

## Portfolio

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# Professional Steps and Key Figures

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The idea of a **portfolio** generally recalls that of a **narrative biography**, a fertile occasion to go back to one's experiences in order to reconsider the ways in which the long adventure of one's professional choices and experience took place and still does.

It goes without saying that it is the **people you meet** and relate with they who may foster an inner process of awareness probably carrier of re-flection and eventual development.

The present area provides feedback on the people I consider agents of my personal and professional growth.



## Discovering Bents

If I go back with memory, the first person my mind recalls is my **middle school English teacher**. I keep a vague memory of her. To tell the truth I cannot even remember her face, rather it is a shape that crosses my mind and, yet, I feel she was important for my later choices: she probably fostered motivation to study English.

I also remember the front cover of my **text book**, not to mention its first pages: the big coloured pictures of two children with large descriptive captions in the middle of the page. It feel I can still see those pages.

Certainly middle school motivation provides an explanation for my further secondary school choices when I decided to attend a school where the study of foreign language was a privileged area of learning.

Again it is the memory of two language teachers more than anything else there that comes back; significantly they were the **English** and the **German teachers**, both excellent professionals, even if very different and complex personalities.

Though very young, they were fond of their job and, according to some, very demanding. I did not agree with them. I always enjoyed their lessons and - to be honest - much more than any other lesson.

Of course German was harder than English and, for plenty of reasons, to me it still is. At the same time I liked German and its strict grammar and syntax and, last but not least, German lexis and vocabulary. During the third year, the German teacher also expected students to read some literature in German and, if I am not mistaken, I read *Der Richter und sein Henker* by Dürrenmatt and something about Peter Weiss and I still like the idea of it.

As for English, the method was completely different; focus was more on speaking there and I do

remember the drilling and the listening comprehension practice followed by summary writing, a task my present students seem to find difficult indeed.

Later came Business English and Handels Korrespondenz.

**Microlanguage learning and writing** did not seem so complex to me and I enjoyed the challenges of letter writing as it unsolicited offers, complaints, execution of orders and the like.

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## The Appeal of Literary Texts

At the end of secondary school, owing to my proficiency, it sounded as if I had to go and work in one of the many firms of the neighborhood requiring foreign correspondents.

It was **my mother** that suggested I should go to university, considering I liked languages. And so it was. I went there and continued learning about language and foreign languages.

I decided I would study Spanish rather than German, probably because they said it was almost impossible to cope with the level of proficiency required by two languages like English and German and, eventually, I decided for Spanish.

University life turned out stimulating for the **subjects** and the **themes** studied and I learnt what regular and systematic studying meant. The last two years were really important: they coincided with the **discovery of T.S. Eliot's poetry, V. Woolf's fiction and the Metaphysicals**.

But it was with my graduation thesis I came across Postmodernism thanks to **Kurt Vonnegut's novels**. Only later did I meet she who I still consider the true agent of my professional development. She was a professor I happened to meet during a training course I was attending to take an examination to become a permanent teacher in the state school. Her lectures unveiled a world totally undiscovered to me at the time. I am of course referring to text analysis: my very passion and certainly one I am sure will not set.

It was during one of her lessons that I became aware I needed a new start - I mean - my approach to literary texts should radically change. This is why Mrs. Mirella Manciola Billi really deserves being

mentioned here. I consider her seminal for my reflection. Thank you Mirella!

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## The World of Teenagers

In 1986 I got a permanent post in the **state secondary school** and it is from there that my professional ad-venture in a new world started. It marked the beginning of a double-route journey: on the one side there were the novel stimula received during my initial in-service training, on the other it coincided with the discovery of a new world: the one of teenagers.

I remember the first time I entered a classroom to deliver my literature lesson (it was in a 4th form): it was almost a shock! I can still remember it. All my expectations like the idea of a more motivating syllabus design and organization - well, to tell the truth, everything seemed to be crashing on that single moment.

The students did not turn out as brilliant as I expected and, what's more their **language proficiency** was not at all adequate to introduce the study of literary texts. It felt everything had to be reshaped and - more than anywhere else in my mind!

All that I had been working for up to that moment (hard personal training together with courses to improve and innovate the more traditional chronological approach to literature seemed to vanish. As a consequence, there was nothing I could do but **reinforce and improve linguistic competence** to later approach literariness through **active work on texts** .

