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# Student-Centered Learning and Teaching Processes (SCLTPs): old assumptions and new approaches.

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## ABSTRACT

*Both the Student-Centered Learning Approach (SCLA) and the Teacher-Centered Teaching Approach (TCTA) are analyzed through the author's long and multifaceted personal experiences and the relevant contribution of researchers, educators and experts in the field of pedagogy, linguistics and social sciences, covering a time span of about fifty years, exactly the period when very significant changes have taken place.*

*The article refers also to how the SCLA approach started in schools, and how to introduce it also into the lecture rooms, with some attention to today's situation in the Italian universities.*

*The main topics dealt with refer to learning styles, the role of the human brain and the taxonomic areas, to new roles of learners and teachers, to Covid 19 pandemic.*

**Keywords: Student-Centered versus Teacher-Centered Learning Approaches, Learning Styles, Knowledge, Culture, Technology, Human Brain, Intelligencies, Life Skills, Mind Mapping, Covid 19 Pandemic.**

## Introduction.

At last the new role of the learner in the educational process comes out, with learning before teaching and the main focus on the learner and no longer on the teacher. This is what appears also from the *Routledge International Handbook:*[1]

"The movement away from *teacher-centered* towards *Student-Centered* Learning and Teaching (SCLT) in Higher Education has intensified in recent decades. Yet in spite of its widespread use in literature and policy documents, SCLT remains somewhat poorly defined, under-researched and often misinterpreted. Against this backdrop, *The Routledge International Handbook of Student-Centered Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* offers an original, comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the fundamentals of SCLT and its discussion and applications in policy and practice.

Modern methodology and this publication are in favor of the *Learning Paradigm* against the *Instruction Paradigm* (Barr &Tagg 1995; Tagg 2019).

I have chosen this upside-down approach, very simply because it is the learner who learns and nobody can force her/him to do so. For any teacher it is important to revisit, analyze, deepen, the basic theoretical assumptions on which Student-Centered Learning and Teaching Processes SCLTPs) are based, and where they come from.

This article aims at revisiting and reinforcing theories and practices related to SCLTPs: bridging the gap between Rhetoric and Reality, Theory and Practice, modifying the Roles of the Teacher and Learners, the Quality of Learning and Teaching, the Processes of Assessment and Evaluation. When I refer to Pedagogy I also think of the contribution of theoretical researches and the basic, essential achievements of neuro/socio/psycholinguistics, without ignoring research and new developments.

We aim at clearing the route, long, difficult, with some snags and contradictions, travelled by scientists, researchers, pedagogists, linguists, such as Bloom, Chomski, Brumfit, Gardner, Wilkins, Littlewood, Baxter, Krashen, Widdowson, to quote only a few. Their work has taken language learning and teaching to where it is now. I disagree with the statement about the "poorly defined, under-researched and often misinterpreted SCLT", ure as I am that it seems out of question that it is the learner who learns without under-evaluating the role of the teacher, a role that in this new approach is, perhaps, even more complicated and demanding. I am used to state in every meeting that "We teachers don't *teach* but, if we are clever enough, we can only create the right conditions for *learning* to take place". This 'revolutionary' statement, made by the German philosopher, Wilhelm Von Humboldt[2]. goes back to the 18th century.

I have been experimenting this change for about four decades now in many educational contexts: High School and University, teacher training courses, national and international conventions, and any time I have played the role of

[1] *The Routledge International Handbook of Student-centered Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. Edited by Sabine Hoidn and Manja Klemenčič. To be published in 2021 by Routledge, 2 Park Square, Abingdon, Oxon.

[2]Wilhelm Von Humboldt was also the architect of the *Humboldtian Model of Higher Education*. He describes the language as a system which "makes infinite use of finite means" The Author has been a Teacher of English at Unisannio and now is a member of the Examining Board.

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the *multifunctioning* Teacher as a guide, facilitator, stimulator, supporter, convincing results have come out, both in quantity and quality.

