduates	258.971	2.470	3.212	7.532	5.486	1.769	5.157
Having filled out the questionnaire	280.230	2.290	3.060	7.007	5.016	1.637	4.840
Women (%)	58,70	93	96	93,30	53,20	77,30	74,50
None of the parents has a degree (%)	68,70	84	79,60	85	67	78,60	65,70

as the students of the different courses enjoy. The most accessible statistics suggest additional directions for further study. In the Almalaurea questionnaire on the graduates' profile, the most readable indicator concerns first-generation graduates, that is, those from families in which none of the parents holds a tertiary education degree: in this situation the deviation of courses for educators, teachers and social workers is significant, even if we try a time-series analysis over the last fifteen years. Table 1 reads 2018 data relating to this indicator and the ratio between genders. Next to the three-year course L-39 in *Scienze del servizio sociale* and the single-cycle five-year course in *Scienze della formazione primaria* (Lm-85bis: qualifying and featuring restricted-number, which suggests a prior selection of users), we can compare figures related to the three-year courses degrees L-19 in Educational Sciences, L-36 in Political Sciences and International Relations, L-40 in Sociology, L-10 in Letters.

For a more careful reading that these data deserve, please refer to further questions; in this case we confine ourselves to highlight an element that sometimes seems not to be fully perceived and that the laboratory teaching of these courses can bring out: that of conflicts related to social status and cultural endowment of students and teachers, both more or less projected to 'make an impression' suited to the context. The relationship with the mass consumption educational literature and with the mass cultural production for children (Schirripa, 2019) subtends, for example, a subtle conflict: as if students were asked to abjure the cultural consumption to which they were exposed – permeating their idea of childhood – and which they often find brought back in their internship environments. A conflict on taste, on the answer to be given, for example, to the expectations of those families which pay more attention to these markers of social distinction.

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Another main feature of these courses as to 'democratization' of academic knowledge – the way we conceive it – concerns their special focus on practices: this means procedures within an organizational environment that take inspiration from knowledge construction models 'shared' with professionals and with a student population socially uneven with respect to the teaching personnel. Just think of compulsory internships, to the relationship between the University and the 'operational' teaching staff (workers, social workers or teachers that have been hired as university teachers). This is strictly related, both evidently and dialectically, to the epistemological and mandate reasons for which those who work in these courses might consider themselves particularly interested in metareflection on the academic teaching. That could be inferred from the statute of most typical disciplines and their possibility to be declined in words suitable to the users, their working perspectives, and the ethical and political reasons that could push them to decide to have a career as a *maestro* or social worker. It is intuitive to expect from some courses in particular, from sociology to cultural anthropology to pedagogy, an approach aimed at raising the awareness of teachers and students so that they can reflexively conceive their way of working together. But in fact a lot depends on what kind of sociology or pedagogy the teachers study and teach, in which fields of experience they have refined their stay in the classroom – the extra-university ones are often decisive, which deeply characterise careers initially, and for a long time, featuring a dual nature, inside and outside the university system (Pellegrino, 2018). This entails the risk of losing this approach to be assimilated to the contexts in which the practice is less present and the social class is higher (think of the contiguous course in Political Sciences). Eventually, the constraints that the law establishes on the teaching regulations are also at stake: in the case of social work, the internship and the presence of professional teachings; in the case of primary education, a dense table of psycho-pedagogical and disciplinary teachings, the internship and the laboratories. And yet it should be noted that these variables – which seem to require a different way of experiencing the university classroom and a contextualised formation even externally, in a structural and binding manner – are somehow subject to a thousand adjustments, ranging from the need to satisfy, embrace or skip formality (a situation which is well known by those wishing to put in place and try their own individual teaching sovereignty) and the need for academic renown.

Precisely because of the evident tensions deriving from these situations we can talk of an experimental season in terms of 'non obvious' teaching in the above-mentioned courses, which we try to illustrate in the cases examined in the next paragraph.

