FOSTERING CRITICAL REFLECTION IN THE FRAME OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION: ITALIAN AND NIGERIAN COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: Critical reflection (CR) is an important process for making decisions on complex issues that influence individuals and societal life. The ability to inform our perceptions and thoughts through the results of critical reflection on our assumptions is fundamentally important in order to face the challenges connected to adult life (Kreber, 2012). Under the perspective of transformative learning (Mezirow & Associates, 2000), the paper discusses the similarities and differences between the ways in which the Italian and Nigerian higher education systems support students' critical reflection. The results show how the two systems are on the right track to implementing the process at the micro and meso levels.

1 Introduction

Critical reflection is one of the important elements of transformative learning. It brings about fundamental change in one's beliefs or assumptions. It mostly occurs when there is an understanding of thoughts, feelings, and actions that are contradictory (Taylor, 2009). It «requires us to ponder our practices, processes and identities. It also requires us to look beyond our own circumstances to the external factors, policies, and people that might influence the choices we make and the actions we take» (Sutherland, 2013:111). It enables individuals to better understand their own professionalism through experience (Lucas, 2012). Bringle and Hatcher (1999) explain that critical reflection leads individuals to examine and question their personal beliefs, opinions, and values through observation, questioning, and the connection of facts, ideas, and experiences to derive new meaning. Fook (2015) sees critical reflection as a process that has two aspects: reflective analysis and change. Fook further explains that it is reflective analysis, especially of power relations, that leads to change motivated by a new understanding of that analysis.

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The role of critical reflection has been recognised in education, particularly in higher education. It is a teaching approach that is important in fostering emancipatory transformative learning (Freire & Marcedo, 1995). Its goal is to help learners «rediscover power and develop an awareness of agency to transform society and their own reality» (Taylor, 2008: 8). Fook (2015) asserts that «the aim of critical reflection is to assist the learner to unearth and unsettle assumptions (particularly about power) and thus to help identify a new theoretical basis from which to improve and change a practice situation» (Fook, 2015:446). It fosters integration between theories and practices which promotes students' learning and self-confidence (Lucas, 2012). It enables learners to connect theoretical knowledge obtained in the classroom with practice (Brooks, Harris & Clayton, 2010); when this happens, it is called applied learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Schwartzman & Henry, 2009). Applied learning is important because «theoretical knowledge without practical application creates the Ivory Tower intellectual incompetent to face the everyday challenges of life» (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009:5). Shandomo (2010) asserts that critical reflection «facilitates introspective learning from values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences that contribute to perspectives of one's self, other people, and the world» (Shandomo, 2010:103). It brings about individual development through awareness of self, the community, and of one's capacities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Learning outcomes associated with critical reflection include thinking, learning, and the assessment of self and social systems (Smith, 2011).

Given the above arguments, this paper discusses, at different levels and based on comparative methodology, the similarities and the differences between how the Italian and Nigerian higher education systems support students' critical reflection, a major element of transformative learning. This paper seeks to provide answers to the following questions in the context of comparing Italy and in Nigeria:

- Do teachers/educators encourage learners' critical reflection?
- How does the institutional context support or inhibit innovative ways of teaching?

2. Theoretical framework

The theory of transformative learning was developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning theory presents the nature of adult learning as a composition of ideal conditions. These conditions are: «transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs, through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it» (Mezirow, 1997:11). Mezirow (2009) explains that transfor-