What about the situation in the Italian academic world? I would like to start from what came out in the areas of academic, didactic innovations during the Convention: "INNOVAZIONE DIDATTICA UNIVERSITARIA E STRATEGIE DEGLI ATENEI ITALIANI- 100 CONTRIBUTI DI 27 UNIVERSITÀ A CONFRONTO" (Bari, 17-19 October, 2018).[3] At last some Italian academics seem to take courage, accepting the new roles of Students and Teachers in the educational process. At the end of the convention, Marisa Michelini *Director of Geo,*[4] *University of Udine, asks herself:* "What have I learned? What am I doing tomorrow"?

Thinking of the didactic innovations, in the convention it has been put into evidence the determinant role of the personal involvement of learners in the formative process, where new strategies and methods of active, responsible involvement have to be exploited, helped by communication, IT and by the interactive web systems.

In the formative process of learning and teaching, it seems necessary to organize tutoring and support autonomous learning, together with interdisciplinary and a necessary, stricter connection between High School and University, a tie which is inexistent in Italy. Also soft skills have received some kind of attention, together with tutoring: in France, if you prepare specific materials to be exploited in tutorials, you can gain a sabbatical semester, in the USA you get specialized tutors who help teachers and in the UK you get paid for this work.

There is a very good initiative put into action by the University of Udine in Italy: if you have produced validated didactic projects for your discipline, you have a better chance to become a university teacher. In this convention the main problem seems to be teachers' formation. There are a lot of meetings, conventions, debates about pedagogical theories mostly widespread in the Anglo-Saxon world, where students are granted more freedom to do things, to operate. Also tutoring receives adequate attention, but a very little attention is devoted to how to present the single disciplines to learners. In these last years I have been trying to do exactly what appears to be missing in the academic world. Sometimes students do not feel happy to participate actively in the lectures, but it works better when you create the correct environment. I have aimed at using problem solving, team learning, micro-teaching, at times connecting with high school, measuring students improvement, always exploiting new strategies and techniques.

Most of the presentations at Bari's convention, take us back to the seventies and eighties of last century, when many of the quoted areas and ideas were faced, discussed and implemented by the most advanced and open-minded foreign-language teachers in the Italian middle and high schools. A lot of modesty is required to make up for the lost time putting didactics at the center of the learning-teaching process also in the academic world. During our lectures, if we want to put learning in the limelight, it is crucial, for us as teachers, to know the theoretical foundations from which the new approach has stemmed: how learners learn, Chomsky and the LAD, multiple intelligences, Bloom's taxonomies, the contribution of socio/psycho/ and neurolinguistics, creative actions, diverging thought and problem solving, study and life skills, our brain, technology and the new dimensions, and much more.

It becomes immediately clear that our brain, learners' and teachers' brains alike, is the engine of this new "revolutionary", upside-down approach. So our brain will receive a lot of attention too. These theories have produced new approaches, strategies, techniques and, consequently, a new teacher's role.

And our aim is to analyze all these areas in details. *Nothing new under the sun* for many educators; but quite a number of them get into problems; they have to change their attitudes; they no longer have just to unload/information; they have to guide their learners towards learning or acquiring contents; they should implement the so-called *retrieval practice*: "getting information *out* of students' brain rather than getting information *into* the learners' heads".

**Learning styles**

Let us begin with learning styles.

Can we identify the way learners learn? How do we work in the class/lecture rooms as a consequence of the different learning behaviors? Do these differences require different techniques?

All persons have preferences for ways to learn. These preferences are called an individual's learning style. Some researchers believe that when an individual is participating in a learning task, *learning* is usually accomplished more rapidly and retained longer if it is presented in ways that the individual prefers (Claxton and Ralston 1978).

The way a teacher handles a learning task is called that teacher's teaching style or instructional style.

