Developing teaching and learning methods to innovate the Italian context of Higher Education.
The case of University of Padua

Monica Fedeli[*], Anna Serbati[*], Edward W. Taylor[**]

This article looks at theories and practices related to faculty development and innovation in teaching and learning methods in Higher Education, in order to respond to the European 2020 Strategy, in which the *High level group on the modernisation of higher education* has been established, whose aim focuses *on improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions* (2013). The paper is framed within the context of the project PRODID (Preparazione alla professionalità docente e innovazione didattica), funded by the University of Padova, Italy with the major goal of creating a permanent and effective academic center for research on learning and teaching and faculty development. The theoretical framework of PRODID is informed by constructivism and social constructivism, and the student centered approach, encouraging student-teacher partnerships as a dimension for faculty development and teaching and learning innovations. The University of Helsinki and Michigan State University are mentioned as relevant examples of organizational settings integrated in higher education institutions that offer a great variety of practices consistent with the chosen theoretical framework. They also offer the Italian program of University of Padova models for critical reflection in how their teaching strategies can be created and developed on the basis of this international experience. The final discussion aims to highlight the strategies adopted during the first year of the project, characterized by the Italian culture and revealing new insights and ideas to create an Italian model of teaching and learning center.

[*] University of Padua.
[**] Penn State University.

Introduction

This paper is framed in the context of the project PRODID (Preparazione alla professionalità docente e innovazione didattica), funded by the University of Padova as a pilot experience at the University of Padova and in Italy with the *aim to create a permanent and efficient academic Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC).* Following the international and European guidelines in the topic of staff professional development and academic innovation, recognizing that no formalized training exists for teachers to improve their pedagogical skills and thinking, at the end of 2013 the University Executive recognized the need to develop a faculty development program for *academic teachers*.

The PRODID project has a major aim to create a permanent unit devoted to analyze the teaching profession, based on specific research concerning teacher and student relationship (methods, educational settings, interaction models, teaching tools, etc.); curriculum structures and organizational settings; to enhance teachers' ability to teach, evaluate and collaborate with colleagues; to support teachers in developing strategies to facilitate students' learning results; and to enhance students' teaching evaluation in our university and the quality of teaching.

PRODID (Felisatti, Serbati, 2014) involves instructors and scholars from different departments (such as education, psychology, statistics, sociology, economics, science, forestry) who engage in a *multidisciplinary approach* and develop activities that seek a balance between institutional (university management, internal boards devoted to quality assurance and accountability), departmental and course (bachelor and master) levels, in connection with national and international networks.

The purpose of the paper is to offer to the audience a description of practices and strategies used to create conditions in the initial construction of a Teaching Learning Centre (TLC), through the introduction of a pilot experience of a Teachers Study Group at the University of Padova. With the intent to create and promote an Italian mode of faculty development, the paper is organized in sessions, which reveal different aspect of the process. First the international context for educational faculty development will be discussed, referring to the main European documents and networks/consortiums for educational development worldwide. This is followed by a description of the PRODID project that uses a constructivist approach to teaching and learning for supporting faculty professional development. After a general overview, two examples of TLC are described, belonging to the University of Helsinki and Michigan State University, highlighting their emphasis for research, their multiperspective on teaching methodologies, and the flexibility and customization of the programs offered to faculty, with excellent level of results

achieved in the local, national and international community. In the light of this theoretical and empirical brief overview, the first experience of the Teacher Study Group at the University of Padua will be introduced, with some reflection on strengths, weaknesses and perspectives for the future.

The international political context for educational faculty development

In the last years, universities in Italy have been called to reconsider their priorities and the services offered to the students. University teaching, unchanged for centuries, requires innovation and modernization in order to continue playing the role as a key actor for a successful knowledge society (Ghislandi, Margiotta, Raffaghelli, 2014). Despite the resistance to the change, the landscape of teaching is changing, faced with international students, young and mature, connected with all sources of online information and materials, with increasing level of competition among institutions. There is growing recognition that the learner has a central position in the learning process, learning outcomes, as well as skills and competences, both subject-specific and generic. In this context, teaching activities play an important role, and they can have a significant effect on the achievements of a university; therefore, *teacher development* is an important issue, which many of the most prestigious universities in the world are investing in and creating new opportunities for.