2. Participatory teaching as a 'de-fragmentation' device

Starting from the introduction of new 'objects' in the academic teaching (such as children's care, social work etc.), we talked about constant ambivalences in teaching contexts, in terms of a constant tension between elements of 'separation' and elements of 'democratization'. Now we would like to discuss how, in some university teaching experiences, this specific tension is taken as an element of interest of the teaching itself. Teaching becomes the field of a more explicit dialogue and conflict between different types of *expertise* on the same object (Allegri *et al.*, 2017), defining a 'participatory' and 'situated' learning paradigm. We will give a more complete definition of it shortly, following different schools of thought; what we would like to underline right now in this context is that the element that interests us most with respect to this broad paradigm is precisely that of mediation and recomposition of categorizations of a different nature on the same topic, by listening to a direct first-person testimony (co-teaching) (among many of them, Pease-Alvarez and Schecter, 2005; Brydon-Miller and Maguire, 2009). The learning in the classroom becomes an experience of topics reframing, of deconstruction and recomposition of the plural overviews that circumscribe the objects of knowledge. An example can better concretise this concept. In the study courses we are dealing with, there are many participatory teaching experiences concerning contemporary migrations: migrants become 'co-teachers' together with sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, social workers (Pellegrino, 2018). Structural dimensions then emerge during the preparation of university courses with migrants – for example, the extension of travel times due to the closure of the corridors of regular migration, the emergence of the spiritual dimension necessary for the emotional endurance in the long migration, choral prayers, travel spirits, a post-secular description of the globe – usually marginal in traditional academic programs. The very 'construction' of the course becomes the occasion to debate around aspects that are

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poorly 'visible' (or made invisible by the prevailing narratives, to say so) that resume incisiveness through the conceptualization made by those who have a direct experience of those social facts. This definition of situated learning – as an opportunity to re-understand the objects of knowledge through the 'eyes of others' – is not new, of course. Suffice it to think of the psycho-pedagogical approaches descending from activism and in particular from authors who, like Dewey (1916), have highlighted the 'democratic implications' of an approach that allows everyone to learn by doing research within their own worlds. But we also think of pedagogical-political approaches such as that of Freire (1970), which go beyond the criticism to teaching as a transfer of information, to the point of theorising the 'necessary reciprocity' between teachers and students: teachers are considered as unaware actors, who do not understand the cognitive limits linked to their individual and class destiny, and who must be freed from their 'oppression' (from their own political unawareness) by the 'students'.

Precisely from these positions, a specific learning methodology spread at the end of the 20th century, defined as 'participated and situated' (Lave and Wenger, 1991): it was focused on teaching by mixed groups of age and social background, on the creation of a 'learning community' where reflection is shared only starting from concrete actions carried out together, and so on. These approaches have spread over the last century, in fact, but basically they have remained marginal in the institutional spaces of education, including the University, tenaciously oriented to the transmission of information in a 'vertical' configuration – from a teacher to the students – in the absence of a listening to and an encounter with 'plural' experiences with respect to the object.

However, in recent years the debate has restarted, by finding new popularity often through arguments different from the past, more focused on a criticism of the 'mercantile' evolution of the public mass university.

Some of these analyses start from the way in which the education system is oriented towards the usability of knowledge by promoting the hierarchization of universities and courses based on their ability to satisfy market requirements – the so-called ranking (Borrelli *et al.*, 2019) – and increasing the internal rating of efficiency which, going hand in hand with the precariousness of the academic work, has made the University a working place of unsustainable stress (Coin, 2018): a true example of (self) exploitation induced by capitalism of immaterial and cognitive type (Pellegrino, 2016). Therefore, some proposals for a Univer-

sity in which the rhythms of life and teaching can focus on more 'relational' forms of exchange – that is to say on 'convivial' contexts to share views – are suggested. In these proposals 'participatory' teaching is presented more specifically as a modality of 'relational resistance' to the forms of exploitation of teachers and students, and in general of cognitive work.

At the same time, some criticism is raised to a University that we could more properly define of 'post-colonial' origin. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004) refers to an academic knowledge paying more attention to the '*Southern Epistemologies*', that is capable of enhancing contexts presented as unhealthy and incapable of Progress (therefore not geographical 'South', but properly geopolitical south, which are present everywhere) and looking there for those non-disciplinary and non-institutional knowledge still capable of 'externality' with respect to the paradigm of competence aimed at competition and storage. Arjun Appadurai (2013) mentions a '*democratic University*', like the one founded in Mumbai, where research and teaching are always shared by teachers and students with the inhabitants of the suburbs, to produce collective imagination on a social order that is different from and more equitable than the present one. And so on.

