

# SWITZERLAND (Cantone Ticino)

*From School Improvement Advisor/researcher's action to the development of autonomous and self-regulating communities of practice in vocational schools of Cantone Ticino*

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## Introduction

The action of School Improvement Advisor/researcher developed itself during these last years, helping schools in their improvement and assisting teachers in the development of their professionalism. This approach, including in itself the features of coaching together with the ones of critical friendship and of academic research, has been well documented during the previous strands. The rationale underlying this action is based on three main principles (Crescentini & Kyburz, 2012):

1. “The epistemological one, aimed at guaranteeing the scientific status of the improvement process conducted by the school”
2. “The interface one, aimed at establishing a bridge between practice in school and results stemming from the academic educational research”
3. “The consultancy one, aimed at giving sound advice and assistance to the actors of the school (principal, teachers, students, etc.)”

During these years the SIA took part in various interventions at the school and classroom level: firstly, a process of self-evaluation in some Swiss vocational schools (Berger et al., 2004); second, the acquisition of the methodology Understanding by Design – UbD (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) and its practice inside the classroom performed by various teachers and groups of teachers with his collaboration and guidance (Ostinelli, 2008a, 2008b); and third, the development and the validation of a questionnaire on teachers’ teaching and relationship with the pupils (Ostinelli, 2011).

## 1. Aims

The principal aim of SIA's action is to help schools and teachers in developing innovative teaching methodologies and in practicing self-evaluation. For instance, the introduction of UbD and the improvement of teaching through feedback coming from the pupils are clear examples of this fact. However, during these years it appeared that, when the accent is set mainly on methodological issues, it is possible that teachers assimilate these procedures without changing their underlying educational paradigms. Therefore, a very important objective is at present that teachers develop not only innovative practices, but also wider innovative educational views.

A second aim is the dissemination of the mentioned innovations. At the present time, the idea is for the SIA to firstly collaborate with some "good and experienced" teachers, following them in the development of educational projects, and to gradually create some communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) around them, including in particular young teachers. These groups should become rather autonomous, and the "expert" teachers are and will become point of reference for the other teachers and for the SIA. This approach frees some extra time for the SIA to collaborate with new teachers/groups of teachers.

A third aim is the extension of the number of SIA. We can now consider the experimental stage concluded, at least for the introduction of innovative practices. The SIA's action, as described in other documents, has proved to be effective in the development of new teaching ways and in the reflection on educative practices, at the school and classroom level. Therefore, the next stage should be the training of new professionals. In order to obtain a similar result, it is necessary to convince the political authority of the effectiveness of this approach.

A fourth aim is the application of an effective strategy for the change of paradigm by teachers, that will be described in paragraph 3.

The vision underpinning this project is that, in order to change the way pupils learn, it is necessary, either before and during this, to change how schools and teachers learn. For instance, the formers' practices rely on some well-consolidated myths in dealing with issues and problems. However, processes of self-evaluation could help them effectively in developing reflections and new insights on what is going on inside them. The latter are supposed to develop new knowledge and competencies through the participation in in-service courses, but usually these don't change significantly the way they teach. The action of the SIA as coach, critical friend and professional in educational investigation can help them in putting into practice some educational innovations.

The learners targeted are young apprentices and students pertaining to the vocational sector of the Swiss education system, aged between 15 and 19 years. The schools participating are operating mainly in the industrial and commercial field.

## 2. Leadership and Partners

The SIA is the leader of the project. However, it should be understood that this leadership is enacted in a constructivist way (Shapiro, 2002) – its role emerges in particular when the “route” of the action needs to be defined – letting however the initiative to the teachers in other moments, even because the philosophy underpinning the project is non-invasive in its nature.

