Soft skills and Jazz in Curriculum design

Valeria Caggiano  
Maria Francesca D’Amante

Università Roma Tre  
Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione  
Via del Castro Pretorio, 20 – 00185 Roma  
valeria.caggiano@uniroma3.it

Abstract

Continuous changing in educational trends and availability of mass qualified personnel has made tougher the competition for job acquisition and job sustainability. The focus of Higher Education Institutions has turned to the value of human capital and its ability to produce creative and independent leaders as a primary investment for future growth. To get an edge over the competitors, students are left with no choice but to add value to their hard skills with soft skills to exhibit their true potential. Hard skills are academic skills, experience and level of expertise, while soft skills are self-developed, interactive, communicative, human and transferable skills. In this article, the authors present a methodological intervention used during a summer school, in which, behind the jazz metaphor the authors discuss suggestions for improving methods and materials, and why this practice can generate an authentic human development.

Key words: soft skills, music education, humanistic approach.

Resumen

Habilidades blandas y Jazz en el diseño del currículum

Con las cambiantes tendencias educativas y la abundante disponibilidad de personal calificado, la competición para la adquisición de empleo y su perdurabilidad se está volviendo más dura. El enfoque...
de las Instituciones de Educación Superior (IES) se centra en el valor del capital humano y su capacidad para producir líderes creativos e independientes como una inversión esencial para el crecimiento futuro. A fin de obtener ventaja sobre los competidores, los estudiantes no tienen otra opción que añadir valor a sus ‘habilidades duras’ con ‘habilidades blandas’, para así exhibir su verdadero potencial. Conforman las ‘habilidades duras’ la competencia académica, la experiencia y el nivel de conocimientos; por otra parte, las ‘habilidades blandas’ (sociales) son habilidades auto-desarrolladas, interactivas, comunicativas, humanas y transferibles. En este artículo se presenta una intervención metodológica utilizada durante una escuela de verano, en la que, empleando la metáfora del jazz, se reflexiona sobre cómo mejorar métodos y materiales, y sobre la potencialidad de esta práctica para generar un desarrollo humano auténtico.

Palabras clave: habilidades blandas, educación musical, enfoque humanístico.

1. Introduction

The debate on the aims of higher education and the key skills to be developed in university curriculum focused, in the course of history, on several aspects, among which the cultivation of individual talents and of what was called the ingenium\textsuperscript{2}. In the thirteenth century, the institute that we still call the University today took shape, representing one of the greatest achievements of the Middle Ages\textsuperscript{3}. In medieval France, at the Sorbonne, pupils looking for excellent Magistri\textsuperscript{4} sat on the ground.


\textsuperscript{4} F. Mattei, C. Casalini, Jesuitica Institutio. Figure e temi di una modernità pedagogica, Roma, Anicia, 2014, p. 185.
as an example of an intellectual disposition, represented by Humility\(^5\). Renaissance Humanism developed new educational models, aiming at the development of social and communication skills together with the deep knowledge of classical texts. The first draft of a Ratio studiorum for Jesuit schools, written between 1565 and 1570\(^6\) contains the general guidelines of a new pedagogical model\(^7\).

For centuries, the university devoted itself to solve intellectual problems and refine highly specialized skills, projecting the student, a graduate who followed a curriculum\(^8\) towards a personal socio-economic ascent within the church or society in general, embodying a civil mission\(^9\).

In recent times, universities, despite the continuity of some of their educational aims, have to face competition in totally new plans. Curricula no longer have to meet the expectations of students looking for Magistri,


\(^7\) Cfr. *Monumenta Paedagogica Societatis Iesu*, Roma, IHSI, 1974, II, 687: «Arbitror enim non esse satis in universum et generatim ordinem et rationem studiorem perscribere, sed particularim oportere per singulas classes et singula earum exercitationum genera, modum et rationem optimam magistro servandam explicare».


but have become a tool for marketing actions designed
to capture the attention of future students less able to
orient their choices.¹⁰

The curriculum has become a criterion of classifi-
cation and identification in international rankings¹¹, and,
in virtuous cases, seems to respond to the needs negoti-
ated with the stakeholders.

It seems urgent to define and bring back in the de-
bate the educational dimension which is part of the uni-
versity culture, for the development of the person as a
whole. This is the main aim of our methodological pro-
posal to teach soft skills with the help of jazz, whose
tools are functional to represent forms and concepts in
an accessible way¹².