Claxton and Murrell (1987) state that if the teacher's instructional style and the student's learning style match, there is usually a more productive learning environment.

However, Stevens (1976), Even (1982) and McCarthy (1984), show that students can be taught specific learning strategies and study skills for particular learning tasks, even though their preferred mode of learning does not match the teacher's instructional style.

[3] INNOVAZIONE DIDATTICA UNIVERSITARIA E STRATEGIE DEGLI ATENEI ITALIANI. 100 CONTRIBUTI DI 27 UNIVERSITÀ A CONFRONTO, a cura di Filomena Corbo, Marisa Michelini, Antonio Felice Uricchio Bari, 2019.

[4] GEO: This book has been realized by *Consorzio Interuniversitario Giovani Educazione Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro e Crui. Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università italiane*, Bari Convention in 2019-Progetto PRODID- GEO- Didactic innovation at University. Marisa Michelini: "In the Italian academic panorama there are researches, meetings, conventions, studies in the field of education going on with new tendencies, approaches identified and explained and shared, but in terms of implementing these results it is quite another story now".

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It is important for a teacher to be aware of the students learning-style preferences, and of his/her own preferred way of *instructing*.

Adjustments can then be made to accommodate students' needs (Boylan 1984; Whitman et al. 1986), and students can be shown how to become more responsible for their own learning (Gregorc 1979).

Learning is the result of raising questions, generating across experiences, defining hypotheses, discussing with peers, making real-world applications, reflecting on results, identifying weak areas and the necessary supporting materials.[5]

Experimental researches on perception (Gotti,1987) demonstrate that a person perceives information as follows:

-through sight 83%
-through listening 11%
-through smell 3.5 %
-through touch 1.5%
-trough taste 1%

Learning differs greatly depending in general on where each person locates her/himself, according to the individual learning style.

Learners, through the appropriate tools, sets of ready-made questionnaires like *The Barsch learning style inventory* can identify their dominant learning styles: analytic or global, visual, verbal, auditory, or tactile, sensing or intuitive, active or reflective, depending also on their left or right brain hemisphere dominance.

Besides, our brain makes many more additional operations. Here are six ones in order of difficulty according to Bloom and others:[6] knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. Taxonomies play a relevant role and interfere positively (helping) or negatively (damaging) with the level of learning. Cawley et al. (1976) identify three domains of learning: *cognitive*, that is knowledge: facts, theories, concepts and problem-solving; *affective*: attitudes, that imply feelings, values and beliefs; and *psychomotor*: skills, referring to new skills and new ways of making and doing things.

Here is an example of how our brain works when we are involved in learning: to learn the word 'coffee' 4 steps are necessary: experience 'coffee', nominalize, narrate and explain this experience. This is a fixed mental sequence called *organizational principle*.

What about language learning and language acquisition, problem solving and diverging thought[7] and mind mapping and brain?

Let us start from learning and acquisition: the former comes from studying, so it is a conscious process, while the latter happens unconsciously.

After that let us examine briefly the advantages of encouraging problem solving and diverging thought.

**Lecturing in Italy**

Some Italian freshmen do not know how to study, and, disheartened, may leave university, or may not attend lectures regularly; as a consequence, they can pass exams with very low marks. Instead students should live the university life, which, above all, means *changing air*, living and sharing new experiences, meeting new people and socializing also with teachers, in a new setting with a friendly atmosphere and, consequently, stronger motivations.

At this point we ask ourselves another question: Does university spend any time in preparing students to learn? It could be done in specific meetings and/or distributing appropriate materials.

*The London School of Economics and Political Science* believes in this approach so much so that administrators publish on their website some guidelines for learners, collected in a booklet. Some study skills are listed in it. Here they are:

-*Pre/while lecturing*: Arrive early and get comfortable; select position in lecture-room carefully; come with questions in mind (and ask some); make notes rather than simply take notes or just listen; maintain attention; get your knowledge quickly and then use it: if you can use it, you will retain it. Students who come out with the best results are those who intend to understand what they are learning, rather than being focused on reproducing course material for assessment purposes only.