On a second moment, I also found out that a few colleagues were interested in innovative venues of teaching. Together we were able to organize successful paths that gradually succeeded in supporting students in the discovery of a new direction in the study of language and literature where **the latter was able to support proficiency in the former and viceversa**.

Right from the beginning of my job experience was I able to find out that it is always stimulating to work with colleagues who rather than feeling safe in the cultivation of what is familiar, **appreciate putting oneself into doubt** and critically revisiting what already experimented in order to **dis-cover** new directions and bringing to the front different forms of learning that **bring the whole individual into activity**, her/his emotions included.

Studying literature through a theme-based approach could bring in a higher degree of motivation and foster **more active participation and human involvement**. Literature is generally a good carrier of emotions and personal reflection activities that, when focussed on topics suitable to the age, prove really helpful to cognition and personal development.

All the same, in later times of experience the adoption of an **intertextual approach to reading** encouraged students - and my self not less - to make more sense of the ways in which texts and culture are mutually

interacting and in the field of communication.

Concluding the present section I must say that right from the start of my experience I was often compelled to come to terms with the gap between the world of pedagogical research and the concrete situation within which teachers are called to work in everyday environments.

Of course, the previous observations are not meant to confine the stimulus from theory in a corner but rather to alert teachers' attention to the constant need of reshaping they are called to in the case they really want to carry out **action-research** and **experimentation** not necessarily doomed to self frustration.

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## New Horizons

I would like to introduce the present section with the list of some key words that sum up the areas of experience and reflection I was able to improve thanks to the input I received along those years.

Even if it is of course inclusive of the whole range of stimulus I acquired from all my tutors, I think it was mainly due to the tutors I met during my five-week training at Norwich University and the personal interaction I had the opportunity to share with the teachers there.

- cooperative learning
- workshops
- language awareness
- "*language is what it is, because it does what it does*"
- teacher as a listener
- linear *versus* non linear thinking

With the passing of time I gradually became more self-conscious what I had been doing in previous years and felt the necessity of a refreshing and to find new stimulus that could somehow respond to a new necessity I was feeling: the idea that school was showing significant distance from the real world outside that was in constant transformation while school contexts and organization seem rather static. The occasion came soon when I was given the opportunity to go and be member of a School Commission for the Final Exam in an Italian Liceo Scientifico in New York.

The experience offered the chance to compare the narrow horizon of the little town school I was working in and the complexity of the New York school which mirrored the peculiarities of a large metropolitan world where the population of students was already overtly showing the features of a multicultural society where plurilingualism and mixed ability classes were the norm.

In addition, the training received at Aberdeen and Norwich universities where I was awarded scholarships

both concerned with Literature and language studies nurtured my need to study something new to be experimented and tested with my students.

The American experience together with the contexts of the British universities seemed to offer me the opportunity to conjugate my previous in-service training with my interest in literature and its linguistic ingredients.

I will never forget the wealth that was handed over to me by my Scottish tutors, especially as it concerns the close study of literary texts and in particular Seamus Heaney's poetry and David Lodge's *Nice Work*.

In addition to all this came the tutors at Norwich: Mr. Alan Pulverness who was able to communicate and teach us students the suitable skills to deal and manage with literary texts and in my personal case to support me in re-shaping my syllabus design into a project work-based one that would result in a more attractive form of learning and studying where any single student could bring in specific personal competences and, after adequate negotiation, the construction of knowledge should result of a sharing process and participation.

What's more as far as language is concerned, Mr. Martin Dodman was really great in fostering reflection on the complex aspects of textuality, language awareness and action research on verb aspects, all areas of research and reflection without which my future work and innovative experiments could not have taken place.

I must recognize that up to now, never did I receive input that might somehow be compared to the stimulus Norwich was able to provide, in spite of the many courses and training I was able to get.

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## A Change of Direction

Once back to Italy I was eager to experiment the recent stimulus in the Italian school context, bringing into my ordinary school work management and practices experimented in Norwich.

The first step was the project **The City** which was developed within a fifth-form class to discuss and problematize the controversial aspects conveyed by **the different media** when hinting at the idea of the city.

