

An online academic context for in-service teachers: what works?

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Abstract

These days, online contexts seem the most appropriate option for in-service teacher education. Many educational institutions have acknowledged the potential of online courses which involve teachers who work full-time in schools. Despite this, it appears to be an issue which has, until now, been scarcely researched. The present study is directed at exploring how some in-service teachers interacting in an asynchronous website construct their professional identity. They were engaged in an *individual* and a group *activity* where they discussed their stories and experiences as teachers. The data collected comprise all the writings of two teacher groups. With reference to Positioning theory, a discourse analysis was carried out. As hypothesized, the findings show that in the online context the construction of teacher identity can be understood as a non-linear and very complex process of positioning and negotiation. Implications in the field of in-service teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: in-service teacher education; professional identity; positioning theory; virtual communities

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Introduction

Overcoming the “technical” perspective of teaching and the emergent theory and practice of the teacher as a “reflective practitioner *in/on* the action” (Shön, 1987) and “*for* the action” (Urzúa & Vásquez, 2008) make it necessary for teachers to be able to review events experienced at school through multiple perspectives in order to look for interpretative keys, to evaluate the effectiveness or inefficiency of the practices carried out, and to plan those of the future.

In this light, it is important to focus attention on *professional development* activities as opposed to *training* activities, and to replace dependence on an “outside expert” who indicates what is opportune in class, with that of a colleague «serving as a good listener, a sounding board for ideas, and a willing participant in conversation» (Chamberlin, 2002, p. 70). Emphasis on “shared reflective practices” allows the situations or events that teachers recount to each other to be recognized as important instruments of professional development (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). These narratives reveal representations of the self as a teacher, in relation to reflections, relationships, practices, and professional experiences. It is these stories and narratives that can then become the subject of research to recognize processes of professional identity construction in in-service teacher education.

Knowledge of the relationship between professional identity and professional knowledge/practice (Flores & Day, 2006; Loughran, 2006; Watson, 2006) has led many educational researchers today to enquire into the modalities of identity construction. Some researchers (Korthagen & Lagerwerf, 1996; Palmer, 1998) have emphasized the need to inquire specifically into the activities that encourage teachers to reflect on their professional identity *throughout their professional career*. These activities are more relevant when one thinks of the waste of energy and the teachers’ desire to be positive, the collapse of initial professional ideals and insufficient support in carrying them out, all phenomena that are found, more and more, in the course of a teaching career, leading to situations of *outsider* or *burn-out*.

Some authors have in fact devoted their attention to the specific research area aimed at inquiring into the processes of professional identi-

ty construction in the context of *in service teacher education* (Barret, 2008; Berry, Clemans, & Kostogriz, 2007; Søreide, 2006; Watson, 2006). Nevertheless, it is a field which has been explored considerably less than that of pre-service teacher education.

Internet resources for in-service teacher education

As discussed in a previous work (Grion, Varisco, Luchi, Raineri, & Mazzoni, 2008), numerous studies have shown the potential of online environment in fostering learning, and specifically learning in a community.

In this light, there is also an increasing use of information technology in the learning environments of teacher education. Some authors (Dreon & McDonald, 2006; Freeman & Brett, 2007; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003; Puntambekar, 2006; Williams, Tanner, & Jessop 2007) have explored the potentials of virtual communities in enhancing teacher education. According to Admiraal and others (Admiraal, Lockhorst, Wubbels, Korthagen, & Ween 1998, p. 59) «telematics offer the opportunity to instruct, mentor and supervise student teachers in a more flexible way with respect to time and place than common face-to-face conversation methods».

These days, online contexts seem to be the most appropriate option for continuous in-service teacher education. We agree with Kling and Courthright (2004) who highlight the value of virtual communities, having observed the limited opportunities available to in-service teachers to discuss teaching practice with other teachers during work time. In the context of their research, the authors created a web site providing a set of interesting teaching materials and an online forum where teachers could discuss and reflect on their own teaching practices. The E-ILF (Electronic Inquiry Learning Forum) appears to encourage reflective discussion of teaching via inquiry and to sustain the development of teachers' communities of practice.

