

Carrying out studies on competence-based training for career development – introduction to the special issue

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Everybody knows that Europe is in crisis. Not a general crisis, or maybe yes, but what we mean here is that we have been suffering from an economic crisis since 2008 at least; and even today, despite some signs of improvement, we cannot say we are totally safe given that almost everybody is struggling to find or to keep a job. In this situation, should we be still talking about competence, training and development?

With the changes related to the invention and the introduction of new technological devices (Weatherbee, 2010) – Internet above all (Torkzadeh, 2002) – to the economic crisis (Utting, Varghese Buchholz and Razavi, 2012) and to different patterns of social life (Tyler, 2002), our modern society has been defined as *information society* (Webster, 2002), *knowledge society* (Hargreaves, 2003) and even *liquid society* (Bauman, 2000, 2011). Do these labels have a meaning or are they a way of hiding phenomena rather than defining them? In any case, they tend to be taken seriously, at least from the point of view of research. As for the relationship between the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the world of education and training, it is interesting to note the existence today, as a sign of the times, of the Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society.

In this framework, such a concept as *lifelong learning* is considered to be important for both work and personal development (Sartori and Ceschi, 2013). In fact, lifelong learning is traditionally considered to be an appropriate response to changes (Gibbs, 2007) and a key lever for adaptation and development (Smidt and Sursock, 2011), both individual and organizational (Roland, 2010; Western, 2010), since it can be the means by which people go on learning new things (Field, 2006), acquiring competences (Shandler, 2000), making meaning, gaining wisdom and expertise (Jarvis, 2009), and adapting to different conditions (International Labour Organization, 2000), developing while growing (Commission of the European Communities, 2007).

Lifelong learning is a theoretical and practical concept; it refers to the idea that it is both possible and necessary for human beings to keep on getting information, knowledge and competences throughout their lives for either personal or professional reasons (adaptation, improvement, development, etc.). It involves such education and training activities as reading, studying, attending lessons, working, practicing at home or other places, travelling, gaining experiences of different kind (off and on-line), and, according to the concept of *reflective learning*, reflecting on them (Schön, 1991; Moon, 2004). In fact, according to a classical definition, lifelong learning is a process through which individuals acquire information, knowledge and competences in a range of formal and informal settings, throughout life. It may occur as part of schooling, education, training, personal development (Brookfield, 1986; Grant and Stanton, 1998) or workplace-based learning (Billet, 2011).

It is therefore clear that competence is a key concept within the general lifelong learning perspective. From a theoretical point of view, over the years the term competence has been defined in several ways (Gelman and Greeno, 1989; Elbers, 1991; Ellström, 1997, Mulder, 2007), depending on the context and the perspectives adopted (Fischer, Bullock, Rotenberg, and Raya, 1993), while practically both scholars and laymen acknowledge that it is something related to learning, training, work and organizations (Spencer and Spencer, 1993): Competences are precisely those personal characteristics (a set of knowledge, abilities and attitudes) that allow people to be effective in the workplace and in everyday life. In this sense, being competent in something can be considered synonymous with capability (in that they both comprise knowledge, skills and experience). Competences can be learned (McClelland, 1973; Nuthall, 1999). That is the reason why they tend to be taught through education and training activities dedicated to people working in organizations and living in our modern society (Raven and Stephenson, 2001).

In a lifelong learning perspective and maintaining the focus on the concept of competence, we can define career development as the lifelong process of managing learning, work, leisure, and transitions in order to move towards a personally determined and evolving preferred future. In educational development, career development provides a person, often a student, with a focus for selecting a career. In organizational development, research in career development looks at how individuals manage their careers within and between organizations, and how organizations structure the career progress of their members. In today's world, more employers are looking for ways to facilitate career development and encourage their employees to drive their own careers.