It was included in the class-materials as a particular product for the final exam. The project provided argumentations about the different visions and revisions of the topic given by the texts included in the school syllabus and much more. It received very positive feedback from the evaluating commission.

The image of the city came to life from literary texts and moved **from films to paintings, music, advertising and documents**. In addition it contributed to **critical thinking** through the practice of a multiplicity of studying strategies that included **analytical, synthetic, interpreting, evaluating and**

choosing .

The students became the **active players within a constructivist approach to knowledge** and the real creators of a class product: a hand-made rudimental video.

Everybody was given the opportunity to contribute and share her or his best competences: from media analysis to camera filming, image and text selection, assembling, caption and text analysis writing together with producing an introduction or a possible conclusion and the like.

The students showed enthusiasm, despite the level of commitment required and the necessity to keep to strict deadlines.

In drawing some possible conclusion as to the role of some key figures in the making up of my professional competences at the time, besides recalling the main role of the Aberdeen and Norwich tutors I have to mention the support received by two colleagues.

Despite teaching different subjects: Italian and Latin Language and Literature and Mathematics in the Biennio, they provided the necessary emotional and sometimes cognitive support (in the case of the Maths teacher also the one connected with the Information technology, being my digital competences at that time still very low) I feel the need to add a further element of reflection.

Once I started action research in the field of project work, reflection mainly concerned the contribution it generally provides to **learning awareness** and as to the further profession direction I was taking I realized over and over again that, despite the many controversial areas, project work really fosters and reinforces **students' autonomy and self-responsibility** for one's choices.

A very good start for the students' future learning and professional projects!

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## **New Professional Scenarios**

After multiple school project experiences that included **module design, interculture, inter and trans-disciplinarity** both for classwork, teacher training and team teaching a new level of awareness was coming to the surface of my professional awareness. It was probably linked to the gradual transformation/s in society: globalization as well as the assumptions and implications of the Information Society and ICT. Furthermore, students level of proficiency at school were becoming lower and lower. The new needs required by the job market, multimedia and the opportunities provided by the Internet, strongly contributed to changing conceptual map-shaping.

**Constructivism as an approach to the learning and teaching process** came to the fore front but the school environment I was working in did not seem ready to receive and transform the new stimula in new practices to be experimented and tested. Need for re-freshment became more and more urgent to me and I started to perceive school space as a rather narrow one. Besides I was losing motivation day after

day.

Luckily enough, again it was the meeting with some people and ideas that fostered the possibility of a change for once. I liked school, especially the didactic relationship inside the walls of the school classroom, but I was beginning to feel it was also **the encounter with the world outside, different cultural and educational agencies** that I needed to enlarge my perspectives so that eventually the new ideas could to be later transferred into the class context. new educational scenarios. and this was what I did and I was right. I won a two-year position and was mainly in charge of project work both at regional and International level. The new post allowed me to gain practice mainly in educational team work and I had the chance to meet a lot of professionalists that had all gained experience in multiple contexts besides the school one.

A particularly positive chance for my professional experience was the fact that I was in charge of an **international project work** that mainly dealt with the creation of experimental modules to be tested in an enlarged European context. The project offered me the occasion to come into contact with some teachers that I will always remember for their **high professional level and rewarding human approach** that encouraged participation even in less expert participants to the project. I must really mention **all the teachers from IRRE Veneto** and naturally all the ones of the national and transnational project team and many more there is not enough space to mention here but all the same very cooperative colleagues. Thank you to all of them!

When working at the General Direction you often cooperate with Technical Inspectors, figures that are hierarchically superior and who might sometimes inhibit you and make you feel uneasy or at least not so self-assured about your competence. Well, in my particular case, I must recognize it was not that easy at first, but after the first natural adaptation period I can say that the stimuli I received from both of them provided many useful stimuli for reflection, despite their different approaches. Also relevant from the pedagogical point-of-view were the ex **General Director of USR FVG**, **the IRRE Veneto ex Secretary** and many others among whom mention should be made to the Philosophy woman professor and researcher in J. S. Mill writings from the University of Santiago de Compostela (Galicia) and all the people I had the opportunity to work with during my Arion Study Visit which is more exhaustively commented in the area Scholarships.