-*Attention at lectures:*

Note when your concentration flags – do something (even chewing gum can help!).

Use any breaks in the lecture effectively with revision, for a coffee.

-*After lectures* (within 24 hrs):

Talk to fellow students, compare and share notes, summarize them. Come back to class with questions about unclear topics. These are often efficient skills to promote active reading: **SQ3R**: *Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review.*

So far we have been dealing with theoretical assumptions with little reference to practice.

HOW to teach or, even better, how to promote/facilitate/guide/support learners towards *Learning* at university level? Let us assume that at the beginning of any semester the director of the Degree Course has assigned to someone (a teacher, an expert…) the task of identifying, in one or two sessions, the students' learning styles. Teachers are informed so that, when lectures start, they can decide beforehand how to present their topics to students.

[5] For additional ideas see: J. Gibbs, *TRIBES, a Process for Social Development and Cooperative Learning*, Center Source Publications, Santa Rosa, California.

[6] *The Taxonomy of Learning Domains* formulated by a group of researchers led by Benjamin Bloom in 1956. David Krathwohl was a partner on the 1956 publication.
See also: Dr. M. Enamul Hoque1, Three Domains of Learning: Cognitive, Affective and Psychomotor, (Journal of EFL Education and Research (JEFLER) Volume 2, Number 2, September,2016.
For examples see Intorcia E., Pepicelli, E., *English for Success*, Aracne, Rome, 2012, pp.98-103.

[7] An additional, interesting and clear contribution to *problem solving* has been given by Dr. Edward de Bono, the Maltese psychologist, who developed the process called *lateral thinking* (1991). Divergent thinking is a thought process or approach which can generate new, and unexpected ideas putting forward possible solutions. It generally occurs in a spontaneous, free-flowing, "non-linear" manner, such that many ideas are generated in an emergent cognitive fashion.

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 www.cpernet.org

Which techniques, strategies, competences, study skills do students already possess and put into action in order to learn? Which ones should teachers add? How should any teacher guide them towards learning through the implementation of these tools?

These tools, also called *study skills*, are interdisciplinary: once you have learned them, you apply them in any circumstance. Ex.: If you know how to summarize, you can do that in physics and in math's, in English and in economics, when speaking or writing and so on.

Before answering these questions, it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that in British and USA universities attendance is compulsory, while it is not in Italy, except for few degree courses where the number of admissions is controlled.

Settings where attendance is compulsory are the ideal contexts for learning and implementing all the mentioned tools. Sometimes learners use them automatically in any subject, and activity. It is much more convenient to guide learners to reflect on these strategies, techniques and skills, guiding them to understand their value and to their implementation.

As it clearly appears from what we have been saying so far, true *Learning* is a social phenomenon, which implies a shared, cooperative, approach between teacher and students, students and students and students and teacher. Consequently, the class becomes a learning group, in the shape of a triangle; and, in order to better academic standards, some working practices become relevant and I like quoting three well-researched ones:

-establishing a positive and safe learning culture;

-understanding how the human brain processes information;

- understanding how the human brain processes information using student-centered learning groups.

**Knowledge, Culture and Technology.**

First of all here is a definition of *culture*: "*It is the climate, the environment and spirit in a school or university that permeates everything that goes on within the class/lecture rooms, the staff and other groups…..The culture is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to constructive meanings rather than receiving them."*(Bruner 1996)[8]

Another area which needs special attention during the learning process is *social creativity*. Actions are considered creative when they produce something original, out of *lateral thinking*. Creativity occurs within structured systems of social actions, such as in a learning group in a university lecture-room. Nowadays, it is necessary to emphasize the concept of *social creativity* that implies factors such as information and *knowledge*, this last area being the main objective of any university.

