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**Life Skills and Entrepreneurship: Educational Pathways**

Edited by Vanna Boffo and Mauro Palumbo

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# Table of Contents

## **4 Editorial**

Vanna Boffo, Mauro Palumbo

### RESEARCHES

## **6 Entrepreneurship: an ongoing discussion**

Vanna Boffo

## **11 Mutual understanding into action: intergeneration and territory in a work placement schemes for school students**

Silvia Luraschi, Laura Formenti

## **16 Coming to terms with entrepreneurship: The REACT project (Reinforcing Entrepreneurship in Adults through Communication Technologies)**

Massimiliano Costa, Paula De Waal

## **22 The NOP work-based learning mode: identifying and strengthening Life Skills in accordance with guidance for studies and work**

Cristina Formiconi, Elisa Attili, Paola Nicolini

## **27 Lifelong Learning Support Services for academic integration of students of international protection**

Fausta Scardigno

### PRACTICES

## **32 Digital technologies, language learning using smartphones. The BYOD project**

Carmelina Maurizio

## **37 Entrepreneurship of adult learners when staking their lives**

Mariadaniela Sfarra

## **42 Book Reviews**

*Federighi P. (ed.), Educazione in età adulta.* Gaia Gioli

# Entrepreneurship: an ongoing discussion

Vanna Boffo<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords**  
Entrepreneurship, Innovation,  
Education

## **Abstract**

*This text discusses a theme little debated in the field of adult education, namely, the dimension of entrepreneurship as a reflective category for life, not a skill, but an orientation, a capacity that summarizes one aspect of a human being but is also a course for action and a trait of value.*

## **1. Introduction**

According to the Treccani dictionary of Italian, “entrepreneurship” is the quality of people who are adventurous, of those who accept to experience the unknown, of those willing to “put themselves on the line”. Over the centuries, pedagogy and education have reflected little on this quality, this category which blends with other terms that in our Western and globalized world have spread out with varying fortunes – creativity, innovation, but also the relationship, the connection, and communication. In this sense, we might say that entrepreneurship can be considered a personal trait, but also a skill/capacity. All of us are enterprising, to a greater or lesser extent, however, it is still possible to train and educate ourselves in entrepreneurship, to acquire the ability to be enterprising. Beyond these terms/concepts, we then have values that derive from the categories indicated: trust, authenticity, gratuitousness, and giving. The thought arises that we might make a leap, from entrepreneurship to giving, passing via innovation and the relationship. It is these values that will lead us back to the importance of reflecting on entrepreneurship within adult education. How much entrepreneurship do we encounter when talking about issues related to the world of adults, to the worlds of work or learning?

Not only values but also virtues: enterprising is the person who does not remain inside his/her circle; we might say, is the person who abandons his/her point of view and focuses on others, but also on other places, who heads towards difference, towards diversity. Resourceful is the person who stops “to take measure of him/herself”, and in fact, goes *beyond*, with courage, with audacity, with a sense of risk when it comes to the new. It would seem that *entrepreneurship* is an ancient virtue, according to Enzo Bianchi (2010), today once again to the fore, to certify the change of pace that education in adulthood ought to attain. Because unquestionably, education and training, also in adulthood, mean building skills for life, to feel good, to avoid succumbing in the face of a “new” which engulfs those unable to adapt to it (Bollas, 2018). Therefore, we would need pathways to become enterprising, to prepare ourselves for entrepreneurship, to investigate what it really means to reach the ability to build, improve, change, transform and go beyond ourselves (Kolb, 1984).

We might think of entrepreneurship as a sense of dislocation, a change in perspective, and we all know how difficult it is for adults to change their point of view and to transform certainties into *possibilities* without losing their reference points and inner security. Looking *beyond* and thinking *beyond* is a prerogative of the paths of reflectivity and creativity. In fact, divergence, which is a departure from the norm, creates difference and diversity

# Mutual understanding into action: intergeneration and territory in a work placement schemes for school students

Silvia Luraschi and Laura Formenti<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

Systemic Pedagogy,  
Intergenerationality,  
Territory

## Abstract

*This article presents a work-related learning project in which different generations were engaged in research on sensobiographic memories of the territory to discover how places have changed and how to activate entrepreneurship as a precondition to action within a particular context.*

