



Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica
Journal of Theories and Research in Education

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ISSN 1970-2221

Registration at Bologna Law Court no. 7596 on 10th November, 2005

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Promoting a purpose-fostering approach in educators' training through a group-based digital narrative design

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Abstract

Purpose development is a construct that can acquire a major focus in early adulthood when addressing university students' educational process. The article presents an exploratory study run within the course "Educational Technologies" of the three-year degree for social educators' training. The study aims at investigating (1) the impact of service-learning approach on purpose development and (2) the transformative role of a prosocial task developed through a digital storytelling design. Students were, in fact, actively engaged in the design and creation of a short video artefact linked with a specific social context to which they have chosen to apply for their forthcoming internship. The video artefact should represent the outcome of a synergic effort of both class peers and the territory actors, since students were encouraged to interact with community beneficiaries and their educators.

Il costrutto del "purpose development", campo di ricerca presente in letteratura in relazione a tutte le fasce di età, acquista rilevante attenzione per i giovani adulti in formazione e i relativi processi di apprendimento. Il contributo presenta uno studio di approccio esplorativo condotto nell'ambito del corso di "Tecnologie didattiche" del corso di laurea triennale di Scienze dell'Educazione e della Formazione (indirizzo Educatore

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/9572>



Sociale). Lo studio si pone l'obiettivo di (1) individuare l'impatto che l'approccio del corso, basato sul service-learning, ha avuto sul "purpose development" e (2) verificare il ruolo trasformativo di un progetto sviluppato in piccoli gruppi attraverso la strategia del digital storytelling. Gli studenti, coinvolti attivamente nella creazione di un breve video, hanno contestualizzato la propria narrazione in uno specifico ambito sociale scelto per il proprio tirocinio. L'artefatto video viene a configurarsi come il prodotto di uno sforzo sinergico, il gruppo dei pari e gli attori del territorio con cui gli studenti hanno interagito (educatori esperti e beneficiari dei servizi coinvolti).

Parole chiave: purpose development; digital storytelling; service learning; formazione degli educatori sociali; tecnologie educative

Keywords: purpose development; digital storytelling; service learning; social educators' training; educational technologies

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1. Introduction

Purpose development is a construct that can acquire a major focus in early adulthood when addressing university students' educational process. Students may be accompanied and supported in their purpose awareness through different activities such as periodical orientation initiatives and appropriate educational approaches like service-learning.

The phrase service-learning conceptualizes a “course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. 38). Service-learning has been widely used in different formal and informal training contexts and the internship, present in different university degrees, is an example of how the learning process at school or at university can take advantage of an immersive experience within the community. This approach can activate an experiential opportunity for students where they can strengthen the relation with the professional contexts and start a direct contact with services, beneficiaries and different profiles. Degree courses like the three-year degree for Educators currently includes at University of Macerata (Italy) a 300 hours internship to be activated during the second semester of the last year and this is for students the first formal opportunity to test themselves in the exchange with the professional context. The exploratory study run in the academic year 2018-2019, within the course “Educational Technologies”, included a hands-on workshop in order to enrich students' chances in terms of contact with the territory and investigate its value to promote a purpose-fostering approach.

Students were encouraged to be actively engaged in the design and creation of a short video artefact linked with a specific social context in which they have chosen (or would like) to develop their future internship. The general objective of the video project work should be the awareness raising of the territory in respect to a single topic of social interest (e.g. disability and inclusion, etc.) and a specific context (e.g. a community for minors).

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2. Background

The case-study, that will be described in its context of application and design in the paragraphs that follow, had an exploratory rationale and was framed around the concept of purpose development (Araújo, Arantes, Klein, & Grandini, 2014; Bundick, 2011; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Koshy & Mariano, 2011; Lawford & Ramey, 2015) and its connection with service learning approach in education (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Furco, 1996; Moran, 2018).

Damon et al. refer to purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.” (2003, p. 121).

Purpose represents a major construct in every phase of life and most studies focus on school age subjects and the connection between academic performance, career progress and purpose.