mative learning is the «learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change» (Mezirow, 2009:22). He defines a frame of reference as 'a predisposition with cognitive, affective, and conative (striving) dimensions' through which learning occurs among adults by «elaborating existing meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, transforming meaning schemes, and transforming meaning perspectives» (Mezirow, 2009:22). It is through critical reflection that frames of reference are transformed (Mezirow, 1997). Frames of reference are structures of assumptions and expectations through which individuals make sense of their world, including associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 2008). He identifies two dimensions of a frame of reference: a habit of mind and a point of view. A habit of mind refers to the broad predispositions individuals use to understand experience, whereas a point of view refers to a cluster of meaning schemes (Cranton, 2005). Mezirow (1991) defines a meaning scheme as «the particular knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that become articulated in an interpretation and defines a meaning perspective as «a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience» (Mezirow, 1991:42). He identifies three types of meaning perspectives: an epistemic meaning perspective, which deals with how knowledge is acquired and how it is being used; a sociolinguistic meaning perspective, which focuses on how individuals perceive social norms, culture, and the use of language; a psychological meaning perspective, which encompasses a person's self-concept, personality, emotional responses, and images and dreams (Cranton, 2005).

Transformative learning is cognitive or logical in nature. In this case, it could be seen as a philosophy that deals with how adults learn to reason. It could bring about dramatic changes, or change could be incremental, which may involve objective or subjective reframing (Mezirow, 2009). Taylor (2009) identifies two theoretical frameworks for transformative learning: the first views transformative learning as personal transformation and growth while the second views transformative learning as personal and social transformation. In both frameworks, Taylor explains the role of critical reflection with regards to learning. In the first framework, it leads to self-critique and brings about greater understanding of one self in relation to others; in the second, critical reflection leads to ideological critique and brings about greater understanding of power and political consciousness for personal and societal transformation.

Cranton (2005) defines transformative learning as «the process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated» (Cranton, 2005:630). It is the «process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of an experience in the world» (Taylor, 2008). Wang and King (2006) explain that the fundamental change in perspective that changes the way adults perceive and engage with the world is the main focus and strength of transformative learning. It is described as learning that changes the way individuals think about themselves and their world, and that involves a shift of consciousness (Corley, 2008).

According to Mezirow (2009), transformative learning involves ten phases:

a disorienting dilemma, that is, a particular life event or life experience such as the death of a loved one or a job change; self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame; a critical assessment of assumption; recognition that others have gone through similar process, however painful it may be; exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan, provisional trying of new roles, building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 2009:19).

Taylor (1998) explains that there are three core elements of transformative learning: individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue. However, other elements that are of great importance have evolved over time: a holistic orientation, awareness of context, and an authentic practice (Taylor, 2009). Critical reflection is the focus of this work and, according to Taylor (2009), it refers to "questioning the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience" (Taylor, 2009:7). Reflection is "the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (Mezirow, 1991: 104). According to Mezirow, content reflection refers to an examination of the content or description of a problem; process reflection involves checking on the problem-solving strategies that are being used, whereas premise reflection leads the learner to a transformation of meaning perspectives.

Corley (2008) suggests that adult educators can foster transformative learning in their classes by creating a climate that supports transformative learning, knowing their students and the types of learning activities that most appeal to them, and developing and using learning activities that explore and expose different points of view.

3. Case studies of Italy and Nigeria

The two case studies were performed in the comparative group work that took place during the 2019 Winter School programme of the IN-

TALL project. Early on in the group discussion, it was highlighted how the two contexts - the university of Padua in Italy and Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria – are on the right track to implementing the practice of critical reflection among students at micro and meso levels, even though some improvements are still necessary. Promoting critical reflection among younger generations means to provide them with the possibility to not only constantly question their assumptions and their habits of mind – consisting of value judgements, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings – through which they interpret the world but also to develop critical thinking. In this sense, a transformative teaching process can become a way to promote new attitudes of learning and changes through which learners interact with environments, using autonomous and responsible thinking. That is precisely the responsibility of adult education: helping people to become autonomous thinkers and to be able to negotiate their own values, beliefs, and meanings instead of acting uncritically. «Becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions is the key to transforming one's taken for granted frame of reference, an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change» (Mezirow, 1997:9). Therefore, to ensure significant adult learning requires teachers/educators to have the ability to select appropriate educational practices based on the definition of learning needs, to set educational objectives, materials and methods, and to evaluate learners' growth using innovative methods.

