

## Italian University Students' Perception of the Common Space for European Education: Challenge for Pedagogic Research

Barbara De ANGELIS \*

### Abstract

In liquid modernity the single citizen must acquire a cognitive modality that protects him from the "new one" showed by the postmodern society. Today every innovation modifies not only working activity of the citizen, but the entire existence and the social context that characterize his life. United Europe has assumed as priority the improvement of the quality and the effectiveness of the systems of education and formation in order to transform the society of the more or less rigid professions in the society of the knowledge.

Europe of the knowledge is recognized diffusely like irreplaceable factor of social and human increase and like indispensable element in order to consolidate and to enrich the European citizenship, it is engaged to us in fact in order to confer to the citizens the competences necessary to face the challenges of the new millennium is and to contribute to the affirmation of:

- the values importance's you flavored yourself
- the belonging to common a social and cultural space.

Such program, sure ambitious, articulates through the process of Bologna in challenges very precise to realize the changes in the fields educational and the aim to construct within a 2010 European Space of the Advanced Instruction.

The research that we agree to introduce it analyzes some elements of the state of the art of the useful process of Bologna for an international comparison and it records, specifically to the national level, the perception of the Italian students in order to the changes introduced in the advanced educational system.

The thesis that's to be demonstrated, valid aim for every countries, regards the necessity to dispose all arrangements ( good information, spread, adhesion) for being able before placing in action whichever planned reform or progress.. The reforms previewed from the process of Bologna risk in fact to meet consisting realization's difficulties if the customers do not know them and still more if the modalities and instruments are not characterized to perceive the international sharing of the value and the quality of knowledge and education.

For the collection and analysis of the data it is previewed to resort to the documentation and to supply a mixed questionnaire to a representative sample of the first year's students selected in all faculties of Roma The University and in the faculty of psychology of L'Aquila University.

**Key Words:** Cognitive Modality, Indispensable Element; Bologna; Common Space.

Contemporary society is changing, declares the brochure of this interesting symposium on new trends in higher education to which we - representatives of Italian educational and pedagogical research – have been invited to attend here in Tbilisi: The 4<sup>th</sup> International Silk Road Symposium 'New Trends in higher education'.

All over Europe there is a need for a better defined education system. The standardization of requisite qualifications and knowledge is urgent in order to build up quality education for students, which can offer opportunities for their beneficial mobility. It is important to receive a part of one's education in different countries, just as it is fundamental to be educated through pragmatic methods based on the democratisation of teaching and learning.

These, today, should be some of the typical features of a more elevated and better defined education system.

---

\* Prof. Dr. SSIS, Aquila University, Italy

It is clear that the aim of this symposium is to discuss new trends in higher education, to promote reciprocal understanding and expert training in these spheres coming out of the Bologna Process.

What is still unclear however, even if it seems strange to us, is how much is happening in Italy and how much more Italy wants to do.

We can certainly express our opinion regarding as a founding educational-pedagogical axis, pivotal for civil education. This is the idea of creating a way of educating a citizenship that can break down ever more quickly barriers of space and time – brought on by the speeding up of physical communication (transportation, new emigration) and symbolic communication (information, media, internet) – in order to bring about the meeting of people which in turn is bringing ever more closely together ethnicities, culture, religions. (It would be important to remember that with Law 53/03 the *l'Educazione alla convivenza civile, un insegnamento trasversale distinto in sei percorsi, educazioni: alla cittadinanza, all'ambiente, alla salute, all'affettività, e ancora l'educazione stradale e alimentare* or “Education for civil co-habitation, a distinct and cross teaching via six routes, citizen, environmental, health, affectivity, and more street and food education” has been introduced in the first cycle of Italian schooling).

This is a first step towards an education of higher quality, the education of citizenship, an *active citizenship*.

In this setting, which is enriched by pedagogical reflections by America scholar Henry Giroux who indicates a path to follow, stating that for pedagogical know-how, the reconstruction of modern categories such as democracy, liberty and social justice are fundamental. He juxtaposes the pedagogical discourse with the political one and sees education as an action, not as an end in itself, but directed to give back dignity to those involved, as well as to give awareness and the ability to take part in and to change reality.

On the other hand, the European Union is determined to promote peace, its values, and the well-being of its own peoples, offering its citizens a space of freedom, security and justice without internal borders as well as an internal market in which competition is free and not falsified.

These principles, even without going deeper (this not being its place) bring out the fact that today; education cannot set aside the end-goal of educating man. Above all, the education of the citizen who is able to seriously face not only the directions of the European Constitution<sup>1</sup> but also the doubts, crises, insecurities and fears generated by complex society with phenomena and scenarios connected with globalization.

