



Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference

of the Journal Scuola Democratica

REINVENTING EDUCATION

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VOLUME III

**Pandemic and Post-Pandemic
Space and Time**

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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**VOLUME III
Pandemic and Post-
Pandemic Space and Time**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"
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**Title Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” – Reinventing Education
VOLUME III Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Space and Time**

This volume contains papers presented in the 2nd International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” which took place online on 2-5 June 2021. The Conference was devoted to the needs and prospects of Reinventing Education.

The challenges posed by the contemporary world have long required a rethinking of educational concepts, policies and practices. The question about education ‘for what’ as well as ‘how’ and ‘for whom’ has become unavoidable and yet it largely remained elusive due to a tenacious attachment to the ideas and routines of the past which are now far off the radical transformations required of educational systems.

Scenarios, reflections and practices fostering the possibility of change towards the reinvention of the educational field as a driver of more general and global changes have been centerstage topics at the Conference. Multidisciplinary approach from experts from different disciplinary communities, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, economics, architecture, political science has brought together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate constraints and opportunities for reinventing education.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and interdisciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners’ mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 800 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on research, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Space and Time

A Premise

Papers in this third volume deals with the Covid-19 pandemic which is having an enormous impact on education systems worldwide. Policy makers, teachers, school managers, parents and students have been called to the reinvent their way of 'doing school'. At the same time, the governance of the education system and schools' organizations have been exposed to unprecedeted tensions.

Within a short period of time, radical changes had to be introduced, simultaneously, at various levels of the school system. At national and regional level, there has been the need to rethink the way in which teachers are recruited, engaged and managed. National assessment and evaluation systems have been suspended or redefined in their uses by school actors. The ways through which institutes were managed and organized had to be rethought, passing in a very short time through an on and off of dematerialization and hyper-normativity of time and space. Within schools, managers and teachers have been called to redefine the role of digital technologies in their didactic, as well as in their relationships with families and students. In some cases, these set of changes led to experience novel and unexpected daily proximities, in other prevailed a context characterized by distance and unsatisfactory relationships. Managers and teachers have been asked to re-invent their professionalism to rethink their organizational, didactic and relational competences. Students and families, on their side, have been called to rebuild and reimagine new way of being at school, re-inventing the spaces and time of schooling and the way in which they relate among each other and with teachers.

The pandemic emergency has been a lens revealing intersections and structural tensions among various level and actors of the education system, but also allowing opportunities of changes thanks to the exogenous shock. At the same time, it must be considered that the emergency is interacting on pre-existing inequalities and contradictions. The pandemic clearly revealed the deep disparities of educational opportunities associated to students' life and housing conditions, beyond their access and uses of technological devices. Remote teaching and the enactment of an 'emergency didactic' has exacerbated learning difficulties for underprivileged students (children facing material deprivation, students with migratory background, students with special needs or disable, etc.). The interaction between the pandemic and pre-existing inequalities created different contextual conditions for actors' agency, orienting toward different directions the pandemic's transformational potential.

Higher education systems have been affected too: in constant evolution due to constant transformations of society and changed functions of knowledge, universities have undergone a structural

change along with pandemic times. Simultaneously, the growing relevance of knowledge for the economic development of the capitalistic system has profoundly affected higher education systems, characterized by the neo-liberal approach which is subject of increasing critical analysis.

However, Higher education systems are starting to be affected by other somewhat inevitable changing processes due to the evolution of knowledge and the consequent forms of its transmission. These forms have to be necessarily new both because of the availability of new instruments and the increased need to develop interpretative models of a constant and often unpredictable change. In this juncture the university might assume a renewed central role. At Higher Education System level, the growing use of digital instruments is envisaged in order to cope with the rising of the management rates of the training offer as well as to answer to the growing differentiation of user categories. A feasible consequence could be the increasing of the already pressure for the differentiation among the universities, with the related social implications.

