

Valutare la competenza interculturale

Il potenziale del Service Learning

Marta Milani¹

Sommario

Nonostante l'attenzione riservata negli ultimi dieci anni alla competenza interculturale da parte delle politiche educative europee, continua a rimanere tema cارسico la sua valutazione, per via della complessità nel saperla progettare, costruire, misurare e riorientare in rapporto agli obiettivi prefissati. Allo stesso tempo, però, c'è la consapevolezza che l'evento valutativo è uno straordinario strumento educativo che sostiene e indirizza la crescita personale, oltre a essere un'importante cartina al tornasole rispetto all'attività didattica e all'operato dei docenti e/o dei formatori. È pertanto essenziale saper prospettare gli strumenti formativo-valutativi più consoni a capitalizzare al meglio le potenzialità pedagogico-generative della competenza interculturale. Il presente articolo intende offrire un contributo alla riflessione rispetto alla strategia didattica del Service Learning come veicolo di formazione-educazione alla competenza interculturale, in quanto non solo consente di mettere alla prova la teoria della pedagogia interculturale che ne è a fondamento con l'esperienza viva, ma soprattutto, grazie alla sua articolazione/strutturazione — in particolare la riflessione critica e la condivisione di pensieri, proposte, dubbi, ecc. con le agenzie della comunità presso le quali si offre il servizio —, permette che tale competenza possa essere monitorata e valutata in un'ottica di perfezionamento continuo.

Parole chiave

Competenza interculturale, Service learning, Educazione interculturale, Valutazione, Didattica.

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Assessing Intercultural Competence

The Potential of Service Learning

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Abstract

Despite the attention paid by European educational policies to intercultural competence in the past decade, its assessment remains a difficult subject due to the complexity in knowing how it should be designed, built, assessed and redirected in relation to its set objectives. At the same time, however, we are aware that an assessment event represents an extraordinary educational tool since it supports and guides personal growth, as well as being an important litmus test with respect to education and the work performed by teachers and/or trainers. It is therefore essential to be able to outline the most suitable training and assessment tools to better capitalise on the pedagogical and generative potential of intercultural competence. This article aims to provide a contribution to the reflection about the Service Learning teaching strategy as a training and educational vehicle towards intercultural competence. In fact, it allows us to test the theory of intercultural pedagogy which is at the base of this strategy with living experience, and, thanks to its articulation and structuring (in particular, critical reflection and the sharing of thoughts, proposals and doubts, etc. with the community agencies where the service is offered), ensures that this competence can be monitored and assessed with a view to continuous improvement.

Keywords

Intercultural competence, Service learning, Intercultural education, Assessment, Didactics.

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Introduction

For more than ten years the «intercultural competence» construct has become a fully-fledged element not only within academic reflection, but also in the European documents and those of various national and international bodies. One example is seen with the European Union which in 2006 enacted the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning* (EU, 2006, p. 7) which also includes, among the eight described competences, the civic and social ones defined as «personal, interpersonal and *intercultural* competence and cover all forms of behaviour that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life, and particularly in increasingly diverse societies, and to resolve conflict where necessary». This document was subsequently revised and replaced by the Recommendation of the Council of 22 May 2018 (EU, 2018) which specifies that intercultural skills underlie all key skills. In 2008, then, by opening the debate on how education policies may better address the challenges posed by immigration and internal mobility flows, the European Commission adopted the Green Paper *Migration and mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems* in which it was stated that «Intercultural skills and the capacity to enter into a tolerant and respectful dialogue with people from a different cultural background are competences that need to be, and can be, built» (p. 8). Competences that, as it will be also stated on the resolution on *the role of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education in promoting EU fundamental values* adopted by the European Union in 2016, should be supported by «[...] all forms of cooperation between schools and universities, for example [...] joint study programmes and joint projects, as a means to foster understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity and to provide young people with social, civic and intercultural competences» (p. 3). Another example of compelling importance is represented by the Council of Europe which, over the years, has fielded several actions with respect to intercultural competence. One in particular relates to the project *Competences for Democratic Culture and Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe, 2013), whose goal is to develop non-prescriptive guidelines and descriptors for competence for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue that national authorities and education institutions can use and adapt as they see fit. In this project competences are firmly based on democratic culture and they consist in a set of attitudes and behaviours that emphasize dialogue and cooperation, solving conflicts by peaceful means, and active participation in public space. Another international player which has contributed to the debate on intercultural competence is the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which launched the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, which is an international survey in the field of education aimed