## 1. A systemic redefinition: mutual understanding as premise for entrepreneurship

*"I learned that you are never too small to make a difference."*

Greta Thumberg

This article describes an experience in which the protagonists were not adults who studying in accord with classic categories of *Lifelong Learning*; instead, they were learning through an intergenerational relationship between youth and senior citizens. The objective was to stimulate reflection on the nature of *life skills* acquired in a "natural" way, that is, through "normal" interaction between *learners* of different ages in a particular context. Adult education today is measured in epochal changes, even in the relationship between the ages of life: in recent weeks, the media has highlighted the theme of entrepreneurship in relation to *Greta Thumberg*, a fifteen-year-old Swedish girl who skipped school one day a week in order to sensitize the world population to climate change (Turro, 2018). This young activist astonished the UN General Assembly by her courage and the maturity of her words at the International Conference on Climate Change (<https://cop24.gov.pl/>). An example, this certainly was, of entrepreneurship across generations. But it is also something that decision-makers seem unaware of, according to Greta.

Common sense tells us that the entrepreneur is someone who knows how to take initiative, to develop new undertakings, to act by seizing opportunities and consenting to take risks. Being enterprising implies qualities of courage and independent thought, overcoming fear and finding the strength to act. However, this definition undervalues of key dimensions of enterprise, those which are of a systemic, epistemological, relational and evolutionary nature. Entrepreneurship arises from knowledge within a context, from relationships we have with objects, with other people, with ourselves, and it evolves over time in a non-linear way, much like the evolution of our physical world, our relations, our environment both social and symbolic. The same person may appear enterprising and capable of acting within certain contexts, relationships or occasions, but then prove utterly inept in others. Like all the qualities expressed through action, this involves a dimension of power: entrepreneurship and interdependence are tightly connected.

It becomes interesting, therefore, to treat this subject in a systemic and critical light, in order to set up educational contexts that generate entrepreneurship, i.e. that open up possibilities in the relationships between people and not inside them. From a systemic point of view, education and learning concern communication and interknowing, i.e. the possibility for an entire system to learn (symmathesy, see Bateson, 2016, 168 et seq.). The construction of intergenerational paths related to a shared understanding with a particular context generates entrepreneurship as an effect that emerges, not one that is anticipated or planned. This concept was behind the work-related learning project conducted during the 2017-18 school year, in which more than one hundred participants of various ages participated, all in the role of researchers and learners. Fifty male and female students representing two-thirds of a senior secondary school, fifty observers aged 65 to 79, two teachers, and four researchers from the University of Milan-Bicocca.

A system of relationships, therefore, generated entrepreneurship on multiple levels, through a methodology that abandoned classic “instruction” and planning to give prominence to the capacity of each person involved to act. Enactive pedagogy, based on a learning model that is ecological (Bateson, 1972), incorporated (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991) and transformative (Formenti, 2017), frames knowledge as a process that shapes the world – ourselves, others, and the environment – by means of a reciprocal game of constraints and opportunities (Ceruti, 2009). Today, many studies in psychology, neurology and pedagogy (Contini, Fabbri & Manuzzi 2006) underline the circular relationship between perception and action:

When I direct my eyes towards what I think is a tree, I receive an image of something green. But this image is not “outside”. Believing this is already a form of superstition, because the image is a creation of mine, the product of many circumstances, including my own preconceptions. (Bateson & Bateson, 1989: 87)

In this vision, skills become concrete, corporeal, and situational, triumphing over a reductive vision of entrepreneurship that sees it tied only to the world of work: the sense of *agency*, confidence in the ability to make decisions and take risks, as well as reflection, are dimensions that cut across all real-world contexts. Accordingly, the objective is to generate concrete experiences of interconnection and co-construction of knowledge, to contextualize the imperative *lifelong* – a guiding principle for the design of educational systems in Europe (ECC, 2006) – in the name of equity, inclusion, and social cohesion in all sectors of the population and among different age groups (Alberici, 1999).

In this respect, we can see work-related learning as a bridge between the *world of education* and the *world of life* (Vitale, Formenti & Calciano, 2017), drawing inspiration for a broader *lifelong* perspective (Dozza, 2009) that embraces possible future scenarios (Dozza & Ulivieri, 2016) as well and recognizes limits imposed by a dominant adult narration that entraps youth in an idealization of the past (Serres, 2018). *Putting histories into motion* means literally revitalizing the connections between generations, understanding contexts, learning how to learn, and the ability to embark upon new courses of action.