At individual university level, it is foreseeable the demand for university involvement in tackling the problems of society and the economy will increase. And this at global, national and local level. From an organizational point of view the most significant feature is represented by the accumulation of traditional and new tasks that do not seem to be possible to manage. Whatever form the higher education systems will come to take, it remains that a central point to be clarified concerns the management of change. It will be the market that will impose its rules and the universities will organize themselves individually within the invisible enclosures that will guide their policies (with predictable growing social and territorial differences), or instead the State will choose incentive policies to direct its training system. It remains that in a condition of uncertainty and constant change the university's roles multiply and become – at least potentially – more and more central. It can therefore be argued that the university is not only called upon to respond to the demands of society but by elaborating answers and solutions to the problems it progressively affects the functioning of society.

We are fully aware that each educational experience produces specific results and definitions of teaching-learning practices. The well-established model of the magister teacher, based on a one-to-many transmission of knowledge, is complemented by new configurations of teaching-learning practices. There are teaching practices that cultivate the ambition to combine the technological innovation with the psychological and pedagogical issues. Educational technologies, such as the Interactive Whiteboard, incorporate a new grammar and pragmatic in which the emphasis is placed on the

involvement and the participation of the student, as well as on a "reverse teaching", compared to the traditional one. The diffusion of online educational platforms, based on algorithmic architectures and data-driven approaches, also draws attention to a personalized way of learning and a datafication of teaching. Digital technologies are therefore stimulating a series of transformations in the socio-material order of the class affecting the spatial and temporal configuration of teaching. At the same time, they are embedded in the complexity of the educational contexts that rework their practical and symbolic value.

In the European framework of strengthening the relations between the labour market and education, we also witness the implementation of teaching practices associated with the idea of knowledge as an economic and social investment. Recently, a large field of critical investigation has highlighted how teaching aimed at improving the employment prospects of students is deeply affecting public values in education. At the same time, different points of view in the educational field claim to postpone the transmission of skills related to the labour market to broader educational objectives of social inclusion and civic participation.

The new proxemics imposed by the current pandemic challenge traditional spatial configuration, from the arrangement of desks to the mobile use of chairs, from the forms of communication in virtual environments to the interaction in the classroom. Therefore, this is to register the need to re-elaborate the ecology of the educational practices, starting from the socio-material space of learning.

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Peer Assessment and Peer Feedback to Foster Collaborative Learning and Consolidate the Writing Skills of University Students

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ABSTRACT: According to national and international studies peer assessment and peer feedback have a major role in student learning processes (Topping et al., 2000; Moretti et al., 2015; Grion, Serbati, 2017). In the process of knowledge building the possibility of making use of peers can foster collaborative learning and the development of critical thinking. Within the university context providing writing activities in peer groups by introducing peer feedback and peer assessment allows to activate analysis, review and self-assessment processes of one's own paper, consolidating language skills (Boscolo, 2014; Piemontese, Sposetti, 2014). The paper provides the results of an exploratory survey conducted with 380 students from the Roma Tre University. The main goal was to investigate the effectiveness of peer assessment and peer feedback to help develop strategic skills, and to enhance collaborative writing skills in digital format. The peer assessment activities implied the formation of pairs of groups that mutually assessed the argumentative text produced, using a semi-structured grid. The students eventually answered a questionnaire. The analysis of the data showed that the work carried out in peer groups, through a process of collaborative learning, contributed to develop both metacognitive skills and the exercise of leadership of the students involved. The outcomes of the research confirm the importance of introducing writing tasks in the university context which, based on peer assessment and peer feedback, can improve the quality of the training.

KEYWORDS: Collaborative learning, University teaching, Peer feedback, Peer assessment, Digital writing.

1. Introduction

In a complex social context marked by uncertainty there is now widespread awareness of the need to promote students' development of the skills and competences needed to become 'lifelong learners'. In the teaching-learning processes there are several variables to monitor in order to promote a student-focused approach that can ensure the acquisition of the most effective learning strategies for educational

