

Fiorella Vinci

## ***Reinventing academic work: the social functions of disciplinary didactic and e-learning***

### **ABSTRACT**

Situandosi nella cornice teorica della sociologia dell'azione pubblica, l'articolo propone di considerare la didattica disciplinare e l'e-learning come leve dell'innovazione del lavoro accademico. Il contributo esplora un livello di analisi intermedio tra micro e macro coincidente con lo studio degli effetti che l'e-learning e la didattica disciplinare, interagendo con le recenti riforme europee e nazionali dei sistemi universitari, possono produrre sulla riconfigurazione delle comunità disciplinari e accademiche. Un'organizzazione sociale riflessiva, all'interno degli atenei, sembra essere la condizione che non solo offre ai docenti competenze adeguate per immaginare comportamenti innovativi ma che, modificando positivamente la qualità delle relazioni professionali, sia tra docenti che tra docenti e studenti, consente loro di riflettere sul ruolo pubblico delle università nelle società contemporanee.

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Through the theoretical lens of the sociology of public action, this article proposes considering disciplinary teaching and e-learning as levers for the innovation of academic work. Investigating an intermediate level between macro and micro analyses, the contribution explores how e-learning and disciplinary teaching interact with recent European and national university reforms and how they contribute to redefining the disciplinary and academic

communities. A reflexive social organization within universities seems to be the condition that not only offers lecturers adequate skills for imagining innovative conduct, but, by positively modifying the quality of professional relations, both between lecturers and between lecturers and students, allows them to reflect on the public role of the university in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** e-learning, disciplinary teaching, reflexive organization.

### **IORELLA VINCI**

Professoressa associata di sociologia dei fenomeni politici e giuridici presso l'Università eCampus. Analista della sociologia dell'azione pubblica, si occupa soprattutto dei processi di legittimazione collettiva delle politiche pubbliche, con particolare riguardo ai paesi dell'Europa mediterranea. Recentemente ha pubblicato *L'autonomia possibile. Percezioni dell'autorità tra i giovani di Palermo* (Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2017); *Il sociologo e la qualità dell'azione pubblica (in Max Weber: Politica e società, a cura di Viviani e Fruncillo, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2021).*

[fiorella.vinci@unicampus.it](mailto:fiorella.vinci@unicampus.it)

## Introduction

Since the end of the 1990s, and particularly since the Bologna Process, the European university systems have been involved in extensive processes of transformation. According to Charle and Soulié, the division of study courses into two cycles, the establishment of educational credits and the systematic assessment of the quality of academic institutions, certified by independent national agencies represent the major transformations of European university systems.<sup>1</sup>

In the last two decades, in Italy, these transformations have produced the multiplication of disciplinary specializations and intense disciplinary differentiation processes within the same discipline.<sup>2</sup>

The increase in disciplinary specializations is not the only element of transformative dynamics, in fact, they are grafted onto more general transformations of academic work produced by the greatest revolution of late modernity: the digital revolution.<sup>3</sup>

In Italy, as well as through the establishment of telematic universities, the digitization of university teaching, has taken place through the gradual introduction of digital teaching tools into traditional courses, variously establishing “didactics 2.0”.<sup>4</sup>

The traditional teaching model has been replaced by more hybrid formulas in which, thanks to the use of web-based platforms, software and digital tools, teaching is co-constructed with students.

The sociologist who observes such processes is struck by the transformative dynamics of the processes and by the institutional conditions of their implementation. The institutional contexts within the various universities, the governance that characterizes them and the different actors involved in the teaching processes are crucial in promoting specific interpretations of national legislation and activating innovation processes.

Following the theoretical tradition of the sociology of public action,<sup>5</sup> the article explores the possibility of using disciplinary didactics and e-learning to analyse the dynamics of innovation in university work, their institutional conditions of possibility<sup>6</sup> and their generative social mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

1 C. Charle, C. Soulié, *Les ravages de la “modernisation” universitaire en Europe*, Paris, Editions Syllepse, 2008.

2 M. Pitzalis, *L’université italienne entre marché, formations professionnelles et pouvoir politique* in C. Charle, C. Soulié C., (eds) *Les ravages de la modernisation universitaire en Europe*, Paris, Editions Syllepse, 2008, pp. 69-88.

3 M. Gauchet, *L’avènement de la démocratie IV. Le nouveau monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 2017.

4 P.C. Rivoltella, *Dalla Fad all’e-learning. Tecnologia, educazione e formazione in Italia*, in “Rivista per la formazione. Tendenza, pratiche, strumenti”, n. 86, 2011, pp. 38-43.