In response to this concern the *European network for quality assurance in higher education* (2007) underscored that institutions should have the means of guaranteeing that the members of the teaching staff coming into contact with students are competent and capable of teaching the contents, in which they are experts. Every teacher should therefore have the opportunity to improve his/her own teaching skills.

Moreover, the High level group on the modernisation of higher education prepared the report for the European Commission on improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions (2013). This document focuses on the quality of teaching and learning, so as to guarantee that young people acquire up-to-date global knowledge and skills, connected to the job market. To help with this result, all teachers should have access to certified training to update their teaching competences. Moreover, the entry and promotion of university teachers should take account of the evaluation of their teaching performance together with other factors (research, service). Institution heads should recognize (with awards and scholarships) those teachers

who contribute to excellence in teaching and learning (by means of their teaching or their research).

If we look now at the educational practices, there are many interesting examples of good practices all over the world, some with recent history, others with long traditions in providing training and support for academic teachers. Since the 1990s, there has been an *increase of research on teaching and learning and professional development* topics as well as in national organizations or networks concerned with promoting good practice in higher education. In particular, the International consortium for educational development (ICED), can be considered as a reference point since it links together those organizations and promotes educational and academic development in higher education world-wide, through the sharing of good practice, problems and solutions. The aim of the ICED network is to support members in advancing educational development through scholarship and research on practice, improving the practice of educational development, reaching out to support new and emerging networks, acting as an international voice for educational development and supporting its member networks[1].

Looking more in-depth at the US context, where the tradition of faculty development is more structured and reflects longer experience, the *Professional and organizational development network in higher education* (POD) constitutes an important example of support and passion for excellence in teaching and learning in higher education[2]. POD is a community of higher education professionals dedicated to improving teaching and learning, which promotes resources, publications, grants, awards, events, and research opportunities. The major values leading POD are related to: the development of theories and practices for personal, professional, instructional, and organizational development; the support of educational development networks on the local, regional, national, and international levels; the enhancement of collaboration among diverse perspectives and diverse contexts; the promotion of programs for faculty, administrators, and graduate students; the identification and collection of a strong and accessible body of research; the continuous monitoring and evaluation of the achievements in this area of study and practice.

Both these international networks represent relevant resources for the Italian context that nowadays is taking its first steps on teachers' professional development. Looking at the experiences and lesson learned of mature practices and building significant relationships with ICED and POD members constitute a strategy to frame the PRODID project and a possible future Italian net-

---

[1] www.icedonline.net.

[2] http://podnetwork.org/.

work on faculty development. Within this connection, the next section de-scribes the educational philosophy, which supports the project aimed at pro-moting change and pedagogical innovation.

Theoretical framework

The overarching theoretical frameworks for PRODID, faculty develop-ment in higher education, are constructivism and social constructivism. These frameworks provide a guiding perspective for both the development of PRODID's conception of teaching and learning as it promotes faculty deve-lopment in Italy and as a perspective for guiding the development of teaching strategies and methods. Constructivism is a theory of learning, "its central claim is that (human) knowledge is acquired through a process of active con-struction" (Fox, 2001, p. 24), as a meaning making process between and in relationship to the experience of the learner and the experience of the learning event (e.g., context, activity, etc.). Constructivism recognizes the significance of prior experience in shaping the interpretation of new experience. Secondly, a process of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1970) leads to the con-struction of new learning and understanding. As new information at times cannot be assimilated, accommodation occurs promoting higher levels of cog-nitive development and revision of prior understandings. Thirdly, the learner is placed at the center of the learning experience, not as a passive participant, but instead with the expectation that learners need to actively engage, predict, manipulate and construct knowledge in more meaningful ways (Brandon, All, 2010). Fourth, "constructivists assume that meaningful learning occurs through reflection and by linking new knowledge to existing framework of knowledge" (p. 91).

Social constructivism takes the perspective of constructivism even further, recognizing that in reality, knowledge, and the learning process is a social process. Learning is seen, not as something that takes place solely within in-dividuals, but within and in relationship to others, whereby the meaning of re-ality, the development of knowledge and new learning occurs through the in-teraction with others. These larger theoretical frameworks of learning (con-structivism and social constructivism) provide the basis for informing a per-spective of teaching and learning in PRODID. For example: this theory pro-vides the foundation for teaching that encourages: a learner-centered teaching approach of continually giving learners greater and greater responsibility of their learning (Grow, 1991); the importance of providing relevant and authen-tic learning context for fostering learning; promoting learning through dia-logue and in small group (collaborative) settings recognizing student knowing

as a viable source of knowledge; and an appreciation of multiple and diverse perspectives when engaging learning. This collaborative approach to learning promotes a process that is more than assimilation of new knowledge by learners but a process in which learners and facilitators are involved and integrated into a learning community (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