The urgency of facing these challenges in the field of education emerges even more from some experimental research developed in Italy in the field of psycho-pedagogy (see Amann). According to this, for example, it is tangibly demonstrated that the representation of Europe and the meaning of European citizenship for Italian elementary school children is based on spontaneous notions.

Probably, we would add, this happens not only because the first scholastic notions regarding Europe are introduced when children are 10-11 year olds, but also because the context of family and individuals are currently only aware of painful competition from the interweaving and mixing up of information networks, products, companies and states promoted by the European Union.

As a starting point then, to take these changes - spread out in social and cultural life – and to examine the effects produced in the education of the subject, is, for us pedagogists, the challenge which becomes the educative and didactic research equipped to respond to the questions coming out of today's society. The phenomena are those linked to globalization concerning economic transformation as well as psychological transformation, and political as well as social change.

---

<sup>1</sup> Article 1-2 and 1-3 of Title I of the European Constitution.

In other words, it is thought that the events characteristic of the modern world impose on didactic and pedagogic thought, the necessity to take into account the complexity and change which distinguishes today's society on a number of levels: relational, informative, economical, communication etc; perhaps also cognitive ones, without avoiding the educational problem of the sense and function of the basic categories of a post-modern society (flexibility, complexity, etc...) in relation to the processes of teaching and learning.

In particular, examining the complex setting which is the backdrop to the phenomena connected to the discomfort characteristic of our society, of a few social groups, but also of education - university in particular - has made it necessary to investigate and reflect on the formative effects produced by the phenomena which shake contemporary society.

As we have noted in recent research, if globalisation is to be understood as a reality reinforced by interchange, information, economic and financial activities and interests (and opportunities for emerging countries for interaction with developing countries and with the global market, as noted by Jurgen Habermas), it also needs to be understood as a possible new challenge for today's education and to interpret the efforts of the people seeking to construct an identity, a model of self, a real horizon of self for the individual in question (as Z. Bauman says in *Voglia di Comunita*, Laterza, Bari, 2003).

From the points identified in this sphere, not only does the necessity to break down the walls of separatism and selfishness as well as the need to open spacious horizons onto the world of new learning, new work skills, of living and being together, emerge, but it is also necessary to offer instruments of legal-convention to those who are learning so that they can productively operate within the tightly-woven web of the rights and duties put forward by advanced societies.

Going on from this, it would be appropriate to bring up the reform of the university education system.

Italian university reform faces a thousand difficulties in application, compared to what is happening on the impulse of the European Union regarding a common European space of higher education. That is, where common national identities and interests can be reciprocally understood and also reinforced to the benefit of Europe, the students and on a more general level, the European citizens benefit.

This aim – central to the Bologna Process since 1999 - also puts forward a question; what is the Europe of the future and what is the future for Europe? Perhaps the answer can be found by starting to give a voice to the youth. Such an occasion arose at the end of March, when our Roman University turned its attention to the European Youth Summit promoted by the European Commission on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.<sup>2</sup> The event which was hosted at the University of Roma Tre's Faculty of Letters and Philosophy and Political Science involved young people from all countries of the Union and took place parallel to the Summit of the European Council in Berlin, where President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso, Prime Minister Romano Prodi, and the president of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Poetering were all present.

It was the natural then to take such an occasion of celebration, in which our university had a hands-on role, to present research which we had carried out "on campus" and which we would also like to present now; one which will have repercussions on our future scientific thought.

This research started off from the thinking that young people can effectively contribute to the fate of a united Europe by increasingly involving them in a tangible way; with participation in public, social and European cultural life.

From school to university, through student mobility programmes; from research to employment outlets in sectors with high innovational content, through programmes wanting to put into practice the aims of the Lisbon Process, the youth must represent a strategic resource for the growth of Europe.

---

<sup>2</sup> On 25 March 1957 the institutive treaties of the European Union were signed. These gave life to the process of European unification.

But it is necessary on this point to underline that in the world of globalisation, it is not the youth that represent the future of Europe, but it is a united Europe; the European project in itself which represents the future of the youth.

Outside of the European Union, without this large project of political civilization, of overcoming nationalisms, the European youth risk not having much of a future.

Therefore, it must be asked whether in recent years, the Italian university system has managed to cast the students into a European dimension within the different university disciplines. In this way I would like to underline that much has been done to elevate the European literacy rate of the European youth, and that comparatively speaking, our Italian youths are definitely above-average.

Much still has to be done to improve the quality and efficiency of systems of education and training in order to transform the more or less rigid society of professions into one of competition. In particular, in the liquid modernity, the individual citizen must acquire a cognitive method which he or she puts at the forefront of the “new” and which promises to change not only its working activity, but also the entire individual and social existence.