at assessing the competences of fifteen-years-old teenagers in various countries of the world every three years. In the 2018 survey, in addition to the traditional analysis areas (reading, mathematics and science knowledge), a specific need emerged, for all the schools, to help students to cope and succeed in an increasingly interconnected environment by defining new learning objectives based on a solid framework and using different types of assessment to reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching practices. To this end, OECD (2018, p. 7) proposed new conceptual foundations and assessment guidelines of global competence, seen as «the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development».

However, despite the attention paid by EU documents on education policies regarding intercultural competence over the last decade, its assessment remains a difficult subject (Milani, 2020; 2017; Baiutti, 2019; Borghetti, 2017; Deardorff, 2015; Byram, 2008), due to the complexity in knowing how it should be designed, built, measured and redirected in relation to its set objectives. At the same time, however, we are aware that an assessment event represents an extraordinary educational tool since (far from being a simple tool for assessing performance) it supports and guides personal growth, as well as being an important litmus test with respect to education and the work performed by teachers and/or vocational trainers. The assessment and outcome thereof, can in fact be a resource for learning and the driving force of an active citizenship, since knowledge, behaviours and attitudes, i.e. the pillars of intercultural competence, can be confirmed, modified and refined through such processing.

Intercultural Competence and its Assessment

Intercultural competence has been understood differently over time. While at the beginning it was linked to the issues of language proficiency, nowadays, despite the linguistic dimension continuing to be an important element, scholars seem to agree on the fact that knowing one or more foreign languages does not necessarily mean being competent from an intercultural point of view (Baiutti, 2019; Milani, 2015; Deardorff e Jones, 2012; Baur, 2008). Being competent rather means mastering an organic, complex and interrelated set of skills, attitudes and knowledge that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of linguistic and cultural contexts (Barrett, 2016; Deardorff, 2015; Portera, 2013a; Bennett, 2009). These cognitive, functional and personal components are complementary: no one alone is sufficient and all are essential. As for the knowledge, it represents a complex activity of internal reworking which, in addition to being

contextualised by language, affects the cognitive dimension but also involves individual history, sensitivity, personal learning styles and social interactions (Cambi, 2004). The knowledge which contributes to intercultural competence includes (Portera e Grant, 2017; Milani, 2017; Barrett, 2016): awareness of the cultural self; knowledge of the one's own and the culture of others; disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge; communicative awareness, that is the awareness of the fact that people with different cultural background may follow dissimilar verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal conventions; understanding of processes of individual, societal and cultural interaction. Skills are related to the ability to apply and use knowledge gained in order to fulfil a particular task and/or to manage a problem and those relevant to intercultural competence includes: skills in discovering information about other cultural affiliations and perspectives; skills in interpreting other cultural practices, beliefs and values and relating them to one's own; skills in critically evaluating and making judgements about cultural beliefs, values, practices, discourses and product; acceptance, empathy and congruence; cognitive flexibility; multiperspectivity (the ability to decentre from one's own perspective and to take other people's perspective into consideration in addition to one's own); building stable relationships, working in cooperative and inclusive groups; mediation, management of stereotypes, prejudices and conflicts; listening to and paying attention to the behaviour of people with other cultural affiliations and perspectives; linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills. With attitudes are understood all personal, psychological and socio-cultural dispositions which facilitate and/or permit effective performance. The attitudes involved are the following ones: respecting people who have different cultural orientations from one's own; being open to, curious about and willing to learn about and from people who have different cultural affiliations from one's own; being willing to seek out chances to engage and cooperate with individuals who have different cultural perspectives from one's own; being willing to question what is usually taken for granted as «normal» according to one's previously acquired knowledge and experience; being willing to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty; being flexible, critical thinking and congruence.