5 P. Duran, *Penser l’action publique*, Paris, L.G.D.J., 1999. A sociological analysis of public action can also be found in G. Moini, *Interpretare l’azione pubblica. Teorie, metodi e strumenti*, Roma, Carocci, 2013.

6 J.L. Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

7 R. Barnett, *Imagining the University*, London-New York, Routledge, 2013. An analysis of the recent major transformations of university systems can be found in O. Giancola, *Il nuovo scenario delle politiche educative: tra valutazione, quasi-mercato e l’emergere di nuovi attori* in Moini G. (ed.) *Neoliberismi e azione pubblica. Il caso*

The paper is divided into two parts. The first is devoted to highlighting the contribution that the sociology of public action can offer to the analysis of innovation processes in university work and, in particular, to the reconstruction of the effects of recent reforms of Italian universities on disciplinary teaching and e-learning. The second is devoted to the sociological relevance of a meso-social level of analysis represented by the processes of formation of teaching communities and the influence that e-learning and disciplinary teaching can exert on the forms they take.

### The sociological analysis of the innovation in university work

The sociology of public action seems particularly suited to the analysis of university innovations because of its ability to highlight the interdependence between the macro-social and micro-social levels of analysis.

Considering public policies not as outputs but as outcomes, this tradition brings out the processual and social dimension of the analysis<sup>8</sup> and is attentive to the diachronic development of social logic and its multi-level and multi-agency composition. Studying the recent transformations of higher education systems, Giancola highlights two main vectors of change.<sup>9</sup> A systemic one, which considers the university system as a social sub-system interdependent on other social systems, and a second one, more institutional-organizational, relating to the transformations of academic work experienced by the social actors in this field: lecturers, researchers, students.

The sociologist of public action who observes such processes is struck above all by the emerging social effects that result from them. On the one hand by the interdependence between the systemic and institutional-organizational vectors of change, and on the other by the social nature of change, which – rather than presenting itself as an event external to individuals – appears to be situated in defined institutional contexts, deeply connected to individual possibilities of reacting to events and shaping their forms. In terms of analysis, among the emerging social effects, disciplinary didactics and e-learning play a significant role. First of all, they appear as important consequences of systemic transformations, both of the pervasiveness of technological innovation and of the design of higher education reform outlined at the beginning of the 21st century by the European legislator. Moreover, they enable the reconstruction of specific mechanisms of internal transformation of academic work, the understanding of how individuals interpret change and in particular how their interpretations modify their social participation, especially in specific professional communities.

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*italiano*, Roma, Ediesse, pp. 129-146.

8 P. Duran, *Penser l'action publique*, cit.

9 O. Giancola, *Il nuovo scenario delle politiche educative: tra valutazione, quasi-mercato e l'emergere di nuovi attori*, cit.

This perspective emphasises the systemic level of analysis: far from being neutral, legislative reforms help to shape multiple social sub-systems. However, they also have direct effects on organizations, helping to redefine their goals and the ways of pursuing them, and revealing important effects at the institutional level. As cognitive sociology has shown, public policies promote specific forms of social action by contributing to the processes of “objectification” of the shared meaning that individuals attribute to their actions.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of this study, the specific interest in the sociology of public action stems precisely from the possibility offered by this tradition of focusing on an intermediate level of analysis that coincides with inter-individual action within organizations. This level emphasises the fact that legislative reforms are implemented in specific organizational contexts and that individuals, through their interindividual acting, attribute variable meanings to them. Exploring these meanings and their degree of influence on individual action, the researcher also seeks to bring to light the public role of universities in contemporary societies, its presence, especially in teaching, and above all the forms it is likely to take. In other words, what makes the recourse to the sociology of public action relevant in the analysis of university innovations is the pragmatic dimension of analysis, the possibility of understanding how the actions of individuals within specific organizations, such as universities, generate institutional innovation, grafting new meanings onto those previously attributed by individuals, re-interpretations, cognitive and normative adjustments to meanings that have already been shared. More specifically, the reflection explores the social functions of disciplinary didactics and e-learning, i.e. the possibilities of disciplinary didactics and e-learning to provoke and promote reconfigurations of academic and disciplinary communities.

If, as Baechler writes, “the main problem of sociology is to understand who is with whom”,<sup>11</sup> and if this problem in contemporary society is particularly relevant,<sup>12</sup> then disciplinary education and e-learning contribute to redefine the participation of individuals in the communities they belong to and refer to. Disciplinary education is also able to modify the way individuals find their place in different organisational contexts, their possibilities of creating community ties, and the forms of the latter.

