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DISTANCE LEARNING AND INTERNSHIP PROGRAMMES: HOW TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Abstract

The health emergency connected to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it significant implications for education systems around the world, which have found themselves managing complex situations that have often led to a crisis in ordinary processes. Distance learning is a long-debated topic in the scientific literature of the educational field (Ardizzone & Rivoltella, 2003; Trentin, 2004; Bates & Bates, 2005; Anderson & Dron, 2011; Simpson, 2018), and the needs related to COVID-19 have also forced those who usually used it integrated with in-classroom teaching to rethink its design as the only vehicle for managing formative processes.

Maintaining a high level of student engagement in a scenario where formative design has been developed entirely at a distance, where direct contact with teachers and peers has been limited or prohibited and where skills and technological resources have sometimes proved insufficient, was one of the greatest challenges posed to schools and universities, also in the Italian context (Lucisano, 2020; Bianchi, 2020; Di Palma & Belfiore, 2020). In the university context, one of the processes that was particularly affected by the implications related to the pandemic also included internship programmes (Mediawati et al., 2020; Srivastava et al., 2020; Jayasuriya, 2021).

This paper examines the results of an exploratory research project developed at the Roma Tre University, in particular in the Department of Education. The main objectives of the research were: to deepen the strategies used to redesign the formative activities - theoretical and practical - related to internships; to identify the methods of coordination between universities and host structures for the design of mixed or entirely remote internship activities and to detect the level of student participation and satisfaction during the internship activities proposed person-to-person and online.

The tools used were questionnaires and written interviews, to interact with the students and with the host structures of the internship, and logbooks, to collect qualitative information on the educational design of structures. In order to collect information on the level of participation of students in the activities, the analytics functions provided by the Moodle platform used by the University for distance learning design were also used.

The data collected has highlighted a high level of student participation and satisfaction in the proposed internship formative activities. The synergy between universities and external structures has been fundamental for the effective development of student internship experiences, despite the limitations in travel and interaction related to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main outcome of the research was that even in times of crisis it is possible to maintain a high level of student engagement by designing internship programmes that allow the development of face-to-face and online activities that are compatible with what the health emergency allows.

Keywords: Distance learning, Instructional design, Internship programs, Student engagement, University.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the last year, formative systems around the world have undergone significant transformations due to the health emergency connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. Established contexts and practices have been suddenly changed to meet the needs of a rapidly changing educational world limited by new space-time constraints (OECD, 2020; Karalis & Raikou, 2020; Daniel, 2020; Lucisano et al., 2021).

Distance learning has long been talked about in the scientific community in the educational field, and over the years many scholars have highlighted its effectiveness with research developed in contexts of different types and levels. The decision to design courses in blended mode, in particular, has been shown over time to be strategic to integrate what is expected in face-to-face formative offers and to

enrich the possibilities of interaction and learning by students (Ardizzone & Rivoltella, 2003; Trentin, 2004; Bates & Bates, 2005; Anderson & Dron, 2011; Simpson, 2018).

If over the years the challenge of blended learning has been accepted and managed more and more successfully by the actors of the educational processes, recently the needs connected to COVID-19 have posed new, perhaps more complex, challenges. In fact, they have often caused a crisis even for those who already habitually made use of strategies for online education; the possibility of being able to manage the teaching-learning processes exclusively at a distance has substantially disturbed the balance of teachers and students, who had to suddenly change their professional and/or study practices (Marinoni et al., 2020; Trinchero, 2020; Williamson et al., 2020).

Much research is currently underway on the subject of teaching during the time of COVID-19, testifying to the interest and commitment shared around the world to identify useful strategies for the effective redesign of educational processes (Roncaglia, 2020; Ali, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020; Luppi et al., 2020). Although in many realities it has been possible to date to resume all or part of the teaching paths in the classroom, it is necessary to treasure what has been learned from this forced experience of distance learning and to identify what strategic elements it is possible to continue to use in didactic planning also in the future. Starting from the kindergarten, the focus should be to reflect on the ways in which to guarantee all students equal access to learning processes regardless of emergency situations and on effective strategies to promote the development of skills in the personal and social domains regardless of eventual spatial limitations.

Maintaining a high level of student involvement in a scenario in which the didactic planning has been developed entirely at a distance, in which direct contact with teachers and classmates has been limited or prohibited and in which at times the skills and technological resources have proven insufficient was one of the greatest challenges posed to schools and universities also in the Italian context (Lucisano, 2020; Bianchi, 2020; Di Palma & Belfiore, 2020). A research conducted at national level by the Società Italiana di Ricerca Didattica (Italian Society of Didactic Research) (SIRD, 2020) on schools has highlighted, in particular, the difficulties encountered on a professional level by teachers and the criticalities connected to the instrumental aspects. Often, in addition to lacking specific training on effective ways of managing distance learning processes, in fact, students and families also lacked the technological devices and infrastructures necessary for the management of distance learning (e.g., few digital devices at home compared to the number of children, poor internet connection).