At the same time, the external environment turns out to be particularly significant for the development and exercise of the competence, since the possibility of having available spaces, times, resources, supports and structures that are conducive to meeting has an effect on the interaction that occurs: the better the context, the better the wellbeing and the development of the Self, and the better the application of the competence (Milani, 2018; Ciancio, 2014; Portera, 2013a).

Since, as we have seen, the concept of intercultural competence has a multifaceted nature, as the result of the presence of observable but also latent components, i.e. that require the exploration of the inner dimensions related to motivational, volitional, social and emotional processes of the individual which

are difficult to assess (Milani, 2020; Baiutti, 2017; Deardorff, 2015; Portera, 2013b), it is important to assume a multiplicity of viewpoints that help to grasp their various nuances and to reassemble them in a coherent and integrated overall framework. In addition, the results and outcomes but also the processes, paths, levels and developments contribute towards the formulation of an assessment. Intercultural competence is not, in fact, the same as a specific performance; rather it represents a kind of «operational scheme» that promotes the dynamic activation and combination of various resources, a set of testable forecasts and inference processes that are shaped according to situations and different contexts.

With this in mind, authors such as Castoldi (2016), Trincherò (2016) and Pellerey (2010) suggest that the assessment of a competence should involve a three-pronged approach: 1) multi-method: the data must be collected through several means; 2) multi-perspective: finding several points of view and encouraging their collective interpretive analysis; 3) longitudinal: assessing the acquisition of competence by observing a family of performances over a reasonable period of time. In particular, according to Pellerey (2004), there should be three privileged observation perspectives in the analysis of competence: a subjective, inter-subjective and objective dimension. The first is linked to a self-assessment instance related to the way in which the individual observes and judges their experience as well as their ability to respond to the tasks required by the specific context in which they operate. The devices used for the collection of reflections and perceptions of one's own work, of the activated thinking patterns and of the resources used, include autobiographies, diaries, self-assessment questionnaires and critical reflections. The inter-subjective dimension, on the contrary, refers to the system of expectations expressed by the individuals in the context¹ in relation to the ability of the individual to respond effectively to the requested task and to the identified goals; it therefore concerns all stakeholders (teachers, students, families, trainers and individuals from outside the school in general) who are involved in various ways in the situation in which the requested competence emerges together with the set of their expectations and expressed assessments. Such «plurivocity» contributes to make the assessment more rigorous because only a holistic approach to assessment can provide an opportunity for the layering and reworking of (intercultural) competence and not only — and not so much — occasions for the inefficacious assessment and classification of performance (Milani, 2018; Varani e Carletti, 2005). The method that is frequently used for the assessment of the subject involves in the first instance the definition of the evaluation parameters and makes use of tools such as assessment reports, structured

¹ As highlighted by Deardorff (2009), suitability is determined by the context itself and, specifically, by the people involved in the interaction; for this reason, it can be defined as «socially determined» (contextual, contingent and conventional).

and non-structured observation protocols, notes and comments, questionnaires and/or interviews designed to detect the perceptions of the various players. Finally, the objective dimension concerns the observable evidence proving the individual's mastery in relation to the expected competence.

To make this possible, the assessment requires a multi-perspective vision which carefully detects, through a cross comparison, similarities and differences, confirmations and gaps between the data and the information collected. In this regard, authentic tasks, reality tests and verification tests are effective examples for analysing competence.

It is therefore essential to be able to outline the most suitable training and assessment tools to better capitalise on the pedagogical and generative potential of intercultural competence; in this perspective, Service Learning (SL) is a prime example because its primary organisation involves the deployment of a multitude of observation lenses that find a proactive momentum towards the continuous improvement of all parties involved in their mutual integration. Through this teaching strategy, the subjective, inter-subjective and objective dimensions become complementary points of view through which one can draw an overall picture of the intercultural competence of the individual and assess their adequacy in relation to the tasks requested and the set educational aims.