success. The introduction of ongoing educational assessment practices into teaching activities that include self-assessment activities and the involvement of peers are essential to develop the ability to self-regulate one's learning (Harrison *et al.*, 2015). The studies by Hattie and Timperley (2007) that investigate through meta-analysis the effect size of different teaching tools and strategies, i.e., the magnitude of the effect of a variable on learning levels deriving from the difference between the mean of the experimental group and the mean of the control group, show how the use of feedback has a positive effect in improving student learning outcomes (high effect between 0.70 and 0.79). The authors underline how this result depends on the type and way in which the feedback is given, on the timing, as well as on the actors involved in the process. These aspects determine the effectiveness of the feedback. For example, the possibility of receiving ongoing feedback, theorized by the group coordinated by Novak (1999) as 'Just-in-Time Teaching' (JiTT) feedback, provided by the teacher during the lesson, immediately after tasks or activities carried out in class also making use of technologies, helps consolidate the knowledge acquired, and keeps the student's motivation and participation up (Novak *et al.*, 1999). Generally, in the national educational context the feedback is suggested by the teacher to the student in written or oral form, providing for different levels of customization, and depending on the activity or task under assessment. Nicol (2010) theorized the importance to overcome a concept of feedback intended as a tool aimed solely at transmitting information on a particular product, moving from what he calls a 'monologue' to a 'dialogue', where feedback appears as a teaching resource through which active learning is promoted; those who receive feedback are involved in the construction of meaning, and can develop the ability to monitor, self-assess and self-regulate their own learning. Dialogue is characterized by: adaptability – i.e., the ability to respond to a student's specific educational need -, flexibility, interaction and reflexivity.

Winstone and Carless (2019) analyzed the old and new feedback paradigms. They used the term 'paradigm' somewhat informally to represent ways of thinking about feedback. The authors argue that in order to build the new it is necessary to reconsider and redesign the old, which is based on a predominantly transmissive cognitive approach, in which the teacher provides information to the student, limiting himself to considerations that do not include indications on how to act in a perspective of improvement. The practices referring to the new paradigm instead refer to the constructivist perspective which requires careful planning and systematic integration of feedback into the curriculum. New paradigm practices imply a so-called interactive 'partnership' between teacher and student, whose focus is on the shared construction of meaning. It is therefore necessary to focus less on the content that teachers provide to students, and more on how students generate, optimize and use feedback in their lifelong learning process (Winstone, Carless, 2020). In this same direction Nicol (2018) defined the so-called

'generative feedback', i.e. feedback capable of activating constructive learning processes in students starting from the analysis and review phase of one's own or others' product, both during the formulation phase of a judgement to be given to an individual and to a group of peers. In this respect, the strategic function of peer teamwork and the exchange of feedback to raise students' levels of achievement is widely recognized by national and international research, the results of which encourage their widespread use starting from the first cycle of education up to university (Topping *et al.*, 2000; Moretti *et al.*, 2015; Grion, Serbati, 2017; Restiglian, Grion, 2019). In fact, in the knowledge building process the possibility of using shared knowledge among peers promotes collaborative learning and the development of critical thinking. Among the educational devices that can be introduced in peer activities, the return of feedback appears to be effective for developing assessment and self-assessment skills, and improving the levels of achievement. Studies in the educational field show that involving the group of peers in assessment and mutual feedback activities appears to be particularly effective. Both in the giving feedback (GF) and in the receiving feedback (RF) phases it is interesting to analyze the processes implemented by the students in the two roles of evaluators and assessed (Li *et al.*, 2012; Li, Grion, 2019). Shared writing can be considered an effective educational device to consolidate language skills. Providing writing activities in peer groups by introducing peer feedback and peer assessment allows to activate processes of analysis, review and self-assessment of one's own work (Boscolo, 2014; Piemontese, Sposetti, 2014; Suryani *et al.*, 2019). The use of online learning environments and appropriate technological support also motivates students to carry out the production and revision of digital texts in a creative way (Guasch *et al.*, 2013; Liu, Lee, 2013; Bradley, Thouësny, 2017; López-Pellisa *et al.*, 2021).

Especially in the face of recent challenges in the educational field, imposed by the emergency situation, it is necessary to innovate university teaching, rethinking the theory of assessment and learning in higher education, implementing peer review and feedback practices, even ongoing ones (Nicol *et al.*, 2014; Grion *et al.*, 2017; Wisniewski *et al.*, 2020; Cecchinato, 2021), using mixed forms of feedback including both feedback in the classroom and in blended or completely remote mode (Topping, 1998; McCarthy, 2017; Serbati *et al.*, 2019).

