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A successful “teach-the- teacher” strategy

18 March 2019 | [Roberta Moscon](#),
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**The shift to a student-centered
education system has implied
disruptive change in learning and**

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teaching. Roberta Moscon from the University of Trento discusses how more higher education institutions are now adopting innovative methods for delivering graduates with skills adequate for the job market, as well as competences in how to tackle pressing societal challenges such as inclusiveness and citizenship.

The **University of Trento** recently organised a series of pedagogical trainings for its academic staff in the framework of its **strategic projects**, including one seminar on cooperative learning and how to organise classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences. The room was packed with academics of all ranks who volunteered to attend during their semester break.

This cycle of seminars, implemented by an ad-hoc “competence center” called **FormID**, aims at enhancing learning and teaching at the institutional level. To this end, having recognised students as leading actors of their own education, the university has invited them to also provide feedback on what prevented them (or not) from reaching their learning and professional goals.

The context here is important. In a traditional system like the one in Italy, for example, the teaching skills and competences of academic staff have long been given little value. The most

common teaching method has been “ex catedra”, meaning it is focused on factual knowledge learnt by heart. Student participation has been underestimated for generations and the university’s main senior lecturers hold unquestioned power.

More recently, there has been truly tangible evidence that the engagement and commitment of academic staff for teaching – and not exclusively for research and publishing – has been increasingly recognised as central to their profession. Professors are no longer the unique source of knowledge as universities are no longer the only education providers. The question is no longer about the content but on how and which contextual conditions can be created to enhance the learning experience and create the most impact. The **excellent teaching ranking results** and the high number of professors from the University of Trento who showed up at the seminar tells us that they have accepted the challenge and that they are open to revisit their teaching methods, to interact with students and to trigger their motivation.

Students can also do their part. And they do if they have been taught and trained in participative didactic. Italian students (with regional variations) are not used to interacting and playing a part in the lesson, let alone discuss, debate or criticise authoritative

figures. This is likely linked to cultural values; as well as the complex social dynamics in Italy in which there is often high pressure to avoid looking bad or stupid (“brutta figura”) in front of their peers, or displeasing a teacher.

In addition to and to complement the “teach-the-teacher” strategy, the University of Trento has long been offering alternative forms of learning. Most of these activities rely on the learning-by-doing or hands-on approach often in the form of a competition. For instance, during the “Industrial Problem Solving with Physics” week, selected students and industries have the opportunity to work together in the university laboratories in search of solutions to real industrial problems. Working in groups, applying the theory learnt in a more relaxed environment, generates a more positive attitude toward the formal university work and triggers higher professional aspirations. Students also develop essential soft skills that are so important in professional life, like teamwork, time management, goal setting and public speaking – which is particularly challenging for many Italian students for the reasons mentioned above.

Conversely, self-reflection and improvement, as well as critical thinking, are in demand in the “Learning to Learn English” module at the Department of Humanities. Students are asked to either keep a

diary or fill in “learning logs” whose main purpose is to help students understand what works for them and what does not, so that they can focus time and energy on the most effective activities. They can write brief notes on what they have done or found interesting or boring, or they can write longer descriptions of activities, self-analysis and thoughts about how to improve their learning strategies. Diaries or logs are discussed in a structured way during the exam.

However, when it comes to self-reflection and awareness about topics of extreme importance and sensitivity in our societies, like inclusive education and unconscious biases, there is still a long way to go. These topics have been tackled only recently, often in the form of principles and primarily in institutional boards and academic political debates, studies and monitoring, and social sciences classes. Less has been done in relation to other components of the university community and to teaching. The work on sometimes very provocative self-reflective statements and everyday situations during the **EFFECT** online seminars on inclusion and citizenship skills has turned out to be a very valuable approach. Participants (academic staff) disclosed themselves in a way people are usually reluctant to do in other circumstances. Anonymity, as well, augmented the “online disinhibition” benignly while providing an additional

protection shield against the moral judgement of others and making it definitely easier for participants to feel freer to express themselves. Besides addressing the whole university community equally, the method of such online seminars for teaching enhancement is definitely to be adopted where traditional face-to-face delicate conversation fails and falls short to convey that problems exist undeniably, starting from within.

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Roberta Moscon

Roberta Moscon from the University of Trento was part of the EFFECT project's pilot group on pedagogical staff development. This teaching enhancement initiative focused on addressing inclusivity and citizenship skills in higher education. Roberta has held several positions at the University of Trento and is currently working in her university's office for Open Access. She is passionate about education-related policies, especially those concerning innovation and learning and teaching in higher education.

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