The potential of online courses aimed at teachers who work full-time in schools and already have very demanding professional duties, and also personal and family responsibilities, has been acknowledged by some educational institutions: i.e. the Italian *Agenzia Nazionale per lo*

Sviluppo dell'Autonomia Scolastica (ex Indire) that offers distance education for in-service teachers. In the light of the various potentialities of online contexts for in-service teacher education, we think that teacher educators and educational researchers should pay particular attention to it.

An online workshop for in-service teachers

For several years, second year students of the Faculty of Primary Teacher Education at the University of Padova, have been able to participate in an online workshop which aims to offer an environment for “shared reflective experiences”. Electronic tools provide an interactive venue where participants, future teachers and in-service teachers¹, take part in case-work activities and are able to discuss, evaluate, and exchange ideas about learning and teaching. In this way the students can reflect on and/or develop their own professional identity through collaboration, research, and discussion.

In the context of the workshop all the activities are online, The students, working individually or in groups of six or seven subjects, interact with each other in an asynchronous text-based web site for about three month. They start with a 10-day-phase of familiarization with the online environment; after which they participate in other online activities.

In the early years the activities included the following:

1. At the start of the workshop, the students, individually, wrote a profile of what it means to be “a good teacher”;
2. Remembering their scholastic experiences, the subjects, in groups, shared and constructed a problematic real-life case in an online forum;
3. They discussed and justified different solutions in a web forum, and wrote, by means of a collaborative writing tool, a shared text which was a synthesis of these solutions.

¹ Some in-service primary or infant teachers attend the pre-service teacher education academic courses, to develop their professionalism, or to achieve academic qualifications to teach in primary or infant schools, which were not required before 1998.

In the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 academic years, a biennial research project (Grion & Varisco, 2007; Grion *et al.*, 2008) was conducted with the aim of exploring the shared construction of professional identity and the nature of interactions among student teachers in the virtual space. The research verified different behaviours in pre-service, novice and experienced in-service teachers, engaged in online activities of casework of professional problems drawn from participants' lives. The findings show that the online workshops were effective for student pre-service or novice teachers, but were not effective for the more experienced in-service teachers (at least 4-5 years experience).

It was therefore hypothesized that the online context designed for pre-service teacher education was not an authentic and significant environment for experienced teachers.

In this light, in the 2007-2008 academic year, two important characteristics were introduced into the educational context, now specifically planned for in-service teacher participants.

First, a context where previous professional experiences could be evaluated and improved was offered. It is important to realize and value that the "expert" comes into the learning group with the outcomes of past individual learning and experience (Turniansky & Friling, 2006).

Second, following Watson (2006, p. 510) when she asserts that «identities are constructed in the narratives we create and tell about our lives», the online workshop was set up as a site for sharing one's own personal and professional *narrative* with the virtual professional community.

Objectives and context of the research

The aim of our research was to find, describe and analyse discursive processes of professional identity construction as activated in a specific *online educational context*², by 13 *in-service* teachers. The participants freely decided to participate in this online workshop as an alternative to other face-to-face workshops scheduled by the university course in Primary Teacher Education.

² See www.celfi.unimc.it/pd

It was hypothesised that the narratives and discussions of personal/professional history would allow the emergence and construction/reconstruction of professional identities by means of the narrative resources available in the online context.

Participants interacted exclusively online in a textual and asynchronous modality.

The activities, lasting three months, were subdivided into several phases. A tutor assigned the initial tasks for each activity phase and stimulated the participation of all those attending the workshop, without intervening in the content of the narratives.

After ten days of familiarization with the environment, participants followed two activity phases: one individual, the other group.

In the *individual activity* phase (about two weeks), in a workspace of individual writing and collective reading, each participant was required to present their own personal/professional history and to define “the good teacher”.