In the university context, the processes most affected in terms of planning due to the COVID-19 emergency were those of lectures, laboratories and internships. In redesigning the configuration in a completely remote way, the focus was on continuing to ensure a high level of student involvement and at the same time a positive continuation of the study path in terms of outcomes. In this regard, one of the strategic areas on which attention has been paid is that of the internship, considering that it often constitutes a privileged channel for students to increase the sense of responsibility and involvement and to learn about and access the world of work (Simons et al., 2012; Parveen & Mirza, 2012; Bernardini, 2015; Salerni, 2016).

The methodology of planning the internship courses during the emergency period have been the subject of reflection by the scientific community also in the international context (Mediawati et al., 2020; Bobbo & Moretto, 2020; Srivastava et al., 2020; Jayasuriya, 2021). What can be highlighted is the strategic potential that internship paths can continue to have in giving university students the opportunity to experience significant formative experiences in terms of learning and engagement even in a situation of crisis and distancing, such as that connected to COVID-19.

2 METHODOLOGY

This contribution explores the results of an exploratory survey developed at the Department of Education (DSF) of Roma Tre University.

The survey was conducted during the 2019/20 academic year and had as its main objective to investigate the ways in which the DSF managed the redesign of the internship activities - theoretical and practical – in light of the constraints imposed by the societal/health emergency related to COVID-19.

In developing the survey, the other objectives on which we worked were: detecting the methods of coordination between the DSF and host structures/stakeholders for the design of internship activities

in mixed or entirely remote mode and detecting the level of participation and satisfaction by students in the internship activities proposed face-to-face and online.

As part of the survey, qualitative-quantitative tools were used in order to gain a broad overview of the phenomena investigated and to be able to give them a multidimensional interpretation.

Through a logbook, qualitative information was collected on the educational planning developed by the DSF with respect to the internship and on the formative proposals offered by the host structures in the period in which the internships were carried out exclusively at a distance. The logbook was useful for collecting data on an ongoing basis and for keeping track of the evolution of the formative proposals of the DSF and of the stakeholders as the societal/health emergency allowed physical return to the facilities for conducting the internship.

Questionnaires and interviews were used to interact with the students and with the host structures, both proposed in written form on-line. Students were asked for information on the modality of participation in online internship activities and for their opinions on the effectiveness of what was proposed to them. On the other hand, the host structures of the internship were asked to explain the methods by which they intended to ensure the possibility for students to carry out the internship activities even at a distance, given the impossibility of physical travel connected to COVID-19.

Finally, in order to gather information on the level of participation of students in the proposed activities, the reporting functions provided by the Moodle platform were used, which the DSF uses for the conduct of distance learning activities relating to both internship and ordinary teaching.

3 RESULTS

The crisis situation related to COVID-19 began in Italy in March 2020, and starting with the announcement of the lockdown, schools and universities had to quickly cope with the new organisational and educational needs.

The survey investigated what happened within Roma Tre University, in particular in the Department of Education (DSF) which first of all had to deal with the reconfiguration of teaching activities (in Italy the second semester of lessons starts as luck would have it in March) and immediately afterwards was able to pay attention to the redesign of the internship activities (each student can start the internship whenever he/she wants according to his/her needs).

The internship activities in the DSF were usually conducted by providing a first theoretical, compulsory and preparatory phase with respect to the practical internship in the structures, and a second phase in the field. With the impossibility for students to move from their homes and for the facilities to remain open to guarantee their services, the internship redesign phase first focused on the theoretical phase of the internship.

Through the logbook it was found that the redesign of this theoretical phase of the internships mainly involved the implementation of online learning environments between March and April 2020. Here, each student, on the basis of their degree programme, had the opportunity to access online learning and in-depth resources and to interact with specific tutors on topics consistent with the type of internship they should have carried out once they were placed in the host structures (e.g., nursery school, social cooperatives, etc). Each degree course, in order to support students in this transition phase in the management of activities, has also provided, in addition to these environments, online spaces dedicated to the administrative procedures related to the internship, so that each process (e.g. certification hours, delivery of reports, minutes) can be done remotely and no longer face to face.