For long time, based on a traditional teaching and learning perspective, supporting learners' transformative learning through the critical reflection practice has often been considered a time-consuming activity, but something is changing in the contexts of education and training.

4. The case of University of Padua

In response to EU recommendations (2011; 2013) a process of change is being registered in the Italian academic context, where some universities are questioning their role in society, a change strongly reflected in their teaching practices and methodologies. Specifically, at the University of Padua, a systemic new and transformative process is happening within the different departments. In fact, in the past, the use of innovative teaching strategies and the development of creative learning environments rarely happened and depended on the individuals' actions, without generating any important impact on academic culture; but now significant and original change is occurring. In 2016, a group of instructors in the engineering department, faced by increasing dropout from their courses, started questioning their teaching methods and wanted to introduce new teaching strategies. This move initiated a bottom-up process of change, which year after year influenced all

university departments, evolving into a Model of Faculty Professional Development called *Teaching4Learning@Unipd* (T4L), with Pedagogy Professor Monica Fedeli serving as Scientific Coordinator. The model - built on *Active Learning* and student-centered approaches, on sharing and dialogical processes, and peer/feedback observations (Fedeli & Tino. 2019) – is designed to promote the improvement of teaching methodology and the development of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) and to generate peer learning, action research, and a continuous process of innovation. The FLC is a community well supported by the Change Agents, a group of interdepartmental faculty who received upper-level training in their role of promoting a culture of change in their departments, supporting new faculty and those colleagues who want to innovate and share their teaching practices as well (Fedeli, 2019). It has been a process of change that has promoted two levels of awareness: at the micro level, because it has helped the professors involved to reflect on ways of changing their teaching and learning perspective; at the meso level, because these professors identified strong connections between their practices and the academic cultural and political system. It has been a process of change that saw the Change Agents as a group of 'middle managers' who by means of bottom-up activities started to develop some innovative proposals and asked the academic system to implement some new policies. These policies have enabled the investment of a relevant amount of money in teaching innovation at the University of Padua, achieving a significant impact on the revision of teaching practices, which are now more focused on some key aspects of the active learning perspective:

- learner-centered teaching approach;
- self-directed learning;
- participatory methods;
- facilitating small and large group discussion;
- formative feedback;
- assessment for learning;
- positive relationship between teachers and students;
- introduction of new technology to support interactive didactics.

These are all meaningful and interactive strategies that require to support students' reflection. Participation, discussions, and interactions are authentic practices that inevitably promote students' reflection on their own beliefs, thoughts, and assumptions.

This important transformative process of changing teaching practices at the University of Padua has already involved more than six hundred professors. Even if this is a relevant outcome, some more efforts need to be made to involve also that part of the faculty that still uses a traditional approach marked by the predominance of lectures and content delivery,

a low level of student participation with the teacher in the active role and students in the passive role, and an overall formal relationship between teachers and students. This traditional approach was often highlighted during the T4L programme, where the use and subsequent discussion of the *Teaching Perspectives Inventory* (Pratt & Collins, 2000) helped participants become aware of their traditional teaching and learning perspectives, encouraging them to make more conscious methodological choices and changes as well. In this perspective, the main purpose of the T4L programme is to involve the whole community of faculty, and to generate a systematic innovative impact as a new 'ID-University Card'. It is a process that is generously supported by institutional policy, as evident in the annual substantial financial investment on the teachers' training: one million euros per year.

5. The case of Obafemi Awolowo University

The role of teacher education in the development of a nation cannot be overemphasised. This is because the productivity of an educational system depends to a large extent on the quality of its teachers, which is in turn determined by the quality of its teacher education programme. Teacher education deals with the training and re-training of teachers for a nation's educational system. It is the process of preparing, training, and educating a prospective teacher for role performance in a teachinglearning situation (Ekpiken & Ukpabio, 2014). It is a specialised area of education that is concerned with policies and procedures designed to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and skills needed for effective and efficient functioning in the classroom, school, and wider society (Esu, 1995). It is the 'professional education of teachers towards attainment of attitudes, skills and knowledge considered desirable so as to make them efficient and effective in their work in accordance to the need of the society at any point in time' (Osuji, 2009). Ekpiken and Ukpabio (2014) argue that teacher education is a catalyst for sustainable national development. This is because it trains a nation's manpower, who in turn utilises the human and material resources for the transformation and development of the nation.