2. Soft Skills and curriculum design

In line with European policies, in particular with
the Bologna Process (1999) and the “Education and
Training 2020” strategy (ET 2020), the university ped-
agogical model should take into account the reticulation
of knowledge and its continuity and, therefore, activate
suitable strategies for meaningful learning promoting
the development of cross-skills focusing on the stu-
dent’s centrality and taking into consideration his learn-
ing needs.

¹⁰ P. G. Altbach, L. Reisberg, L. E. Rumbley, Trends in Global
¹¹ K. N. Missall, M. K. Hosp, J. L. Hosp, Reading Proficiency in
Elementary: Considering Statewide Testing, Teacher Ratings and Rank-
ings, and Reading Curriculum-Based Measurement, in «School Psychol-
¹² Cfr. V. Caggiano, Educación emprendedora y el uso de la metá-
fora: un camino hasta la felicidad, in «Educazione. Giornale di peda-
In terms of long-term effectiveness, the university path should ensure adequate inclusion in the prospective work environment, through professional responsibility and citizenship skills\textsuperscript{13}. The update of the recommendations of the European Union Council on key skills for lifelong learning (2018)\textsuperscript{14} highlights the need to enhance entrepreneurial, social and civic skills.

Entering higher education with the cognitive ability to handle the academic rigor is often not enough to succeed and persist in an environment that requires students to also possess non-cognitive skills such as self-regulation\textsuperscript{15}. These skills, also commonly referred to in literature as “soft-skills”, are said not only to have an impact on personal development and academic success; but are also considered to be key factors for career and life advancements. Non-cognitive skills are considered to be relational, involving both personal and interpersonal skills. They are skills associated with “behaviors, attitudes, and strategies” which typically display core competencies rooted in emotional intelligence (National Soft Skills Association, 2015).

However, in recent decades educators and academicians have become increasingly aware that the set of skills known as “soft skills” is a necessary complement to the traditional hard skills imparted to students interdisciplinary. Soft skills courses enhance students’ creativity, powers of persuasion and can facilitate the relationship between children, families and communities. The soft-skills pedagogy is focused on the reflective model

\footnotesize{
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14}https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN.
\end{itemize}
}
wherein a large part of teacher education takes place in schools. Students and teachers are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and are supported in this process, thus learning to be a reflective practitioner\textsuperscript{16}. Today, teacher education is less commonly considered as a pure applied science, and instead many teacher education programs aim to match the applied science with the reflective approach.

Instead of aiming merely on the mastery of purely didactical skills and teaching techniques, the soft skills approach focuses on a holistic development process including knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences. Thus, teacher education can be viewed as a policy issue. Teachers are expected to ensure high students’ achievements, and the present debate focuses on which variables within teacher education ensure the best results\textsuperscript{17}. In order to combine the reflective learning process and the soft skills approach in teaching activities, teachers obviously need a set of skills different from the ones traditionally used. The required in-service training should provide teachers with the abilities to reflect on their personal role in the process and in addition, skills for encountering and supporting the learning process of their students. Therefore, in addition to potential educational benefits, non-cognitive skills can be vital for global citizenship, workforce adaptability, and personal development.


3. Jazz competences to learn soft skills

The metaphor of jazz proves to be very useful for discussing the acquisition and training of soft skills. This article aims at illustrating, in an exemplary and effective way, the contribution and enrichment that “doing jazz”, in its philosophical, operational and relational peculiarities, can bring in the training field and in any context in which the rules of cooperative learning apply and in general where cooperative learning has a strategic value\(^\text{18}\) In essence, jazz can be the metaphor of an act of acquiring knowledge that is always based on a previously internalized tacit dimension\(^\text{19}\) through comparison with tradition, while creating according to one's creativity; since jazz acquires its own vitality in improvising on traditional materials, the jazz musician must lose his identity while he finds it\(^\text{20}\).

Jazz is an experience that takes the form of a unique and unrepeatable musical moment, defining itself as *hic et nunc* in its manifestation, a performative *ex-perire* that summarizes a whole wealth of knowledge and know-how to be shared\(^\text{21}\).