At the conclusion of the individual phase, participants were subdivided into work groups (7 subjects per group)³. Group A comprised teachers with 8-10 years’ school experience, group B was teachers with 4-5 years’ school service. During this *group activity* phase, each member of the 2 groups recounted specifically their experiences regarding their own professional choice; after that, each group developed a discussion in a web forum emerging from this last narrative. After this first input, narratives and discussions could take on various features or directions since the only limit was to remain within the ill-defined and flexible boundaries of each professional life.

Design, data collection and instruments

After the workshop activities, all the individual and group texts produced in the different spaces were collected.

³ Based on similar previous didactic experiences it has been verified that the group activity is more efficient when it comprises 6-7 subjects.

A discourse analysis was conducted making reference to Positioning Theory as formulated by Harré and van Langenhove (1999). As the authors assert, «P. T. focuses on understanding how psychological phenomena are produced in discourse» (p.4) and further – «Within “conversations” the social acts and societal icons are generated and reproduced» (p. 15). The authors refer to the concept of “positioning” as «the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of the conversation have specific locations» (p. 16) or “positions”. The stories we tell to make sense of how we experience ourselves and how we would like to be understood in order to bring structure to our lives, are expressions of narrative positioning i.e. the processes of identification and/or rejection of subject positions available in the discourses. Davies and Harré (1990) clearly explain the concept of “subject position”:

An individual emerges through the process of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is, that is, what sort of person one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one’s own and others’ discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and other’s lives. Stories are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and moral judgments outlined, and the subject positions made available within them (p. 35).

The different subject positions, that can be more or less explicit within the discourses, give access to images, hope, beliefs, practices and values, and are hence essential in the construction of different understandings of the world and our situation in it.

As Søreide (2006, p. 529) asserts interpreting Position Theory, «If several subject positions make clusters within a discourse, an identity construction will emerge».

To carry out the analysis by means of P.T., the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the people who interact in certain ways and yet at the same time are a resource through which speak-

ers and hearers can negotiate new positions. P. T. enables an investigator to grasp how people are located within conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines.

In this qualitative research, interpreting what teachers write in an online context is an attempt to appreciate how they have constructed their understanding of themselves as teachers.

To analyze the discourse we followed the subsequent steps.

The preparatory phases concerned organising the texts into 4 textual *corpora* (individual *vs* group texts of the two groups) for processing by means of the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti.

The three-phased process of discourse analysis involved:

- identifying the *subject positions* assumed by participants in the narrative context; a descriptive code was assigned to each position;
- identifying how participants use these subject positions (frequency of each subject position, interrelation between positions);
- identifying the emergence of professional *identity constructs*, understood as clusters/networks of subject positions, i.e. narrative positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998) in the single *corpora*, and in the group *corpora*.

Findings: Emergent professional identities

The emergent professional identities are the product of multiple positioning of participants in the context of online workshop.

The analysis of the frequency of each subject position and the qualitative interrelations between positions in each *corpora* allowed us to recognize 5 emergent identity constructs.

The first 4 identities are found in both groups (A and B); instead the fifth is found only in group A (teachers with greater seniority).

We did not find different identity constructs in the individual *vs* collective texts. This result shows that teachers, in their individual process of identity construction, make reference to a shared stock of narrative resources (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) or, in other words, a number of joint subject positions which arise from a common professional context.

However, we can observe that in the first online environment (individual) each emergent identity construct was characterized by a higher

number of interrelating subject positions than in the second (collective forum). The webforum interactions allowed teachers to share some subject positions, perhaps the most meaningful positions in this context, leaving or rejecting others. In this way, identity construction in the collective environment consisted of a smaller number of subject positions which were explored more deeply by the teachers.

The 5 emergent identity constructs were the following:

The 'relational' teacher

Certainly the professional identity of the “relational teacher” is a strong identity construct which emerges from the narratives of participants in both groups, in individual and group phases. The ability to relate to all members of the scholastic community (students and colleagues) and out-of-school (families) is one of the characteristics that participants cite in order to identify themselves, directly or indirectly, as teachers.