Therefore, the SIA acts in a framework of emergent distributed leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). During the first years of his practice, the SIA defines and negotiates together with the school principals the main targets of his action, with the State the necessary resources, on the basis of the school’s needs. In this context, he is then free to work with the teachers choosing the more appropriated strategies and approaches, depending on every teacher’s particularities. It is also important to stress that the SIA collaborates also with the local institute for teacher education in the vocational sector (Istituto Universitario Federale per la Formazione Professionale – IUFPF), co-ordinating the activities developed by the teachers coached by him with the programs and needs of the IUFPF.

## 3. Strategies and activities

The strategy of the SIA is to collaborate with the school and its teachers in a non-invasive way, gaining gradually trust from them and involving them in a reflection on their way to teach and to organize the school life and activities. This is performed through various actions. For instance, the use of a questionnaire on teaching and relationship can provide the teacher with some feedback from her/his pupils whose content, when duly analyzed, scrutinized and located, can be the object of a reflection and the first pace towards the improvement of some educational or classroom management practices.

However, the SIA can’t perform this kind of coaching forever. First, it is very important for the changes performed by the teachers to become a stable feature of their teaching during the years. This can be (and is actually) progressively accomplished through the constitution of communities of practice whose members are able to share their experience between themselves. It is clear that these communities of practice need to be built around a key-figure, a “local agent”, and this is the scope of the previously mentioned strategy, consisting in involving in first instance “good” and motivated teachers.

This strategy is inspired by sustainability. The traditional approach to innovation in education starts with the experimentation of some novelties, involving some teachers, followed by an overall extension to the remaining ones. The result is often that the innovation becomes a temporary fad and don’t put down roots (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). This happens because this way to operate neglects teacher motivation and doesn’t give therefore an answer to their needs. When the SIA starts his collaboration with a teacher, he tries to help this teacher in reaching the level of improvement suitable for her/his capabilities and needs.

During these years, it appears with some evidence that, if the aim is to assist the teacher in the development of a really innovative way to teach, even if s/he is able to develop a good mastery in using some educational technologies (e.g.: Understanding by Design), a real change of paradigm is actually needed. And this will be a very important aim for the SIA during the next years. At present, between the before

described three functions, the action of the SIA privileged the epistemological and the consultancy ones, neglecting therefore the interface one. This was due to the accent posed mainly on schools' and teachers' needs. However, it is also important to foster some reflections, for instance on pupils' learning strategies. During the next school year, therefore, some workshops will be organized in the participating schools, involving some reflection on popular themes (e.g.: “democratic” management of the classroom and indiscipline of the pupils; student and teacher motivation; competencies, skills, understanding and knowledge: what are them?; how to teach and learn something taking into account different perspectives). These themes will give the opportunity to introduce some key ideas, like how the people learn, or how functions individual motivation, and so on. In practice, a balance is to be found between immediate teachers' needs and medium-long term vision on education. For this reason, these workshops will be linked to practical activities inside the classroom, but will also lead the teachers to some more deep reflections. Some of them will be structured in more stages: introductory workshop – practice in classrooms – reflective workshop – practice in classrooms.

#### 4. Context

The context is constituted by vocational schools in Cantone Ticino (Switzerland), including the SPSE of Tenero, the SPAI of Mendrisio, the CPC of Chiasso and the SSMT of Lugano. We are now looking for the involvement of other schools, still in the vocational sector. One of the aims for the future is the participation of schools from other sectors. Usually, it is easier to perform educational investigation in the vocational branch, because of the political adversity towards assuming “risks” at the primary or secondary school level. However, the preliminary stage of the project is now concluded, and we are at present in its developmental phase: therefore, the risks are now reduced, and the SIA action could be performed without problems in other schools.

This approach had the luck to arise from the encounter between a part-time University professor and researcher and the offer for a role as critical friend and coach in a school improvement project firstly funded by the Swiss Confederation and then by the Swiss State of Cantone Ticino. Those conditions gave birth to a very uncommon experience, crossing the borders separating University and educational systems.

