

WHAT LEARNING AGAINST SOCIAL “WITHDRAWAL”? PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTIONS

QUALE APPRENDIMENTO CONTRO IL “RITIRO” SOCIALE? RIFLESSIONI PEDAGOGICHE

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Abstract

Learning should be safeguarded and cultivated from the point of view of the spontaneity and pleasure that the constancy of interactions with oneself, with others and with the world provide to individuals; the exercise of the ability to refine these interactions to make them increasingly functional and, above all, an irreducible component of a process of self-determination of the Self and the conquest of a lifelong existential planning is entrusted primarily to training systems and processes. In the light of increasingly widespread phenomena of renunciation of full participation in one's own life, one wonders in what direction pedagogy and didactics can act. Understanding what is happening as an impoverishment of the vital impulse in which the processes of adaptation are based on meaningful and creative - and not replicating and alienating - learning, an important opportunity could be represented by giving priority to the dimension of creative thinking in learning and training processes.

L'apprendimento andrebbe salvaguardato e coltivato dal punto di vista della spontaneità e del piacere che la costanza delle interazioni con se stessi, con gli altri e con il mondo procurano agli individui; l'esercizio della capacità di affinare queste interazioni per renderle sempre più funzionali e soprattutto componente irriducibile di un processo di autodeterminazione del Sé e di conquista di una progettualità esistenziale lifelong è affidata *in primis* ai sistemi e ai processi formativi. Alla luce di fenomeni sempre più diffusi di rinuncia a partecipare pienamente della propria vita, ci si chiede in quale direzione possano agire la pedagogia e la didattica. Intendendo quanto sta accadendo come un impoverimento della spinta vitale in cui i processi di adattamento si basano su apprendimenti significativi e creativi, e non replicanti ed estranianti, un'importante opportunità potrebbe essere rappresentata dall'accogliere prioritariamente la dimensione del pensiero creativo nei processi di apprendimento e formativi.

Keywords

Development; Learning; Life Designing; Creativity.
Evoluzione; Apprendimento; Progettualità; Creatività.

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1. Learning in order to develop. Critical issues and pedagogical alternatives

Higher education and training systems have always had a great responsibility not only to enable the acquisition/creation of skills but above all to keep alive and nurture the propensity to learn, the taste for being active in the environment, the ability to learn that is at the heart of human adaptation processes. The specific quality of training does not reside so much in opening up to new knowledge as in the gradual acquisition of the ability to learn and, in conjunction, the desire to do so. It is well known that motivation and willingness to lifelong learn are closely linked to the learning methods, the quality of training experienced and the successes achieved. The implementation of adequate training courses enables the learning of effective strategies and reinforces the desire to continue training: those who have had more training the more they ask for it, finding themselves in possession of useful resources for the purpose, both cognitive and affective and motivational. In this respect, the context of neuroscience is of particular interest because in linking biology, neurology and psychology it offers indications and reflective suggestions of specific pedagogical relevance. The psychological and motivational dimension is intertwined with the specific evolutionary “mandate” that the human system expresses; our brain processes are aimed at optimising survival by creating the best conditions for evolution. The original evolutionary purpose, which we could summarise as making one’s own body feel good and well in the world, therefore constitutes a sort of lighthouse, a constant guide for everything that animates us cognitively, emotionally and in terms of behaviour (Immordino - Yang, 2017, cf. p.109 et seq.); we could say that the search for well-being, the drive to overcome obstacles that stand in the way of its affirmation, and the tension to protect it from danger, are nourished by the processes of learning, of experimenting, of putting oneself to the test. It is as if learning had to correspond to something vital and, therefore, its activation and accompaniment can only be characterised by participation in a journey that belongs to many and to each one, that directly involves people, because it tells about them, their personal stories, their existential needs and the ways in which they would like to achieve them.

If learning is a natural process, its spontaneity must be safeguarded and cultivated, in terms of the pleasure that the constancy of interactions with oneself, with others and with the world bring to individuals; the exercise of the capacity to refine these interactions to make them increasingly functional and above all an irreducible component of a process of self-determination of the Self and the conquest of a lifelong existential planning is entrusted *in primis* to training systems and processes.