University students, enrolled in the first-level university degree, are included in the emerging adulthood phase of life cycle where a specific attention and care of purpose development is advisable:

“Emerging adulthood, commonly understood to encompass the years between late adolescence and early adulthood (roughly, ages eighteen to twenty-five), typically marked by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, revision of life priorities and goals, and possibilities, represents a singularly important life phase in the development of purpose” (Bundick, 2011, p. 90).

Purpose in emerging adults, when addressing university students, become of a paramount importance to exploit students’ planfulness (Skager, 1979) and to work on their “aligned ambitions”, that is, “how much education a student thinks he or she would like to acquire is associated with the type of job he or she would like to have” (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999, p. 80).

Even if the existing heterogeneity in emerging adulthood (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006) makes it difficult to trace a common developmental path, different attributes specific to purpose are suggested by Benard (1991, p. 9) including “healthy expectancies, goal-directedness, success orientation, achievement motivation, educational aspirations, persis-

tence, hopefulness, hardiness, belief in a bright future, a sense of anticipation, a sense of a compelling future, and a sense of coherence”.

Nowadays, those attributes are being affected by the quickly changing labour landscape that can have a deep impact on attainment and career development for students and, specifically, the ones who, in the socio-educational field, will have to face the complexity of society and the cultural changes connected to current social dynamics.

Koshy and Mariano (2011) highlight the need for the educational contexts to offer a comprehensive contribution in fostering purpose development in adolescents and young adults, a perspective shared in several studies on purpose development where a productive educational approach is found in the direction of service learning like in the work by Moran (2018) where she underlines how, through practice and exploratory activities, students could obtain useful inputs from service work and develop a purpose-oriented thinking. Purpose-oriented educational paths, based on service experiences, that is, on “engagement in actions expected to positively impact others and the common good” (Moran, 2018, p. 149), have the advantage to help students with a less mature and with a narrow range of purpose’s attributes to start identifying their life direction. Moreover, all students, also the ones with a clear goal- directedness, when engaged in relationships with experienced educators and/or service beneficiaries, will have the chance to clarify their expectancies, reaching “outcomes with potential far beyond that intended at the outset” (Garlick & Palmer, 2008, p. 86). When Garlick & Palmer refer to university’s ethical intentions and the need to “shape, a shared and committed common good” (p.87) they refer to the need for students to have an impact on the community.

As underlined by Koshy and Mariano (2011) service learning creates the opportunity to have a connection with real life issues towards common social purposes “When young people are able to set prosocial goals and target the steps needed to reach the goal, they can work to change their orientation to the world, and thus attain a commitment to pursuing their life purpose” (p.23). If included as an integral part of the curriculum service-learning activities could help students activate a long term engagement.

Students can be oriented towards service-learning using different methodologies and didactical activities (Felten & Clayton, 2011) and best practices are considered the ones in which the experiences let students reach not only the expected course competences, but when “objects” for the benefit of the community are created (Mortari, 2017).

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The present contribution describe a workshop activity, a group-based digital storytelling, aimed at fostering students' awareness in terms of personal ambitions, course achievement motivation and social goals attainment within a degree course for social educators. The design of a “narrative object” was the strategy to involve students in activating a contact with the territory (with the support of digital technology) and in creating an artefact that could be used by the social services to raise the awareness of citizens about marginalized groups or disadvantaged ones. The narrative approach (Abrahamson, 1998; Selmo, 2015) along with a digital storytelling approach in service learning (Boase, 2013; Petrucco, 2018) has been experimented in different contexts at international level. The relationship between narration and education is widely discussed in the literature (Shank, 1990) touching several emotional dimensions like empathy (Fedeli, 2019) and healing (Anderson & Mack, 2019) which can play a relevant role for the contexts of social services.

3. Context

The reported investigation was run in the A.Y. 2018-2019 within the “Educational Technologies” course scheduled in the third and last year of the university degree “Science of Education” (major “Social Educator”) at University of Macerata (Italy). The course was organized in the first semester and the 48 available hours (8 ECTS) were distributed between a theoretical/descriptive initial section and a hands on workshop/lab section. The overall course objective dealt with the concept of digital technologies and related competences and opportunities at educational/didactical level; students, at the end of the course should have been able to identify, select and properly use digital devices, tools and applications in educational settings. The competence and skills within a digital literacy framework could be applied during the workshop with the development of a video projects in a collaborative way in small groups of 2-3 participants.