2. Research methodology

The paper presents the results of an exploratory survey conducted within the Department of Educational Sciences of the Roma Tre University. The survey involved 380 students, enrolled in the first year of the course, who attended the course *Teaching organization and assessment processes* in the academic year 2020/2021. The main goal of the research was to investigate the effectiveness of peer assessment and peer feedback in the

university context to help develop strategic skills, and to enhance students' collaborative writing skills in digital format.

The students were involved in group activities aimed at consolidating digital writing skills through the production of short argumentative texts and mutual exchange of peer assessment through written feedback.

The first phase of the research consisted of splitting the 380 students into 40 groups who worked remotely using the Moodle platform of the Department of Education (formonline.uniroma3.it), and the environment set up for simultaneous Microsoft Teams communication. In this phase, instructions on the first activity of the peer-to-peer work were given, consisting of a digital paper of up to 600 words. During this very first phase the assessment grid was presented too, drafted by the research group, that would be used for peer assessment, with the aim of helping students write the argumentative text.

In the second phase of the research, students were asked to explain the choice of the keywords identified to build a concept map on the subject of assessment in the context of educational services for the age zero-six (Novak, 1991; Moretti, 2018). The text should also include references to scientific bibliographic sources and multimedia resources relevant to the argumentation developed.

The third phase involved peer assessment of the texts produced by the groups using the previously shared assessment grid and peer feedback activities. The paper produced by the groups was subject to peer assessment, and pairs of groups were formed to mutually assess each other using a semi-structured grid through which written feedback was given.

The assessment grid is divided into two sections (Table 1). The first one presents descriptors relating to the formal aspects of the text: the identity of the group, the layout used and any syntactic-grammatical inaccuracies; the second part focuses on the argumentative skills and ability to synthesize information, and on the use of sources and digital resources relevant to the text content.

The assessment was expressed on a scale from 1 to 4 where 1 is the lowest value and 4 the highest for each aspect assessed. The evaluators were also asked to write a short written feedback to justify the attribution of the value expressed by the scale.

Once they had the grid back, the groups in the fourth phase of the research were able to review and integrate their written papers on the basis of the feedback received from peers.

The fifth and last phase had the purpose to collect the students' point of view through a semi-structured online questionnaire, to understand if and how teamwork and the peer assessment and peer feedback activities had contributed to qualify the training course and, specifically, to develop strategic skills for educational success. The tool, consisting of 20 closed and 2 open questions, was administered online to all students who took part in the survey approximately 2 months after the end of the course. The closed questions were about the collection of ascriptive data (age,

degree course, year of course, type of high school diploma and year of the exam) as well as specific questions regarding: the organization of the remote writing task of the argumentative text, the use of the assessment grid during the writing phase, the potential difficulty in formulating written feedback for the assessed group, the grid size where the peer feedback was considered adequate, the skills that the peer teamwork helped develop more. The open questions focused on a brief description of the experience of remote peer teamwork, and the ways in which this type of activity helped qualify the students' training.

TAB. 1. Peer assessment grid of the argumentative text

FORMAL ASPECTS OF THE TEXT	In official documents it is important to:	Indicators	Feedback on the work done
Identity	first of all clarify your identity (description of the working group)	dichotomous scale: present/absent	
Layout	choose a suitable layout (check text font, size, use of bold, italics, underlined, highlighted and any colors in the text)	1-4 scale	
Syntactic-grammatical inaccuracies	read over to correct any syntactic and/or spelling inaccuracies	1-4 scale	
FORMAL ASPECTS OF ARGUMENTATION	In the proposed writing task it is important to:	Indicators	Feedback on the work done
Argumentative skills	discuss pertinently to instructions	1-4 scale	
Ability to synthesize	effectively synthesize what requested, respecting the word limit as per instructions	1-4 scale	
Use of relevant key words	identify and use key words that are relevant to the argumentation	1-4 scale	
Use of original key words	express and use original key words as required	1-4 scale	
Use of sources	explain the choice of key words referring to the sources	1-4 scale	
Use of multimedia	use multimedia (pictures, links to videos, useful websites or documents) to explain one's choices	1-4 scale	

3. Outcomes of the research

The students were divided into 40 groups of about 10 people. Specifically, the groups, divided into pairs, had to give each other mutual written feedback guided by the criteria set out in the grid. The outcomes of the research will mainly focus on the analysis of the data collected through the semi-structured online questionnaire on peer activity. The questionnaire was answered by 100 students with an average of about 2 members for each working group.