The consequences of a distancing from education, and increasingly of the abandonment of education systems, are serious and relate to the marginalisation of cultural and scientific training processes, an impoverishment of the level of awareness and of the sufficiently expert exercise of active citizenship, a barbarianisation of social life and a weakening of production systems and their capacity for innovation. What we are witnessing in recent months is an amplification of processes and situations that have already existed for some time; the pandemic situation has stressed a condition of “withdrawal”, of renouncing to participate in associated forms of life, especially those relating to training and referring to adult figures. In some ways, we could say that a “scientific” demolition of school in particular is taking place, if we think above all of what is its task, i.e. providing conditions that allow the new generations to be able to direct differently what should not represent family “destinies” (Cunti, 2020). The school, more specifically, should practise conditions of fairness rather than equality, giving more opportunities to those who have fewer of them; the condition that looms is that of a democracy in danger because if the school were to give up its task, which is to contribute to the human growth of everyone by acting strategically and in a differentiated manner, the mass of the excluded would increase and only those who had the opportunity to do so thanks to their family and social environments would advance.

After all, the fact that individuals have been given back their own fortunes and that it is up to each individual to determine his or her own emancipation is a key to recent European documents, according to which the person who is able to acquire knowledge/competences that

correspond to social and occupational demands is placed in the foreground, within what appears to be an “appropriation and re-signification of the notion of *learning* by a lexicon of the economy, culminating in the Report of the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in which *lifelong learning* is mainly [...] interpreted in the sense of ‘promoting employment and economic development’” (Striano, Oliverio, 2012, p. 249).

It is therefore a conception of learning that coincides with corresponding to something pre-established and, consequently, with the ability to adapt to those dimensions, to those traits of learning, considered successful as enabling a recognised personal and social affirmation.

That of exclusion, of voluntary withdrawal, which has led to be expressed in terms of a “pandemic of the excluded” (Verdelli, 2021), seems to represent an effective interpretation of behaviour, especially among adolescents and young adults, which appears to be emerging and increasingly widespread. It is as if renouncement and closure were the other possible alternative to the more usual options of opposition/contestation with respect to the world of the fathers, so to speak, or of integration with it.

The sense of “withdrawal” is also that of a lack of full participation in one’s own life, even before that of others. In this respect, the question arises as to what direction education systems can take in the light of this rampant social phenomenon. Understanding what is happening as an impoverishment of the vital impulse in which the processes of adaptation are based on meaningful and creative - and not replicating and alienating - learning, a major opportunity could be represented by giving priority to the dimension of creative thinking in learning and training processes.

Creativity in learning could consist in developing the capacity to learn in a generative way. One is creative when the approach to knowledge and to understanding has characteristics of globality and transversality; creative is the one who is able to glimpse into the folds, to intercept what is not yet but could be, to connect naturally intertwined dimensions such as cognitive and emotional (Damasio, 1995; Immordino-Yang, 2017), to feel with the mind and to think not excluding emotions, to have a holistic and systemic view.

Creativity in learning requires, above all, starting from oneself, making oneself the creator and guide of one’s own learning, being present to oneself in the construction of one’s own “cultural and formative self” (Cunti & Priore, 2020, p. 33), in other words, one’s idea of oneself as an individual capable of participating in culture and of determining oneself on a formative level.

The task of the training systems is, therefore, to accompany people through research paths in which the innovative and transformative plot inherent to knowledge and disciplinary knowledge is declined in coherence with the instances and desires of individuals, groups and communities.

In this sense, the protagonism of those who learn is not functional to the achievement of educational success, but opens up new issues and scenarios that society, science and education will have to face in order to participate in what will increasingly have to be configured as an envelope rather than a development (Morin, 2020), where the former sees the I in the We, interdependence and cooperation.

Creative thinking is hardly an individual thought; technology amplifies the possibility of sharing, thanks to which creative thinking can be born and grow in an optimal way.

Training in creative thinking also means educating about diversity and differences. Creativity, in this sense, is the overcoming of oppositions, starting with those that dwell within each of us (Stanghellini, 2017) and that can cause discomfort and inhibition of action or reactivity.

Creativity cannot be dissociated from opening up to new perspectives, from understanding languages, methods and anthropologically and scientifically distant visions of the world, which help to move away from self-referentiality and short-sighted and limited readings of reality.