Teacher-centered and *learner-centered* approaches might be considered along a continuum of teachers' orientations in response to different and dynamic teachers' and learner profiles, varying contexts and subjects and the cultural conception of higher education. A teacher-centered approach is more likely to conceive teaching as transmission of knowledge from the experts (teachers) to learners, whose knowledge is considered more relevant than understanding the process of learning. In contrast is the learner-centered approach, which is focused on students' existing knowledge and the facilitation of reflection to create a learning environment to understand concepts and apply them across a variety of situations. It is the construction of *student-teacher partnerships*, in which students are involved as active participants in the classroom (Cook, Sather, Bovill, 2014). Working in partnership encourages the development of student engagement and enhancement of learning and teaching. Partnership is understood as a relationship in which both students and teachers are actively engaged in promoting student learning. The focus is more on the process and on the competences that students achieve than the outcome itself. According to HEA (2014), developing engaged student learning through partnerships leads to benefits for both staff and students. On the students' side, they are more engaged in the process of learning to develop crucial knowledge and skills and a community of learners that helps support a commitment to learning. As for the staff side, teachers experience a deeper engagement with students and transform the perception about their practice, with both students and teachers experiencing higher levels of reflection and understanding.

In light of these emerging pedagogical theories in PRODID, we can affirm that changes are occurring which strongly influence the role of academic teacher requiring specific skills, pedagogical, and educational competences. For this reason, the need for faculty training, support and development is in great demand to assist faculty to engage in more progressive teaching and learning strategies to better address student learning in a changing era. The project PRODID pursues this aim to assist junior and senior teachers to engage in a more learner-centered approach to teaching in order to affirm the central role of the student in the learning process and the role of the teacher as the person most able to promote learning framed within constructivism and social constructivism.

Strategies for supporting faculty professional development: general overview and examples of good practices

In order to have a general picture of common activities for teachers' professional development, some teaching learning centers (TLCs) in the United States and Europe have been analyzed through web research, analysis of documents, contacts with key people in those services. As Coryell (2015) mentions, activities for faculty development may vary across different centers and countries; however, there are some common strategies and formats. Most often the TLCs offer general *seminars and webinars* on teaching and learning in higher education, aimed at developing teaching, planning and assessment of learning practices. Sometimes seminars are organized into a structured longer program, in particular for new teachers as an orientation to teaching.

Despite seminars with invited speakers, also more specific workshops are provided, with a more practical orientation. The topics preferred for *workshops* are often syllabus creation, classroom teaching techniques, classroom assessment techniques, writing of learning outcomes, using educational technology, academic supervising, etc., to help faculty develop their teaching and technology skills. Sometimes, workshops are tailored to specific need and interests identified by the departments in the university. These customized programs include discipline-based methods devoted to address specific problems or concerns about teaching and to find together possible solutions. Workshops on educational technology are often organized to support faculty in developing better skills in using eLearning platforms and tools. *Micro-teaching* workshops, which involved practice teaching experiences by teachers with the opportunity to receive feedback from peers, are a frequent technique that enhance self-evaluation as well as peer assessment. In addition, individual and collaborative reflective sessions are also provided, where TLCs organize, for example, *Faculty Writing Circles*, namely small groups of faculty who meet regularly to provide feedback about one's scholarly writing and to support each other in developing communication skills.

Along with instructional workshops institutional consultants are often available for private and *confidential consultations* on specific problems addressed by teachers. These consultations do not usually affect the performance evaluation of the faculty member. Consultants are available also to perform *classroom observations* to give teachers feedback on their behaviors in class as well as the methodologies and techniques proposed. After the observations, goals for improvement are identified, the consultant offers support to teachers in finding the best ways for enhancing their performance.

Another format that can be offered by TLCs is *midterm students' feedback.* Consultants organize meetings with students (without the faculty member) to

identify problems, requests, comments, and useful ideas to be then shared with faculty. This is a good way to get students involved in the enhancement of the learning environment through the mediation of an external expert. Teachers are then in charge to implement appropriate needed changes before the end of the course which may have positive impacts on final course evaluations as well as student learning.