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10 P. Muller, Y. Surel, *L'analyse cognitive des politiques publiques: vers une sociologie politique de l'action publique*, in “Revue française de science politique”, n. 2, 2000, pp. 189-207.

11 J. Baechler, *Groupes et sociabilité*, in Boudon R. (eds.), *Traité de Sociologie*, Paris, PUF, pp. 57-96.

12 M. Magatti, *Libertà immaginaria. Le illusioni del capitalismo techno-nichillista*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2009.

## The impulse of the European legislator to disciplinary teaching and e-learning

As Rivoltella points out, the recent reforms of the Italian university system – including those relating to its digital innovation – should be analysed in the light of the innovative impulses provided by the European legislator.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, ever since the Lisbon Strategy, the EU legislator has indicated a design for innovation in higher education based on the need to link the knowledge society with progressively increasing youth employment objectives. The way to implement the common orientation is indicated in a professional qualification achieved through targeted courses, whose success is ensured by training networks that integrate the action of universities and enterprises in programs increasingly based on the use of new technologies. In such a design, disciplinary training and e-learning are central and interconnected elements of innovation. The reconstruction of the European documents that make up the Bologna Process reveals the presence of the theme of disciplinary teaching from the earliest declarations, which will then be explicitly drawn on in 2010 by the Vienna and Bucharest Declarations. Similarly, the theme of e-learning has been present in European documents since the early 2000s. For example, it can also be found in the Council of Europe’s resolution of July 2001 (2001/C 204/02), and on the e-learning action plan *Designing tomorrow’s education* and in the proposal for a decision of the Council and of the European Parliament for the adoption of a multiannual program (2004-2006) for the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in European education and training systems. The attention paid by the European legislator to the application of e-learning to higher education has been constant over the last decades. It focuses above all on training the digital skills of teachers and students.<sup>14</sup> In 2006 the European legislature – with the aim of continuing harmonization and innovation of education in the different EU countries – drew up the Recommendation on the key and citizenship competences. (PE 2006/962/CE). In 2017, the European Commission intervened by publishing the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators, the DigCompEdu, i.e. a framework for defining and fostering the development of digital competences of teachers at all levels, including university. Finally, the Commission has also recently adopted a new action plan for digital education (The digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027), which, following the pandemic, develops a strategy for a highly efficient digital education ecosystem with enhanced e-skills for teachers and students.

13 P.C. Rivoltella, *Dalla Fad all’e-learning. Tecnologie, educazione e formazione in Italia*, cit.

14 To deepen the analysis of teachers’ digital skills, within the rich literature dedicated to this topic, we can also consider S. Lovece, *Promuovere, formare e certificare le competenze digitali di insegnanti e educatori*, in “Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica – Journal of Theories and Research in Education”, 8, 2013, pp. 1-18; A. Dipace, *Competenze digitali, nuovi ambienti di apprendimento e professionalità*, in G. Cipriani, A. Cagnolati (a cura di), *Le frontiere della didattica tra discipline, competenze e strategie di apprendimento*, Foggia, Il Castello Edizioni, 2019, pp. 403-416.

The analysis of the European documents reveals specific aspects of both the subject of disciplinary teaching and e-learning.

Disciplinary didactics, far from presenting itself as the specialised teaching of individual disciplines, appears to be a useful vector for the construction of highly-qualified professional curricula in which training involves the collaboration of training-productive units inserted in polycentric training networks based on disciplinary pluralism.

In the first place, e-learning is presented as the function that specifies the forms of professional qualification by fixing the innovation of higher education to digital skills. In addition, e-learning is also presented as a vector of social inclusion. This possibility stems from the idea that e-learning can make it possible to reach students otherwise excluded from higher education, such as working students and students with disabilities. Following the European recommendations, e-learning has been given an increasingly broad scope over the last twenty years. At first, e-skills were aimed at spreading familiarity with information and communication technologies among both teachers and learners; later on, the increasingly aware integration of digital didactic tools in learning processes has also taken on the objective of promoting the building of co-constructed knowledge between teachers and learners.<sup>15</sup>

On first analysis, at the beginning of the 21st century, the functions attributed by the European legislator to disciplinary didactics and e-learning still seem consistent with a conception of the political development of individuals based on the ideal of the formation of the good citizen that constituted Modernity. On closer inspection, however, to these dimensions are attributed a specific “performative function”,<sup>16</sup> that of enabling individuals to effectively manage the complexity arising from societies characterised by multidimensional and global problems, information entropy and growing risks.