“L’Europa della Conoscenza”, or “the Europe of Knowledge/Awareness” is widely recognised as an unsubstitutable factor of social and human growth and as a space of commitment to confer on the citizens the necessary skills. It is also necessary to confront the challenges of the new millenium as well as to reinforce the importance of shared values and membership of a common cultural and social space.

This programme, obviously ambitious, pronounces well-defined challenges through the Bologna Process in order to realize changes in the fields of training and education, with the aim to construct a European space of higher education by 2010:

Romano prodi said:

“ I have no doubt as to what will be a dominant trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The increase of planetary economic integration. Dare I say that the unity of world-economy will go forward at an unstoppable rate. The main challenge in front of us in the new millenium is to construct a government of these tumultuous processes a globalisation of politics which knows how to balance out economic globalisation. This is the task at hand: Europe must become an answer and a model.”

Romano Prodi’s opinion, which appeared in the Italian daily “La Repubblica” on the 5 January 2000, lends itself well to introducing the thinking on one of the challenges of the third millenium and precisely that which calls to the forefront education and the role of educational know-how – the crux of the different “educational sciences”.

Therefore, comparisons between education systems both emerging from this symposium as well as those coming out of the need to evaluate the performances of different education systems are very welcome. The latter being a typical necessity of our times, linked to the renewed centrality of the education systems in the context of the “Society of Knowledge” (as noted amongst others by Edgar Morin in his “La testa ben fatta” or “the well-made head”)

Above all, the elaboration of *ad hoc* methodological instruments in order to understand the dynamics which are concluded between systems and within these systems are welcome, especially in a society characterised by a multiplicity of cultures which interact in all institutional spaces.

In order to highlight some of these aspects and after the emphasis given by my colleague Professor Cavalieri, I would like to present the part of the research which - with the aim of analysing a few elements of the current state of the Bologna process useful for an international comparison - reported on something on a national scale. That is, Italian university students' perception of the changes introduced in the system of higher education. We propose to put forward a thesis which we believe to be valid for both all the countries of Europe and those about to become European countries, concerning the necessity to have a good level of information, diffusion and adhesion to whatever planned reform or reform that is in progress in order to put into practice the reform in question.

The anticipated reforms of the Bologna Process risk consistently encountering difficulties concerning their realization. This is if the users do not recognise it, and what's more, if methods are not identified and instruments not made to acknowledge the international sharing (in the Brunerian sense of the word) of values and of the quality of training and education.

Our aim was to measure the perception and awareness of the importance of a socio-cultural educational space for the Europe of knowledge and awareness.

For the gathering and analysis of data, after documentary research, a mixed questionnaire was expanded on and given to a sample of first year students taken from a few faculties of the University of Roma Tre (Educational Science, Architecture, Engineering, Letters and Philosophy) as well in the Psychology faculty at the University of Aquila.

The questionnaire, produced for first-year university students in both humanities and non-humanities faculties is definitely also suitable for high school leavers about to take the state exam and for new school leavers about to go into higher education. It is also a rapid but effective testing ground for those in their three-year university career, aware of their own gaps and wanting to reappropriate themselves of lost knowledge.

The very subject of the questionnaire pre-supposes the confluence of different problematic areas, amongst which there is the European context itself (the Europe of the 27, the "elasticity" of the borders, the knowledge of objectives); the dynamic between nation states and the European Union (the European space and the "educational sovereignty", new and old nation states, the subject of competition versus collaboration); the role of educational comparison in the era of globalisation; let alone the prospects of secondary school in the European discourse (the legitimacy of differentiation criteria, the passage from structures to aims, the role of teachers); all aspects which constitute the scholastic level in which the specific cultural, social features of each country are reflected.

In essence, the research highlights:

- First, the establishment, before the draft of university reform, of the ever-decreasing capabilities of students regarding their studies and the available uses of their studies in the European context.
- Second, the conviction that within the missing curricular link between secondary school and university lies one of the reasons which causes the drifting of basic knowledge and half-knowledge (there is a marked interruption in didactic curricular which comes out again in the interruption in teaching methods - between school and university, which not only takes for granted basic skills, but which also does not always verify the students' point of departure nor take into consideration the lacunae to be filled).
- In short, the triennial degree and the reform which is happening of Italian schooling intends to safeguard an educational experience which ensures tight contiguity. This is as well as producing collaboration between school and university, allowing maximisation and advancement of skills, not their weakening and loss.

From these reflections we can see a need for "therapeutic" intervention, immediate and tangible, in which our research is interested. Interventions which not only act as links in continuity of knowledge and of half knowledge, but which above all have the boldness to invite reflection on those areas in which the questionnaire, expanded during our research, itself has been able to reveal strong discomforts and large incompetences between students.