As stated in the National Policy on Education, teacher education in Nigeria includes pre-service training and in-service training (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008). Pre-service training refers to training or education received before the commencement of teaching services (Osuji, 2009). The National Policy on Education further states that induction shall be part of the teacher education programme in the country. Specifically, the policy states that «all newly recruited teachers shall undergo a formal process of induction» (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008:

40). This function is carried out by the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), an agency of the Federal Ministry of Education.

In Nigeria, teacher education is offered by different educational institutions, such as colleges of education, universities, and the National Teachers Institute. The colleges of education (public and private) and NTI award the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), which is the minimum qualification for entry into the teaching profession. The universities as well as the NTI offer postgraduate diplomas, degrees, master's (research and professional), and doctorates in different areas of education.

Ekpiken and Ukpabio (2014) explain that teacher education in Nigeria is based on two basic models: the consecutive model and the concurrent model. According to the consecutive model, «a teacher first obtains a qualification in one or more subjects and then studies for a three- or four-years period for the first degree depending on the entry qualification» (Ekpiken & Ukpabio, 2014:586). In the concurrent model, «the student teacher simultaneously studies one or more academic subjects with various methods of teaching and professional courses leading to the award of bachelor's in education» (Ekpiken & Ukpabio, 2014:586).

According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2008), the goals of teacher education shall be to:

- 1. produce highly motivated, conscientious, and efficient classroom teachers at all levels of our education system;
- 2. further encourage the spirit of enquiry and creativity in teachers;
- 3. help teachers fit into the social life of the community and the society at large and enhance their commitment to national goals;
- 4. provide teachers with the intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and to make them adaptable to changing situations;
- 5. enhance teachers' commitment to the teaching profession (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008:39).

In order to regulate and control the teaching profession at all levels in the country, both in the public and private sectors, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) by TRCN Decree No. 31 of 1993 (now TRCN Act CAP T3 of 2004). The TRCN Act (2004), therefore, categorised teachers in the country into four classes:

- A- class: Holders of a Ph.D. in Education or a Ph.D in a different field plus education (i.e., a post-graduate diploma in education);
- B- class: Holders of a master's degree in education or a master's degree in a different field plus education (i.e., a post-graduate diploma in education);
- C- class: Holders of bachelor's degree in education or a bachelor's degree in a different field plus education (i.e., a post-graduate diploma in education);

D- class: Holders of the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) or its equivalent.

Teaching practice is an important component of the teacher education programme in Nigeria. It gives student teachers the opportunity to develop and improve their professional practice in the context of the real classroom under the guidance and supervision of a trained teacher and their lecturers (Azeem, 2011). During teaching practice, pre-service teachers are able connect theory with practice. It enables pre-service teachers to try the art of teaching before actually getting into the real world of the teaching profession (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009). From the framework of transformative learning, Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey (2000) identified two important elements for critical reflection to take place: structured field experience under the guidance of a coach and a knowledge-base in education that enables pre-service teachers to connect knowledge with experiences. These two elements are present in the teaching practice exercise that student teachers undergo as part of their professional training programme.

6. Comparison of the case studies: Differences and similarities

The following comparison is based on the preparatory report that each student presented during the Comparative Group Work (CGW), which is part of the intensive programme that each year brings together many international students in Würzburg. In February 2019, that programme was part of the INTALL project, which is managed by a European Consortium. During the international CGW, four countries were involved in the discussion: Nigeria, Italy, Turkey, and the Netherlands. Even if this chapter was written in line with the comparative process developed within the CGW, only two cases were considered: Italy and Nigeria.