Enhancing Intercultural Competence through Service Learning

Since, as pointed out by several authors (Baiutti, 2019; Portera, 2017; Milani, 2017; Deardorff, 2009; Baur, 2008), intercultural competence cannot be taught, but can only be acquired by acting in the material and social reality, it is of primary importance to root the learning processes in reality. Putting the experience at the centre of the educational process means targeting the possibility of a true presence, the one which puts us into direct contact with the problems of existence, making the surrounding environment a laboratory of thought and action. However, in the various forms of experiential learning, as Mortari (2017a, p. 17) emphasises, there is a risk «that the school/university relates to the external context in a merely instrumental way, i.e. by using the surrounding world only as a tank full of issues to be investigated and cognitive resources». Instead, there is a way of connecting scholastic and university education to reality by going beyond the instrumental use of contexts, and this condition is fulfilled when one goes outside (at nongovernmental organizations, indigenous grass roots organizations, non-profit organizations serving local refugee communities, just to give some examples) not only to understand what happens in the world by considering the environment as a useful setting that is functional to making the learning activity meaningful, but also to contribute to the improvement of the

community in a virtuous self-perpetuating cycle.² This perspective is supported by the SL teaching methodology, which stands for «A structural [...] experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction [...] with others in which they can apply course content; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to further understanding of course content, deepen understanding of global and intercultural issues, broaden appreciation of cultural difference, and enhance a sense of their own responsibility as local global citizens» (De Leon, 2014, p. 21).

SL is especially well suited to contribute significantly to the development and assessment of intercultural competence because it provides this experiential and reflective opportunities for learning with and about diverse people that are not easily replicable in classroom settings alone. A host of studies have indeed demonstrated that it not only increases awareness of cultural differences, sensitivity to diversity and civic mindedness, but it also challenges stereotypes and decreases racism by moving students from a charity orientation toward more of a social justice one (Baecher e Chung, 2020; De Leon, 2014; Deardorff e Edwards, 2013; O’Grady, 2012; Tangen, Mercer, Spooner-Lane e Hepple, 2011; Welch Borden, 2007; Kaye, 2004; Westrick, 2004; Dilg, 2003).

The approach of intercultural education outlines this methodology, by encouraging people to bridge the gap between knowledge and action, to take a position and to compromise oneself. The competence begins to emerge when students are exposed to reality and identify conflicts and challenges by facing local communities or practices which relate to a code of values, ethics and morality that is different from their own. The belief behind this vision is that education should not be functional to the system, but an element of transformation through a contextual and dialectical thinking. SL is an immersion into reality not only to change it, but allow ourselves to be changed by it; it helps to question the fundamentals that drive knowledge, beliefs (especially cultural prejudices, social stereotypes, the stigmatisation of groups or racist views) and/or value assets of each one of us and to provide elements for a new point of view.

In considering the three privileged perspectives of observation identified by Pellerey (2004) in the analysis of competence, we can see that SL meets the different assessment elements.

- *Subjective dimension*: from the learning point of view, the student’s leadership does not consist of «doing» things, in the sense of direct action, but of cognitive processing (thinking, deeply examining, analysing and negotiating meanings, hypothesising solutions, employing effective thinking strategies

² In this sense SL is therefore distinct from other forms of experiential learning, such as volunteerism, community service, internships, and field education.