Quite frequently, TLCs provide faculty with *online teaching models, tutorials, publications and resources*, online communities and forums to exchange and sharing among teachers about current practices. All these elements can be used online as self-learning and can support teachers' professional development and peer exchange. Moreover, grants are generally available for best teaching performers. These grants are teaching awards often related to the best teaching program, or to support the use of technology in education, participatory approaches.

TLCs also offer support to faculty who are interested in conducting research into their teaching. The practice of the *Scholarship of teaching and learning* (SoTL) proposed by Boyer (year) in the early 1990's offers an opportunity and necessity for teachers to specialize their role as a teachers, with a possibility to develop research on the teaching practice. The idea is to create conditions for faculty to deepen and extend student learning, to reflect on the effects of their teaching practice and to strengthen institutional integrity. TLC's offer a unique opportunity for self-evaluation, dialogue with students, and a deep understanding of classroom teaching and institutional assessment, with the aim to enhance pedagogical expertise and professional development. The focus of SoTL is therefore a strategy to support professors in moving from a position of "expert" in their field to a position of researcher of teaching techniques, impacts and events occurring in classroom and to collecting data on teaching effectiveness.

This variety of strategies for faculty professional development represents an ambitious path for the University of Padova in the aim of building a Teaching Learning Centre that may offer services to internal teachers and professors. Starting with a slow but constant process of innovation, the PRODID project will focus primarily its attention on developing seminars and webinars on teaching and learning in higher education devoted to junior and senior faculty, by using the methodologies of a teachers study group and micro-teaching with an evidence-based approach.

Two examples of good practices: the University of Michigan Centre for Research on Teaching and Learning and the Helsinki University Centre for Research and Development of Higher Education

The switch from a teacher centered approach to a student centered one and the new role of teacher as facilitator require new ways of staff development, not based upon proposing a range of techniques to be applied in class, but on fostering reflection on the practices, dialoguing with students and colleagues, developing awareness about one's own beliefs and conceptions on teaching. As example of good practices, we propose two examples of well-structured services of staff development. The first is the University of Michigan Centre for Research on Teaching and Learning, United States, and the second is the Helsinki University Centre for Research and Development of Higher Education, Finland. The reasons for the choice of these two cases are related to the significance of their experience and the interest of their approach for the development of teacher training activities in the PRODID project.

First of all, both programs have a strong *emphasis on research*, which supports and justifies their practice and training activities, with publications on data collected monitoring staff development. Moreover, they offer a *multiperspective on teaching methodologies*, providing teachers with examples, supporting reflections at conceptual level on their beliefs, related to theories, promoting peer support among teachers, even at interdisciplinary levels. Very relevant are therefore the services offered to faculty, with excellent level of results achieved in the local, national and international community. In both cases, direct contact has been established with members of the Centers in order to deeply investigate their practices. The dimensions considered in presenting the two case studies were mainly the context and structure of the centers, the instructional services and methodologies proposed and the research activities carried out.

The Center for Research on Learning, Teaching (CRLT) at University of Michigan

The context and structure of CRLT
The Center for Research on Learning, Teaching (CRLT) founded in 1962 at University of Michigan is the first and oldest, one of the finest in the United States, and a model of centers around the world well integrated in the University Community and in the country. This center is part of the Provost's office and works with faculty. Its *mission* is to promote excellence and innovation supporting learning and teaching practices and providing a lot of different teaching and learning services. In terms of web resources, the center is well known all over the world and is increasing the numbers of visitors of 15% over the previous year. 68% of the visits of the website come from engines and are related to the following terms: teaching strategies, teaching phi-

losophy, lesson plans, curriculum design and active learning. In addition the center organizes also online workshops and multimedia productions.

The main developed areas are: professional development, assessment and research, digital education, diversity and inclusion, internationalizing of the curriculum and theatre. Services are normally offered to University of Michigan clients and to external clients. In the year 2013-14 the center offered 15.049 services to U-M clients and 1.937 services to external clients. The regular staff of the center is composed from a quite big group composed by a Director, an administrative team (3 units) a Director of CRLT in engineering, Assistant Directors and Instructional Consultants (7 units) CRLT Theatre Program (3 units, with different roles) Administrative staff (3 units), project staff (7 units), and staff in CRLT in Engineering (3 units); this list does not include postdoctoral research associates, graduate teaching consultants, graduate research assistants, actors and students assistants.