*Technology* is a factor that can enhance creativity and design development. At its best it connects with *Talent*, and *Tolerance*, summarized with the acronym *3Ts*.

To what extend are students allowed to take part in the lectures, asking questions, giving answers, presenting their homework, that is playing an active role?

The first questions, I ask myself when facing a group of learners, are:

-What do students expect from me?

-Do any information gaps appear in the triangle: teacher/learner, learner/learner and learner/teacher?

-How do I generate/provoke/induce the desire to fill these gaps, having contributed to create the correct expectations?

Consequently, classroom management becomes simply paramount, being the essential competence on the part of educators.

Classroom management requires, as each of us is well aware of, knowledge and deep awareness pertaining to pedagogy, psycho/socio/neurolinguistics, to all the above-mentioned areas and…….more!?!

The learning-teaching process implies motivation, involvement, socialization, shared values, basic knowledge, ability to disambiguate everything that is not clear. It expects from any teacher the knowledge of the following pairs, which imply the theoretical competence necessary to fulfil the required aims and objectives in education: *learning vs teaching, error vs mistake, exercise vs activity, learning vs acquisition, product vs process, token vs value, langue vs parole, notion vs function, competence vs performance, signified vs signifier, formative vs summative assessment/evaluation, mocks vs official exams, marks vs general statements; and also: inductive vs deductive methods, right vs left dominance/hemispheres, texts vs hypertexts, latent vs manifest curricula and cognitive vs affective and psychomotor domains.*

The expert educator has the ability to create a relaxed atmosphere and expectancy, to grant space for everyone, to share basic values and, above all, to produce the correct stimuli, to create information gaps, to foster the desire to participate in the group discourse. S/he is the last resource when there is a question: the class has to answer first.

But sometimes answers may well be outside the learning environment (i.e. in a dictionary, in another book, on the web, by an expert) and the teacher has to have the courage to say "I don't know the answer" if that is the case. Being honest does not surely damage our prestige.

Educators have never to forget that learners take with them their own *encyclopedia* and also that it is difficult to give a convincing answer to everything and to everyone.

[8] In the curricula "it is useful to include those tasks and activities which represent a challenge ……. involving learners in finding solutions for these challenges….. developing their thinking and critical skills, …….enhancing their active participation and developing their communication skills……implementing a problem solving approach and task-based learning "(Bruner, 1996).

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I understand the difficulties of classroom management and the usefulness of micro-teaching because I have been experiencing *classroom observation*, using video-cameras, recordings or colleagues, experts. Contents should be gained/acquired/conquered by learners, actors of their own growth, through simple but crucial mental operations: listening/reading, speaking/writing, repeating, reflecting, comparing, confuting, recalling, asking/answering questions, matching, correcting, going backwards and forwards, making hypotheses, attempting/suggesting solutions,….

Teachers identify and choose strategies and techniques, all the means they know in order to facilitate the learning and acquisition of content. In Italy all the exams are oral or written and oral; students report orally at the exams about the subjects, but content, unfortunately, will often be forgotten soon after the exam itself; it has, in fact, been learned by heart and put into the *short-term memory*.

Instead teachers should aim at creating an atmosphere of trust, should encourage their learning group, involve them in decision making, be kind, energetic, authentic without a judgemental attitude; all this helps create a positive climate in the lecture room.[9]

Besides learners should be involved in informal, continuous assessment activities, during lectures.

In the teacher's daily work, informal assessment is important and highly recommended, a technique similar to the *Socrative assessment*, a formative tool that helps teachers and learners to assess learning and progress.

After a student's power point presentation of own homework, the class can ask for explanations, can add something and finally assess, on a voluntary base, that work. I often have to reckon students are even stricter than teachers!

In so doing learners can reflect also on their own learning, become more familiar with their strengths and weaknesses, get an appropriate level of support and challenge based also on their teacher's responses to the assessment data.