and making decisions, etc.). Through this process, in fact, students integrate their experience in the community with the studied theory, in order to maintain a critical and objective attitude for the duration of the service: «reflection allows students the opportunity to confront bias, challenge simplistic conclusions, as well as share their gazes and shift their eyes away from the “others” with whom they are working, to themselves» (Bringle, Hatcher e Jones, 2011, p. 115). The aim is to create an awareness³ that allows one to open up to the world, discovering the lights and shadows of one’s own culture and other people’s culture by integrating them into an unprecedented synthesis (intercultural education), to recognise and seize the numerous nuances of reality (multicultural education) and to feel the common bonds of humanity beneath the flow of diversity (transcultural education).⁴ The reflection can be in written form and/or oral form, it can be started individually and/or collectively, and can be carried out with different levels of frequency and feedback (Ash, Clayton e Atkinson, 2005). The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE) (2009) is essentially a series of questions about an experience which has been particularly relevant and it is particularly useful for the improvement of the exercise of independent critical faculties on the responses to experiences of other cultures. The questions take the students back over the encounter, over they responded, how they think others in the encounter responded, how they thought and felt about it then and now, and what conclusions they can draw from it for the future. The AIE (or a simple diary) can then be part of a portfolio (Torre, 2019), which is a self-assessment tool (as it further solicits reflection) and an assessment tool at the same time, because it is a useful way to get a snapshot of the global answers given by students when dealing with tasks and/or multicultural situations. In this regard, it is important to remember that self- and hetero-assessment are two necessary actions because «whereas effectiveness can be determined by the individual engaging in the behavior or communication, appropriateness can be determined only by the other person(s) in the interaction [...], who judges whether the individual was communicating and behaving appropriately based on his or her own (i.e., the other’s) cultural norms. Appropriateness is directly related to cultural sensitivity and adherence to the cultural norms of the other person(s) with whom the individual is interacting» (Deardorff e Edwards, 2013, p. 162).

³ Mezirow’s (2000) transformational learning theory provides a useful framework for understanding how SL can produce powerful learning experiences. In this model, learning requires examination of one’s presuppositions in relation to new knowledge, leading to reconstruction of meanings through reflection and interaction.

⁴ For further information on the differences between intercultural, multicultural and transcultural education see Santerini (2017), Portera (2013a) and Pinto Minerva (2002).

- *Inter-subjective dimension*: SL is a type of two-way service, in other words, it is co-coordinated by an institutional educational agency and by the community, which is considered the beneficiary but also the co-responsible and co-director of the service action (Felten e Clayton, 2011; Eyer e Giles, 1999; Myers e Pickeral, 1997). The ultimate goal is to achieve common objectives and promote competence for all the partners. This is made possible by the continuous exchange between all the players involved, which leads to the creation of new knowledge and ideas and allows for the joint development of feelings and awareness that may be different compared to a more or less recent past. In fact, although self-assessment is quite useful for assessing effectiveness from the student's point of view, appropriateness can be assessed only by others. Therefore evidence should be solicited from both students and people with whom they interact.
- *Objective dimension*: in addition to the multiperspective approach that solicits evidence of the competence from all the stakeholders involved in Service Learning, the evidence will be stronger if some of it is demonstrated rather than reported. In this sense, direct measures such as systematic observations of students performance (e.g. by instructors, host family members, community members, etc.) or problem-solving interviews are fundamental to intercultural competence assessment: «Such approach provides for richer data and a more holistic picture that can be used to identify turning points and critical experiences that reveal students' progression of development for the intercultural competence learning outcomes» (Deardorff and Edwards, 2013, p. 174).

Final Reflections

Nowadays, the economic and social phenomenon of globalisation significantly affects every human action, increasing and reducing the distance between society and community. Anyone who aspires to become a prepared and competent citizen must be provided with knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary to deal with the global processes they are involved in.

SL is a powerful vehicle of training and educational vehicle towards intercultural competence. In fact, it allows us to test the theory of intercultural education which is at the base of this strategy with living experience, and, thanks to its articulation and structuring (in particular, critical reflection and the sharing of thoughts, proposals and doubts, etc. with the community agencies where the service is offered), ensures that this competence can be monitored and assessed with a view to continuous improvement. Such incompleteness represents, in fact, the tension required for its development, because the construct of competence always includes the idea of «further», of what has still not been achieved, and

will never be fully conquered. The underlying idea is that competence, including all the variety of its dimensions, should be therefore understood more as a point of reference than an arrival. This is why, on an educational level, we should aim at setting up long-lasting projects which require commitment and perseverance and that, for this reason, are fully integrated into the curriculum.

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