Instructional services

The center provides professional development services for the members of the campus teaching community, new faculty orientation, seminars for teaching staff, deans and chairs, engineering seminar series, programs for new faculty, faculty grants and awards, faculty learning communities, international faculty dinner. The center provides also programs for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, media teacher certificate programs, future faculty programs, graduate teaching consultants programs.

Types of services offered to University of Michigan clients:
– campus wide programs;
– customized programs for departments and schools;
– consultations;
– instructors.

Types of services offered to external clients:
– workshops;
– theatre performances;
– consultations.

In total 4.695 individuals among graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, faculty, staff have been involved in the Centre's activities. The center has served in 2013-2014, 84 U.S. Educational institutions, 30 other organizations, 138 foreign institutions, and presented its programs to 77 Chinese universities.

Research activities

The center also has a faculty advisory board; these 14 members play a very important role in terms of laying the foundations of the connections between the center and the university community.

(All the data are published in the CRLT annual report 2013-2014, available on the website of the CRLT, University of Michigan). The center has also expanded its research activities; the staff is pursuing several projects on teaching and learning topics of particular relevance for faculty and students of the community. This center is a very good example in terms of developing research and teaching and learning services that

constitute the practical contexts for conducting experimental research. The center offers also grants and awards competitions for innovative approaches and practices in teaching and learning, encouraging the disseminations and sharing of innovations.

Research, innovation and services for teaching and learning are the three main pillars of the CRLT.

Source: www.crlt.umich.edu/about-crlt/staff-directory.

The Helsinki University Centre for Research and Development of Higher Education (YTY)

The context and structure of YTY

The Centre's main tasks are to carry out and support research in the field of University Pedagogy and to coordinate and organize programs on university pedagogy for academic personnel within all disciplines at the University of Helsinki. The Centre started in 2003, although already in Nineties there were pedagogical courses in a less structured way. It is located at the Faculty of Behavioral Sciences, due to its strong research-intensive attitude, but the staff of the Centre works with all faculties and departments. The Centre fosters research on learning and teaching in higher education through qualitative and quantitative studies and provides data and results to support the credibility of the programs offered as well as to provide evidences on their effect.

The regular staff of the Centre is composed by a professor (leading the Centre), 4 assistant professors, PhD students and post doc researchers (also participating in teaching), study psychologists, and one administrative assistant. They develop close relations with administration and technology departments as well as with the office that analyzes students' success in the labor market. They collaborate with other Finnish universities, following a national network with periodic meetings with the purpose of alignment of the courses provided.

Instructional services

The Centre organizes different kind of services:
– flexible large or small programs for faculty;
– consultations with pedagogical university lecturers at the departmental level;
– specific projects on teaching and learning.

One of the major activities is a 60-credit program for teachers, which is divided into smaller courses. The most popular course is a 10 credit basic course on teaching and learning in higher education. The teachers can participate in the separate courses, and after completing 25 credits they can apply to complete the 60-credit program. This program provides participants with an official certificate that allows them to teach also in other institutions; this certificate is recognized as relevant for applying for a position at university. The different modules composing the course deepen different aspects of the teaching and may be combined in different ways, according to the specific needs.

Within the program, quite a large variety of teaching methodologies are used, in order to allow teachers to experience different techniques that they can then apply

in their classes. Staff provides some lectures, but it mainly facilitates group work and discussion, collaborative learning, and problem based learning. In some courses teachers do individual assignments, in other group assignments. ELearning platforms are often used to support face-to-face activities. PhD students can also attend the 60 credits course and include this course as a part of their educational program. However, the staff organizes special courses for them, as well as separated courses in English for international teachers. 170 participants have been involved in courses provided by the Centre in the academic year 2013-2014.

Professors (including assistant professors) of the Centre organize the courses; moreover in all faculties there is a *pedagogical university lecturer*, who is in charge of developing teaching and learning in that faculty. Shorter courses on basic pedagogical skills are also organized at the local level.

All the pedagogical university lecturers have some background in education and quite often they first attend pedagogical courses or the whole program themselves, in particular if they have a background in the discipline. Most of them do research on teaching and learning in their specific faculties. They form a network to reflect and decide common activities, share experiences, collaborate with each other, together with professionals from the Centre.