In so doing teachers learn more about each student's understanding and her/his strengths and weaknesses; they collect data about students' learning and the expected progress over a topic, creating more reflective learners at the same time.

The traditional approach, previously called *Instructional paradigm*, does not guarantee that students get valuable knowledge by lectures and occasionally by doing some exercises for practice.

The formative assessment comes to the rescue through questions provoked by the teacher and /or by students. Formative assessment is opposed to summative assessment, which is used to evaluate a student's progress at the conclusion of the course. Strategic questioning is paramount. The most effective strategy in instruction is having your students ask as many questions as possible and question everything they are learning. At the end of a lecture, I usually ask the class who has actively taken part in it. They understand that the higher the number of active participants is, the better for the success of the lecture.

**Human brain at work**

The main function of our brain is to sort out and catalogue patterns of information.

However, the thinking part (the cerebrum) of the brain cannot perform that function when a condition of stress, threat, fear or other strong feeling persists. The thinking part of the brain *downshifts* into the limbic system where strong feelings such as anger, love, concern, hatred, fear, excitement, sadness, jealousy, etc. are processed.

*Intelligence* is a set of capacities that result in many different ways of knowing, understanding and learning about the world (Gardner).

Intelligence, or, better, multiple intelligences, play a relevant role and here there is another investigation that should be done for each learner, also through appropriate, tested questionnaires to be filled in order to identify the level/role of each intelligence in their learning and acquisition processes.

During or after the first meeting, students can fill an appropriate questionnaire as homework and then file the results for the teacher and their peers.

The teacher will select activities, tools, exercises according to the results obtained. Variety is the easiest and handiest answer to facilitate the learners' participation and favor their learning and acquisition.

**Mind mapping[10]**

Another theoretical area listed in the teacher's competencies regards *Mind maps*.

What are they and their pedagogical advantages?

*Mind mapping* means first of all leaving absolute freedom to our mind, to our brain; each of us has a differently operating brain, depending on the left hemisphere or right hemisphere dominance, or something in-between. It implies being less or more analytic or less or more global, just to give on straightforward example. The brain's *left hemisphere* is the analytical, linear one that produces the step-by-step sequenced, logical thinking. The brain's *right hemisphere* does the opposite; it produces the global, holistic thinking, the overview.

[9] Emile Durkheim, Robert Merton, and Talcott Parsons distinguished between *the manifest and latent curriculum. The manifest curriculum/syllabus/program* is the content teachers are required to teach.
"It means that teachers should not concentrate only on content, which is not what students remember most; rather, *the latent or hidden curriculum* is the knowledge that becomes more deeply embedded in students' memories and daily interactions. The hidden curriculum refers to the values, beliefs, and attitudes that are transmitted to students through the education system; a latent function of these hidden lessons is that these help to socialize young individuals to form a more cohesive society".

[10] Intorcia E., Pepicelli E., *English for Me*, Aracne, Rome, May, 2017, pagg.144-1

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By encouraging learners to focus on words, the teacher activates the left hemisphere and deactivates the right one. This is most unfortunate because the right hemisphere learns 1,600 times faster than the left one.

And we should also take into consideration the importance of one or more *intelligences* among those identified by H. Gardner: *linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, naturalist.*

Their support varies tremendously in each individual; it implies the way we learn or the way we prefer learning (visual, mathematical, audial, pictorial, etc.).

When involved in the learning/teaching processes do we help our brain or not? Do we cooperate with our brain? Are we its friends or enemies? How does it work anyway?

Before analyzing the relationship between *brain* and *mind mapping*, let's state that our brain doesn't work in a chronological, sequential way, i.e., like in a daily routine. In fact, it works by association of ideas, depending on our emotional, cultural, educational background and on the situation in which we are involved.

Our brain works, or, rather, it prefers to work jumping from an idea to another one, going backward and/or forward, repeating, comparing, activating a number of additional mental processes. In literature we have outstanding examples of the so-called *stream of consciousness* like in *Ulysses* by James Joyce.

