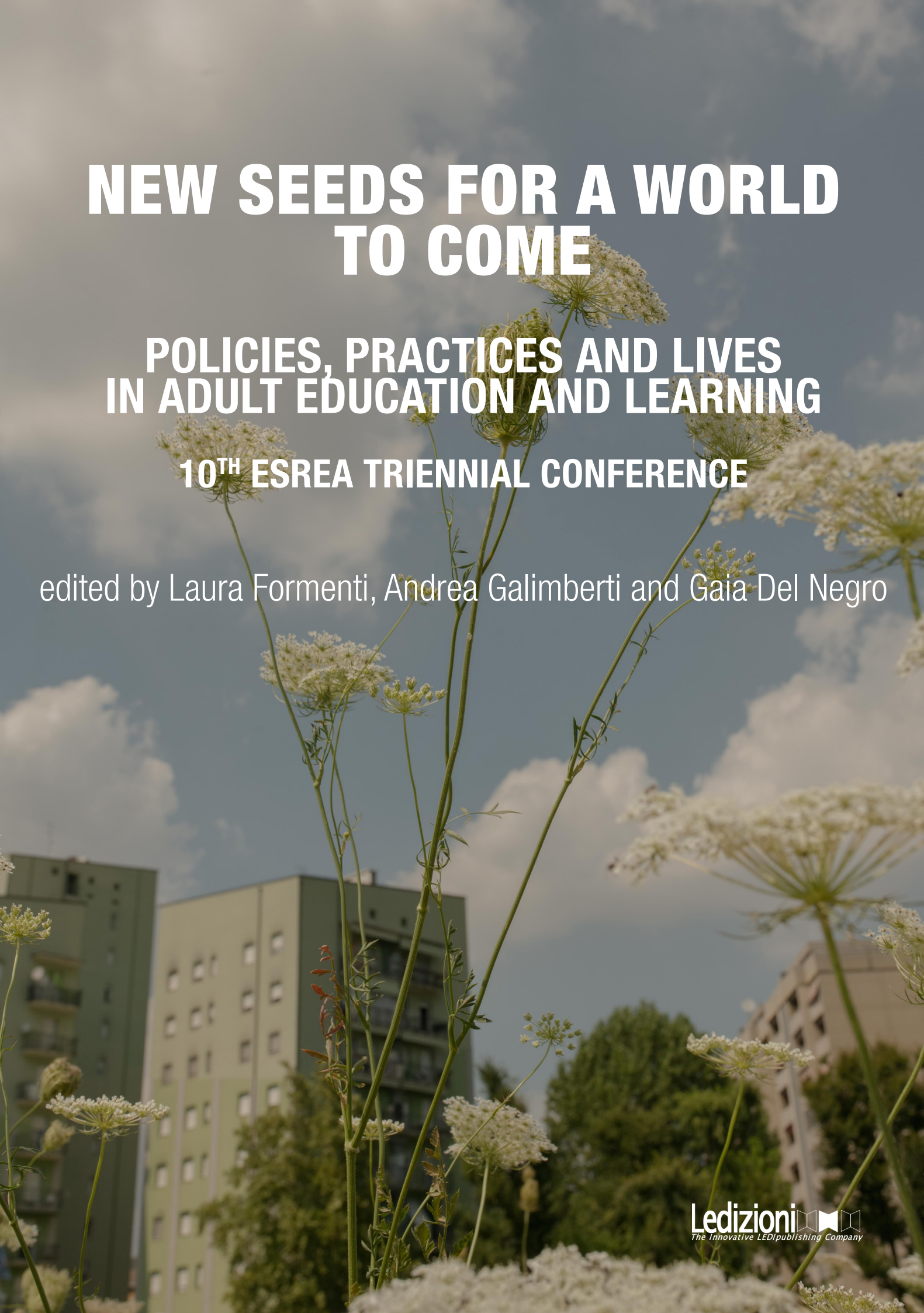

NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME

POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING

10TH ESREA TRIENNIAL CONFERENCE

edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti and Gaia Del Negro

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The Innovative LEDIpublishing Company

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Proceedings of the 10th ESREA Triennial Conference
University of Milano Bicocca,
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edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti
and Gaia Del Negro

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Responding to Changes in Workplace Demands and Learning Styles: Challenges and Benefits of Work- Integrated Learning for Student Development in Higher Education

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Abstract - The aim of this presentation was to build and expand on a multiple-case study research conducted collaboratively by four convenors of the ESREA "Workplace Life and Learning" network in 2021. The research was designed as an opportunity for the contributors to examine and contrast their approaches for enhancing employability capabilities of students. The three key themes were discussed: (1) Work-integrated learning (WIL) and the development of identity, (2) WIL and the process of reflection, (3) WIL and transfer of learning.

KEYWORDS: Work-integrated learning, generation Y, higher education, reflective practice, employability.