Research activities

The Centre is devoted to promote and coordinate *scholarship of teaching*, to conduct *research on higher education*, to enhance research-based teaching and evidence-based academic development and to *provide courses* on university pedagogy to teachers and researchers at the University of Helsinki. The Centre underlines the importance of *multidisciplinary research* and cooperates closely with pedagogical experts across the universities nationally and internationally. It also supports field-specific development efforts in all campuses and plays a strategic role in institution-wide changes at the university. The University of Helsinki also has a *Teachers' Academy*, a network of teachers from different faculties who have invested their time in the development of teaching, teaching skills and students' learning processes. The aim of the Academy is to improve the status of teaching in the academic community and to provide opportunities to earn merit and reward members for their teaching qualifications and expertise. Both communities and individuals are encouraged to develop the quality of teaching in a goal-oriented manner.

Sources:
– http://www.helsinki.fi/yty/english/training.htm;
– http://www.helsinki.fi/opettajienakatemia/eng/;
– interview to Liisa Postareff, Assistant professor of Higher Education, member of the YTY staff[3]).

---

[3] We thank Liisa Postareff for the information provided about the Helsinki University Centre for Research and Development of Higher Education and for the revision of the paragraph devoted to its description.

First reflections

In response to the research about faculty development programs, theoretical framework, the description of these two centers and the PRODID project and related surveys, the following is an attempt to identify what is most relevant for the PRODID faculty development training program. The aim of PRODID is to frame all initiatives, including programs for senior and junior faculty, related research, innovative pilot experiences, and events of disseminations into a holistic perspective in the creation of a Teaching Learning Centre. Guiding this frame are a series of guidelines proposed by Sorcinelli (2002) for successfully getting started on an organizational dimension:
– build stakeholders by listening to all perspectives;
– ensure effective program leadership and management;
– emphasize faculty ownership;
– cultivate administrative commitment;
– develop guiding principles, clear goals and assessment procedures;
– strategically place the center within the organizational structure;
– offer a range of opportunities, but lead with strengths;
– encourage collegiality and community;
– create collaborative system of support;
– provide measures of recognition and rewards.

Considering the individual and organizational dimensions, it becomes important to offer carefully planned, focused faculty development programs as well as to establish a dialogue with relevant stakeholders, in order to create an institutional structure and a diffuse culture that values teaching and teachers' development. The theories presented in the theoretical framework provide direction to the actions and proposals within and across the different academic settings.

Based on the results of a local need analysis (realized through questionnaire, interviews and focus groups), review of related literature and exploration of international practices, the Research Group is now realizing a training program for faculty to enhance teaching competences through the promotion of critical reflection on their teaching practices and an emphasis on learner-centered approaches to teaching. *Individual reflection* is framed within and supported by *collective reflection in* a community of practice that encourages teachers to improve significantly their understanding of students' needs, best practices, as well as an appreciation for the role of context, continually innovating towards standards of excellence.

While the study examines the theoretical framework and takes into account two examples of teaching and learning centers, one in Europe and one in US, the Authors of the present article pursue the aim to involve more instructors in

the community and other universities in the actions proposed. In our getting to know centers such as Helsinki and University of Michigan and many others in the US, Columbia and Europe we found very similar settings, training offerings and strategies to involve the faculty staff in the *mission* of the centre. Some of the experiences and perspectives shared here provide an initial view in which faculty and staff development can occur within an Italian University setting and shaped by cultural beliefs and contexts new to this kind of initiative.

The research data, collected during the first year of the project PRODID, illuminate our choices and processes of knowledge that give impulse to our initial proposal and reinforce our will to look for contextual elements in order to innovate the didactics in Higher Education. Our efforts are now going into the direction of creating and promoting an Italian way of faculty development to animate debates on this topic, to nourish ourselves as scholars, to find ways to compare the Italian context with those of other countries and in this way to learn from each other.

