

Chapter 3

ACADEMIC TRANSITION AND PEER TUTORING A case study at the University of Padova

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ABSTRACT

According to the European Space for Higher Education document by the Confederation of European Rectors' Conferences (Finocchietti, Foroni, Palla, & Sticchi Damiani, 2013), research, teaching activities, and orientation/tutoring programs enhance the university's educational offer. Students entering the university who are not fully aware of the challenges ahead risk abandoning their endeavours (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Álvarez Pérez, Cabrera Pérez, González Afonso, & Bethencourt Benítez, 2006). Cognitive-social approach theories (Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 2004) highlight the importance of preparatory activities assisting students in making appropriate decisions and in facing new challenges. Like many European counterparts, the University of Padova (Italy) has initiated tutoring services including pre-enrollment orientation, freshman welcoming activities, ongoing tutoring initiatives, and outgoing orientation. "Open Day," an initiative organized by the University's Tutoring Service of the Teacher Education Program, is an aspect of that service. Junior tutors, students enrolled in second-cycle degree courses, organize the initiative each year by holding workshops for new students interested in various degree courses. Here we describe the University's tutoring service in all of its manifestations and in particular focusing on the "Open Day" orientation experience. This observational study falls within the context of the (STPD08HANE_005¹) project promoted by the University whose aim was to analyse developments and trends in higher education, and to assist students in achieving academic success.

Keywords: peer tutoring, entrance counselling, tutor, drop-out, academic transition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of educational continuity between the secondary school and the university system has been emphasized particularly over the past decade by European policy-makers. In March 2001 during the European Council Meeting held in Stockholm, the "Instruction" Council identified three basic objectives: (i) to increase the quality and the efficacy of instruction and teacher education in the European Union, (ii) to facilitate access to it, (iii) to open these systems to the rest of the world (Bertagna & Puricelli, 2008, p. 34).

¹ For further information see Zago, G., Girado, A., & Clerici, R. (2014). Successo e insuccesso negli studi universitari: Dati, interpretazioni e proposte dall'ateneo di Padova [Success and failure in university studies: Data, interpretations and proposals by the University of Padova]. Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino. The work describes the results of a study falling within the context of a strategic university project entitled: Learning Difficulties and Disabilities from Primary School to University: Diagnosis, Intervention and Services for the Community (STPD08HANE_005) developed by the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education, and Applied Psychology of the University of Padova. <http://www.unipd.it/ricerca/finanziamenti/finanziamenti-ateneo/progetti-strategici-ateneo>

The importance of providing support systems promoting student awareness as high school students/graduates approach the university and throughout their academic journey was also highlighted.

2. STUDENT NEEDS

Recent investigations (Rodríguez Moreno, 2002; Toscano & Monescillo, 2010; Lucangeli, Callegari, & De Gasperi, 2010; Johnston, 2013) have demonstrated that some students encounter difficulties during the transition from high school to the university systems. Those studies have highlighted the need to potentiate the flow of communication through a network which promotes the exchange of information and thus the transition from secondary school to the university. The transition may prove problematic for a variety of reasons: differences in teaching styles/methods at the university with respect to high school strategies; loss of reference points such as friends, classmates, families, teachers, and living situations; the difficulty in meeting new academic requirements.

In response to recommendations by the Council of the European Union (2001), many continental universities have begun to employ a variety of support systems in order to identify and meet student needs. The needs linked to student orientation can be classified into three types: (i) the need for general information about the university system; (ii) needs of an educational type such as requests for help to attain a higher level of knowledge and/or learning skills and/or to encourage the development of appropriate study habits and techniques; (iii) the need for a specific kind of counselling implicating individual, psychological and/or motivational support.

3. TRANSITION: A PHASE IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

The transition from high school to the university system is a crucial moment in the student's life course in view of the important decisions that must be made including, and most importantly, the choice of the course of studies to follow (Hernández, 2004; Álvarez, Bizquerra, Espín, & Rodríguez, 2007; Santana Vega, & Feliciano, 2009; Bertagna & Puricelli, 2008).

The experience can disorient anyone if the emotions characterizing that transition period and the doubts and uncertainties linked to it are faced without a conscious awareness of one's aptitudes, interests, abilities and proficiencies, and especially in the event the student foresees no prospect of being able to carry out a specific professional activity. The obstacles/difficulties encountered by a student who is not highly motivated can lead to the decision to abandon the university.