It is precisely the relevance of this performative function that brings to the forefront the need for European indications, the construction of the European Higher Education Area to be translated at national level into effective public policies. As European policy scholars have stressed,<sup>17</sup> the effectiveness of these policies derives not only from multi-level governance systems but also from the different national and local capacities for implementing them.<sup>18</sup> This is also confirmed with regard to higher education policies, for the implementation of which the national and local levels

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15 D. Lipari, *Nuove parole della formazione*, Roma, Palinsesto, 2014

16 V. D'Ascanio, *La polisemia della performance. L'istruzione superiore e la società della conoscenza*, Anicia, Roma, 2017.

17 S. Liebfried, P. Pierson, *European Social Policy, between integration and fragmentation*, tr. fr. *Politiques sociales européennes entre intégration et fragmentation*, Paris, Editions L'Harmattan, 1998.

18 F. Vinci, *L'efficacia dei fondi strutturali europei. Processi e protagonisti al vaglio della sociologia dell'azione pubblica*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2013.

prove to be decisive.<sup>19</sup> The impulse given by the European legislator to disciplinary teaching and e-learning invites the sociologist of public action to redefine the focus of the study, to analyse the national levels of implementation of public policies together with the European ones, trying to understand which institutional conditions at the local level allow specific interpretations of the Community's recommendations.

## The effects of the Italian reforms on disciplinary teaching and e-learning

In 2010, the Gelmini Law (Law n. 240 of 30 December 2010) was approved in Italy. This law directly influences disciplinary teaching and intersects e-learning as an effect of disciplinary specialization.

The disciplinary rebound, the establishment of the teaching of new disciplines, had already been favoured during the first decade of the 2000s by the introduction of the so-called "3+2 system" (from subdivision of the years of study) and the consequent emergence of new academic courses.

The disciplinary differentiation within each discipline, on the other hand, appears to be a direct effect of the objective of reorganising the university curriculum pursued by the Gelmini law.

Both disciplinary rebound and differentiation cause first of all a disciplinary hyper specialization. This first effect, which could be defined as mechanical and which directly affects the formation of disciplinary communities, is linked to a broader reconfiguration of academic communities.<sup>20</sup> The institution within each discipline of scientific disciplinary areas regulating the recruitment and career advancement of lecturers helps to reduce the size of disciplinary communities by transforming them into sub-disciplinary communities and helps to strengthen their influence in the career advancement of university lecturers. At the same time, however, the identification of minimum thresholds for the number of departments and their consequent aggregation promotes the mismatch between disciplinary and academic communities, introducing the possibility that the latter may increasingly be cohabited by professors belonging to different disciplinary communities.

The promotion of e-learning is part of the transformation of disciplinary and academic communities.

The sociological analysis of the effects of e-learning on disciplinary and academic

19 D. Palomba, *Politiche europee dell'istruzione fra attualità, storia e comparazione*, in D. Palomba, C. Cappa (eds.), *Sistemi d'istruzione in Europa: orizzonti a confronto*, in "I Problemi della Pedagogia", 1, 2012, pp. 3-16. S. Colarusso, O. Giancola, *Università e nuove forme di valutazione. Strategie individuali, produzione scientifica, effetti istituzionali*, Roma, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2020.

20 F. Denti, R. Moscati, *Strutture formative e le relazioni sociali: la riforma degli ordinamenti didattici nell'Università italiana*, in "Rivista Italiana di Sociologia", 4, 2008, pp. 1-32.



communities, as well as their composition through the enhancement of professional relationships between teaching and IT staff, highlights latent processes of community transformation. In the academic communities, e-learning highlights opportunities for multidisciplinary reflection, as if it could become a “multidisciplinary foyer of aggregation” and eventually a “trans-disciplinary object of study”.

In the disciplinary communities, on the other hand, it unexpectedly introduces the centrality of the didactic question, and, since the latter is very little connected to the career advancement of individual teachers, it reveals opportunities for discussion and confrontation not influenced by the prevalence of an utilitarian course of action.

During the second decade of the 2000s, in many Italian universities, following the guidelines of the Yerevan Conference (Bologna Process 2015), digital didactics learning courses flourished, both for university teachers and for teachers from other school levels.<sup>21</sup> These courses spread among the universities like wildfire, developing very differentiated skills among teachers. However, they reveal, within the academic communities, opportunities for transdisciplinary confrontation which contribute to their redefinition, to the opening of their departmental boundaries allowing the inclusion of teachers belonging to other departments but also to other universities or educational institutions. These same courses, aimed at learning digital and multi-media teaching techniques, despite being experiences distributed unevenly throughout the country, and in some cases niche experiences, introduce into the disciplinary communities common reflections on the subject of disciplinary teaching carried out through collaborative and experimental practices.