The first Teacher Study Group at University of Padua

A faculty development intervention that has proven to have much potential and related challenges in higher education, consistent to the theoretical framework of this project, are teacher study groups (Clari, 1998; Stanley, 2011). They are predominantly faculty self-lead groups with the intent to develop a learning community that fosters professional development based on a critically reflective practice among selected faculty (Stanley, 2011). "It is authentic – embedded in the reality of school life anticipatory – it is designed to be directed with teacher input" (Clair, 1998). These Teacher Study Groups have three primary purposes: opportunity for teachers to think about teaching and its relationship to knowledge; opportunity to learn from each other; and opportunity to learn from outside experts. Theoretically, these groups are rooted in constructivism and social constructivism whereby they take advantage of the relationship that exists between experience and reflection, engaging in shared "knowledge-in-action" among professionals that provide the medium for promoting critical reflection of practice "accounting for the ongoing conversations and in-process experiments that typify the expert at work" (Wildman, Hable, Preston, Magliaro, 2000, p. 249). Secondly, these groups provide a context for making meaning of practice through shared stories (narratives) of teaching. Third, they represent collaborative learning at its best: "by being in charge of their [faculty] own personal learning through the collaborative inquiries ordained by the study groups, faculty have an enhanced opportunity to give structure and meaning to their practice" (p. 250).

Recently, PRODID has started with a Teacher Study Group composed of Senior faculty from the University of Padova with the following objectives:

a) to encourage the development of a deep self-awareness of teaching beliefs and related underlying assumptions about learning/teaching that frame the foundation of a critically reflective practice;
b) to provide a place for free and frank discussions about teaching and learning with the intent to promote a critically reflective practice;
c) to provide the opportunity to explore a variety of teaching strategies and learning theories that are consistent with a particular educational philosophy;
d) to provide the opportunity for participants to share, practice and demonstrate teaching strategies with and for each other;
e) to provide the opportunity to observe and be observed by peers while teaching in class and provide/receive constructive feedback; and
f) to learn how to effectively mentor/coach other faculty in developing a more effective teaching practice.

This is the first training activity offered to faculty that begins to explore a theoretical framework developed in an Italian academic context. Two instructors (one instructor; full professor of adult education coming from US and an Italian instructor, associate professor of Teaching and learning methods for adults at University of Padova) created and organized the training with the aim to share with colleagues their knowledge and experiences of adult education theories and techniques. All the Authors are deeply involved in different ways and with different roles in the project, and even if in a very limited way can represent a first effort with a general overview of the experience in this academic representative context.

Discussion

By examining these first steps and results of the project PRODID, we intend to offer to the readers an insight of an Italian way to introduce relevant changes in the faculty development. The first Teachers Study Group offers us the opportunity to reflect and touch concretely if it is possible to create a community of teachers strongly involved in this *mission*. The practice based learning gives the group the opportunity to share, to get to know each other better and to reinforce their practices informing them with various theories of adult education.

The coordination of the project proposed two training programs. The participants for each program were selected according to different criteria from the needs analysis questionnaire and on the bases of their academic qualifica-

tions. The selection for the senior faculty program involved experienced teachers who answered the questionnaire and declared their willingness were contacted and informed about the possibility to attend the training program. Each interested teacher sent a volunteer self-application with a letter of intent and description of their teaching experience. The Scientific Committee of the project selected the participants on the basis of their experience and interest in professional development, trying to cover the different scientific areas. In the case of junior faculty, all teachers employed for 5 years at the University received information on the program and then submitted volunteer self-applications.

The first group was composed of full professors and associate professors and the second group of assistant professors. From the literature and the practices examined there are examples of choices based on this criteria, and also on that of mixed participants' group, selected on the bases of their discipline, interests, motivation, and professional needs (Boice, 1992; Caffarella, Zinn, 1999). This represents, according to our perception, an attempt by an Italian University to respect the qualifications of the various faculty in a very formal way. Although, it could reinforce barriers among colleagues and reflects in some way the formalism of our academic context and the attention that is given to academic rank.

Our first experience suggests that people are very interested, and therefore faculty need time and opportunity to be comfortable with this direction. From our perspective the participants are satisfied, even if skeptical and sometimes confused. They are now trying to apply new methods in their classrooms to varying degrees, based on learner-centered teaching. The energy and the enthusiasm demonstrated by the senior group reflects positive feedback. As the group continues to develop, we will have the chance to investigate more in the next months in order to build our future actions and promote activities placing strong attention to our context and looking for our Italian way to innovate higher education.

References

Baeten, M., Struyven, K., Dochy F. (2013). Student-centred Teaching Methods: Can they optimise Students' Approaches to learning in Professional Higher Education? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 39, 14-22.

Biggs, J.B., Tang, C. (2003). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Boice, R. (1992). *The New Faculty Member: Supporting and fostering Professional Development. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Brandon, A.F., All, A.C. (2010). Constructivism Theory Analysis and Application to Curricula. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 31, 2, 89-92.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Caffarella, R.S., Zinn, L.F. (1999). Professional Development for Faculty: A Conceptual Framework of Barriers and Supports. *Innovative Higher Education*, 23, 4, 241-254.

