Competency development in higher education: Crafting the future self as a driver for change

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Abstract

Comparison between ideal and real self provides the chance to implement a process of social and emotional competencies development. At theoretical and empirical levels, there is still room to measure the effects of the ideal self crafting on the activation of a competency development process and how the real self signals actual strengths and areas of improvement. Nonetheless, literature could devote more attention to the role of higher education institutions in the process of developing the competencies, from helping students in assessing their real self and discovering the needed competencies to achieve the desired future. The present study describes the implementation of this process in the domain of higher education, showing the results from an elective course delivered in a public Italian University to Master's degree students.

Keywords: Intentional change theory; ideal self; real self; social and emotional competencies; Higher Education.

1. Introduction

Recent surveys, conducted on both employers and managers, have underscored that the workplace is still characterised by a significant skill gap (McKinsey, 2020; McKinsey, 2021). Results emphasise a shift in the most valued skills within the workforce to focus on emotional and social competencies (ESCs). The discrepancy between labour market expectations and the skills profile demonstrated by graduates has been an ongoing issue in the academic and institutional debate (McKinsey and Company 2012). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are in charge of equipping future workers with the necessary skills they need to enter and perform in the labour market, thus reskilling must be at the centre of HEIs debate. While extant literature calls HEIs to put more effort in adequately preparing students on ESCs (Bonesso et al., 2019), research itself should better sustain this effort by providing new methodologies and stronger evidence on how ESCs can be developed within HEIs programs.

In this paper, we propose the use of the Intentional Change Theory (ICT) (Boyatzis, 2006; Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006), as a framework to develop effective ESCs development programs in HEIs, and evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the ICT related stages and activities. Given the development of ESCs requires a complex cognitive and behavioural effort to reshape the brain's neural structure (Boyatzis, 2006; Boyatzis et al., 2019), which is difficult to apply simultaneously to a great variety of ESCs; we suggest creating a personalised process of competency development would favour a successful implementation of the learning process. In doing so, a critical prerequisite is that students become deeply aware of who they are and the kind of future they envision for themselves in order to be able to direct their development efforts towards the most valuable portfolio of competencies to achieve the desired future self. In this regard, the concept of the "ideal self" and the comparison with the concept of "real self" (Boyatzis, 2006) is strictly connected to the management of careers and personal development. The real self has been partially addressed by studies on multisource feedback, which show mixed results on their ability to promote behavioural change (Drew, 2009). While, in exploring the effects of defining the ideal self, extent literature mainly focuses on post-graduate contexts and does not delve into the analysis of consequences after the reflection on desired future. This gap leaves unaddressed the following research question: what is the impact of the Intentional Change Process in mobilising graduate students to acquire the critical ESCs competencies necessary to attain a desired future?

The next section will briefly review the literature on ICT and Future Work Self. Then, the empirical setting will be illustrated with the description of an educational project implemented within a public university in Italy, along with the methodology and related measurement scales developed. The subsequent section presents the analysis of the students' reflections on their learning experience. Finally, the paper offers insights on how to refine the activities to ameliorate the learning journey in the higher education context.

2. Theoretical background

Intentional Change Theory (Boyatzis, 2006; Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006) is a theory of personal change that relies on the assumption that lasting change is sustainable only if it is intentional and desired (Boyatzis, 2006). The whole process unfolds over five steps, called discoveries, that flow in a sequential order and in an intertwined manner (Boyatzis, 2006). To account for motivation and aspiration, ICT proposes that a fundamental first step in any change process is identifying one's ideal self, which is the individual's image that depicts the characteristics that someone wants to see in his/her future (Higgins, 1987). The seminal article of Boyatzis and Akrivou define the ideal self as "a psychological component of the self […] an image of what kind of person one wishes to be, what the person hopes to accomplish in life and work" (2006: 625). In a similar vein, the research stream of work self proposes a similar construct, with a narrower focus on the work and career domain. Strauss et al. (2012) defined future work self (FWS), as "an individual's representation of himself or herself in the future that reflects his or

her hopes and aspirations in relation to work" (2012: 580). The personal future ideal is formalised in a "personal vision" statement. By ensuring a sense of meaning and direction, and providing optimism and hope, this ideal self image represents a critical mechanism that spurs sustainable and enduring change (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006; Oyserman and Markus, 1990). Stronger awareness and clarity on one's future self was found to positively influence various proactive career behaviours, among which skill development (Strauss et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). Similarly, literature provides evidence that adjustment in career design only leads to successful outcomes when those are consistent with individuals' aspirations (Hall et al., 2018). Overall, these results reinforce the role of the future work self not only as motivational driver for skill development, but also as a compass to direct one's change towards the development of ESCs that are consistent with one's career aspirations.