### **The intermediate level of analysis: reconfigurations of academic and disciplinary communities**

The disciplinary differentiation and the learning of digital didactics highlight processes of reconfiguration of academic and disciplinary communities.<sup>22</sup>

In some cases, these processes reproduce within the individual sub-disciplinary communities pre-existing forms of power and the pyramidal organization of its exercise. In others, however, they activate ambivalent associative mechanisms and unprecedented epistemological and methodological reflexivity triggered precisely by the disciplinary differentiation and the new disposition to learning transmitted by e-learning.

21 M. Pitzalis, M. Porcu, A. De Feo and F. Giambona, *Innovare a scuola. Insegnanti, studenti e tecnologie digitali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2016.

22 T. Anderson, J. Dron, *Three generations of distance education pedagogy* in “The International Review of Research in Open Distance Learning”, 12, 2011, pp. 80-97.

G. Therriault, D. Baillet, M.F. Carnus and V. Vincent, *Rapport au(x) savoir(s) de l'insegnant et de l'apprenant. Une énigmatique rencontre*, Bruxelles, De Boeck, 2017.



From an analytical point of view, what emerges from these processes is the relevance of the interdependence between the different forms of professional community that shape universities.

Communities, both academic and disciplinary, appear as places of innovation precisely because they are places where it is possible to redefine the inter-individual logics of the constitutive domain of academic work. These places are relational spaces that define the participation of subjects in the groups they belong to, the motivations and phenomenologies of their membership. They are also known as institutional contexts in which the contents of national laws take on specific forms, become effective, outlining conflicting individual freedoms, professional relationships between teachers and between teachers and students that are potentially innovative. This happens both because they are established between new subjects and because they bring about arrangements and reinventions of the shared meanings attributed by individuals to their actions.

In the innovation of university work, and in particular in the analysis that disciplinary teaching and e-learning exert on its dynamics, disciplinary and academic communities seem to compete according to morphogenetic mechanisms that, in Weber's words, can be either "alliance" or "antagonism".<sup>23</sup>

Basically, the interactions between disciplinary and academic communities seem to follow a pattern of mutual isomorphic adaptation or mutual reinvention of their forms.

Following classical sociologists such as Durkheim and Merton<sup>24</sup> and taking up the numerous community studies in the sociological literature, fundamental elements of the communitarisation processes are "the quality of the relationships that bind the members of the communities together" and the "degree of openness of the communities towards the outside world".<sup>25</sup>

The innovative potential of the community seems particularly conditioned by the relationship between the inside and the outside, by the perception of the outside as a space that can expand the individual's possibilities of self-determination or as a space that, on the contrary, can jeopardize his possibilities of development. Individuals' adhesion to communities, their possibilities of creating community ties in university contexts, as Weber pointed out, are always based on power relations and the interindividual logics that legitimise them.<sup>26</sup> In Italy, as Pitzalis (among others) has pointed out, the liberalist phase of university innovation has not succeeded in

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23 M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1922; trad. it. 1958, *Il Metodo delle Scienze Storico-Sociali*, Torino, Einaudi, 1958.

24 E. Durkheim, *De la division du travail social*, Paris, Alcan, 1893. R.K. Merton, *Teoria e struttura sociale. Studi sulla struttura sociale e culturale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000.

25 A. Bagnasco, *Logiche della comunità in sociologia. Pensare le comunità*, Bentivoglio, Asmepa Edizioni, 2012.

26 M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1922; trad. it. *Economia e Società, vol. I*, Milano, Edizioni Comunità, 1999-2000.

unhinging the corporatism that traditionally structures Italian universities.<sup>27</sup> However, what appears interesting in the analysis of the internal innovations of university work that we are conducting through the study of disciplinary didactics and e-learning is the possibility that change emerges as an unexpected process, as a consequence of different ways of imagining and performing university work. From this point of view, the change we are analysing has a clear pragmatic imprint, it comes from a process that induces new social relations which, in turn, define new ways of conceiving the profession of university lecturer.<sup>28</sup> What emerges is a type of innovation that social development scholars define as “incremental”. It derives from the associations of individuals and the possibilities that these associations allow them to modify the logic of acceptance of domination, which structures their participation in certain professional contexts.

### Disciplinary teaching and attentional reflexivity

The specialization that structures the disciplinary communities deriving from the Gelmini Law produces, in many cases, a reduction in the size of the original disciplinary community of reference and causes a fragmentation of university power; the new disciplinary communities are, in fact, densified around the full professors of the various sub-disciplines. However, this fragmentation does not change the hierarchical-corporative structure of the university power, as it frequently replaces its top-down organization with its reproduction, on a smaller scale, within the numerous sub-disciplinary communities.<sup>29</sup> The latter, being smaller than the original disciplinary communities, seem, in the first instance, to reinforce the logic of the participation of the individual in the community, validating the instrumental connection between the sub-disciplinary training of the teacher in the institution of the community, his/her belonging to the community of reference and the advancement of his/her career.