The first or freshman year is one of the most critical periods of the university experience and coincides with numerous social changes and emotional and psychological challenges. A lack of information just as an inadequate academic or cultural preparation can impede the student's integration into the university context and can lead to the decision to drop-out (Álvarez Pérez et al, 2006; Andreu, 2008).

Johnston (2013, p. 19) defined the transition as a concept composed of two faces of the same medal:

- The transition the student must make at the beginning of a university course of studies;
- The study programs and other activities through which the university furnishes student support.

The transition, according to Johnston (2013, p. 20), is then made up of different dimensions linked to personal, academic, economic, and social expectations which can be synthesized as follows:

- Cultural and community changes: the transition from high school to the university can implicate a change in social class, culture, social relations, at times, even in language.
- Academic changes: the student is faced with an entirely different situation with respect to the high school one. The teaching method and approach are different; the testing timetable and grading system are different. A different study method is unquestionably necessary. While students have more freedom in organizing their time, they are also held responsible for more academic material and at times may be expected to work in study groups.
- Social changes: when students begin the university they enter a new, larger community; some have moved to a different city distant from family and friends, and many encounter, for the first time, persons with a completely different cultural baggage.
- Personal changes: students must assess themselves realistically and learn to face ever more complex and challenging intellectual tasks. Students also need to learn autonomous living skills, to face economic pressure, and to manage stress.

Recent studies have demonstrated that many freshmen are unprepared for the transition and this can explain why entering a new educational system can lead to difficulties that can trigger course changes, study delays, or even the decision to abandon the university (Rodríguez, Fita & Torrado, 2003; Rembado, Ramírez, Viera, Ros, & Wainmaier, 2009).

4. EFFORTS TO CURTAIL THE DROP-OUT PHENOMENON

The drop-out phenomenon is considered a worldwide “social problem” involving all educational levels from elementary school to the university.

According to data gathered by the *Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario* (the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System [CNVSU], of the nearly 285 thousand freshmen who enrolled in Italian state universities during the 2006-2007 academic year, approximately 232 thousand continued with their studies, meaning that the drop-out rate was 18.5%. The drop-out rate for students who enrolled in the 2007-2008 academic year was 17.5%, and for those enrolled in the 2008-2009 academic year, it was 16.7% (CNVSU, 2011, p. 56).

As hypothesized by some studies (De Beni, 2002; Smith & Naylor, 2001; Tinto, 1975, 1993), the interpretative key of this pattern could be the difficulty in autonomously managing study organization and in facing the transition to a new system. On the one hand, although students have fewer opportunities to verify and compare their learning skills, they need to adapt their study methods to meet the demands of the new educational system. On the other, those same students are required to manage their time, responsibilities/commitments, and spaces in a context that is more elastic although more challenging with respect to the high school one (Arcuri, Paggin, & Zago, 2002; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). The incapacity to organize their commitments and to adapt their study methods seems to be the major cause of stress when students enter the university and thus the cause of drop-outs and/or study delays.

As emphasized by Zago, Giraldo, and Clerici (2014) “... another risk factor for university failure is having a “weak” high school background (having attended a technical

or professional institute, a low final grade, an unsatisfactory scholastic record).” Those same authors went on to explain that “besides individual factors, aspects regarding the course of studies must be taken into consideration. The interventions and/or services created by the university should therefore be differentiated and measured just as students’ characteristics need to be analyzed and monitored” (p. 55).

Knowing which risk factors are linked to drop-outs or delays can lead the way to preventative measures and interventions for students most in need.

5. COUNSELLING AT THE TIME STUDENTS ENTER THE ITALIAN UNIVERSITY

The 341/1990 Italian law introduced peer tutoring in all Italian universities. This law aims to guarantee students “a fruitful participation in university courses of studies” also through counselling and tutoring activities.

In order to achieve these goals, the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) delineated university orientation and tutoring activities and distinguished four phases:

- Ingoing orientation - for students who are facing the university experience for the first time;
- Welcoming activities - for students who have just enrolled;
- Tutoring (ongoing orientation) - for students enrolled in a university course of studies;
- Outgoing orientation - for students who are about to or have just completed their course of studies (Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università italiane [CRUI], 1995).