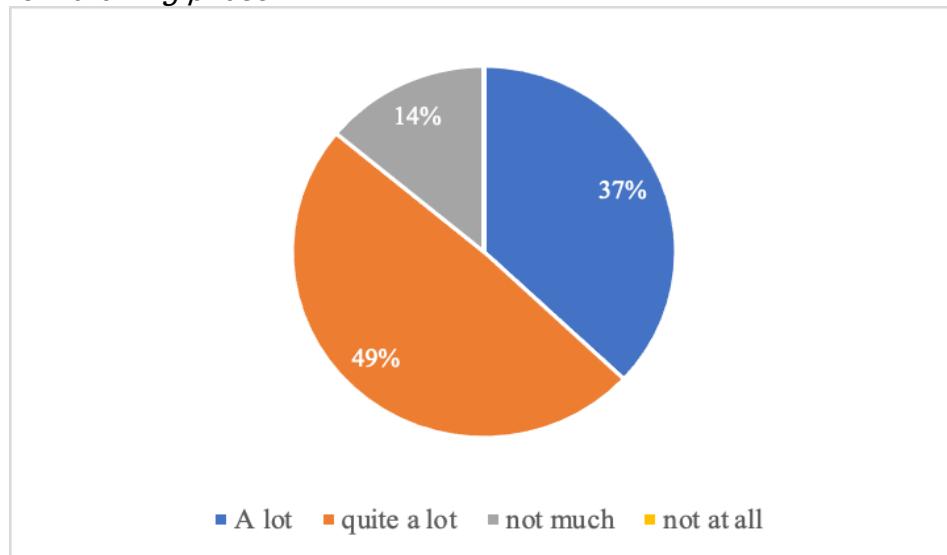
91.4% of the respondents were freshmen enrolled in the academic year 2020/21 between the age of 19-21. The students who declare that they

have attended more than 75% of the *Teaching Organization and Evaluation Processes* course are 69%, while 18% have attended between 50 and 75% of the lessons.

The research group shared the peer assessment grid with the students from the beginning of the course with the aim of helping them write the argumentative text. 89% of the respondents said they started using the grid at the moment of writing the digital text. Knowing that the writing work would be subject to peer assessment, most of the working groups took into consideration the elements included in the assessment grid during the text drafting phase. The possibility of knowing in advance the elements under assessment allowed the students to focus on all the aspects considered fundamental to write a digital argumentative text (layout, syntactic-grammatical inaccuracies, argumentative skills and ability to synthesize information, correct use of bibliographic sources and multimedia resources).

During the drafting of the text 39% of the students took into consideration the elements included in the assessment grid 'a lot', 49% 'quite a lot', and only a small percentage made little use of the grid (Fig. 1).

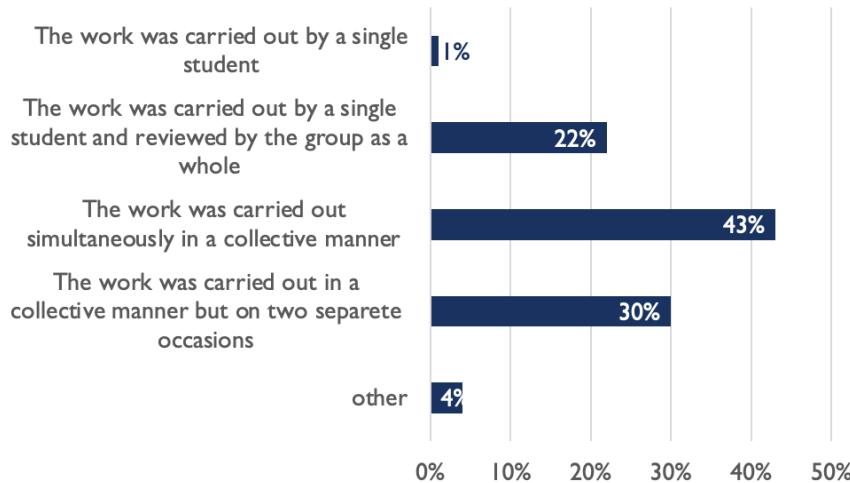
FIG. 1. How much the assessment grid was taken into consideration during the text drafting phase