This mechanism though, coexisting in the formation of constitutively departmental and multidisciplinary academic communities, gives rise to unexpected didactic effects. In the daily morphogenetic process of sub-disciplinary communities, didactic learning plays a founding function. It not only differentiates the individual disciplines, but also creates the need for reflective disciplined learning in individual teachers.<sup>30</sup>

Within the academic community, disciplinary teaching seems to be able to generate

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27 M. Pitzalis, *L'università italiana entre marché, formations professionnelles et pouvoir politique*, cit.

28 D.A., Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, 1983; trad. it. *Il professionista riflessivo, per una nuova epistemologia della pratica professionale*, Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 1993.

29 C. Facchini, L. Sacconi, M. Fia, *La governance universitaria in Italia, tra mutamento legislativo e adattamento istituzionale. Teoria ed evidenze*, in “Social Policies”, n. 3, 2018, 363-386.

30 L. Mortari, *Apprendere dall'esperienza. Il pensare riflessivo nella formazione*, Roma, Carocci, 2003.

what Donati has called “attentional reflexivity”, i.e. relationships that the teacher entertains first of all with his/her own historical-relational knowledge, not exclusively based on instrumental rationality, or on the advantage that disciplinary training can bring to the teacher’s career. Quite the opposite it’s oriented towards understanding what advantages the teacher’s disciplinary training can bring to others, colleagues and/or students and to their participation in the same didactic environment.<sup>31</sup>

This kind of reflexivity digs into individual disciplinary knowledge not with the intention of finding in them principles of self-sufficiency, but with the intention of finding logical connections with other knowledge, the possibility that the didactic action redefines the intersubjective sense of disciplinary knowledge through the sharing of a composite, collective and participated training plan. What emerges is not a didactic relationship based on multidisciplinary, but a professional relationship crossed by an interdisciplinary tension, attentive to the mutual contribution that each discipline could offer to the construction not only of defined training plans, but of the historical and institutional conditions necessary for their efficient implementation.

In particular, attentional reflexivities seem to erode the traditional forms of legitimation of domination, removing individuals from the exclusive monopoly of their forms and allowing complex rationalities to emerge.

According to Durkheim’s classical analyses, such processes are facilitated not only by the frequency and density of social relations, but by their regulation, by what Durkheim called “moral density”.<sup>32</sup> The sociological analysis of attentional reflexivity brings to the surface the organizational dimension of academic communities and the “practical attitudes” that nourish the didactic actions of individual teachers.

## E-learning and experiential-collaborative learning

As in the case of disciplinary teaching, e-learning also seems to contribute to morphogenetic models of academic communities that compete with more traditional models of disciplinary communities. Here too, in the first instance, the privileged places of innovation seem to be the academic communities. In this case the relevant condition is not the reflexive learning that the teacher is led to implement in order to search for the didactic meaning to attribute to his disciplinary knowledge, but the diffusion and intersubjective validation of an “experimental and collaborative didactic attitude”.

The experimental attitude is a constitutive characteristic of technological innovation and its methods of implementation. When applied to university teaching, it reveals a surprising innovative potential. First of all, it introduces, alongside the primacy of

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31 P.P. Donati, *Sociologia della riflessività. Come si entra nel dopo-moderno*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011.

32 E. Durkheim, *De la division du travail social*, cit.

formally codified knowledge, the effectiveness of informal, often tacit, knowledge. Secondly, as the etymology of the verb *experire* itself reminds us, it removes knowledge from its cumulative logic, tracing different learning paths and processes, often very much linked to the solution of concrete problems. This possibility generates a very situated knowledge, delimited to specific cases, to biographical paths and to defined didactic situations: the use of specific web-based platforms, the use of specific software and other digital tools, and last but not least the search for colleagues who have already gained experience in e-learning.

E-learning seems to redefine the academic communities and within them the relationships between teachers, highlighting a specific pragmatic scheme based on a new language and on learning its rules.<sup>33</sup> What emerges is a metalinguistic framework that as such does not require the prior sharing of a disciplinary semantic code but rather a disposition to communicate, to share professional experiences with teachers of different disciplines and between teachers and students.