Similarly, the learning development management and its creation requires the ability to experiment and empower people of all levels to find innovative organizational solutions to support development processes\(^\text{22}\). Drucker outlines the 21st century leader as an orchestra


\(^\text{22}\) Ibid., p. 605.
conductor, although the orchestral comparison includes a score and a single conductor as a leader, therefore does not describe in full the need to experiment and manage ambiguity and great complexity\textsuperscript{23}: this comparison turns out inadequate to express the unpredictable and unknown change without schemes\textsuperscript{24}. If classical music is not a good metaphor of learning, it is the jazz band that stands out as the prototype of an organization conceived to maximize learning and innovation\textsuperscript{25}. Jazz musicians do what managers find themselves doing – that is to manufacture and invent new answers without a pre-established plan and without certainty of the results; discover the future that their actions generate as it unfolds, during the process.

At the end, it is the same philosophy of jazz, understood as a philosophy of life, to express the essence of improvisational practice. The main sources of jazz reside in the calls and cries, in the work-song, in the gospel songs, in the field hollers; the slaves in the countryside and in the cotton fields sang their ancient blues and spontaneously, on the call and response formula, gave nourishment to an unstoppable flow of live musical correspondences that flowed over time into jazz songs.

Improvisation stands at the basis of this genre, as an artistic practice that escapes the structure of the mainstream. It should be noted that although it found its legitimacy in jazz, it made its appearance much sooner: improvisation was already a common practice in western culture music, especially in Gregorian chant, in or-

\textsuperscript{23} Ibidem.


gan music, in Baroque music and also in classical-romantic music\textsuperscript{26}. Jazz teaches us that what cannot be planned and planned in advance can become a source of enrichment, the discovery of new and better possibilities, opening the way to \textit{problem solving}.

Edgar Morin in his volume \textit{Seven complex lessons in education for the future} includes key concepts such as knowing how to deal with uncertainties, teaching the principles of strategy that allows to face risks, the unexpected and the uncertain, understanding how to modify their evolution thanks to the information acquired during the course of the action. So, says Morin, it is necessary to prepare the mind to expect the unexpected and face it\textsuperscript{27}.

In the field of music, improvisation opposes the practice of composition, an opposition that, starting from the Middle Ages, is linguistically constituted as a signifier that cuts out a precise innovative semantic unity\textsuperscript{28}. Jazz improvisation can offer important food for thought to learn soft skills, which turns out to face the unexpected by acting effectively within a changing context.

Both in jazz and in organizations, the drive for action derives from an element essential to both areas – that of innovation, closely connected to creativity\textsuperscript{29}. In jazz creativity is fundamental above all as a process and not only as a result of the process: the interest is displaced from the finished work to the operation, from the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{28}] V. Caporaletti, \textit{I processi improvvisativi nella musica: un approccio globale}, Lucca, Libreria musicale italiana, 2005, pp. 10-11.
\item[\textsuperscript{29}] J. F, Barrett, \textit{Creativity and improvisation}, cit., p. 617.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
result to the investigative process and to the itinerary itself that leads to that result\textsuperscript{30}.

In jazz, the aesthetic object coincides mostly with the process of producing sounds, and therefore it expresses itself in an ontology of events\textsuperscript{31}; it is an activity that conveys its value at the moment of its creation, in progress and allows you to do harmonious, useful and beautiful things together\textsuperscript{32}. In essence, it is about doing something new using what is there, namely what is offered by the context.

Paraphrasing the great double bass player Mingus we will say that «Making complicated what is simple is trivial; transforming what is complicated into something simple, incredibly simple: this is creativity». In both the musical and organizational fields, the aim of each creative and improvised act is extremely practical because it is oriented towards responding to a need or solving a problem. In order to be innovative, managers like jazz musicians must interpret vague starting points, face confused tasks, develop incomplete knowledge, engage in dialogue and negotiation, in creating shared spaces for a decision-making procedure based on experience rather than on hierarchical positions\textsuperscript{33}. This does not mean that jazz improvisation is built on randomness and accident, but on spontaneity that emerges thanks to the previous work that each one has done for himself and that he is able to share with others thanks to musical and social rules that everyone respects\textsuperscript{34}. The jam session also serves to make mistakes, and these are con-

\textsuperscript{31} Bertineto, \textit{Eseguire l’inatteso}, cit., p. 43.
templated as a constitutive aspect of jazz and experimentation. Mistakes are indispensable to the creative process, they are a source of learning and open new avenues of investigation, ultimately contributing to what can be called an aesthetic of the imperfection\textsuperscript{35}.