The second discovery of the process relates to one's awareness of who she/he is in the present moment. Gaining knowledge about the real self is essential to being able to reasonably set the starting point of the change process and to better plan the activities to attain the ideal self. Acceptance of vulnerability is a fundamental prerequisite of the real self phase. The acquisition of self-awareness represents a key of this second discovery (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005) as it enables people to understand their current level of ESCs owned and to give sense to their thoughts and reactions along the change process (Bonesso et al., 2017). Scholars suggest self-awareness is better developed through a 360-degree feedback that entails both self-evaluation and evaluation from external observers (Boyatzis et al. 2019). Others' feedback can be considered reliable to the extent to which the external raters know the person quite well and they are in the condition to provide an honest assessment, guaranteeing a safe context to receive the evaluation. In order to motivate change, the real self is compared with the ideal self. In so doing, the person can identify those elements in which the two selves are consistent (individual strengths) and those in which they do not overlap (individual improvement areas).

The third discovery entails the definition of a useful learning agenda, meaning the definition of learning objectives, with corresponding new behaviours to practise. To ensure the design of an appropriate learning plan, priority must be given to the development of those ESCs (learning goals) that the individual identifies as the most necessary to achieve the desired future. For each learning goal specific actions are defined coherently with the personal learning styles (Boyatzis and Kolb, 1995). The discrepancy between the demonstrated and the necessary level of competencies would motivate to commit as much effort as possible to achieve an overlap between the actual-self with the ideal self (Higgins, 1987).

The fourth phase refers to experimentation and practice. New behaviours in different contexts are exercised and real change occurs as long as it is strengthened by continuous practice. The last discovery regards the importance of trusting and meaningful relationships along the whole process, since they enable a person to "experience and process each discovery in the process" (Boyatzis, 2006: 613).

3. Method

3.1. The learning program structure

The present study illustrates the implementation of the ICT process within an educational program designed by an academic centre of an Italian public University. Graduate students enrolled in different disciplinary fields (economics, humanistic, linguistic and scientific study courses) have the opportunity to attend the program as elective. The educational activities are aimed at creating a personalised learning plan to develop students' competencies through the path of ICT discoveries.

The academic centre embraces the experiential learning theory (Boyatzis and Kolb, 1995) and the whole person learning pedagogy (Hoover et al., 2010) as the preferred methodological approaches. Alongside, learning programs are designed to give participants the opportunity to interact with the environment and to derive meaning from their own experience to exploit the possibility to achieve an effective behavioural change, as proposed by social cognitive and constructivist learning orientations (Allen et al., 2022). Graduate students are made aware of the definition of ESCs and the process for their development (Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman, 1995).

Participants attend in-person lessons, where they are involved in each stage of the ICT; between one meeting and another, several assignments are carried out individually on an online platform.

The ideal self is elaborated in a personal vision statement, a written document of a minimum length of 1,000 words. Students are provided with guidelines that support them in a detailed description of their future self, including their inner identity, their personal and professional life. The personal vision accounts for their deepest values, dreams and aspirations to the extent to which they are achievable within a given time frame (from 5 to 10 years). Once they elaborate their vision, they are asked to identify critical competencies necessary to achieve their desired future. As a second discovery, the real self is assessed with a survey in which students have to evaluate themselves on the degree to which they manifest each of the considered ESCs. Each competency is assessed through a multisource feedback process in which students and external raters are asked to evaluate the frequency of manifestation of each competency. Each competency is captured by four items on a 0–10-point scale. The mean value represents the final score for each ESCs. While in most ESCs development programs, the multisource feedback is only aimed at the evaluation of the self-others discrepancy as a proxy of personal awareness (Eckert et al., 2010), in this case the interpretation of the multisource assessment is done also with reference to one's aspirations. Indeed, students choose their learning objectives in accordance with the second discovery (real self), while being aware of the first discovery (ideal self), focusing on critical competencies to attain their desired future.

3.2. Sample

The sample consists of n=875 graduate students who attended the program over six years (i.e., 2018-2023). The sample average age is 24; 81% is female. The average number of participants per year is n=146.

3.3. Measures

In this section the measures adopted in the different stages of the ICT process are described.