PREMISE

Work-integrated learning (WIL) embeds a broad range of learning practices encompassing (1) systematic training (e.g., apprenticeship), (2) structured work experience (e.g., field experience, internships), and (3) institutional partnerships (e.g., service learning) (Sattler et al., 2011; Stirling et al., 2016) that are designed to provide students with exposure to 'real-world' work experience by deliberately integrating theory with practice (Patrick et al., 2009). Among the benefits of integrating curricula with workplace experience are deepening students' knowledge and understanding, enhancing their work-related capabilities, and developing a sense of their professional identity (Cooper et al., 2010) and learning experiences (Patrick et al., 2008) as well as exposing the student self (Barnett et al., 2001).

Preparing a new generation of students to face the demands of the workplace, including workload, job insecurity, and perceived job content (Zeinolabedini et al., 2022) has become an increasing concern for higher education faculty. But how to approach curriculum development in a way that both appeals to different learning styles of students and allow them to reflect on competencies required by the new work environment? Even though there is evidence that certain disciplines in higher education (e.g., nursing, education, and engineering) have greater experience with WIL (Patrick et al., 2008), the rationale for concentrating on WIL practices stems from limited research studies focusing on the interpretation of the data regarding the benefits of WIL to students' learning, competency development and employability across national contexts.

The aim of this presentation was to build and expand on a multiple-case study research conducted collaboratively by four convenors of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults "Workplace Life and Learning" (WLL) network in 2021. The research was designed as an opportunity for the contributors from various countries, including Cyprus, France, Italy, and the United States to examine and contrast their approaches for enhancing employability capabilities of students to WIL, guided by the two following questions:

1) What are the ways academics from different higher education institutions and countries are approaching and using WIL in their curricula?

2) How are different WIL approaches benefiting students' learning, competency development and employability?

The recognition that learning occurs within the workplace and is associated with organisational and individual development is not new (Bond & Garrick, 1999). According to Stevens et al. (2001), workplaces are structured to enrich learning experiences and provide opportunities for the development of the capacity of individuals. Indeed, WIL may contribute to the development of students through enhancing capabilities to identify and act upon new opportunities, enriching and expanding research abilities and critical thinking.

The need for Gen Y students to be prepared for a complex world of workplaces requires academics to work on curriculum on an ongoing basis and to consider WIL opportunities as part of curriculum design. This is because this generation discovered video games before anyone else and have a world view characterized by more individualism than previous generations. They also have a lesser attachment to social rules and this also in the workplace (Dalmas & Lima, 2016). The development of new teaching methods, therefore, is among the major challenges that higher education faces (Kozminski, 2011) to remain relevant in the current fast-changing and knowledge-driven business landscape (Avolio et al., 2019).

The curriculum development is an ongoing social activity, where learning can emerge from continuous interactions with students and milieu (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed additional changes within teaching and learning practices (Lokhtina & Tyler, 2021) that had an impact on the design of the material and the practices that academics use to support students to make a smooth transition from a higher education institution to a workplace. In addition, WIL can contribute to the development of a learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) among students and potential employers through different activities that can help them construct new (social) artifacts of knowledge and skills. WIL embeds a broad range of learning practices encompassing (1) systematic training (e.g., apprenticeship), in which the workplace is the central place of learning, (2) structured work experience (e.g., field experience, internships), in which students are familiarized with the world of work, and (3) institutional partnerships (e.g., service learning). Examining the main themes associated with the application of WIL approaches in private higher education institutions through a multiple case study approach will enable a reader to have a close insight into WIL approaches as part of curriculum development and the impact and benefits of WIL for Gen Y's learning.

INTRODUCTION OF THE CASES

Methodologically, the research approach that was chosen by the authors fits in the tradition of multiple case study (Yin, 1998). In multiple case studies, research data can be treated cumulatively aiming at exploring real-life and contemporary bounded systems through detailed and in-depth data collection (Creswell, 2013). Multiple cases are considered as multiple experiments (Yin, 1998). The chosen approach was also exploratory in nature. Exploratory case studies typically concern cases where there is a need to explore situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003). In exploratory case studies, researchers look inductively at patterns and differences across cases that lead to the identification of important themes.

Case studies are a very common methodological approach used in WIL research because of the highly contextualized nature of such programs (Coll & Chapman, 2000). Multiple-case study design also offers the flexibility of looking at different types of information, increasing opportunities for having a deeper understanding of the key explorative themes, making the evidence generated from a multiple case study be strong and reliable (Gustafsson, 2017).

The following table (Table 1) presents a high-level summary of the cases that were brought by each contributor.