2. Declining a generative didactics of creative learning

Creativity is often traced back to creative thinking and its characteristics and conditions. Thought, as the mind’s capacity to construct meaning, is emotionally imprinted and is, in particular, linked to experience, and therefore to memory and learning. In order for a thought to

be considered creative, it must on the one hand be appropriate to the situation, and therefore useful, and on the other hand be unusual, original and unexpected (Elliot in Craft, 2002, p. 93; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999, p. 3). Another interesting aspect concerns the fact that a creative dynamic is activated more in reference to the context than to the content; this refers to the plurality and immediacy of the stimuli and, so to speak, to their holistic character. It is not so much the content itself that inspires us, but the situation in which it is inserted, made up of organisational, relational and individual aspects, the latter relating to motivations, expectations, the quality of the presence that the subject expresses in the learning context. From this last point of view, particular importance is given to the attitude towards learning and the idea that what can be imagined and produced can have practical implications, that is, it can be used to the advantage of oneself and of others; it is clear that the quality of the relationship and the way in which it expands to include knowledge contents, strategies, tools are in the foreground. In this sense, a creative thought can hardly be generated in conditions of minimal freedom, of rigid and repetitive communicative forms, needing components related both to the relationship, such as mutual trust and, therefore, the possibility of relying on and unconditional acceptance of the other, and to education and teaching, such as openness to what is different and unexpected, to what is challenging and perhaps calls into question known and established ways of acting (Smith, 1975).

An area often referred to in connection with creative thinking is metacognition, which, when linked to creativity, includes aspects relating both to the individual and to the situation in which he or she is operating. Metacognitive prerequisites for creativity are the knowledge of how one is best able to think, of which personal dimensions are more effective than others, of what one needs to optimise one's way of learning, but also of a declination of these components in the field of creativity; to paraphrase the title of the book "Quella volta che ho imparato. La conoscenza di sé nei luoghi dell'educazione" - That time that I learned. Knowledge of the Self in education environments. - (Formenti & Gamelli, 1998), we could say that it is a matter of understanding what makes us be creative, or rather what can predispose us to a new thought that contains a different sort of outlook and operativity, in other words, that time I was creative, what helped me to be so, what was in some way the setting of creativity, not to replicate it but to make use of a specific knowledge and previous experience (Davidson & Sternberg, 1998; Feldhusen & Goh, 1995; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013).

Neuroscientific research has highlighted the involvement of a specific physiological condition, consisting of the processing and integration capacity of the prefrontal cortex (Ashby, Isen, & Turken, 1999; Ashby et al., 2002; Bekhtereva, Dan'ko, Starchenko, Pakhomov, & Medvedev, 2001; Bekhtereva et al, 2000; Carlsson, Wendt & Risberg, 2000; Damasio, 2001; Kornhuber, 1993; Martindale, 1999; Scheibel, 1999); it is a question of functional potentialities that can be presented with greater or lesser effectiveness and, in this sense, the education factor plays a decisive role, declined from the point of view of the way of thinking of oneself as an individual capable of learning and of the emotions that accompany this kind of thinking. It is clear that this is an attitude that calls into question the structure of identity, which includes what each person thinks he or she knows how to do and is able to learn, a structure that begins to take shape in the first forms of family interaction, based on the acknowledgement and acceptance that the primary system is able to express. The "you are important to me" translates into "I am important" and, if the behaviour of the other person goes in the direction of nourishing the biological drive to seek the best conditions to exist fully and freely in one's own environment, a climate of trust is activated towards oneself and towards those who from time to time accompany one along the paths of knowledge and becoming competent.

Well-being, then, is to be understood, within this conceptual framework, as the biological possibility of being in the world in coherence with the vital urge to realise oneself in fullness and authenticity; where there is a fear that one's own well-being may in some way be jeopardised, this fear must be contained. Only in this way can thoughts and emotions that accompany a condition of authentic wellbeing open up to the possible and to the unknown; In this sense, *possibility thinking* can be found in minds that are not afraid to put aside paths already taken, to

take risks, to go against the tide of what circumstances would suggest, where the “protection” against all this is constituted by a sort of safe harbour in which one believes one can act, characterised by a sufficient integrity of the Self nourished by benevolence and, once again, by trust (Craft, 2002, p. 111; Jeffrey & Craft, 2006).