3.3.1. Ideal self: core elements described and reactions

After the submission of the personal vision, students are asked to fill in a survey that aims to measure the extent to which they described the main aspects of their life and the feeling they experienced after writing the vision. Different scales assess: 1) personal identity (8 items); 2) professional identity (4 items); 3) family and wellbeing (3 items); 4) hope (5 items); 5) core interests (2 items); 6) synthesis (3 items); 7) proactive actions (3 items); 8) coherence (3 items); 9) the extent to which the students thought before about their vision (2 items).

3.3.2. Ideal self and real self reflections: perceived usefulness

The perceived usefulness of the proposed activities is evaluated with a second survey delivered 1 week after the end of the program. In this second survey, they are asked to rate on a 1-7 Likert scale the perceived usefulness of the different activities they carried out during the first three discoveries of the Intentional Change Process. Specifically, perceived usefulness has been measured on 4 items: 1) The activities on the ideal self helped me to reflect on my desired future; 2) Writing my personal vision helped me identify my main future professional and personal goals; 3) The real self activities helped me to reflect on my level of social and emotional competencies possession; 4) The activities on the real self helped me to identify behavioural competencies on which to undertake a development pathway.

4. Results

Participants rated the components that were most included in their personal vision. Items regarding professional identity scored higher (M=3.8, SD=0.7) than personal identity (M=3.7; SD=0.6) and family life (M=3.0, SD=0.82). Students agree on having included important concepts (M=4.4, SD=0.62) in a coherent way from a temporal and thematic point of view (M=4.2, SD=0.64). Embracing the process of vision writing strongly correlates with a sense of hope (r=0.46, p <.001) and relates to proactive actions (r=0.23, p<.001). Helpfulness in defining professional career is witnessed by higher correlation (r=0.23, p>.001), rather than personal identity (r=0.10, p=.003).

When asked to assess the perceived usefulness of the reflection activities, all the discoveries had a great impact on supporting students in the change process. First, the reflection on the ideal self

has activated awareness of one's desired future with consequent identification of professional and personal goals (M=6.2, SD=0.93). Verbal comments provide additional evidence, as the following quotes exemplify: "*I think the vision drafting exercise was really useful because otherwise I would never have stopped to think about me in the future and my goals in such a specific way*" or "*The writing of the personal vision made me aware of myself and what I want to become*". Second, real self tasks helped developing awareness of one's manifestation level of ESCs (M=6.3, SD=0.81) and helped identifying of the most critical and urgent ones to be developed in order to achieve one's career goals (M=6.3, SD=0.85); verbal comments report: "*discovering through the real self activities what my strengths are made me more confident in myself and it was equally interesting to discover more clearly my weaknesses to work on and improve*"; "*it was very interesting to analyse, also externally, my own behaviours: like a mirror, it improves awareness of strengths and weaknesses. In general, it allowed one to put in order some perspectives for the future*".

The results provide evidence on the satisfaction and usefulness of the activities, highlighting the relevance of supporting students in a process of individual reflection to gain the hope and willingness to design a learning program to foster the development of their ESCs.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The present study offers two main contributions to the academic and empirical debate.

First, our results strengthen the relevance of the Intentional Change Process in helping people to become aware of their fundamental desires for their future, to recognize the competencies they need and their level of manifestation. Moreover, the process facilitates engagement in a learning plan in which people are motivated to pursue change.

Second, it has been highlighted the strong connection between HEIs' critical role in supporting students in their learning journey. By implementing the learning activities described, it is possible to derive a greater likelihood of reducing the poor employability of graduates through a direct effort to develop a more comprehensive array of skills required by the job market.

However, the study could be advanced when considering several aspects. One example is the effect of the discrepancy that students perceive between their ideal and the real selves; in fact, a gap perceived as too difficult to bridge could hinder the motivation or a gap too small could prevent serious effort in a path of improvement. Future studies could introduce the measurement of the distance between ideal and real self and consider this variable as moderator.

Future longitudinal studies should consider how external events (e.g., pandemic crisis) have modified the way in which students envision their desired future. As a consequence, it could be fruitful to assess levels of satisfaction derived from these activities.

To conclude, the present work shed some light on a possible way to help HEIs reduce the gap between the students' image of the future selves and the embodiment of necessary ESCs

competencies to attain future goals. Furthermore, the aforementioned lines for further research suggest that both academia and practitioners could benefit from a broader analysis and additional investigation on this topic.

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