A further question was useful to examine in depth the *giving feedback* (GF) phase, verifying any difficulties encountered by students in assigning the score for each descriptor in the grid and in giving written feedback to the assigned group. At this level 90% of the students said they have not encountered any difficulties in peer assessment. The organizational dimension of intra-group work was analyzed too. Specifically, the writing mode of the argumentative text was investigated: whether it was carried out by only one member of the group and reviewed by all; whether it was carried out in a shared and simultaneous way (e. g. collective writing) or in a shared and asynchronous way (e. g.

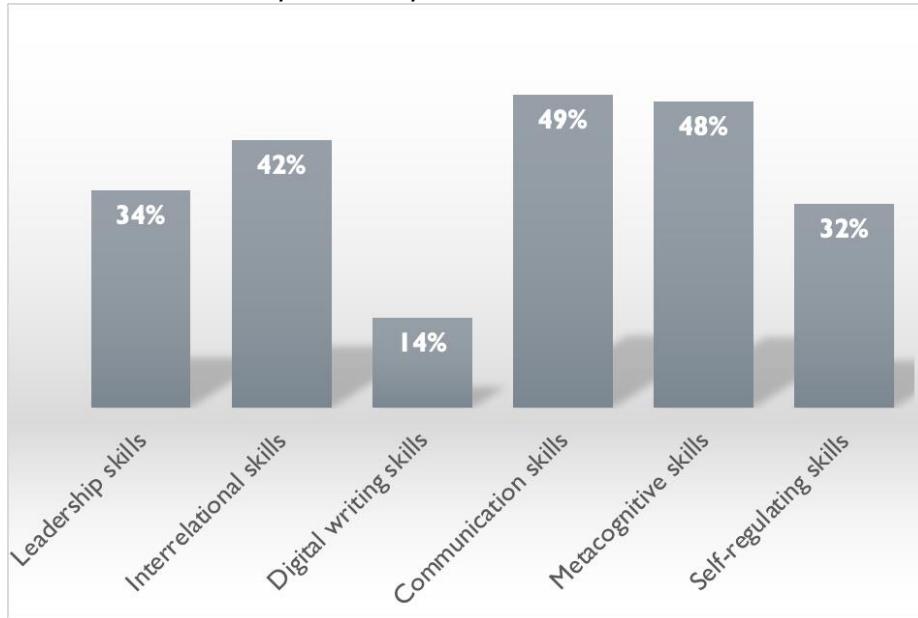
everyone wrote a part that was then shared at a later time). 43% of the students said they used collective, shared and simultaneous writing using the Microsoft Teams and Formonline Department platform. A good percentage (30%) used shared writing in the asynchronous mode, and only a smaller percentage (22%) chose to delegate the writing of the argumentative text to another member and then review it all at a later time. During the production phase of the text, the possibility of using technological tools enhanced peer work in the university context (Fig. 2).

FIG. 2. *Organization of the digital, intra-group writing mode.*



The research group also investigated the 'receiving feedback' (RF) phase, asking students to examine the quality of the feedback received, particularly if it was appropriate compared to their own perception of the quality of the work performed. The answers of the students revealed that 24% considered the feedback adequate with regard to the ability to synthesize, and 23% for the argumentative skills shown. Reporting the use of bibliographic sources incorrectly was considered adequate by 19% of respondents.

The grid was used by the groups to examine their own products first, and then those of others they assessed. This double activity of examining the assessment process has allowed to compare the two different works performed. The peer assessment phase of the assigned group's writing work stimulated critical self-assessment in most of the students regarding collective digital writing activities. The skills that the students believe they have developed most after peer assessment and peer feedback concern communication skills (49%) and interpersonal skills (42%) considered essential for working in a group, and meta-cognitive skills (48%) considered essential for university studying. Digital writing skills (14%) were perceived as less developed by freshmen accustomed to using communication and information technologies (Fig. 3).