Even if the curriculum of the three-year degree course “Science of Education” to train future educators experienced in the recent years a deep structural change thanks to the law 2443, (approved in late 2017 and active from January, 1 2018) which aims at clarifying the profile of the “professional socio-pedagogical educator”, such profile still address a variety of options: the trained educator will, in fact, be able to play his/her role in any formal, informal, and no formal educational context where he/she is intended to facili-

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tate the personal and social development of a target audience who can vary enormously in terms of age (from early childhood and adulthood to elders).

In this landscape it is undeniable that a specific purpose development training path would be appropriate to support students during the years at University by taking into account the fragmentation of the different contexts in which the future educator will be able to work (educational services for inclusion, personal and territory development, equal opportunities, integration of immigrants, etc.).

Given the wide range of profile dimensions, students may enrol at the first year without a precise idea of what their aspirations are and how those aspirations can be connected with the degree course they have chosen. This statement is aligned with data collected at the beginning of the first semester of academic year 2018-2019 through a questionnaire submitted to students of the first year in preparation of a training extracurricular seminar specifically addressed to novice students. The department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the University of Macerata supported such new practice within the PRO3 project¹ for the innovation of university didactics. The 10 hours training seminar was activated in November 2018 to improve students' awareness about the work contexts with which they could be in contact as future educators. The seminar was targeted to newly enrolled students in order to promptly orientate them in the course by addressing some key concepts in the educators' professional profile. The training wanted to ground key concepts in real life by making students meet expert educators who could report their professional experience through case-studies to be discussed and analysed together with students. The experience was of paramount relevance and 90 students showed their interest by participating to the initial questionnaire where, among other issues, they were requested to clarify their "purpose" in the choice of the degree course for Educators.

¹ The university project PRO3 for the Innovation of Didactics (2016-2018) aimed at supporting the students' active learning and included the development of direct experimentations within different courses taught by the involved faculties, included the one reported in the article. The rationale of the project was to improve, on one side the professional development of faculties, and on the other side to widen the learning opportunities for students by organizing activities in the direction of a more active students' engagement where the development of transversal skills, like critical thinking, could be one of the focus of the interventions.

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The students' replies to the question "Why did you choose the course for Educators?" can be categorized into two main typologies: (1) Generic statements (82,2%) like: "I want to become an educator", "I love dealing with children", "I wanted to continue studying"; (2) goal-directed statements (17,7 %) like: "I believe that this course will offer both the needed knowledge and practical strategies to be able to work in the social educational context in which I wish to operate mainly dealing with marginalization".

Just a small percentage of students showed to have a purpose and for the most of them purpose was not yet reified in concrete trajectories and displayed in its attributes.

The experience represented a reinforcement for the design of the workshop addressed to students of the third year, a relevant phase of the curriculum not only because it's the last year, but also because it's when the students' internship is scheduled, the first opportunity to be directly involved in the work context.

4. Research Design

The qualitative research was framed within a descriptive case-study design (Yin, 1993). The whole group of 23 students, regularly attending the "Educational Technology" classes, represented the sample of participants. Data collection occurred during the duration of the course (participant observation) and soon after the completion of the exam (semi-structured interviews). Students were duly informed about the research objectives and methodology used to record (interviews were audio recorded), archive and anonymize data in order to guarantee the privacy.

Taking into account the objectives of the course digital storytelling was the selected didactical strategy to make students create an "object", a group-based digital video that could connect the work in class with the territory allowing for a service-learning experience. The video, in fact, should be designed by students to promote the citizens' awareness about the reality of social associations/institutions/cooperatives and their role for disadvantaged and /or marginalized groups. The task implied the contact with the selected social work reality in order to negotiate their involvement in the video design.

The aim of the workshop was to elicit qualitative data about three different macro areas of interest connected to the effectiveness of the methodology used:

- (1) students' experience of peers' care/support in a collaborative task: the group narrative through digital tools;

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- (2) students' learning process in respect to the topics of the course (e.g. digital competences);
- (3) students' first person approach with active citizenship in their territory; facilitating students' purpose understanding/development through active citizenship.