These scholars, all truly 'academic', seem to be looking for a new *g-local* approach to academic knowledge, which explicitly states the tension between indigenous knowledge and colonial knowledge, but above all that allows a situated and critical 'digestion' of notions conveyed as universal. It is worth notice the notion of '*modest categorization*' used by Ricca (2016), a scholar who works in the specific framework of 'intercultural law' and defines academic knowledge as the result of 'global platforms for debate' (disciplinary platforms, in this phase) able to become local processes of 'diastole and systole' between general knowledge and particular worlds. Within this cultural turmoil typical of the g-local dimension, there are interesting cases of experimentation. At the Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal, for example, Ndiaye (2010) proposes a model of '*Popular University*' in the specific sense we have mentioned: as an economist, he suggests not to consider African economic organizations – self-employment, bricolage, in-house production and direct sales – as backward traditional practices, but as innovative practices resulting from adaptation to the specific African socio-cultural system. The objective is achieved by involving 'the territorial protagonists' (in his case the 'informal' economic entrepreneurs, the village committees, and so on) to organise and conduct university courses.

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The most interesting aspect of all these proposals is perhaps the common effort to define *operational forms* of teaching that help to decline these cognitive purposes through 'consistent' methodologies. We can mention some of them, using some case studies.

• *The presence of 'experience experts' and the 'choral teaching'.* The 'co-teacher' plays an extremely important role in the types of universities and participatory teaching we are dealing with, e.g. an individual who has first-person experience in the social conflicts involved in the teaching. Think of the case of the 'experts du vécu': in some European countries, education on poverty, dependency and illness issues must be provided by people who have direct experience in the formation of *social workers* (Renard, 2012). Often these lessons are set up starting from 'choral narrations', compositions of points of view on the topic, such as e.g. in the case of the teaching practice of the 'cross-eyed', where teachers and migrant women compose their own autobiographical memories on the post-colonial condition (Pellegrino, 2016). It is an '*intercultural choral narrative*' of the topics of the course which then becomes the text of the lesson, involving students in writing, asking them to integrate the text after having seen it on stage. And precisely the staging of the group of 'co-teachers' as well as the 'reciprocity' of their telling each other, allow students to perceive and understand the concepts inherent in intercultural dynamics. This 'chorus' (the understanding between different co-teachers, the 'horizontality' between them) redefines learning as the result of a circular thought based on saying and listening to, in turn, to conceptualise the conflict rather than to recompose it.

• *The 'process' of analysis replacing the 'program' of study.* Within the teaching experiences we mentioned, the course topics are defined by the group of co-teachers in the variously organised preparation of the course, which becomes research material. Notably, the program then varies during each course. Lesson after lesson, students' questions give rise to new reflections among co-teachers and to invitations from colleagues from other disciplines, useful for answering those questions. In this sense, *interdisciplinarity* is unavoidable here: it is not an *ex ante* element, but it is linked to the need to answer the questions raised by teaching, which are accepted here to become the program (Wernli *et al.*, 2016).

• *The 'corporeity' in teaching.* Lastly, in this debate on co-teaching the issue of 'theatralization' of learning is considered very important (Bidlo, 2006). In many cases, theatre directors and playwriters follow the courses with the aim of com-

posing the choral narration. In these experiences of participatory co-teaching the body is put at the centre, because in a context where the existential difference among learners is marked and disturbing, words are not enough to govern the emotions related to learning. The goal is to take care of the emotions conveyed by the body, the way in which they inform us and form us together with those who study and teach theatre. Here the alliance aimed at learning tends to widen again: not only academic scholars, experience experts and students, but also 'theatre actors', those who translate learning into bodily exercise.

3. University education and the triggering of individual and social change processes

As we have seen, degree courses in *Scienze del servizio sociale* can be a privileged observatory for experiments with participatory and situated teaching. The original conflict characterizing these courses of study opens up spaces for exploration and change in terms of social practices. Among the other items mentioned, also the possibility of contamination between the academic world and the professional world offers interesting insights in a perspective of social innovation and sociology of the possible. In the hands-on experience we intend to talk about, students but above all social workers are at the centre: here the university resumes its task as an institution not only with respect to its direct recipients, the students, but also to other social actors in the territories in which it is located. The context then becomes here, more explicitly, the link between teaching and third mission, the centrality of a reintegration of lifelong learning into ordinary teaching.