Therefore, working by association of ideas we do not work against our brain but together with it, and you should reflect on this assumption and act consequently.

**Some steps to making a mind map**

~ Start in the center of a blank page to give your brain freedom to spread out in all directions and to express itself more freely and naturally.

Also one single word could suffice, but it is better to use an image, a picture for your central idea. The teacher/guide/organizer/trainer can suggest the idea/image/picture or you can suggest yourself where to start from. Why? Because an image is worth a thousand words and helps you

~ A central image is more interesting, keeps you focused, helps you concentrate. Use colors throughout because they are as exciting to your brain as are images. They stimulate your reactions.

~ Connect your main branches because your brain works by association of ideas without following a routine.

~ Make your branches curved rather than straight-lined because it is less boring to your brain.

~ If, on the other hand, you are crazily creative, impulsive right-brain learner that hates order *and* is super-duper imaginative, these strategies will help you learn a new language. (Global behaviour prevails).

Of the tools which any learner needs to learn and/or acquire, LIFE SKILLS are on top of all.

**Life Skills**

In 1997 The World Health Organization (WHO) defined life skills as "abilities for adaptive and positive behavior, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life".

*Life Skills* are therefore those skills we need to make the most out of our lives. They can allow us to manage and live a better quality of life, helping us accomplish our ambitions and live to our full potential.

Life skills can be learned, acquired and developed.

Any skill that is useful in our lives can be considered a life skill; this is why there is no definite list. As a matter of a fact, we might need different life skills at different times of our lives (ex.: study and learning skills for our education; *employability skills* for work, including conflict resolution, stress-management and problem solving skills; interpersonal skills for social life, IT skills to cope with technology, etc.).

In the world of work, in particular, employers are often looking for skills that go beyond qualifications and experience. Students entering the job market in the 21st century need to have flexible skills to cope with a changing work environment. Learning English opens a wide range of employment opportunities within an international context. Therefore, acquiring life and employability skills along with language skills is equally important.

The term employability skills refer to those skills necessary for getting, keeping and being successful in a job. Employer requirements typically include both hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills include the knowledge you need to do the job, while soft skills include your interpersonal skills (personal attributes, personality traits, creative thinking, teamwork, motivation, communication abilities needed for success on the job, etc.). Much emphasis is also given to problem-solving and decision-making in the modern workplace and these skills are also very desirable and useful in our daily lives.

Life skills are not always taught directly but often learned indirectly through experience and practice. Although there are many important life skills, maybe the most important one is the ability and willingness to learn, that is the ability of learning to learn. By learning new skills, we increase our understanding of the world around us and equip ourselves with the tools we need to live a more productive and fulfilling life……

Referring to life skills and their widespread exploitation, I wish to list those requested for a perspective Member (Trustee) of the Brontë Society[11]

· Ability to think strategically
· Breadth of vision and future focus

[11] At The Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth, Keighley, West Yorkshire BD22 8DR, England.

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· External and customer focus
· Stakeholder relationship management and networking
· Communication and influencing skills
· Fundraising
· Basic finance skills, especially in the not-for-profit sector
· Problem solving and lateral thinking
· Excellent teamworking
· Learning and change skills, adaptability.

**The role of technology in the learning/teaching process.**

Social theory needs to be completely rethought in a world of digital media and social media platforms. Fifty years after Berger and Luckmann published their classic text *The Social Construction of Reality*, two leading sociologists of media, Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp[12], revisit the question of how social theory can understand the processes through which an everyday world is constructed in and through media.

Schütz, Elias and many other social and media theorists, ask: "what are the implications of digital media and their profound involvement in those processes"?
"Is the result a social world that is stable and livable, or one that is increasingly unstable and unliveable"?