Students were guided by the teacher in the development of each group video project which included the production of two digital artefacts, a storyboard and a 2-3 minutes video using either class or personal devices (desktop pc, laptops, tablets, smartphones) and dedicated software for audio and video editing. Students were left free to choose the video and storyboard format (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. An example of storyboard and related video frame created by students.

The collection of data relied on two methods, teacher's first-hand observation during the class workshop sessions and a semi-structured individual interview developed after the end of the course when students had already given their exam. The physical artefacts (storyboards and videos) supported the interpretation of data from both sources (field notes from observation, interviews).

During the observation the attention was focussed on “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1954) that refer to concepts that “merely suggest directions along which to look” (p. 7) as a way to better understand the empirical instances and, in this case, the attention was directed towards the communication flow and interaction dynamics in the groups dur-

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ing their organizational and production process. Since the researcher was the course professor herself the observation notes were taken soon after each class and not during its development.

The opportunity to have also an interview, that could blend few closed and mainly open ended questions, had the advantage to focus on a set of selected specific issues and, at the same time, to open up the conversation with follow - up why or how questions (Adams, 2010). The semi-structured interview, in fact, is a methodology that helps the researcher stay consistent with the topics of interest and let the respondent feel free enough to deal with issues initially unforeseen by the researcher.

The interview guide was organized around three main areas to investigate and was piloted with two intended respondents, this step allowed a refining process.

Questions were organized around three topics: (1) students' perceived effectiveness of the methodology used (group work to develop a video storytelling) to improve their understanding of the opportunities/challenges opened by technologies for the socio-educational context; (2) students' impressions about the usefulness of the video project to raise the awareness about the existence and the role of the communities/associations/institutions working in the socio-educational field in the territory; (3) students' reflections about their idea of what being a social educator mean after the experience done with educators of the territory thanks to the video project.

5. Methods of Analysis and Discussion

The analysis used a qualitative content analysis approach (Bardin, 1977) and collected data were organized, categorized and analysed with the support of the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO (version 11 plus).

The coding process included interviews (sources) and the sample. The descriptive coding of participants (case) involved 17 available participants over a total of 23. Each student was coded with a letter (referring to the group work) and a number (1,2,3) and marked with three attributes (age, gender, previous professional experience, even a simple and short one like a volunteering activities) whose values are summarized in the table 1; this step was needed to be further able to connect attributes to each source and triangulate those descriptive attributes with specific interpretative categories.

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Student	Age	Gender	Work experience
A1	20-22	Female	No
A2	20-22	Female	Yes
B2	20-22	Female	Yes
B3	20-22	Female	Yes
C1	20-22	Male	Yes
C2	20-22	Female	No
D2	23-26	Female	Yes
D3	20-22	Female	Yes
E1	23-26	Female	Yes
E2	20-22	Female	No
F2	20-22	Female	Yes
H1	20-22	Female	No
I1	20-22	Female	Yes
I3	20-22	Female	Yes
J1	20-22	Male	Yes
K1	23-26	Female	Yes
K2	23-26	Female	Yes

Table 1. Descriptive codes.

Sources were coded using interpretative categories (nodes) and further analysed at the light of the digital artefacts (videos and storyboards) and the notes taken by the researcher during the observations. The final tree structure of the nodes includes: main category “approach” with related subcategories: “digital storytelling”, “Group work”, “Service-learning”; main category “Purpose” with subcategories taken from the attributes by Benard (1991): “Achievement motivation”, “Anticipation”, “Educational aspiration”, “Goal-directedness”, “Hardiness”, “Persistence”, “sense of coherence”, and the main category “Technology” with related subcategories: “Literacy” and “Professional use”.

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In figure 2 it is shown an example of display of sources coded by the node “purpose” and sub-node “goal-directedness”.