By way of example, one of the theoretical internship online environments that has been expanded on in this research is the one designed by the degree course in *Nursery School and Childhood Services Educator*. This environment re-presented to students, in online form, the articulation of face-to-face thematic meetings through video lessons. In the transition to online mode, however, to make the materials easily usable and to encourage truly meaningful learning, the video lessons were not the simple repetition of what was done face to face but consisted of short videos each related to a specific area. In order to enrich the online training offer with additional resources compared to those foreseen in face-to-face mode, moreover, for each video lesson, self-assessment tests were formulated and made available to the forums to interact with the tutors and with the classmates. The self-assessment tests were useful for the students to comprehend their level of understanding of the topics covered and for the tutors to identify any critical areas to be explored with the students in dedicated clarification meetings to be carried out live. Integrating the learning offer of the theoretical internship with these

online resources, based on what was collected with the qualitative-quantitative tools used, was very effective in keeping the active participation of students alive by involving them in meaningful activities that involve interaction with the tutor and with peers even in a historical period characterised by physical distancing on a social level.

The logbook was also used in the research to monitor the coordination methods between the DSF and host structures of the internship/stakeholders, who kept in touch over time - starting from April 2020, the month of the start of the first practical internships at a distance - to understand how to manage practical internships with students despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The structures were invited to describe and discuss the internship teaching offer that they were able to propose to DSF students through questionnaires and written interviews.

Overall, 112 structures expressed their availability to the DSF for the co-planning of remote and/or mixed-modality practical internships. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the availability of the facilities changed progressively over time also on the basis of the COVID-19 legislation in force in Italy. Comparing the answers provided in the months of April and July 2020 was important to reflect on how in the months during which the research was conducted the practical internship activities of the students were able to resume, in some cases returning to normal within the limits of the possible already from the month of July.

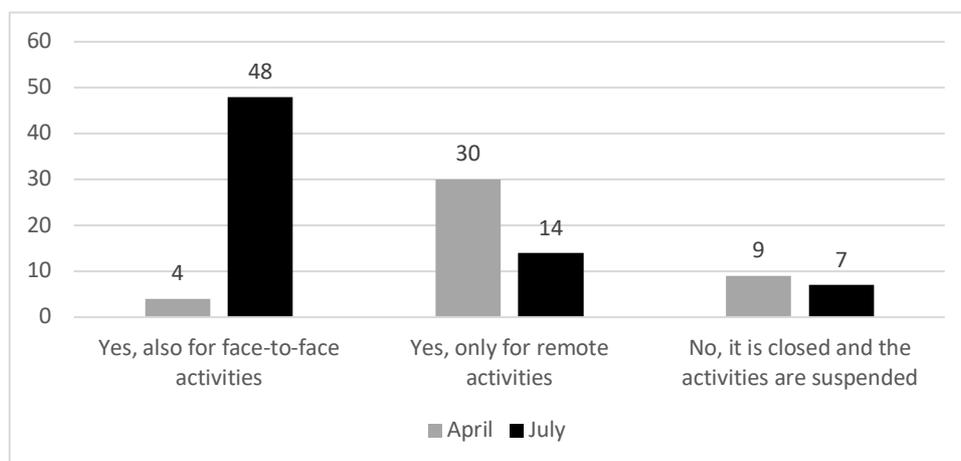


Figure 1. Availability of structures for conducting practical internships (absolute values)

Since June 2020, in Italy it has been possible for many professional educational situations to return to conducting activities in face-to-face and/or in mixed mode, therefore, as expected (and as shown in Fig. 1) in July the structures capable of offering face-to-face internship opportunities significantly increased (from 4 to 48 units). At the same time, however, it should be noted that even in July situations remained in which the internship could only be conducted through remote activities and situations that were still totally blocked. The possibility to carry out the internship in complete remote mode even during the summer, even if in Italy the lockdown was no longer total, was guaranteed by the DSF in order to respond to the needs of a nation in an emergency situation and of students who were not always able to move from home.

The modalities agreed between the DSF and the host structures for carrying out practical internships in a totally or partially remote mode have enabled all students to experience meaningful learning experiences, albeit in a crisis situation, through different types of activities. The students, according to their needs, were able to choose whether to go to the facilities or whether to carry out activities remotely. Among the main remote activities proposed by the stakeholders and chosen by the students were: participation in research groups on education topics; participation in team meetings in the education sector; analysis of sectoral education project documents; conducting distance learning activities with children and/or teenagers and conducting remote activities to support the study.

On the basis of what was declared by the host structures and by the students, the practical internship experiences were significant beyond the physical presence of the trainees. The opportunity to interact with educational experts already active in the field made it possible to keep participation in university studies alive and to strengthen the sense of identity with the DSF. Both the structures and the students declared that collaboration at a distance was always stimulating and that the sense of

individual responsibility also proved mature; the commitments agreed on in the training projects stipulated at the beginning of the internship were always respected.

The positive reactions expressed by the students regarding the practical internship experiences conducted during this emergency period confirm the effectiveness of the redesign of the internship path made by the DSF in order to increase the engagement of students even in a period of crisis and learning mainly at a distance.