Bertagna and Puricelli (2008, p. 63) delineated three types of “guidance needs” that students embarking on a university experience generally demonstrate:

- Information needs - students often require information about various practical aspects with regard to the university system;
- Learning assistance needs - students may require help in reinforcing their basic secondary school preparation or in learning more appropriate study methods/skills;
- Specific needs for specialized guidance and/or counselling aiming to aid the student to make informed, conscious decisions or with regard to emotional or interpersonal problems.

This work focalizes on the first phase (ingoin orientation), that is, on the needs of students entering into contact with the university system for the first time. An initiative designed and tested at the University of Padova and aiming to meet future freshmen’s needs for “information” is outlined here. In particular, we examined the role of the junior tutor, students enrolled in the second-cycle degree course of studies or Doctoral School Programmes who have demonstrated competence in their course of studies and who have followed specific training programmes. Under the supervision of their teaching professors, those tutors engage in interactive activities throughout the academic year and at an open house orientation experience at its beginning during which they place their own academic experience at the disposal of potential or new university students.

6. PEER TUTORING AT ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Considered a turning point with regard to activities assisting students, Law 341/1990 officially introduced the orientation and tutoring system into the Italian university system. Article 6 of that law specifies that “the statutes of the university must provide for

orientation courses for students enrolling in the university and must assist them as well as those students enrolling in post-graduate courses in creating their plan of study”.

In 2005, the *Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori - ISFOL* (Observatory on Social Inclusion of the Institute for the Development of Workers' Professional Preparation) (Felice, 2005) published a volume analyzing some research projects concerning mentoring and tutoring activities carried out to support students and to reduce and prevent the drop-out phenomenon at Italian universities. The former reported that only 28 Italian universities offered services to support enrolled students. Information regarding supportive activities being offered students and especially with regard to those actions carried out by “veteran” students on behalf of newer ones was also outlined.

Peer tutoring, which can be considered an educational model for and between equals, has its conceptual and hypothetical roots in community psychology, and its methodological approach is linked to the theoretical contribution of socio-cultural animation and action research by Lewin who underlined the dynamic qualities of groups as a primary resource in the workplace and in the real world.

According to that model, as far as practices utilized to socially promote and support activities between equals in a scholastic environment are concerned, students are the true protagonists of every phase of work - from its ideation to its evaluation. Psychological as well as pedagogical approaches particularly in recent decades have tended to highlight the importance of social influences during childhood and adolescence. That explains why the potential of peer education as a prevention method and as a supportive strategy between equals has been so completely embraced in the didactic sphere (Astin, 1993). It has been seen, in fact, that communication between equals is much more efficacious than that between the adult and the child (or adolescent) especially in a troubled context. Some authors have stressed that students have the greatest influence on other students' affective development and that a university's judicious and imaginative use of peer groups can strengthen its impact on student learning and personal development. As a consequence, in recent years beginning in the United States and later in Anglo-Saxon countries, scholastic peer tutoring has spread extensively both at the high school as well as at the university level (Astin, 1977; Pellai, Rinaldin, & Tamborini, 2003).

6.1. Peer tutoring at the University of Padova

Italian universities have promoted over the past decade “actions to accompany and to support students along the way (*in-itinere*), with the objective of qualitatively sustaining their educational career not only from the point of view of content but also with regard to the developmental and personal progression of each student” (CRUI, 2000).

The University of Padova has set into motion tutoring projects rooted in the 2003 peer-tutoring model that was developed in the Anglo-Saxon world (Arbizu, Lobato, & del Castillo, 2005; Da Re & Zago, 2011) and adapted to other university environments in countries such as France and Italy as an instrument to contrast the dropout phenomenon (Pedicchio & Fontana, 2000).

7. INFORMATION ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PADOVA: THE OPEN DAY WORKSHOP

The Orientation Service of the University of Padova was authorized to furnish “information and consultation while students select their programs of study not only with

regard to courses and didactic opportunities but also concerning services offered the students by the university” (Lucangeli et al, 2009).

“Open Days” were conceived as encounters at the beginning of the academic year for potential freshmen still endeavouring to decide on their course of studies. Students would be given the opportunity during the day’s activities to visit university buildings including study halls, class rooms, laboratories, libraries and other venues of interest; they would receive information about courses of study, future career and job opportunities, and specific details about the selection and enrollment process; they would also be able take a simulated entrance exam.

These encounters were and are organized to give potential students the opportunity to meet in a friendly atmosphere and on an equal footing (*au pair* or *alla pari*) a fellow student (tutor) who could/can answer their questions and help to work out doubts and fears.

8. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME: THE OPEN DAY WORKSHOP

Every academic year the Orientation and the Right to Study and Tutoring Services and the Tutoring Service of the Teacher Education Program of the University of Padova together organize an Open Day during the summer for students interested in the three-year first level course of studies and another for students about to enroll in the two-year second level one. Beginning two years ago (2012), the Open Day for the former was organized as a workshop.

This was done in order to respond to two necessities:

- to give future students the opportunity to interact on an equal footing (*alla pari*) with students (tutors) who are (*hic et nunc*) themselves enrolled in a course of studies that they freely chose, thus creating a communicative atmosphere in which a student can feel free to express doubts and perplexities without embarrassment or fear to someone who has shared a similar experience (Torre, 2006).
- to enhance the teaching experience and the skills and competences acquired by the tutors themselves; this serves to empower them by reinforcing their self-esteem and self-determination (Croce & Gnemmi, 2003).

The rapport thus created produces positive effects not only on the person who is being assisted but also on the tutor. Defined in the literature as the “tutor effect,” it has been found to enhance the individual’s self-esteem/image, sense of accomplishment, and competence (Barnier, 1989).

Open Day lasts approximately three hours and is made up of several parts: the first is managed by the presidents of the degree program and the professors who outline the courses offered by their departments. This is followed by a general presentation by the tutors regarding courses offered by the Teacher Education Program. The students are then divided into small groups depending, in part, on the number of degree programs being presented (each participant can sit in on a maximum of two workshops). While each workshop is structured in the same way, the content varies depending on the degree program involved. More specifically, the students are given information concerning pre-enrollment and enrollment and job/career opportunities linked to a particular course of studies. During that part of the session, which lasts an hour, students can also voice concerns, raise problems or pose questions and the tutor, who is acting in the capacity of a mediator, attempts to answer the questions fully and to put the students at ease. As there are only a limited number of participants, each student has the opportunity to ask questions of specific interest. Students can take a tour around and those who wish can take a simulated

entrance exam. At the end of each workshop the tutor asks the students to fill out a feedback questionnaire that also gathers data on the participants' age, gender and place of origin.

The main theoretical references are connected to the relationship between learning and doing (J. Dewey), the concept of "self-efficacy" (A. Bandura), the link between language and action (J. B. Bruner) and the impact of peer groups on student learning and development (A. Astin).

The bibliography that exists (Frabboni, 2004; Margiotta, 2003; Truffo, 2005; Zanchin, 2002) underlines how the workshop experience focalize attention on the educational rapport (in this case in the transmission and sharing of knowledge between the tutor-student and the potential-student) regarding motivation, curiosity, participation, sharing and metacognition of knowledge and socialization. With regard to the last aspect, the workshop's feature as a socializing space facilitates both the singular activities as well as peer-tutoring exercises and group activities through intentional interactive moments between persons of the same status and age.

9. SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS ON OPEN DAY

Two important considerations emerged from the study:

- the priority of adopting a preventative approach by organizing informative encounters for potential students. Orientation activities offering information and tools so that the future student can directly learn about the university environment have proved not only useful but absolutely indispensable;
- the significance in this context of the *peer tutoring* model which was created to encourage the relationship and dialogue between the student and the tutor. The student feels closer to the tutor because of the common age and status and because the tutor places his own experience at the disposition of younger charges. A student-tutor interaction that sustains and facilitates access to the university has been found to be a positive strategy. This is because a more expert student who is about to or has already completed a program that the new freshman is just embarking upon can give useful assistance because he knows what difficulties will be found and what advice can be useful. At the same time, the freshman approaching the university world has less difficulty relating to a tutor figure and feels free to express concerns or doubts.

The Open Day activity described here briefly can be defined a case study carried out within the Italian university context, an experience that can presumably be perfected and upgraded to make it even more in tune with students' needs.

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Biographical sketch: Giuseppe Zago is full professor of History of Pedagogy of the University of Padova. He is author of works concerning the history of pedagogical theories, the history of the school and of educational institutions, and essays on some contemporary educators. He participated in the 2009-13 Strategic Project funded by the University of Padova “Learning difficulties and disabilities from primary school to the university: Diagnosis, intervention and services for the community” and coordinated the 5th group (“Learning difficulties of university students enrolled in the three-year degree course of studies in the light of the tutoring and orientation experience”). He has participated in various research activities and coordinated numerous group activities.