In the first phase, what the analysis reveals is the definition of a new communicative situation capable of positively influencing didactic action; this situation is based on the communication of different professional experiences, on the discovery of individual professional stories, and, above all, on the sharing of multidisciplinary didactic methodologies. In this phase, the teaching action is characterized above all as “collaborative action” linked to the solution of concrete problems and highlights the relational and interactive dimension of teaching.<sup>34</sup>

As a professional conduct, collaborative action has a retroactive effect on teaching methods and their routine nature. It seems above all to favor a “professional logic of discovery”, which is useful both in relations between peers, between teachers, and in relations between teachers and students. It is the interiorization of the logic of discovery that brings to the forefront the possibility of students to participate directly in the definition of teaching action, it is this that allows the emergence in teachers of faith in the possibilities of both colleagues and students to participate in co-protagonist roles in the definition of teaching action. The logic of discovery encourages teachers to see their students in an enabling way, full of confidence in their ability to learn. It redefines the participation of teachers in the professional communities of reference, both disciplinary and academic, it fragilizes the instrumental sense of professional relationships, mainly based on the individual advantages that individual teachers can draw from collaboration among peers or even with students, to establish new ways of creating professional relationships, more participatory and more based on a professional inclusion generating social value.

The sociological analysis of the innovative teaching potential of e-learning does

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33 P.C. Rivoltella, *Nuovi alfabeti. Educazione e culture nella società post-mediatale*, Brescia, Editrice Morcelliana, 2020.

34 P. Raviolo, *Dinamiche di apprendimento collaborativo nella didattica telematica universitaria*, in “Educational Reflective Practices”, 2, 2016, pp. 126-145.

not, however, appear to be a sufficient condition in itself for generating innovative mechanisms in university work. Like disciplinary didactics, it seems to require specific organisational and institutional conditions in individual universities and specific practical skills in individual lecturers.

## The organisational and institutional conditions for innovation

In the analysis of innovation processes in universities, the possibilities that disciplinary didactics and e-learning offer to reconfigure academic and disciplinary communities and the professional relationships that structure them highlight the importance of the organisational-institutional dimension of the various universities. Viesti has emphasised how crucial this dimension is in Italy in promoting innovation.<sup>35</sup> His analysis suggests that academic communities, in defined territorial and organisational contexts, are able to compete with disciplinary communities, modifying the latter's ability to control individual teachers and legitimising innovative models of professional action. What could condition the forms of interaction between disciplinary and academic communities seems to be the quality of professional relations, both in-side and outside the universities.

This is a dimension that Merton had already highlighted as fundamental in the community morphogenesis that structures the different professional communities and that Donati has more recently taken up in his in-depth study of the concept of social capital.

At a local level, according to Donati's perspective, the quality of the relations that the university has with companies, but also with second level schools, with third sector associations, and with other universities in other regions and/or other countries, becomes decisive.

These relations could exert a spillover effect both in the search for disciplinary didactics that favour specialization without sacrificing the integrated character of curricular training and in the application of e-learning in order to increase the quality of students' training and the possibilities for them to actively participate in their higher education.

The quality of professional relations does not seem to be a foregone conclusion of communitarisation processes, but rather the outcome of professional learning processes, the outcome, within the various universities, of the institutionalization of certain organizational forms of university work. For example, the inclination to collaborate activated by e-learning within a specific academic community and characterizing the teaching activities of teachers from different disciplines seems to have a specific trans-disciplinary tension that generates new community morphologies. It would

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35 G. Viesti (ed.), *L'Università in declino. Un'indagine sugli atenei da Nord a Sud*, Roma, Donzelli Editore, 2016.

seem suitable to replace the traditional self-referential model of the disciplinary community, based above all on predefined and standardized evaluation mechanisms which condition the didactic actions of individual teachers, with a more informal model, permeable to experimentation and specific learning, based on agile direct collaboration, internal to the didactic context, oriented towards the resolution of everyday problems and nourished by specific technical skills. Such arrangements, however, require work organizations that involve and create moments of learning and confrontation between individuals with different academic roles, between different teaching staff, between teachers and online tutors, between teachers and student representatives. In other words, these individual dispositions and, above all, their intersubjective validation require a reflexive organisation that succeeds in supporting the standardised reports on the evaluation of the quality of courses of study with the experimentation of innovative teaching practices and the reflection on their didactic effects. These practices could, for example, be experimented by setting up permanent teaching committees for the multi-disciplinary analysis of the didactic offer of the various study courses and, again as an example, by means of training courses on e-learning addressed to teachers, or again by sharing research projects dedicated to the impact of e-learning on teaching conducted among both teachers and students.