The brain is stimulated by the negative emotions that can block learning; an individual who has developed a training experience full of disappointments and failures will not be able to make use of a positive thought and feeling about their experiences, neither from an obvious motivational point of view nor as regards the procedural aspects and setting, in other words, a negative experiential background cannot be a resource for creative thinking. We can say that, if creativity has also to do with the elaboration of previous learning in new forms, in situations of discomfort of learning it is necessary to create new conditions and relational arrangements able to depotentiate the negativity towards one’s own future of learning and knowledge. A pupil who has accumulated a persistent sense of frustration, of distrust in the possibility of learning and, of necessity, of making knowledge and skills linked to training count in life, needs to be immersed in educational relationships that can also represent sources and concrete opportunities for redemption from failed ideas and experiences of oneself. In this respect, the protagonism of the learners does not only concern putting in the foreground what they are able to think and organise, but also their stories, because creative thinking requires optimism, curiosity, the conviction that they count, that they can contribute substantially to their own training process. This is because creative thinking requires optimism, curiosity and the conviction that one can count, that one can contribute substantially to one’s own training process. Participatory climates, supportive and cooperative atmospheres, inclusive learning environments, capable of welcoming and restoring the emotional dimension, all represent suitable contexts for creative thinking.

In conclusion, thinking is creative when it is free to be, without emotional, relational and contextual obstacles and hindrances; if thinking is free, it is also aimed at creating the best co-adaptive conditions for well-being.

3. Theoretical-methodological reflections on creativity in Higher Education

Wanting, hoping, choosing, risking (Beck, 2000) in the time of liquidity (Bauman, 2000) qualify as the key words of a working future that, for these peculiarities, can be defined as a time of the human (Cambi, 2006; Morace, 2013) to educate. It is, as a matter of fact, the task of education to give meaning and credibility to the future, starting from the training of specific transversal skills, such as those related to creativity, autonomy, responsibility, ability to resist and adapt, which could prove to be strategic tools in the synergistic construction of the personal and professional Self. As a matter of fact, there is an urgent need to think and articulate precise training responses that produce a turnaround from the prevalence of lazy thinking, as highlighted by Bencivenga (2017), among others, which puts the new generations in the possible condition of not being able to analyse the world and themselves, of not having time to imagine possible futures, plan and change. In this framework it is appropriate to recall the close link between change and learning processes/knowledge construction which, if analysed in the perspective of complexity, call for the use of a systemic and dynamic approach that places the student at the centre of the educational process. Guiding the Self in relation to change (Cunti, 2015; Loiodice, 2004; Massa & Demetrio, 1991) becomes the focal point of didactic-educational paths that intend to support the development of key orientational skills, such as the ability to critically and creatively manage oneself. The latter refers precisely to the process of production of the “new” which is indispensable in the processes of identity construction and which already in the early years of life makes the individual capable of changing the present by turning to the future (Vygotskij, 1992). Alternative, divergent (Guilford, 1968) and, therefore, productive thinking (Wertheimer, 1959) is clearly a strong requirement of our society (Lin, 2011), which appeals precisely to that quality of individuals who are able to adapt to the plurality of experience and to assume the mental *habitus* of change as a specific way of observing and dealing with life situations. According to Gardner (2006), this is a real intelligence for the future, along with

disciplinary, ethical, respectful and synthetic intelligence, to be enhanced and developed in the contexts of formal training; in his theorisation, creativity refers to a continuous search for the new that stems from dissatisfaction with the existing and the desire to improve it.

The creative potentialities of the individual are to be considered as a functional way of coping with the disorder and the inexhaustible problems that characterise contemporaneity, and they would be articulated, in the argument proposed by Bertin and Contini (2004), according to a gradual development process of four components: *divergence*, in the sense of the ability to search in an open manner and the overcoming of convergent and rigid forms of thought; *constructiveness*, as a passage that leads the simple imagination to become a real creative act; *difference*, that is the distancing from forms of homologation and the expression of one's own uniqueness; finally, *existential potentiality* that, as a synthesis and completion of the previous ones, projects the individual towards the construction of a different existence.