FIG. 3. Skills developed after peer work.

The answers to the open questions of the questionnaire administered to the students highlighted that overall the remote teamwork was an opportunity to qualify the students' training by consolidating some cross-cutting skills such as the communicative, relational and self-assessment skills of the students involved:

There was a lot of collaboration within the group, no arguments, only exchange of ideas, mutual aid and clarifications on unclear topics.

The remote group activity has improved the relational aspect in my training and the exchange of views in the careful search for reliable scientific sources in order to complete the job.

Regarding peer assessment and feedback, students said that

the feedback we received from the other group made us understand the writing mistakes in our argumentative text and was very useful to improve it later

The feedback helped me a lot, it highlighted inaccuracies that I had considered irrelevant

I encountered difficulties when we got an assessment from the other group that seemed inappropriate to us, but we sorted it out by using teaching materials to improve our text anyway.

The data analysis showed that peer teamwork, resulting in collaborative learning, helped develop both meta-cognitive skills and the exercise of leadership of the students involved.

Final conclusions and future prospects

The adoption of a dialogic dimension, based on the idea that assessment facilitates students' learning processes, allowed to focus our survey on the dynamics that is typical for shared construction of meaning and peer knowledge starting from the analysis or review of one's own or others' product (Nicol, 2018; Windstone, Carless, 2020).

In general, the research confirms how relevant peer assessment and peer feedback are for the qualification of university students' learning processes (Topping *et al.*, 2000; Moretti *et al.*, 2015; Grion, Serbati, 2017). In particular the survey highlights the importance of introducing writing tasks in the university context, based on peer assessment and peer feedback to help improve the overall quality of the training. In fact, the exploratory research interestingly shows that collaborative argumentative text processing in digital format allowed the students to improve their writing skills (Boscolo, 2014; Piemontese, Sposetti, 2014; Suryani *et al.*, 2019), but especially strengthen and develop personal communication, relational and meta-cognitive skills.

Apparently, the effectiveness of collaborative activities relating to the development of a plurality of skills, mainly depends on the attention paid to three different dimensions that appear to be closely linked to each other: clarification of assessment criteria, organization of giving feedback (GF) phase and organization of receiving feedback (RF) phase (Li *et al.*, 2012; Li, Grion, 2019).

Teacher's early clarification of the assessment criteria of the writing tasks as well as the organization of discussion and sharing sessions are crucial in maintaining the peer group's focus on the assigned task and in reconciling its positive outcome with the expected learning goals.

Students' reflection on how to manage the giving feedback (GF) phase underlines the importance of involving them in the formulation of targeted, contextualized and useful information in a peer context. The activities at this stage imply the need for students to further examine the assessment criteria used, and adopt a new perspective aimed at facilitating the understanding of the feedback by the recipients.

The analysis of the receiving feedback (RF) phase also highlights the dialogical and generative value of student active involvement in activities that require students to examine the degree of adequacy of the feedback received as far as individual assessment criteria are concerned, and to appreciate its quality and usefulness in relation to the established learning goals. The results of the research highlight some challenging aspects characterizing the phase of receiving feedback, in particular the gap between the individual or group perception of how the task was carried out, and the feedback received.

The research confirms that collaborative work and feedback exchange are not educational activities by themselves, but that they can foster learning in cases where they are the result of carefully designed trainings, taking care of the relationship between teachers and students and that

with peers; making sure that feedback is the product of a dialogue and not a one-way process. In this perspective we can say that the formulation of peer feedback is strategic for the activation of processes of analysis, revision, integration and processing of knowledge in students (Grion, Tino, 2018; Moretti *et al.*, 2015). The ongoing emergency situation and the new educational challenges, especially among freshmen, suggest to implement peer review and peer assessment in higher education, and to enhance feedback both in the classroom and in the blended mode, or even in remote teaching (McCarthy, 2017; Serbati *et al.*, 2019; Wisniewski *et al.*, 2020).

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