The interest for this profession resides in some elements that are related to this very link. The social worker: continues to play a central role in the Italian welfare system even in this phase in which contracting-out is increasingly resorted to (Fazzi, 2016); has got the power to classify the users (Illich *et al.*, 1977; Dominelli, 2004); can translate social welfare policies into innovative social practices. The management of power is central to the helping relationship, considered, *per se*, an asymmetrical professional relationship that can be expressed in Weberian terms as a generative 'power' but also as a 'power' that oppresses. Particularly in a historical moment in which social workers find and employ-

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ment in the Third Sector, the advocacy function is highlighted, which is now accentuated (Allegri, 2015) precisely because of the *mission* of these organizations (Fazzi, 2016). In other words, their function of agents of change is increasingly emphasized, therefore questions are asked about the skills and abilities necessary to play this role. The professional practices and social interventions of social workers can accompany the user, giving up part of their power and triggering processes of autonomy and recognition of the person's agency capacity or, even unintentionally, helping to reproduce stereotypes and in some cases to build new classifications and labels (Goffman, 1963; Bonolis, 2012) that trigger processes of minimization and passive adaptation to situations.

The founding event in which these aspects are identified as definers of the professional community of Italian social workers is the Conference of Tremezzo (1946), where a possible political profile of social work emerges in a perspective of democratic regeneration after Fascism; on that occasion social workers are outlined as the figures who can assume the responsibility of conveying the values of freedom and democracy through their own professional practice. The need for an eclectic and multidisciplinary education is then pointed out as a necessary basis for these degree courses.

This is the image, that of the social worker policy maker, which the professional community has crystallized in the first Code of Ethics (1999) and which it continues to implement in its 'public discourse'. There is a clear inspiration to the Italian Constitution in the formulation of the values of social service as well as in the promotion of self-determination and participation of the person, the groups and the community. On the one hand making reference to the principle of self-determination and participation urges the social worker to learn how to delegate their own professional power by therefore empowering the user to become the protagonist; on the other hand, it shows the effective power that a social worker can have towards a person who lives in a situation of vulnerability.

These two representations, that of the social worker 'bureaucrat' and the other of 'reflective' professional (Fargion, 2013), nurture an ambivalence in the definition of professional identity which, paradoxically, creates a potential space for reflection: the hypothesis then is that the university education can be placed in this interstice and act 'as a' micropolitical mechanism of re-location «of the workers (the learners) in the reality in which they live, so as to be able again

to take a stand with respect to real conflicts and their own way of coping with them daily» (Pellegrino and Scivoletto, 2016: 55).

This brief analysis, as well as what was said in the previous paragraphs, leads to reflect about the type of training useful to students enrolled in the degree course involving the professionals of the context around them as co-teachers. With this respect we deem useful here to present a case study: an educational project aimed at creating the conditions for establishing a permanent space for experimentation, discussion and codification of professional knowledge within the academic world involving the social workers of local services (Tarsia, 2019). We started from the consideration that activating three situated and participatory teaching tables made up of university researchers, social workers of public social bodies and private social care companies, students and users could be useful to convey contents and interpretations that could take into account the different points of view by therefore allowing to bridge the gap between the types of knowledge that are regarded as intrinsic to Academia and types of knowledge that are instead thought as other, and therefore extrinsic; as already pointed out, between the types of knowledge that are thought as 'legitimate' and those instead that are regarded as 'illegitimate' and finally between types of knowledge defined more or less 'expert'. At the end of the first year, a permanent 'study table' was established.

The starting point was to trigger a virtuous circle of information among social workers, or operators in general, working in extreme contexts as to the management of power and the emergence of latent conflicts, such as mental health, drug addiction, and the reception of forced migrants. We discussed with them about what skills were needed to act a type of social work being more corresponding to the complexity of needs and about how it is possible to acquire a professional *habitus* (Tarsia, 2019) and a style of work that facilitates the construction of functional operational methods to ensure that social workers can really have an impact on local social policies. The objective of the meetings was to define the contents and the method of teaching thematic lessons that were then given, in co-teaching, to first-year students.

The lessons were designed through an initial phase of participatory codification of the types of knowledge to be conveyed. In this phase, which involved whole of the first meeting and part of the second, the group discussed the urgency of classification existing in social services (Dominelli, 2004) as well as the need to define what was meant by 'forced migrant', 'psychiatric patient',

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and 'drug addict' thanks to a process of signification and construction of shared meaning within the group (Weick, 1995).

The main idea which circulated at all the tables, between operators and users, was that, first of all, students should be made to understand how some categories used to define the persons who apply to the services are indeed the result of a social construction which is often 'distortive': these people are considered 'deviant' because they are different, that is far from a supposed 'normality'. This representation, which can generate reactions of fear or compassion, is then going to have an impact on the performance of the helping process that is affected by the mainstream 'beliefs', such as those prevailing within a household or a specific community of citizens. We thus discussed about how the solutions proposed to problems could then result in «forcing the situation», as if the situation (the history) of the person/user should be traced back to the predetermined form for which the answer had already been thought. Continuing the exploration and trying to figure out what conveying to the students and how, we increasingly realized the complexity and the heterogeneity of the perspectives despite the decision to assume a 'punctuation' (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967) that seemed common to the members of the group, that is despite the intention to show a side of the helping process which is not described in the textbooks but which rather belongs to the experience of the professionals.