What is envisaged is a minor Copernican revolution that focuses the function of the teaching communities on limiting the solipsistic centrality of the disciplinary knowledge pre-acquired by the individual teacher. The professional relationship that underpins this type of teaching community is nourished by inner research conducted by the teachers not on the contents of individual subject knowledge but on the contribution of this knowledge to the teacher's didactic-scientific training; it is research on the teacher's professional training and on the aims of his/her subject knowledge. The distinctive trait of this research is that of an epistemological movement that takes place thanks to a renewed discovery of the intersubjectivity that acquires the forms, through the didactic action of colleagues from different disciplines and students, of a knowledge that is other, different, plural, reciprocally attentive to the multiple singularity.

The multidisciplinary and collaborative teaching community appears to be characterised by three dimensions: the coexistence of disciplines, the full inclusion of students in their role as protagonists of the teaching process and the continuous integration of scientific research in the teaching process. The dynamics generated by these dimensions bring innovation to university work because they introduce into the mechanisms of production and transmission of knowledge what Ricoeur might call the possibility of a thought for the other, "the possibility of a freedom that becomes free thought for the other".<sup>36</sup> It is not only the existence of the other who is in front

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36 P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Ed. Du Seuil, 1990; tr. it. *Sè come un altro*, Milano, Jaca Book, 1993.

of me, but the discovery of being able to think the other, the colleague, the student and, ultimately, the self, according to codes and logics that are not exclusively and predominantly those of utility and opportunism. In this perspective of analysis, the social functions of disciplinary teaching and e-learning find fertile ground in concrete teaching communities and appear to be playful-training functions that introduce into university work the possibility, perhaps the learning of a renewed public sense of university work. The latter seems indispensable for generating educational communities in the Wengerian sense of the term, i.e. communities of practice not only based on a common way of exercising and thinking about didactic work in universities, but also on what could be defined in agreement with Dewey a “social intelligence”. It will be re-called that for Dewey social intelligence requires knowledge of all the resources in the field, an understanding of their potential to cooperate in the promotion of social growth and the sharing, on the basis of these elements, of educational plans that aim at the development of society as a whole.<sup>37</sup> Social intelligence requires from teachers not only epistemological and methodological competences, but also practical attitudes, shared responsibility for the future of students, for their concrete possibilities to help, through their personal professional contribution, the development of the whole society.

## Conclusions

In the tradition of the sociology of public action, this paper proposes considering disciplinary didactics and e-learning as privileged points of observation for understanding the transformations of university work produced by the recent reforms of the Italian university. The fundamental idea is that of the existence of a meso-social level of analysis constituted by the disciplinary and academic communities and influenced in its potential innovations by disciplinary teaching and e-learning.

The latter, when analysed in the light of European and national reform processes, show unexpected social effects, driving change through internal innovations in university work. In particular, they seem to erode the instrumental rationality traditionally diffused in the professional logics constitutive of disciplinary and academic communities, redefining the morphogenetic processes of the latter and contributing to the emergence of innovative teaching practices.

Disciplinary teaching seems to foster in teachers a specific inclination to reflective learning and, consequently, to favour the connection between the disciplinary knowledge of individual teachers and the broader training plans that characterize the various courses of study. It seems to transform the paradigm of didactic effectiveness,

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37 J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York, 1916; tr. it. *Democrazia e educazione. Una introduzione alla filosofia dell'educazione*, Roma, Editoriale Anicia S.r.l., 2018.



which is particularly characteristic of contemporary university education in Italy, in search of a more efficiency-based training model. E-learning, on the other hand, seems to favour a teaching approach based on experience and professional collaboration between teachers and between teachers and students, a participatory teaching paradigm, based on the logic of discovering other knowledge and exploiting their possible interconnections.

Both these levers of innovation, disciplinary didactics and e-learning, lead the change to implementation of specific didactic practices and the realization of defined social organizations of university work.

This change is generated within specific organizational contexts, participates in their transformation and seems above all to be conditioned by the quality of the professional relationships that structure the different communities, both disciplinary and academic.

The institutionalization, in the different universities, of formal moments aimed at learning useful methodologies for e-learning, but also of formal moments aimed at making the different training offers of the different study courses more and more coherent with the professional demands present in the different territories, seem to be fundamental elements of the dynamics of innovation in university work. They redefine the possibilities for lecturers to reinvent their work by rediscovering its practical components and its possibilities of affecting the formation of societies. A reflexive social organization within universities seems to be the condition that not only offers lecturers adequate skills to imagine innovative conduct, but by positively modifying the quality of professional relations, both between lecturers and between lecturers and students, allows them to reflect on the public role of the university in contemporary societies.