All the above quoted people are, in a way or another active part of a transformation process I underwent from the moment when, despite having won a post for two further years at the General Direction, I found out that what I really liked was teaching and, in particular, teaching literature and literary texts, possibly in a project work option and that is why I decided I would go back to school. But there is another teacher I would like to quote here for the effect and the stimuli she was able to elicit, besides the information and training opportunities she suggested me in the area of The European Dimension, an object of recent interest for me. I am referring to **Mrs. Nora Salvadori**  
**Thank you Nora and good luck for your further adventures!**

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## Back to School in a European Dimension



After two years at the General Direction I decided to go back to school where I could teach literature again and, in addition, I could have improved day practice and **education to interculture, opening students awareness to the new European dimension in education.**

I was perfectly aware that ordinary school curriculums do not often include actions promoting self-awareness as for citizenship and active participation and, last but not least, guiding students acquire consciousness about what **being European citizens implies**

Literature and reading comprehension practices, together with **cooperative project work in school networking** seemed to offer the possibility of combining subject study with the one of the most frequent aims of cooperative projects. Helping students gradually understand they will soon make decisions in public life is something school should embrace as one of its task, especially as **active citizenship** is concerned .

Again the suggestions and training opportunities suggested to me by Mrs. Nora Salvadori proved useful in designing project work or modules to be entered in the school syllabus.

Moreover during that period, the idea crossed my mind that without a reasonable degree of knowledge offered by **ICT tools** there was very limited possibility to effectively coordinate or support European or international competences which require net working which is generally computer-assisted.

In previous times I had taken part to a Training Course held in my school and coordinated by **Mr. Piergiuseppe Rossi** which I had found particularly stimulating since it appeared to **combine technical know-how and pedagogy**. The blend sounded the real thing to get to and certainly one that could offer a possibility to improve learning and teaching procedures. At the same time I felt I needed support and training in the field of **intercultural, international/european context** with a decent level of know-how and practical skills. Procedural knowledge was not my strength and therefore I decided to take a Master in **Open Distance Learning**, a decision that proved successful in that, since that moment, I acquired familiarity with the digital world and as a result I decided to face the challenges that seemed totally impossible to me before attending the Master courses.

Mr Rossi, gave us significant input about the ways in which **computer -assisted practices** could open up further reflection on and underlined the importance of the pedagogical framework behind any learning-teaching process.

But working for the improvemeng of an intercultural attitude suitable to implement practices open to an **enlarged European dimension, European citizenship** and its complex implications, required background knowledge like European History, European Law, the European Union and Education, Project Work at European Level, the Credit System and many other areas of Knowledge which I was able to gain attending a European Master in **Eurocultures**.

As matter of fact it was not a case I wrote a paper and my Master Thesis on the problem of **The European Dimension in Secondary Education**, but I am sure that would not have been possible without the input provided by **Prof. Mezzetti or Prof. Petracchi** and the different contributions given by the Master courses at the residential module held in Grado (Gorizia), Italy. They all together offered fertile and seminal contributions and allowed me to work in the school context with a new level of awareness. Also the reflection that came with the different initiatives I could take part in, thanks to the

opportunities provided by the **Training Seminars on Active citizenship and Europe** was really useful. The Ministry of Education, University and Research and the General Direction of the Regional School Office selected me as a participant to seminars, national and interregional campuses of the students of Europe that provided reports from various experts at European and international level.

As it comes clearly to surface the **combination of theory and practice** may provide the teacher with suitable tools and know-how to face the challenges of the new contexts school has to be able to interact with.

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## Looking Forward ?

I have no working prescriptions to suggest as for new itineraries or venues to follow in the school environment. It is not a mystery teachers are more and more disillusioned and it is really difficult to get encouraging results in the class context, despite the efforts that most professionalists make.

School perception on the part of students and teachers has sensibly changed and so has the role and the social position of teachers that feel rather frustrated and underpaid especially if their status is compared with other European countries.

Anyway, if some satisfaction may come from daily work to teachers I think it should come to terms with



new concepts that can be easily summarized in the key words that follow

- motivation
- self-efficacy
- locus of control multimedia
- ICT
- Internet
- selfassessment
- portfolio
- self esteem .

It goes without saying that the previous words open up spaces of in-service training, lifelong learning, action research and imply a reflective teacher and certainly one that cannot choose to live in the security of what is reassuring and familiar.

**Good luck to us all.**

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