## 2. Sensotra: an incorporated methodology to generate mutual understanding and agency

Sensotra is a research project funded by the European Community with the goal to investigate transformations in our relationship to the environment from a sensory, multi-generational, and technological viewpoints (<http://www.uef.fi/en/web/sensotra/home>), i.e. the ways European citizens of different generations have lived and are living the transformations of their territory. A member of the European team, Formenti, suggested two teachers from the “A. Greppi” secondary school of Monticello Brianza (LC) explore the project’s research method, i.e. sensobiographic walking developed by Järviluoma (2017), to lay a path to be co-designed with students in the role of researchers.

Sensobiographic walking is an incorporated ethnographic method: researchers ask a witness to choose a si-

gnificant place for his/her life and to then follow along the way for a mobile interview; during the walk, the history of the place is invoked through smells, sounds, tactile sensations and other sensory and biographical memories emerging from interaction with the environment. In the initial phase of the project, a series of experiential and reflective workshops (12h) allowed the students to familiarize themselves with the method: while practising it themselves, they questioned the link with the territory and co-developed the guidelines for the sensobiographic walks.

It is interesting to note how, already at this stage, the overcoming of certain fears and resistance was reported subsequently by the children themselves as a learning moment in favour of the relationship and their capacity to act autonomously:

*Ultimately, I learned that if the researcher is moved by a passion, by genuine interest, the subject of the research perceives a calming climate and consequently opens up easily and becomes inclined to greater openness. In this way, we frequently find ourselves in practice deciding for ourselves how to handle certain parts of the project, not knowing how to carry them out correctly for fear of not achieving the required objectives. One of the most beautiful aspects of the research was the relationship I was able to establish with Luigi, the elderly man I interviewed, because even today when we meet on the street in the village we always stop for a chat. (Marco, 17 anni)*

The project's objective was to create a community of practice through a strongly cooperative scheme. The task of the students, divided into territorial groups, was to locate witnesses, arrange the informed consent, record and transcribe the dialogues, shoot and store meaningful images of the route and analyse all the materials to produce a final summary. They were intentionally left free in order to encourage the assumption of responsibility, creativity and the capacity to make choices and take risks.

From a first analysis of material produced, the project seems to have generated careful listening to the other individual, themselves, and the places passed through. This is informal learning, despite the scholastic framework. The perceptions, emotions and stories fostered new stances and the possibility of developing brief experiences of autonomy. A first project outcome was the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge and awareness which opened up fresh possibilities:

*During our walk, Elvira told me what the piazza had been like many years earlier, how it had changed over the course of time, and also expressed some considerations with regard to the people who used to frequent this place and those who come here now. She made reference to what she could see, hear, and touch in the square and in doing so, a nostalgia for the past touched her. She also spoke of her husband and his profession; he had been a paediatrician. Another thing that I found very interesting was her account of the period during the war and the partisans; she recalled that once she was halted by the Germans for some checks and that she "saved" herself thanks to her astuteness. Equally beautiful was the story of her house, an old villa, which, after the war, was used to house the poor. I can therefore sum up by saying that, even if in the beginning I was a little prejudiced, in the end this experience was useful for me because I discovered many things I didn't know about the village where I live, about the period of the war and the old villa near my home. (Maria Cristina, 16 anni)*

These words show the value of intergenerationality in supporting a different perception of our life environment based on listening, curiosity, and historical knowledge. If work-related learning is a training device that favours self-orientation, in this case it promoted an education critical of the territory, which challenged the previous meaning (Mezirow, 2015):

*Through their stories, I understood that the uninformed transformation of a place can not only harm the space figuratively, but also the sensibility of the people who frequented that space. This made me understand the increasingly overwhelming alienation of modern places that are built, not only without taking account of the surrounding environment, but also the function of the building. That's why this experience allowed me to develop a greater sensitivity towards what surrounds me, to have respect for places, since they are not static things but come to life in people's memories. (Patrizia, 18 anni)*

There is still much to be done to create contexts and occasions for intergenerational knowledge, both inside and outside the school, where learners of all ages can learn together to think like adults (Mezirow, 2015). During the project, all the participants were constantly interrogated to give the experience meaning, generating a self-analysis of what they were doing, living disorientating experiences along with authentic and deep dialogues. However, the students often reported that they would have liked a more structured organization, more precise instructions, and more concrete help in the field: autonomy and curiosity still do not appear skills schools actively encourage.



## Notes

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