It may be appropriate, at this point of the discourse, to try to recall some theoretical reflections and some empirical studies that have focused on the theme of creativity in Higher Education. It should be noted that the cultivation of skills such as creativity, evidently classifiable in the pedagogical alphabet of the crisis (Dato, 2015) and recognisable as a founding element in identity-building processes (Giddens, 1991, p. 5), still struggles to be formally pursued in the contexts of university education (Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2014). Moreover, a significant incongruity between the learning processes implemented in university contexts and the conditions experienced by graduates in the world of work can be observed, probably due to a disconnection between the two contexts that would highlight a certain resistance of the academic one to overcome traditional teaching methods (Cunti, 2014; Priore, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017) and to free itself from a fixation on learning outcomes (Benavot & Köseleci, 2015). It is university students themselves, as reported by Power (2015), who show a good awareness of the value that creativity could play in terms of opportunities and who recognise the presence of barriers that the university itself would place on its development (Wilson et al., 2017). There are numerous studies demonstrating the positive influence of creativity on career development, and there is significant evidence in favour of placing it among the main educational strategies in Higher Education; in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) *Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution* published in 2016, which identified the ten *employability* skills of the future, creativity plays a central role, given that two other skills among the ten, namely *complex problem solving* and *critical thinking*, are strongly interlinked with it. In the context of liquid and flexible work, creativity is thus presented as a dimension that closely links the issues of effective learning with those of student employability; it is believed that it can represent a strategic competence both in the context of training for work and in professional practice.

The definitions of creativity reported in the literature are many and varied according to the contexts or domains of application, but the distinction between big creativity ("big-c") and little creativity ("little-c") is recurrent. While in the first case scholars (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007) refer to a first-generation creativity related to a level of genius and associated with highly original and creative ideas, in the second case they look at a second-generation creativity, which belongs to everyday activities aimed at original and appropriate problem solving/explaining. In articulating a model of creativity called the *Four C model of creativity*, Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) transcend the basic distinction that was just described and add two further factors referring to a "mini-c", i.e. the creativity inherent in learning processes, and a "Pro-C", to be understood as the evolutionary progression that goes beyond the "little-c" and projects creativity on a professional level. From this perspective, a precise educational challenge is defined, which concerns the orientation of the didactic discourse towards learning aimed at the development of professional creativity, i.e. that which can lead students towards innovative ways of understanding and practising the profession. It is therefore clear that these processes are to be considered in close connection with *student-centred* methods, aimed at building a subjective relationship with knowledge based on manipulation, transformation and creation. As a prelude to revisiting

one's own perspectives, learning that follows procedures of production rather than repetition can be defined as meaningful and transformative (Mezirow, 1997) and is supported by modes and processes of *critical thinking* (Brookfiel, 2000).

In examining how training contexts can teach creativity, it may be useful to reflect on the link between creativity and error; although this aspect is treated in a limited way in the scientific literature, it may be useful, especially with reference to the declination in teaching practices, to theorize on a broadening of the concept of creativity that includes the dimension of error. As a matter of fact, thinking outside the box and being oriented towards the new can imply “making mistakes” (Ball, 2003); to put it simply, there is no creativity without risk. If we assume that creativity entails accepting the risk linked to the possibility that ideas and imagined projects may not come to fruition, it follows that training in creativity must focus on educating people to think, which is the very essence of creativity, and not in a simplistic and sterile way on the mere feasibility of ideas. Training contexts are, on the contrary, strongly permeated by a habit whereby the consequences of failure are overwhelming; it would then seem easier, in such a context, to learn, by replicating them, ideas rather than constructing them (Ceruti, 1986). What we hope for in the future is the possibility of practising, as Morin (2015) teaches us, forms of learning that contemplate error as something fruitful, provided of course that the conditions are put in place to be able to recognise it, to identify its causes and processes. Knowledge, which has become radically relative and uncertain, is based on the criteria of diversity and multiplicity and certainly expresses some significant criticalities; but despite this, thanks to these characteristics, it has also become a stimulus for the learner; uncertainty and non-definition are not, then, non-values, where the aspects of progressiveness and gradualness, cognitive breaks, error and having to deal with stalemates belong to life. Hence, we could say with Morin (1989) that the need of subjects undergoing training is to reflect, recognise, situate and problematise knowledge, i.e. to slowly acquire, even by making mistakes, that “knowledge of knowledge” which cannot be relegated exclusively to the world of experts.