The 'maternal' teacher

A second identity, which emerged in both groups, is that of the “maternal teacher”. Although less articulate and complex than the previous one, this identity is widely found in the participants’ writings. The construct is formed around the “caring” code and is understood to define the teacher who feels “the desire to be useful to others”. This identity is characterized by an attitude of “almost maternal understanding”, and by being “welcoming, human and helpful” towards the students. It is the teacher who “welcomes and accompanies the student” in their growth process, who places particular attention on listening to children in order to meet their needs, and value their interests and abilities. The “maternal teacher” has a relationship with children that touches the personal areas of the emotions and affect, “helps them with empathy, courage and affection”, and has almost adoration for the world of infancy in which he/she loves, “to listen to the discourses, children’s particular way of seeing things and the world...”.

The teaching professional

This identity is found more clearly in the two *corpora* of *individual* texts, which may be due to the narrative input regarding a “good teacher” pro-

posed to participants in the individual activity phase. This identity assumes different attributes in the two *corpora* of individual texts (groups A and B), and is characterized by: “transmission” of knowledge and specific competences (methodological and psychological) in group A, and an articulated conception of the teaching/teacher of the “Socio-constructivist” type, in group B. Common elements of the two identities are the positions defined by the codes of “continuous training”, “teacher by passion” and “shares and collaborates”. The “teaching professional” is seen also as a person who knows how to self-evaluate and evaluate others, who pursues the continuous changes in teaching practice, who remains open to comparison, who therefore continuously puts him/herself on the line and who searches for innovation.

The ‘personal’ teacher

The “personal teacher” is an identity where the professional dimensions are based and developed on personal dimensions, and in which the professional dimensions form part of the personal sphere. Within this interlacing between the professional and the personal, some participants seem to be searching for a line of demarcation between the personal and professional self, without succeeding in defining it. The urgency with which the identity of the “teacher as a person” emerges from the narratives – some sequences seem to be ‘shouted’ by the teachers – justifies considering this identity as one of the most important in revealing the significance that participants assign to their profession and to themselves as “teaching professionals”. Situations and practices carried out in school do not, therefore, depend so much on the quality and characteristics of a formal and standardized preparation for teaching, or on an acquired and applied technique, but on the *personal journeys* through life and the construction of one’s teaching *being*, an expression that Ketty clearly differentiates from the more generic expression and less involved “*doing teaching*”.

The teacher in crisis

The “teacher in crisis” is an identity that emerges only in group A (teachers with longer experience) and in particular from the *corpus* of the fo-

rum. This positioning indicates a widespread experience of moments of particular difficulty, discomfort and de-motivation in the teachers' lives. They are moments that lead one to ask whether to continue in the profession or not. They are manifestations that lead the teacher to become aware of the beginning of a path which may lead to abandoning the profession. The "temptation to change path" is prevalent in those who have to add the onerous obligations of their private life to the daily tasks of the profession. *Women* in particular are normally weighed down with the burden of family life. It is at this level that the identity of the "teacher in crisis" overlaps with that of the "teacher as a person".

Discussion

The process of individual construction of professional identity can be seen as a process of positioning and negotiating between the different possible identities emerging in each discursive context (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Søreide, 2006).

Results show that in the online workshop situation, teachers used narrative resources to present themselves in a certain way, in order to assume a particular identity in this specific context. We discovered how emerging identities are linked to one another, and which of the emerging identities are meaningful constructs for participants in this context.

The first consideration is that these understandings of identity lead to a refusal of the technical perspective of teacher education within which it is supposed that teachers can be provided with ready-made and universal identities which they should fit in to (Søreide, 2006).

Second. We can consider the following points.