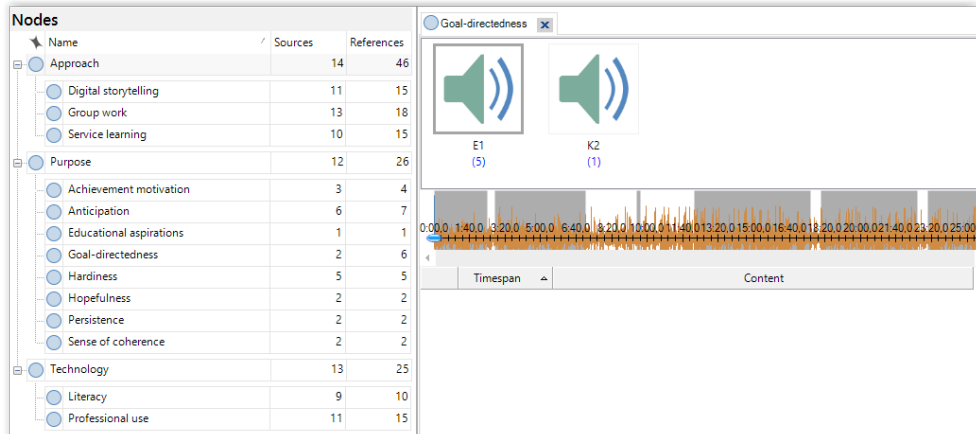


Figure 2. Tree nodes and a visualization of the coding for one specific node with related sources (E1-K2) during the process.

The researcher used the NVivo “matrix coding” tool to cross different variables (e.g., the categories and the participants’ descriptive attributes) to identify the value of specific aspects (e.g., the relationship between age or work experience and specific interpretative categories). In the graph that follows it is shown the triangulation connected to “age range” and the purpose’s sub-node “hardiness” where younger students appear to be the only one who refer to this purpose’s connotation. (Fig. 3).

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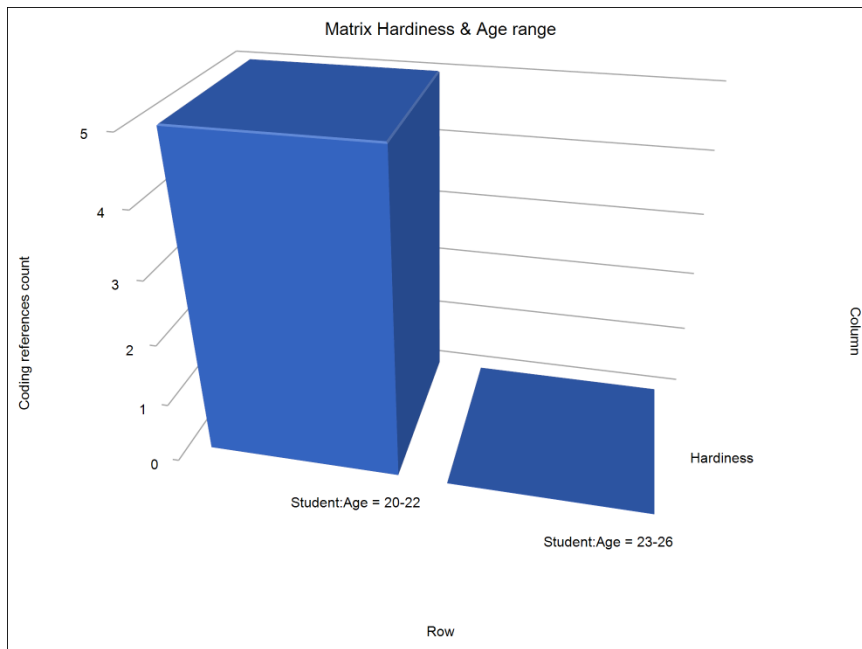


Figure 3. Matrix showing the interrelation between age range and coding results of sub-node “Hardiness”.

The “comparison diagram” tool was, instead, used to compare data from two different cases (e.g. two participants who worked in the same group). In the example below (Fig. 4) the comparison between the two students of the group “C” shows a clear difference in terms of coding.