Looking specifically at creativity and the ways in which it can be taught, the focus is on certain contents, methodologies and teaching tools that can be used in Higher Education to socialise students with the professions, creating possible links between training and the world of work. More precisely, what we mean is that creativity can benefit and enrich the training work on professional prefigurations², providing students with tools to create a new relationship with

2 Scholars' interest in the process of the emergence of professional prefiguration is quite new and mainly concerns the ways in which university students are socialised into the profession. According to the reference literature, the process of professional identity formation takes the form of professional prefiguration in the early stages, also known as “pre-professional identity” (PPI), i.e. a sort of less mature identity including qualities, behaviours, cultures and ideologies that the student shows in reference to the profession. The passage from the prefiguration to the assumption of a real professional identity is marked by the presence of some key indicators which concern, respectively, having acquired knowledge, skills and beliefs shared with colleagues, being different from those who perform another job and, finally, identifying with the profession. Definitions drawn from the literature tell us that PPI refers to “a way of being, a lens for evaluating, learning and making sense of the profession” which is nurtured by the ability to reconcile personal values with professional values, and self-awareness. For a more in-depth look at the concept of professional prefiguration, see: Jackson D. (2016). Re-conceptualising graduate employability: the importance of pre-professional identity. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35, 5: 925-939; Klenowski V., Askew S. and Carnell E. (2006). Portfolios for learning, assessment and professional development in HE. *Assessment and Evaluation in HE*, 31(3): 267-86; Nicholson L., Putwain D., Connors L. and Hornby-Atkinson P. (2013). The key to successful achievement as an undergraduate student: confidence and realistic expectations? *Studies in HE*, 38(2): 285-298; Nyström S. (2009). The Dynamics of Professional Identity Formation: Graduates' Transitions from Higher Education to Working Life. *Vocations and Learning*, 2, 1: 1-18; Trede F., Macklin R. and Bridges D. (2012). Professional identity development: A review of the HE literature. *Studies in HE*, 37(3): 365-384.

the profession and creatively redefine the beliefs, models and representations built up to that moment.

In didactic terms, it is possible to imagine paths aimed at bringing out in students' creative ways of thinking, acting and feeling about the profession, for example by confronting them with possible situations or problems related to work or using tools such as metaphor that expresses innate dimensions of figurality, imagination, dynamism and creativity (Cunti, 2018; Franza, 1988; Laneve, 1981; 1994). The latter, also widely used in the context of *career development* (Amudson, 2009; Mignot; 2004), can be employed to support the student in creating a dynamic and living vision of the profession, bringing out what is innovative that can be traced in experiences, practices and realities of work. The formative implications of metaphorical language lie precisely in leveraging the expressive potential of the student and the link it establishes with syntagmatic-narrative forms of thought, through which to activate processes of re-signification of experiences and cognitive restructuring (Bruner, 1990). This exercise also urges students to critically reflect on the motivational aspects of work and personal images that invest the professional field; therefore, the effectiveness of the proposal to employ metaphor as a device for the development of creativity can be identified in its ability to generate new *insights* into future professional roles and practices, and also to project the implicit and critically access tacit beliefs (Prior, 2017). Considering that the pictures students create of their own, most often associated with beliefs about professional roles that reference cultures propose as consolidated, will go on to qualify their specific work culture, it becomes imperative to purify them of forms of automatism and recursivity that could prevent their creation (Cunti & Priore, 2020a).

In conclusion, although it is acknowledged that the issue of creativity in Higher Education is still a field of wide exploration, the hypothesis supported is that if the models of teaching and learning that the didactics proposes to students are declined in precise ways of relating to knowledge that inevitably become approaches to the profession and life (Cunti & Priore, 2020b), then the role that creativity can play in professional practices is closely related to the choices and educational goals. The possible link between didactics and professional practices, supported through the discourse on the creative formation of prefigurations, can represent a useful focus for reflection when designing curricula, especially in virtue of the knowledge and skills considered necessary in terms of professional development.

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