Table 1. Overview of the Cases

	Case #1 Cyprus	Case #2 Italy	Case #3 France	Case #4 United States
Context and Sample	**Audience:** final-year undergraduate students **Program of study**: Hospitality and Tourism Management **Institution:** Private university, the Republic of Cyprus. **Language of instruction:** English	**Audience:** Master's students **Program of study**: Human Resource Development **Institution:** public university, Italy **Language of instruction**: Italian	**Audience:** Master's students including **Program of study:** Sciences of Education **Institution:** public university, France **Language of instruction**: French	**Audience:** Master's students **Program of study**: Adult Learning and Leadership **Institution:** private university, United States **Language of instruction:** English
WIL intervention/ Process	**Project-based learning** Plan and organise a fundraising event to develop professional identity and critical skills	**Traineeship** Use exploration of HRD websites dedicated to online assessment of soft skills to develop critical thinking and reflexivity on assumptions	**Apprenticeship** Use apprenticeship experience to develop the ability to question one's competencies and approach to work	**Action Learning** Work with a real-world client using an action learning process
Underlying Theories	Experiential learning, Identity formation in practice, Reflective Practice	Transformative learning, Reflective practice, social constructionism	Vocational didactic approach to the analysis of activity Reflective Practice	Action Learning Transformative learning Reflective Practice

Below, the key themes will be presented and discussed.

THEME # 1: WIL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY

Self-efficacy, self-confidence, openness, and appreciation for others, these are the types of growth that students reported experiencing across cases. Working in teams and sharing perspective with others were important catalysts to their perception of development. Across cases, there was clear evidence that working in small groups helped students gain insights into their own contribution, which in turn developed their confidence to voice their own opinion and engage with the team. At the same time, there was an interesting tension between the students' aspiration to become clearer about their identity and their need to protect their existing relationships and sense of belonging. How can WIL better recognize this tension and what are the implications for teamwork and group discussions which are at the heat of WIL design? Recent research by Sanojca and Triby (forthcoming) highlights how new technologies and artificial intelligence require less socialization at work. In this context, a key moment in the construction of one's professional identity is more likely to be found in the intimacy of the subject, whereas previously it was formed through forming relationships within the organization. How can WIL recognize and respond to this emerging trend? What kinds of design may help students become more aware of their personal values? How can rapid shifts and changes in today's world become opportunities for a deeper reflection on one's knowledge and personal values?

THEME # 2: WIL AND THE PROCESS OF REFLECTION

Across cases, important learning outcomes were linked to the opportunity offered to the students to step back and reflect during their experience. As we went deeper into the cases, we found that both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1991) had an impact on them. Reflection-in-action was experienced as an opportunity to pause, step back and make adjustments in real time to individual or teamwork while reflection-on-action helped strengthen their level of critical consciousness on their goals and processes. Our cases show a range of reflective interventions for WIL such as feedback (e.g., formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998)), journaling, reflective dialogue (Gray, 2007). Reflection is also enhanced when faculty members act as learning coaches and facilitate the reflective process through reflective and meaning-making questions (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007). However, we also wondered how students' new appreciation for reflection would endure once facing the reality of the workplace where it is often expected to "follow the flow", make quick decisions and not "waste time". In addition, there is a natural tendency among many students to jump to the task and get it done. How can we better help them turn their new appreciation for stepping back and taking perspective into a lifelong capacity?

THEME # 3: WIL AND TRANSFER OF LEARNING

Students graduating from our programs usually have a high rate of employability. Yet it is our view that employability is not only a quantitative measure and should be linked to their capacity to transfer learning and apply their skills to the workplace demands. In our research, there was evidence that students saw immediate applicability of what they learned. Complex problem-solving, the ability to challenge and reframe assumptions, critical thinking, these were examples of the skills students recognized as valuable for their professional future. However, we also noticed a strong sense of confidence about their capacity to apply what they learned for future employment. Even though organizations value problem solving and critical thinking, we are also aware that transferring these types of skills should not be seen as a taken-for-granted process (Cree & Macaulay, 2000): competence transferability is as much a theoretical as a pragmatic issue. How can we account more in our work about the risk of creating too much "perception of self-efficacy"? Transfer of learning often needs meta-competences: abilities to frame the acquired content/attitude in new contexts and this may involve transformations, negotiations, struggles etc. How is it possible to foster this dimension in WIL settings based in higher education settings? How can we then prepare them to transfer and sustain the capacities they developed during their WIL experience?

CONCLUSION: WIL IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

The Covid-19 pandemic generated interesting questions as to whether and how WIL could be implemented in hybrid or blended formats combining asynchronous and synchronous learning. All of us were affected by the pandemic and had to experiment new solutions (e.g., the Italian case was completely re-designed as an online version). We had no alternative but to acknowledge and embrace the central role of technology and its impact on our settings and the relationships among students. We also noticed that our students belonged to a generation which has spent its entire life in the age of smartphones and are comfortable journeying through the digital sphere. Yet too often, many students do not question the functioning of the digital world and take what it offers for granted. This led us to realize that we have the opportunity to play a critical role in developing our students' "digital literacy" (Hartley, 2017). How can we create the conditions of a meta-reflective space helping our students see more of the hidden agenda offered by the digital world and develop their capacity for critical reflection? The pandemic will also likely affect employability dynamics. How can we make WIL more relevant for the post-pandemic workplace (e.g., networking, personal development, identity formation) and help

our students increase self-confidence and resilience in difficult times? More longitudinal studies exploring long-term effects on work transitions and career benefits will be needed too in order to understand structural changes and ways to support our students.

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