Before presenting the analysis of the differences and similarities between the two case studies, it is useful to specify what comparative research is. According to Charters and Hilton (1989), comparative research is not about placing data 'side by side' (Charters & Hilton, 1989:3) but rather about understanding and interpreting the reasons for and meaning of similarities and differences between phenomena. It is a process that leads to interpreting similarities and differences on the basis of interrelating the contexts at different levels (Egetenmeyer, 2017). According to this perspective, the discussion that took place during the 2019 Winter School intensive programme highlighted two important common categories of comparison for the Italian and Nigerian contexts: a) the teaching methods; and b) the role of the

educator. During the in-depth discussion, each category was broken down in sub-categories (Table 1).

Categories	Sub-categories	Italian university	Nigerian university
	Use of online platform	√	√
	Fields visits	√	√
Teaching methods	Group discussions	√	√
	Role play	√	√
	Peer-learning/feedback	√	
Role of the educator	Questioning	√	√
	Supportive	√	√
	Open to discussion	√	
	Facilitator	√	√
	Mentor in mentorship system		√
	Vertical (formal) relationship	√	V

Table 1 – Comparison of Italian and Nigerian universities by two main categories. [Source: Authors'own]

In the juxtaposition of *teaching methods* and *role of the educator* at the two universities, it seems there are more similarities than differences. In both contexts, participatory teaching practices are the main feature of the teaching approach based on, above all, two types of *teaching methods*:

Horizontal (informal) relationship

√ (few)

√ (more)

- 'In-class' activities, such as *group discussions* and *role play*. They are practices that transform the students' and teachers' role in the classroom; they give all of them both voice and responsibility, generating a power balance in the teaching and learning process laying the ground for a self-directed learning approach. As mentioned in section 2.1, teachers at the University of Padova have been paying more and more attention to this kind of leaning environment since 2016, thanks to the T4L programme. However, for an overview of teaching methods in Italian academia, it is important to highlight that the CGW discussion that there are different level of didactic innovation at the various Italian universities: some teachers use only a traditional teaching approach; some use a mixed teaching approach; others use active learning didactics occasionally; and a few teachers make the effort to implement participatory learning and teaching practices on a daily basis.
- 'Out of the school' activities such as the use of the *online platform* and *field visits*. At both universities, the *online platform* is provided as a space

where students can open discussions, share materials, complete group work (collaborative wiki work, workshop, Padlet group activities, glossary, etc.) and where, sometimes, teachers provide learning material in order to design flipped classroom activities. These are activities that students can complete outside of the classroom and from everywhere according to their personal needs. Other important outside activities are field visits; they are proof that the two institutions try to connect formal and informal learning, and to raise awareness of the societal changes and needs as well. For instance, at the University of Padova, many teachers developed the Work-Related Learning (WRL) programme, which emphasises cooperation with employers to integrate generic skills development into the curriculum (Frison et al., 2016). In Nigeria, Students Industrial Work Experience (SIWES) for engineering students, residency and internship programmes for medical and nursing/pharmacy students, and Teaching Practice Exercise for education students exist as part of the approved minimum academic standards in the various degree programmes for all the Nigeria universities, colleges of education, and polytechnics.

Concerning teaching methods, the difference between the two case studies is the use of peer learning/feedback. In fact, while at the Nigerian university, this learning practice is not used as a teaching strategy, at the University of Padova, many teachers, above all of in the field of education, are implementing it. An Italian study investigating this strategy showed how students benefit from the peer feedback process, not only in terms of learning and understanding but also in terms of becoming more responsible protagonists of their own learning process (Grion & Tino, 2018).