4. Jazz competences as teachers’ soft skills

In recent decades school had to perform a new role, going well beyond what was required half a century ago, i.e., teach according to ministerial programs. Recent policies have increasingly placed the emphasis on the responsibility and decision-making of the teacher, who has acquired a progressively greater weight in establishing the fate and importance of the curricula studiorum. With the advent of autonomy in schools, the teacher became an active director of his class, inclined to contextual and situational planning, as can be seen in the text of the National Indications of 2012: «In this perspective, teachers will have to think and implement their educational and didactic projects not for abstract individuals, but for people who live here and now, who raise specific existential questions, who are looking for horizons of meaning»\textsuperscript{36}. In these indications we trace the objectives, ambitions and expectations of a contemporary school that pursues the ideal of autonomy in many senses, but certainly do not define, in a prescriptive way, specific stages to be followed.

The teacher’s skills must therefore be directed towards training the pupils, with their specific attitudes, skills, intelligence and potential, and training the civis, as an actor of the res-publica, the society and the world.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 78.
\textsuperscript{36} MIUR, Indicazioni Nazionali, 2012.
On the one hand, there is open space for initiative and decision-making by the teacher, as well as that for the subjectivity of the learner; on the other hand, the criticality of the unexpected arises, which at the same time constitutes a distressing element and a precious resource, as it is precisely this unforeseen matter that will take shape and therefore this unforeseen will be welcomed and listened to in its manifestation\textsuperscript{37}. The unexpected brings with it the wealth of a subjective experience and has even more value than the programmed and programmable experience, which is why it is essential to be able to grasp and welcome it, through a clinical and located approach to training focused on the concrete and individual dimension of reality from which the teacher’s theoretical background is relocated and enriched\textsuperscript{38}. Therefore we advocate for the development of a “jazz competence” which metaphorically represents the essential and constitutive ability of the teaching professionalism as it contains the necessary declinations of observation, disposition and action that allow the contextualized approach.

Arguing the need for jazz competence, we imply an interpretative paradigm to conceive soft skills not as stable and expendable arrival points in different fields, but as intrinsically complex and contextual. Jazz competence, in particular, concerns an attitude towards reality that every human being experience in many areas of his life; it is itself in continuous evolution and change (like reality); and it has no finishing points. Jazz competence


concerns the professional action of the teacher in context, and for this reason he invests countless aspects of pedagogy, planning, mediation and teaching. It does not refer to a single device, or to particular methods or tools: it is a global competence. The competence required to act in the present moment, to find, in the here and now the necessary to progress and develop an educational and didactic situation, also brings its counterpart: «This development in human history marked the end of improvising as our primary modus vivendi»\(^{39}\). The instinct for planning is an adequate response to concern for the future and for one’s own safety: it responds to the need for management of the unknown. Drawing up scrupulous lists of the actions of the day, establishing a weekly planning of one’s activities or, in the school setting, establishing routines and macro objectives, are actions of great importance for keeping intact the sense of the path being taken. But this alone is not enough, because there is no way of living or teaching that can take into account the infinity of variables at stake at all times: «Reality continually presents itself as a fresh moment\(^{40}\)». Improvisation is a methodology\(^{41}\).


\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) On the next page, the author reports a quote commonly attributed to Charles Darwin: “In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed”. Darwin’s words are paraphrased by Leon Megginson in Lessons from Europe for American Business, in «Southwestern Social Science Quarterly», 1963, 44 (1), 3-13, p. 4.
Conclusions

Jazz is proposed as a model aimed at expressing pedagogical contexts to experiment with soft skills; represents a model for organizational improvisation; a musical metaphor that can open infinite possibilities in other professional fields and primarily broaden the horizons of training. We use jazz as a metaphor to consider the professional organization itself as an art, because we think there are situations in which the team should work not so much as a well-planned and tested machine, but rather as John Coltrane’s quartet, that in December 1964 recorded *A love supreme*; as the ensemble Dave Brubeck Quartet at Carnegie Hall; as Thelonious Monk and his band in *Genius of modern music*.

We are aware that in a historical moment of anorexia in education and bulimia in training\(^\text{42}\), it is necessary to experiment and propose new organizational models. «Courage and hope», as John Coltrane wrote, «here is how I sound: I start from a certain point and go as far as possible, in the hope of not getting lost on the road. I say "hope" because what interests me most is to discover the ways that I would never have suspected existed». As in a jam session, a regular and extemporaneous situation where the musicians meet, professionals involved in designing curricula cannot exempt themselves from sharing a common language to invent a new way of being in the educational relationship.

References


Mattei F., Casalini C., *Jesuitica Institutio. Figure e temi di una modernità pedagogica*, Roma, Anicia, 2014.