The presence of the first professional identities considered (the "relational teacher" and the "maternal teacher") could be interpreted as the effect of particular narrative resources which can be found in the specific human context. A strong scholastic culture set in infant and primary schools (the work environments of our participants) features a typical and traditional image of the female and motherly teacher. It is a culture where the teaching role is mainly represented by caring, loving aspects and a relationship with school children. These two strong, omnipresent, and identifiable connotations of the participants, seem to confirm an

idea formulated by many researchers (Bullogh & Knowles, 1991; Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, & Shaker, 2005) that is that higher or academic education has little effect on professional identity. Of greater importance and influence are the various models and teaching styles learnt and encountered during experiences as students. However, these first two identities, in which all participants in our online laboratory recognized themselves, do not only appear to be traditionally and exclusively characterized by caring and relational dimensions. Their features seem rather to consist in sensitivity and commitment towards different and complex scholastic contexts, in an awareness of one's personal involvement and curiosity towards educational and childhood realities, and in attention towards childhood needs and interests.

The last two identities reported are of particular interest.

First, we find the "personal teacher" in both groups. This identity is in line with what has already been reported in previous studies (Viteretti, 2007) with regard to different interactions between personal and professional identities in complex professional organizations. An analysis of the positioning of participants shows a fragile and flexible relationship between personal identity and professional role. It is a problematic relationship typically reported in professionals, that is, individuals who measure themselves by means of the difference between what their professional role asks of them and what they are in reality, according to their personal needs and aims.

The professional identity of the "teacher in crisis" was only found in group A – the teachers with more than 8 years' experience. It can be associated with the burnout syndrome, which is nowadays recognized as a phenomenon which is gradually becoming more widespread among teachers. With regard to the *status* of the "teacher in crisis", feelings of loneliness and abandon appear to be the causes which emerge most frequently. We have observed that despite efforts towards deep and collaborative dimensions in scholastic organizations, carried out for some decades in infant and primary schools, today there still seems to be a strong individualistic culture accompanied by a risky status of professional solipsism. We expect that this situation may become worse due to recent changes in the Italian MPI (Ministry of Public Instruction/Education) for primary schools (the "single primary school-teacher" of the *Gelmini Scholastic Reform*).

Conclusions and perspectives

First, it is important to highlight the effectiveness of the particular context. This specific structure consists of *narrative* interactions associated with personal and professional aspects, a feature which has created a climate of mutual trust and reliance (Turniansky & Friling, 2006) and has underlined each professional experience. In this kind of environment, experienced teachers have been able to engage themselves in the «continuous and dynamic process which brings people to search for a sense and to (re)interpret their values and their own experiences» (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220), in other words, a process of construction of the teacher identity. This type of dynamics is defined by some authors as the process of professional development (Flores & Day, 2006; Sachs, 2001). Becoming a teacher in a more complete and better way implies a process of transformation of one's professional identity, a process that for teachers «is mediated by their own experience in school and outside of school as well as their own beliefs and values about what it means to be a teacher and the type of teacher they aspire to be» (Sachs, 2001, p. 6).

Secondly, attention must be focused on the *online* context. We found that the narrative processes of professional identity construction also take place in an online environment. As suggested by some authors (Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004; Bonk & King, 1998; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Hiltz & Goldman, 2005), we can suppose that the online context, and specifically the *asynchronous, text based* environment, may have activated the reflexive processes which allow teachers to construct meanings about the self and the professional world of which they are members.

Considering the *web context* used, we can also observe how the results of this research are particularly important in relation to in-service teacher education. Use of the Internet is an essential resource for reaching people regardless of their location and for attaining an active motivated participation in tasks. For this, the online context is the most appropriate option for continuous in-service education today.

These considerations also emerge from many participants' reflections when asked to assess the online laboratory.

This experience has been positive. In fact from a practical point of view there are many advantages in organizing time: long breaks allowed me to think and then to

take part when my thoughts were more mature or simply when I was free (and this may not seem very important, but the quality is not indifferent, for example if we think of motivation). Furthermore, the possibility to compare with others and to make contact with the ideas of others has been a stimulating opportunity and a rich source of ideas. In fact it has helped to analyze our own, and other people's points of view and to understand what point we have reached on our journey as teachers (Ketty).

It must, however, be noted that the results of this research are only representative of a single, specific context and cannot therefore be generalized. For this reason, we underline the need for the further research to corroborate these findings.

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