MEDIA should not be seen as tools, devices, objects, texts only, but they require an analytical attention to the relationships each of us builds with them and to the social effects of Media on us, creating the so-called *app or net generation.*

Will the net turn us into stupid people? Is a digital 'dementia' developing/coming out? (see D.Kerchhove, M. Spitzer, 2015).
Here are some of the suggested, widespread techniques:
KAHOOT: a game-based learning platform.
GAMIFICATION: to use video game design and game elements in a learning environment.
One basic element: rules to be respected, a democratic approach.
BLIPPAR: augmented reality: a digital platform. Users look at real-world objects enhanced with
text and digital graphics through camera, smartphone, tablet….
FLIPPED CLASSROOM: a blended learning strategy. Students prepare learning before they meet.
There is content exploitation, meaning making or capturing, demonstration and application.

***THE PANDEMIC AGE: Pros and cons of distance learning mode***

Due to the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, universities, just like other educational institutions all over the world, have been forced to interrupt in-presence lectures, tutorials, and activities and stop the use of laboratories, libraries and other facilities. To keep activities going, the use of online learning environments has turned out to be fundamental and unavoidable. Universities and schools are shifting their process of learning and teaching to this big change: to e-learning and blended learning modes. Academics and primary and secondary school educators are adapting to this change, involving both the learning/teaching process together with assessment and evaluation. This has generated several challenges and opportunities for both academics and students. It would be interesting to examine perspectives and perceptions with regard to how they are handling this emergency and challenge as well as highlighting any opportunities they are experiencing. The main themes coming out of this new experience are: new learning and teaching modes, e-learning, blended learning, collaborative technology, new skills and knowledge opportunities, new challenges…..
And, in my opinion, here are some pros and cons of this new approach.

**Pros:**

- Distance learning helps anxious students during exams, because it lowers the so-called affective filter.
- Students and teachers alike do not have the problem of transportation, avoiding queues, traffic jams, sparing a lot of time to be devoted to other tasks.
- Many students do not spend money for renting accommodation.
- There is the acquisition of additional competencies in managing computers, connections, both for teachers and learners, at any level of instruction.
- Distance mode reinforces autonomous management of online relationships.

**Cons:**

- The distance mode *increases social inequalities* among learners, a truly great problem.
- Smart education is increasing dramatically the gap among the young: weak learners are becoming weaker and strong students are becoming stronger, which is, in the long run, a big damage for the whole society. Instead during distance learning it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to exploit paralinguistic features for communication at its best: gestures, eye contact… body language.
- Clarifications are usually delayed or ignored on both sides. Students' active participation diminishes consistently; instead the widespread, traditional, approach by academics follows the *Instructional Paradygm mode*, where the teacher speaks, explains and learners listen, try to understand or they pretend to understand.
- There is not an adequate time gap between lectures.
- Families are forced to buy one computer for each child, without forgetting that someone has got some help by university administrators or local/central authorities.

[12] from: *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, December 2016, by Nick COULDRY, Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Andreas HEPP, Professor of Communication and Media Studies at the University of Bremen.

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- Students try to find 'illegal' help during the exams, i.e. an extra-computer, other people…….
- There are some technical snags: difficulty of connections, videos and microphones not working properly.
- Staying in front of a computer for such a long time, the whole morning and also in the afternoon at times, produces tiredness, boredom, lack of concentration….
- When, during the exam, some students do not know the answer to a question, they pretend not to have understood the question; they may say that the connection is poor, slow, the microphone does not work properly and so on.
- Students interviewed on the matter, prefer direct lectures in a proper room; they think that distance learning is more stressing than face-to-face lectures, where you can stop, ask for help; besides peers can help you at times, and the whole experience is more natural, spontaneous and socializing, when at its best.
- As a consequence of this pandemic, are we becoming 100% technological? Is it good? Is it bad? We do not know the answer yet: we shall wait and see! One thing is sure: *we will never be the same when the pandemic ends!*

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