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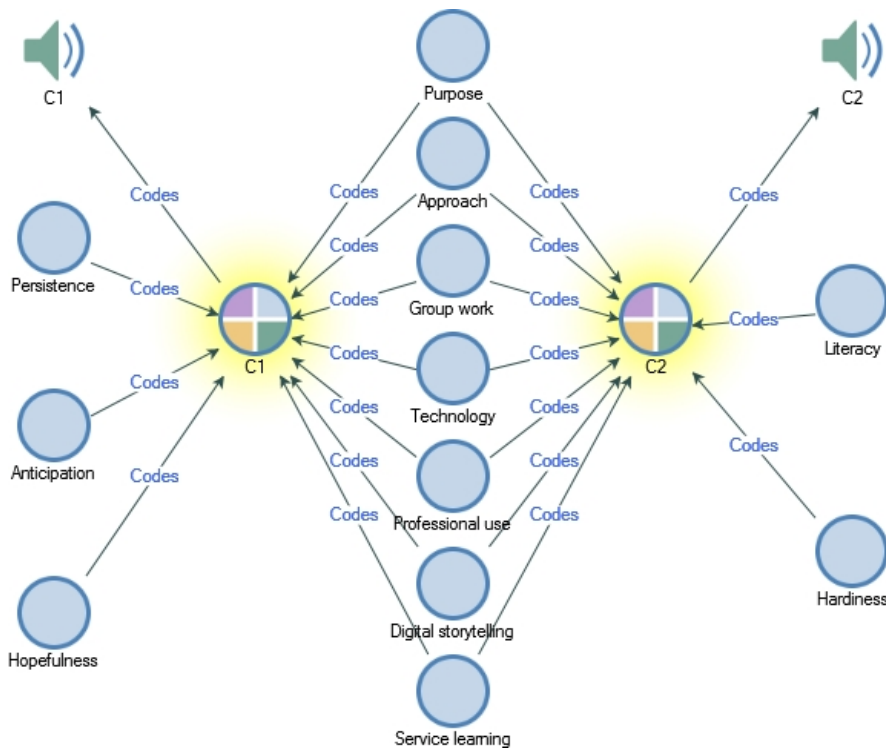


Figure 4. Comparison diagram between case C1 and C2.

C1 reports, in fact, a multi-perspective vision of his purpose showing a determination towards the own professional goal (persistence, anticipation and hopefulness), while C2 only refer to her purpose underlining how complex (hardiness) she sees her future as an educator. The difference could be partly justified with the lack of any working experience in the case of C2.

Henceforth, the overall coded data will be discussed according to the interpretative nodes, “Approach”, “Purpose” and “Technology” and related sub-nodes aiming at offering a global perspective on the connection among the presence of purpose’s attributes in students’ statements and the impact the three approaches had.

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Even though it is clear that the different approaches are strictly intertwined and it would not be possible to clearly isolate their value, the discussion will be, here, organized around three main dimensions of interpretation according to the number of sources/references crossed by nodes. The first dimension will explore the impact that group work, in the design and creation of a video story, had on students' reported new attitudes toward technology and their understanding of how digital skills and competences could be integrated in their professional tool box. Secondly, it will be discussed how group-work affected the personal individual purpose and finally it will be reported the impact that the involvement of external actors (educators and/or beneficiaries) had on the students' perception of their development in terms of professional purpose.

5.1 Group-based storytelling and disciplinary awareness

All students reported that having the chance to experience a hands-on activity using different technologies in terms of devices and software, and having to manage digital file formats (performing actions of modifying, creating and mixing) with the goal of creating a video artefact was a compelling task. Probably, they could not have completed the activity without the reciprocal support of the group peers. Group-work was perceived as very effective mainly when group members showed different skills and could support each other without asking for the teachers' help.

The video project resulted, also, useful to enhance students' awareness on the professional use of technology: if it is true that the majority of students reported to have acquired a self-confidence in technical aspects, 11 students discussed also precise examples of how a digital narration could be used with different audiences and objectives in the social settings, this was specifically interesting to visualize the process of how students reflected on the design of an educational activity going much beyond the technical final product.

Specifically, narration as a strategy was appreciated for a number of reasons: it was, in fact, associated to a process of awareness development and a flexible means to be adapted in different situations. Students reported, then, a double connotation of narration, a conceptual one and an instrumental one proving that they delved deeply in their task.

