

# Editorial

## *Editoriale*

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Writing the editorial of a general issue is usually harder than writing that of a special issue. In fact, the connection between the papers risks to be rather loose, with the only common denominator being the journal scope. This time, however, I was lucky, as four out of the six papers that were accepted for this general issue seem to be connected by a common thread: teachers, their professional identity, and their relationship with technology. I believe there are good reasons for this. More than ever, the crucial role of educators' competence has come to the forefront, with particular focus on digital competence, including the ability to use technology in an effective way in educational settings, be them face-to-face, hybrid or online.

The main reason for this increased awareness has been under our eyes since the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent distancing measures have forced educators around the world to use technology to “surrogate” face-to-face teaching. Unfortunately, in most cases, the verb “surrogate” turns out to be the correct one: too often technological environments have been used merely as a (sub-optimal) substitute of the usual physical environment, due to the lack of time and competence needed to redesign teaching from scratch, taking advantage of the full potential of technology. In addition, other important challenges are playing the role of a litmus test for teachers' need for continuous professional development. One of all is the need to ensure that all learners can develop their potential in a context where students' cultural diversity is increasing and, at the same time, nationalist sentiments and lack of tolerance continue to fester among the population. Our only chance to build the bases for a peaceful world is through so-called global education, and this makes teachers' competence in inclusive education and informed use of technology of paramount importance.

However, luckily, some institutions have been working in this direction even before the pandemic. For example, in the first paper of this issue, Teixeira Antunes, Armellini and Howe describe how the university of Nottingham shifted to Active Blended Learning (ABL) in 2018, and coherently re-designed both the pedagogical approach and the physical Campus. Their paper focuses on the barriers met by the academic staff, as well as on the enablers of this shift. Among the former, lack of students' engagement, inconsistencies in teachers' adoption of ABL practices, diversity in students background and engagement, change fatigue as well as excessive workload on the side of teachers. Among the latter, the use of digital technology in teaching, small group teaching and collaborative learning, positive interactions between learners and between learners and teachers, triggering a sense of belonging.

The second paper, by Gabbi, Gaggioli and Ranieri, focuses on the effects of the abrupt online shift caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on socio-educational services that heavily rely on the value of relationships, proximity and onsite intervention. In this paper, the researchers' assumption is that aiming to provide continuity to the service is not enough: the need for keeping the service quality high requires to ensure active

involvement of the target population too. The difficulties faced and the solutions elaborated by these educators to compensate for the lack of personal contact, stimulated the researchers to study the changes caused by the social distancing regulations on their work from the organisational and technological point of view, and the new shape of the caring activities they carried out. While, in some cases, the service was interrupted, in many others the educators managed to establish new positive forms of communication with the people in their care.

Brynildsen, Nagel and Engeness, in the third paper, examine how teachers use TeachMeet to organize bottom-up professional events to share their ideas and experiences concerning use of digital technology in their profession. The researchers used thematic analysis to analyse the answers to questionnaires and interviews of a sample of TeachMeet users, in order to study teachers' views on how their Professional Digital Competence can be developed through participation in TeachMeet and how these events contribute to nurture their Transformative Digital Agency. According to their results, these initiatives are an asset of teachers' professional development as the rapidly evolving digital technology world requires educators to take the initiative and become independent agentic practitioners who can self-direct their own learning. At the same time, the findings also indicate that these short, bottom-up events are not sufficient to promote teachers' professional development: they need to be part of longer term initiatives, where collaboration with colleagues intertwines with practice.

The fourth paper, by Gurjar e Sivo, resonates well with the above concepts, as it focuses on pre-service teachers' intentions to adopt Twitter for professional development. The study used the Technology Acceptance Model to test research hypotheses drawn from the literature. The study findings point out the importance of ease of use, subjective norms, and perceived connectedness in fostering intentions to use Twitter. Perceived mobility explains participant differences in the perceived ease of use. These results implicate that teacher education initiatives should leverage mobile applications and positive social media subjective norms to improve teachers' attitudes towards connectedness.

The last two papers of this issue investigate topics that are somewhat distant from the above themes. In the fifth paper, Goglio e Nascimbeni analyse the panorama of MOOCs in Italy and highlight its peculiarities. These authors contend that while, in theory, the term Open is an important keyword in the discourse about MOOCs, in practice, in the global landscape, the meaning of this term has been declined with very different nuances, up to the point that this feature of MOOCs isn't always fully realized, because many MOOCs and their materials are not accessible indefinitely. This does not seem to be the case in the Italian panorama, as most MOOC providers in Italy do use open content licenses and their accessibility in time is higher than in other countries. At the same time, however, the Italian MOOCs landscape suffers from a rather high degree of fragmentation. The authors also try to formulate hypothesis about the causes of these peculiarities.

In the sixth paper, Tacchella and colleagues focus on an initiative aimed to assist upper secondary students in their choice of university career. As opposed to most of these initiatives, the approach adopted is based on offering students hands-on immersive experiences and opportunities for peer interaction in the field of Computer Engineering, based on a workshop in educational robotics. The underlying hypothesis is that hands on experience of the type of content and methods typical of Computer Engineering courses could put students in a better position to make an informed choice about their university career. As a matter of fact, the results show that students' awareness of the features of this type of university career choice improved, and their knowledge in basic computer science also did. On the other hand, students' interactions taking place during the initiative were rather low, and probably not enough to favour community building.