In this work of exploration and actual research of the content to be conveyed to the students we immediately came to terms with the need of making explicit the 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1966) contained in the professional practice of the single operator. Social workers also had to deal with the point of view of the user who did not always agree with them: at times the visions, experiences and different positioning within the helping relationship led to extremely hot and highly interesting debates. In these confrontations the members of the group had to make the effort to explain, describe and make others understand their own points of view. No real solution was found but this confrontation introduced in the group work important elements of reflection that everyone then brought home and resumed in subsequent meetings.

In the end, the lesson was carried out in front of the students: each group chose a method and some tools.

The work of reflection used the different points of view to generate social representations aimed at the deconstruction of a imagination that despite being

consolidated was distant from the reality experienced by the operators and the users of the services. The testimonies, the narration of life stories, the images, the readings were among the tools that were used as the beginnings of, others and new, narratives that originated and were nurtured in the groups and with other students. The sharing of all these opinions and thoughts, such lively confrontations convey, in turn, new suggestions, questions and solicitations that are useful to reinterpret the reality, to re-signify one's own codes of meaning and one's own beliefs.

It is a path of reconstruction and re-narration that also passes through the shared evaluation of the process: the experiences must be relocated, reconnected with individual experiences but also with those lived within the group that is, in these processes of knowledge development, a learning space for all the participants.

4. A paradigm to redefine the public function of academic teaching

The comparison between the described experiences reveals recurrent aspects; we select some of them, thus relaunching some in-depth analysis lines.

Firstly, we insisted on social stratification. We have considered the case of teaching operations aimed at tackling problems – and making the most of opportunities – linked to the social and cultural heterogeneity of the students in the classrooms. Which and how much heterogeneity can be tolerated in a study environment is one of the main issues of the historical processes of mass education that through selection, school offer differentiation and orientation tend to reproduce homogeneous contexts, and here again the main focus goes back to participatory education. Contrary to what is often thought, a workshop practice, such as the type described above, does not mitigate the conflicts linked to social and cultural differences but instead it brings them out, it makes it even more difficult to avoid them. An academic teaching soliciting the emergence of these questions raises the issue of coming to terms with them, of teaching to focus on profound dimensions that also involve the teachers themselves: the choice to leave them implicit is an inertial and profound agent of lack of reflectiveness.

Secondly, the paradigm of participatory teaching that we propose here has to do with the creation of confrontation devices that counteract the 'fragmen-

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tation' induced by the subdivision of complex issues into specialized objects, which reiterates the subdivision of class through the inheritance of those specialized objects, by thus inducing social fixity and incommunicability between groups. In these proposals, *interdisciplinarity* is again put at the centre of the academic teaching question, but not in an abstract sense or once again by focusing on the rhetoric of 'spendability' in the market, but rather as a response to the questions of the collectives involved in the lessons, as a concrete outcome of study groups, through concrete processes of de-fragmentation of the issues, focussing precisely on the invitation into the classroom of those who live in person the issues addressed. This does not in any way limit the role of the teachers and the centrality of the discipline entrusted to them, but entrusts them with a constant recomposition and re-categorization – as established by the institutional mission of teaching and research, here united among them (each class produces data for research) and together with the 'third mission'.

Finally, we deem useful to review the teaching experiences that we have conducted in some contexts in terms of coherent methodologies, but, even before that, we deem important to focus on indicators in the light of which to explore the courses teaching reorganization modalities. Often the debate runs aground on a false alternative between an enthusiastic vision of scholastic innovation, naively indulgent to neoliberal rhetoric, and a defence of the school's public function declined in a reactive if not traditional sense. Those who analyse the evolution of academic teaching, in order not to fall victim of it, must be able to relate operational aspects to the declared visions of university. Vision, methods and choice of contents are poles that must be examined together. Only under these conditions is it possible to subtract such paths from isolation or trivialization in order to grasp the underlying implications. Collective construction and de-fragmentation of knowledge, mixing of social groups and professions, horizons and procedures democratization, initiating processes of change: these are objectives and indicators that can be observed in classroom dynamics, they can become widespread practices being able to contaminate each other, they can integrate an overall paradigm for the reform of tertiary education in contemporary societies.

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