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5.2 Group-based approach and purpose-fostering effect

Group-work represented a chance for students to experiment what being part of a team means, how much others' views can impact on your own decisions, and how much the relation of shared responsibility for a common goal within a group makes it possible the activation of supporting behaviours resulting into unforeseen outcomes. Exemplifying, in this direction, is the case of respondent E1 who explains how the relationship with one of the colleagues in the group made her discover the proper strategies to adopt when teaching someone something you are expert in, she says “you need to be simple to make your learner understand, you need to align with the learner’s need and skills if you want the learner to reach the goal”. Playing the role of “reference” person in the group helped E1 develop a direction in her life purpose, that is, continue her educational path and get the opportunity to become a teacher. The same student reported that the whole group class and the dynamics that were fostered by the project reinforced her purpose highlighting the perception of having taken the right professional choice, be an educator with the possibility to play also the role of teacher.

Several students reported that being involved in a group activity not only supported them in concrete results (make a video), but contributed in having a productive reciprocal exchange of viewpoints in terms of professional vision.

5.3 Service-learning approach and purpose development

Having the opportunity to contact experienced educators working in associations/institutions of the territory (most of the time the same contexts in which students will have their internship) was recognized by students as a precious opportunity. More than 1 respondent reported that having to ask questions and collect data to be able to communicate the reality of the social service in an effective way through a video storytelling gave them a broader vision of the service itself. This experience let them gain an insider view and, at the same time, discover a more complex professional identity than the one they expected.

Participant K2, for example, reported that she knew “disability” as a construct, but she realized she did not know what being disabled mean and, most of all, what being in contact with relatives of disabled people means. She said: “Before having contact with this

institute disability was for me something outside myself, now I can better understand the implications of disabilities for the interested subjects and for the others”. The contact with direct beneficiaries of the social services (people with disabilities, minors without family, immigrants, etc.) made students understand that the educational relation needs a holistic approach, that “it’s not a dyadic relation between the educator and the person in need, but involves families too for examples” (K2).

The approach with the educators and their activities was reported by some students as a perception of a sense of coherence between theory, acquired during classes at university, and practice seen at the external institution; this connection represented a reinforcement for students’ purpose. Also service-learning resulted useful to enrich the vision of the range of roles an educator may play: participant E2, in fact, said “I didn’t expect the educator had to take care also of management”. The experience made students reflect on skills and competences contextualized in a specific reality, the same respondent continued saying: “I started asking myself «will I be able?», when I entered in contact with the institute I felt powerless, I was afraid”.

6. Conclusions

Purpose-fostering approaches can take advantage of several educational and didactical strategies and the case-study here described wanted to highlight how a service-learning experience connected to a specific task based on a digital narrative design had an impact on students’ awareness. The results shows that a number of students not only acquired a major self-confidence in the use of devices/software, but developed a flexible attitude on the use of technologies in context being able to foresee an adaptation of digital storytelling for different potential audiences. The effort made in completing the task reified in a process where the opportunity to (1) be engaged in a prosocial activity with the production of an “object” that would raise the audience awareness about the existence and functions of specific social services, and to (2) be in direct contact with those services, their operators (educators, pshycologists, et.) and beneficiaries (unaccompanied minors, people with disabilities, etc.) represented the successful keys to make it explicit the connection between the dimension of potentiality (I would like to take care of) and the dimension of actualization (In order to be able to take care of, I will have to/I need to...).

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The contact with educators of the social services made a change in the students' naive vision of what an educator is: from the simple meaning systems like “the educator helps people” to the problematization (Fabbri & Romano, 2017) where the complex social processes in which the educator acts, that were initially simplified, reach a more realistic vision like in the statement “As an educator I need to find the proper strategy to use narration because people with drug addiction have different needs”.

The research shows that the strategies adopted helped some students acquire an idea of their profession in evolution, this means that a transformative action has been activated. But the initiatives like the workshop organized within the course “Didactical Technology” risks to be ineffective for long term objectives if they are not structured as an integrated practice in the whole curriculum, students should, in fact, perceive them as a continuum in their course of study and not as isolated “add-ons”.

Moreover, a critical reflection phase is needed (Boyle-Baise, Rhondalynn Brown, Hsu, Jones, Prakash, Rausch, Vitols, & Wahlquist, 2006): the doubts and uncertainty that characterize young adults in their purpose development can become a generative step if they find a way to discuss and reflect on concrete goals with the support of the teacher and through a deep direct contact with professional profiles that cannot be reduced to the period of internship.

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