#### 5. Resources

The main resources are constituted by work time, both for the SIA and the teachers involved in the experience. At present, the SIA works partly (half of his working time, around 20 hours a week) with schools and teachers, while the remaining of his workload is shared between consultancy and support activities for the local Ministry of Education and teaching at the Universities of Bologna and Milan. Every teacher disposes of 90' of time every week for the planning of his activities, and also for discussion and collaboration with the SIA. At present the SIA is working with 15 teachers. The technical resources of the schools (computers, facilities, installations) are usually of good quality and can be used through a well-timed planning.

## 6. Development over Time

This project developed itself during the past years, leading to a satisfactory standing, documented through the analysis conducted by the DFA of the SUPSI (Crescentini & Kyburz, 2012). While during the first stage (2003-2005) the SIA acted more like a critical friend, he fully developed his function during the following years. Now, besides the usual activity of support to teachers and schools, three new activities will be performed:

4. The organization of 4-5 workshops during the school year, in every school, on themes of relevance for the teachers. This activity will be preceded by a brief survey inquiring the most important issues and needs of school's teachers.
5. The development of communities of practice, starting with peer observation and collaboration, and including four meetings involving a common discussion on the utilisation of Understanding by Design in the classroom. During this process, the more experienced teachers should gradually become point of reference in every school.
6. The repetition of the self-evaluation process in one school.

The planning of the experience for the next school year will be the following:

Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June
<b>Activity with teachers on teaching (UbD, development of communities of practice)</b>									
	Workshop	Workshop		Workshop	Workshop	Workshop			
Quest. on paradigm change							Review of authentic performances		
						Interviews	Interviews	Student quest.	Quest. on paradigm change
						School self-evaluation			

## 7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

The first aim is to “help schools and teachers in developing innovative teaching methodologies and in practicing self-evaluation”. The feedback given by teachers and students (see the following point 8.) will provide some evidence about the effectiveness of the actions performed. Moreover, a brief report on school self-evaluation process will be produced. The assimilation of a more innovative and research-oriented paradigm by teachers will be inferred by the administration of a questionnaire (see the following point 8 for details).

The second one is “the dissemination of the mentioned innovations”. In fact, this aim will become effective in so far as more teachers start to collaborate in couples and then, gradually in little groups. This should lead to the creation of communities of practice. The happening of these facts will be reported and documented.

The third aim is “the extension of the number of SIA”. This is a very ambitious aim, since it entails the willingness by the political level in investing in innovation beyond the level of experimentation. The idea is and will be proposed to political stances during the next year.

The fourth and last aim is the “application of an effective strategy for the change of paradigm by teachers”. This intervention will be described through a report, including also some reflections on the experience.

## 8. Success Factors

The aim, as said before, is to help the teachers in developing a more research-based and innovation-oriented teaching paradigm. At present, I am conducting a survey in various countries, comparing teachers who participate regularly in in-service or even Ph. D. courses to teachers that don't or do it only from time to time. In brief, the preliminary results of this research show that there is a statistically difference between the two sub-groups.

The same questionnaire will be submitted to teachers constantly participating to the workshops, at the beginning of the school year and at the end, and every statistically significant difference between both administrations will be checked. Moreover, their results will be compared with the results of both sub-groups participating to the original survey, and the information will be complemented with some interviews.

The students' learning will be more oriented to understanding than the learning in traditional classrooms, since Understanding by Design remains a key feature of the project. Therefore, a brief synthesis of their authentic performances will be gathered, and the “Questionnaire for the evaluation of teaching and the relationship with the teacher” will be administered to them at the end of the school year.

Some interviews on SIA's action, involving teachers participating to the project were performed and more will take place during the next school year.

## 9. Tensions and impediments

At present, there are no tensions and impediments. However, since this is a more bottom-up oriented project, it is faced with the constant difficulty to get the opportune and necessary resources. I think that this is a very common problem: on the one hand the top-down projects are usually rather far from teacher's needs, but dispose of appropriate resources (and are held as primary by school principals); on the other, bottom-up ones are more near to teachers' and schools' needs, but have far more difficulties in finding adequate funding and resources.

## 10. Sources

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