Clair, N. (1998). Teacher Study Groups: Persistent Questions in a Promising Approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 3, 465-492.

Cook-Sather A., Bovill C., Felten P. (2014). *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Coryell, J. (2015), Creating and Sustaining Teaching and Learning Centers: Models of Resources and Support, Lessons Learned, and Building a Culture of Teaching and Learning Excellence. *Excellence and Innovation in Teaching and Learning*, 1.

European network for quality assurance in higher education (ENQA) (2007). *European Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance within Higher Education Institutions*.

Felisatti, E., Serbati, A. (2014). *The Professional Development of Teachers: From Teachers' Practices and Beliefs to New Strategies at the University of Padua*, Proceedings of the ICED Conference Educational Development in a Changing World, Stockholm, 16-18 June 2014. Available online at: http://www.iced2014.se/ proceedings.shtml.

Fox, R. (2001). Constructivism Examined. *Oxford Review of Education*, 27, 1, 23-35.

Ghislandi P.U., Margiotta U., Raffaghelli J. (2014). Prefazione. *European Journal of Research on Education and Teaching*, XII, 1, 9-16.

Gow, L., Kember, D. (1993). Conceptions of Teaching and Their Relationship to Student Learning. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 63, 20-33.

Grow, G. (1991). Teaching Learners to be Self-directed. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41, 3, 125-149.

High level group on the modernisation of higher education (2013). *Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions*, Belgium: European Union.

Higher Education Academy (2014), *Framework for Partnership in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/ default/files/resources/HEA_Framework_for_partnershi p_in_learning_and_ teaching.pdf.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T. (1975). *Learning together and alone*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T, Smith, K.A. (1998). Cooperative Learning returns to College: What Evidence is there that it works?. *Change*, 20, 4, 26-35.

Johnson, D.W., Maruyama, G., Johnson, R.T., Nelson, D., Skon, L. (1981). Effects of Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Goal Structures on Achievement: A Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 89, 47-62.

Johnstone, A.H., Percival, F. (1976). Attention Breaks in Lectures. *Education in Chemistry*, 13, 2, 49-50.

69

Kember, D. (1998). Teaching Beliefs and Their Impact on Students' Approach to Learning. In Dart, B., Boulton-Lewis, G. (eds.), *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Camberwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1-25.

Mayer, R. (2004). Should there be a Three-strikes Rule against Pure Discovery Learning? The Case for Guided Methods of Instruction. *American Psychologist*, 59, 1, 14-19.

Piaget, J. (1970). *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*. New York: Orion Press.

Piaget, J. (1972). *The Psychology of the Child*. New York: Basic Books.

Pratt, D.D. and Associates (1998). *Five Perspectives on Teaching in Adult and Higher Education*, Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing.

Qin, Z., Johnson, D.W., Johnson R.T. (1995). Cooperative versus Competitive Efforts and Problem Solving. *Review of Educational Research*, 65, 2, 129-143.

Samuelowicz, K., Bain, J.D. (1992). Conceptions of Teaching held by Academic Teachers. *Higher Education*, 24, 93-111.

Slavin, R.E. (1980). Cooperative Learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 50, 2, 315-342.

Stanley, A.M. (2011). Professional Development within Collaborative Teacher Study Groups: Pitfalls and Promises. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 112, 71-78.

Struyven, K., Dochy, F., Janssens, S. (2010). Teach as you preach: The Effects of Student-centred versus Lecture-based Teaching on Student Teachers' Approaches to Teaching. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 33, 1, 43-64.

Trigwell, K., Prosser M. (2004), Development and Use of the Approaches to Teaching Inventory. *Educational Psychology Review*, 16, 4, 409-424.

Trigwell, K., Prosser, M., Taylor, P. (1994). Qualitative Differences in Approaches to Teaching First Year University Science. *Higher Education*, 27, 75-84.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wildman, T.M., Hable, M.P., Preston, M.M., Magliaro, S.G. (200). Faculty Study Groups: Solving "Good Problems" through Study, Reflection, and Collaboration. *Innovative Higher Education*, 24, 4, 247-263.

Yamarik, S. (2007). Does Cooperative Learning improve Student Learning Outcomes? *Journal of Economic Education*, 38, 3: 259-277.