With regard to the second category, the explicative sub-categories, related to the role of the educator, are strictly connected to the first one. At both universities, in fact, the dominant presence of the participatory approach is connected to the role of the educator as a supportive and facilitator for students, always ready to question his/her teaching and aware that teaching methods need to be constantly improved. Even if the two categories are connected, there are some differences at the two universities in terms of how the role of the educator manifests itself. The Italian context is marked by the educator's openness to discussion; an informal relationship between teachers and students is found only in a few cases, and the role of mentor in the mentorship system is never mentioned. This means that in Italy, the discussions are generally focused on the content of the course and rarely on personal dimensions, and that the transformation of the educator into mentor requires more cultural change. At the Nigerian university, the cited dimensions show the opposite picture: the dominance of the *informal relationship*, together with the role of educator as *mentor*, reflects the presence of a *mentorship system*. Moreover, in Nigeria, there is more of an informal relationship between educators and learners. This is because Nigerian society is known for communal living, which promotes human connections whereby people who are not immediate family members are seen as part of one's larger family. However, it is the formal relationship that opens the path towards informal relationships. Moreover, educators still remain the providers of course contents.

7. Lesson learned

In order to investigate the level of teaching innovation connected to supporting students' critical reflection and the role of Italian and Nigerian institutions, this paper discussed two main categories that emerged during the CGW of the 2019 Winter School: teaching methods and the role of the educator. Applying the comparative categories revealed many similarities and few differences between the two cases (see Paragraph 5), but these seem to originate from both common and different factors. Even if the shared feature of teaching methods at the two universities can be identified in institutional policy support (meso level), it has a different origin. In fact, in Nigeria, institutional policy seems to be intertwined with Nigerian society at large, which is characterised by communal living promoting human connections. This is because effective programme planning and implementation - in this case, a teacher education programme – is based on a continuous exploration of contextual factors such as knowledge about the people, the organisation, and the wider environment (socio-economic, cultural, and political climate) (Caffarella, 2002). This means that next to the formal teachers' training programmes, there is a consistent cultural dimension that facilitates the use of participatory teaching methods to create a mentorship system and to support a more informal relationship between teachers and learners. It seems that the idea of a traditional community involving the intergenerational exchange of know-how as a natural process still exists. This finding may also be interpreted as showing the small influence of globalization. In Italy, institutional support finds its origins not only in the innovative attitude of the University of Padua (meso level), in which the T4L programme finds its roots, but also in European policy recommendations (EC, 2011; 2013) (mega level), which constantly invite member states to innovate teaching practices for promoting European citizenship development through students' lifelong learning attitude. This is a dimension that is inevitably promoted by the connection between formal and informal learning and participatory methods based on critical reflection practices. In fact, group discussions, peer/feedback/learning, and role play are practices that involve students in a reflective process that impact their assumptions and premises.

In both countries, the role of the educator is also strongly related to political and cultural dimensions. In fact, in both countries, the role of the educator is influenced by the teachers' political training: at the meso level in Nigeria, and at the meso and mega levels in Italy. In addition, in Nigeria, a cultural dimension plays a strong role concerning this aspect; in fact, in this country, the strong communal living perspective has led to the dominance of horizontal relationships between students and teachers, and it seems to be identified as a natural characteristic of teaching methods. In Italy, where for a long time the formal relationship has controlled learning environments, the shift from a formal to an informal relationship is happening in some contexts and is often connected to the teachers' educational background and training as well as their personal attitudes.

This analysis produced answers to both the first research question – «Do teachers/educators encourage learners' critical reflection?» – by identifying the introduction of participatory methods as a way to support students' critical reflection in both academic contexts; and to the second research question – «How does the institutional context support or inhibit innovative teaching methods». In fact, in both countries, there are political actions related to the implementation of teacher training regulations that are determined at meso and macro level in Nigeria (the National Policy on Education, Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria), where the education system encourages the spirit of enquiry and creativity in teachers, helps them to fit into the social life of the community in order to achieve national goals; and at meso, macro, and mega level in Italy, where the national education system is created according to a European perspective (EC, 2011; 2013) that includes the innovation of teaching approaches.

The overall result of this comparative analysis shows how the two countries with different cultural and political systems respond to teaching innovation as a common and current issue.

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