Returning to the example of the Degree Course in *Nursery School and Childhood Services Educator*, during the research period, a total of 1102 students took part in its theoretical internship.

The reports that Moodle has allowed us to extract, regarding the activities carried out online, attest to a wide participation in what is proposed by the degree course: all participants viewed the video lessons several times; following upon each video lesson, the related self-assessment tests were carried out in 97% of cases (and often even several attempts were made for each test); the average scores obtained in the self-assessment tests are equal to 8.1 points out of 10. This information has allowed us to advance considerations in support of the expectation that autonomy in accessing resources can increase students' motivation to go deeper into the issues proposed to them and carry out the theoretical training activities with enthusiasm and interest. From the qualitative analysis of the forums, it emerged that comparison between peers could be further encouraged, considering that the written messages are mainly related to a request for the resolution of individual problem cases. This is an aspect that was reported to the tutors and which they will work more on to further improve the theoretical online internship, with the aim of ensuring that the learning environment also becomes a space for comparison between peers. This path, in fact, considering the effectiveness identified, will not be eliminated once it is possible to resume all the teaching activities face to face; it will instead be integrated with new digital materials and physical meetings in order to once again establish face-to-face relationships as well.

In order to detect the level of satisfaction of the students with respect to the theoretical internship activities proposed online, a questionnaire was used, enriched by some questions that required more than a yes-or-no answer. The data collected allows us to highlight a high level of satisfaction, so the goal of working on the engagement in a period of crisis through distance learning activities would seem to have been achieved. Despite the limitations associated with the constrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DSF continued to maintain a stable relationship with its students through internships.

557 students responded to the final questionnaire of the theoretical internship, which was optional and had no evaluative purposes.

Based on the answers provided, from the point of view of the students, the internship experience carried out online was mainly positive: 51% expressed their opinion as "very positive" and 46% as "fairly positive". The remaining 6% of students who provided the "not very positive" response, when going deeper into the rationale provided in support of their judgement, linked ineffectiveness to the need to carry out the activities totally remotely. The impossibility of providing an alternative to this totally online path due to the COVID-19 legislation and the high number of student trainees, however, does not allow us to follow up on this flag at the moment.

With respect to various indicators identified (e.g., clarity of information, accessibility of resources, spaces for communication, self-evaluation tests) the students' answers always placed in the upper part of the evaluation scale used; the average scores are in fact always about 3.5 points out of a maximum of 4. With respect to the opinions expressed on self-assessment activities, it may be interesting to point out that, according to the students, these help "a lot" to *focus on the important aspects of the study materials* (47.6%) and to *reflect on what was presented* (52%), aspects that - again on the basis of the answers provided by the students - in face-to-face meetings seemed less worthy of note.

With open-ended questions, students' opinions on the strengths and criticalities of the internship experience redesigned in online mode by the DSF were revealed. From their point of view, the articulation of the theoretical internship path was sustainable and facilitated the maintenance of good synergy with the university context, with peers and tutors in a period of crisis and distancing. Similarly, those who had the opportunity to carry out the practical part of the internship during the emergency period expressed positive opinions on the organisation agreed between the DSF and the host structure.

The redesign in remote mode of the internship learning activities was therefore effective and made it possible to carry out the activities and be able to critically reflect on the themes proposed at their own pace. When it becomes possible again, however, the students report that it may be useful to provide mixed face-to-face and online activities, so as to be able to “return to normal as much as possible” (A.M.), “interact more with classmates and teachers” (F.P.) and thereby to curb the “fatigue associated with just using the computer” (R.G.).

What students lack most, therefore, is face-to-face feedback, although the lack of space-time constraints for carrying out the activities and the simplicity in accessing resources seem to be appreciated.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The results of the survey confirm what is subscribed to by the scientific community at international level: despite the limitations connected to the current crisis situation linked to COVID-19, it is important to work at every level of education and teaching to guarantee students the possibility of continuing to be protagonists of quality learning processes. In this regard, internship activities can and should be a privileged channel in university contexts to keep students active and involved in experiences that see them involved in activities also connected with stakeholders in the field.

Within the scope of the investigation presented in this paper, the data collected allow us to highlight a high level of student participation and satisfaction in the internship formative activities proposed by the DSF. The synergy between the DSF and external structures has been fundamental for the effective development of student internship experiences, despite the limitations in travel and interaction related to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The redesign of the internship activities that was carried out, which first envisaged a totally remote and then - gradually - mixed form, was effective and it is hoped that this is a path that can be shared within other formative contexts in order to spread practices to encourage student engagement also in future crisis situations.

The main outcome of the research was that even in times of crisis it is possible to maintain a high level of student engagement by designing internship programs that allow the development of face-to-face and online activities that are compatible with what the health emergency constraints allow.

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