In this Special Issue, we want to link the concepts of competence, training and career development by articles from different countries. Activities such as training and development dedicated to adult employees and workers aim to promote learning based on the analysis of their professional needs (Sartori, Tacconi and Caputo, 2015). Different kinds of learning are considered to be promoted by different kinds of training activities and would allow the development of different kinds of competences. In this regard, the EU's 'Education and Training 2020' work program is a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training that builds on its predecessor, the 'Education and Training 2010' work program, and provides common strategic objectives for Member States, including a set of principles for achieving these objectives, as well as common working methods with priority areas for each periodic work cycle (Mulder, Weigel and Collins, 2007; Mulder, 2007; Weigel and Mulder, 2006).

The main aim of the framework is to support Member States in further developing their educational and training systems. These systems should better provide the means for all citizens to realize their potentials, as well as ensure sustainable economic prosperity and employability. The framework should take into consideration the whole spectrum of education and training systems from a lifelong learning perspective, covering all levels and contexts (including non-formal and informal learning) and trying to achieve the following four strategic objectives:

1. *Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality*: progress is needed in the implementation of lifelong learning strategies, the development of national qualifications frameworks linked to the European Qualifications Framework and more flexible learning pathways. Mobility should be expanded and the European Quality Charter for Mobility should be applied;

2. *Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training*: all citizens need to be able to acquire key competences and all levels of education and training need to be made more attractive and efficient;

3. *Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship*: education and training should enable all citizens to acquire and develop skills and competences needed for their employability and foster further learning, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue. Educational disadvantage should be addressed through high quality inclusive and early education;

4. *Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training*: the acquisition of transversal competences by all citizens should be promoted and the functioning of the knowledge triangle (education-research-innovation) should be ensured (Sartori, Favretto, and Ceschi, 2013; Ceschi, Dorofeeva, and Sartori, 2014; Sartori and Scalco, 2014). Partnerships between enterprises and educational institutions as well as broader learning communities with civil society and other stakeholders should be promoted.

A set of principles are also provided that should be observed when working towards the objectives mentioned above. This includes the implementation of European cooperation in education and training from a lifelong learning perspective (Mulder, Weigel and Collins, 2007; Mulder, 2007; Weigel and Mulder, 2006).

Against this background, the first article of the Special Issue deals with the career decision-making competence, a construct which is needed to be kept in mind when explaining why some people take personal care of their career development while others do not seem to take it seriously (Ceschi, Philips, Costantini and Sartori, 2016). The term "decision" refers to the entire process of selecting an alternative by evaluating outcomes. According to Stoner (1968), the decision is the process of

identifying and selecting a solution for solving a specific problem. For McGrew and Wilson (1982) a decision is much more than the end of a state, but a dynamic process known also as decision-making. A more completed definition is given by Hastie and Dawes (2010), who consider a decision to be a response to a situation where the decision maker is able to evaluate more alternatives and to create expectations regarding possible outcomes (Sartori, Ceschi and Costantini, 2015).

The second article deals with the concept of VET (Vocational Education and Training), that is to say education and training for work. In its technical sense, education is the formal process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills, customs and values from one generation to another, for example by schooling. On the other hand, training is the acquisition of competences as a result of the teaching of vocational or practical skills and knowledge, for example in the workplace. The article reports a German experience of a competence-based VET (Bohne, Eicker and Haseloff, 2016).

Given the variety in definitions, Weigel and Mulder (2006) and Mulder (2007) examined the question whether there exists any coherence in the concept of competence in the context of VET development in England, France, Germany and Netherlands. Therefore, in line with the before-mentioned German article and with considerations by Weigel and Mulder, the third article deals with the development of vocational competences during secondary education from a career development perspective. It cites an English experience (Behle, 2016).

With the fourth article, we move to Lithuania and we pass from school to the workplace (Tutlys, 2016), while the fifth article describes a study based on the construct of career adaptability (Bocciardi, Caputo, Fregonese, Langher and Sartori, 2016).

The last article is from Iran: The author of this paper carried out a study in order to find out how closely students career intentions are affected by their entrepreneurial knowledge (Farani, 2016).

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