



## LEARNING-BY-MEDIATING. REFLEXIVE MEDIATION IN ACTION

Aprendizaje por mediación. Mediación reflexiva en acción

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### KEYWORDS

*Community mediation  
Peers  
Soft skills  
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Empowerment  
Cross-disciplinary  
methodology*

### ABSTRACT

*This paper aims at sharing some reflections and results concerning some experiences carried out within a European interdisciplinary Erasmus+ project. The main themes are community and peer mediation, considered from the perspective of educational innovation and experimentation. Two on-line videorecorded meetings of the project are analysed to show that the process of the project and this article-writing was consistent with mediation, that emerges as a topic within a discipline, but also as a cross-disciplinary methodology. The collective construction of meaning becomes a way to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes while the participants are involved within interactive and constructive educational dynamics.*

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### PALABRAS CLAVE

*Mediación comunitaria  
Pares  
Habilidades blandas  
Reflexividad  
Empoderamiento  
Metodología interdisciplinaria*

### RESUMEN

*Este trabajo pretende compartir algunas reflexiones y resultados de un proyecto Erasmus+ interdisciplinario. Las temáticas son la mediación comunitaria y entre pares-iguales, consideradas desde el punto de vista de la experimentación y de la innovación educativa. El análisis de dos grabaciones en vídeo de dos encuentros online del proyecto pretende demostrar cómo el proceso del proyecto y de escritura de este trabajo fueron coherentes con la mediación que emerge tanto como tema que como metodología interdisciplinaria. La construcción colectiva de significado se convierte en un medio para adquirir conocimientos, capacidades y aptitudes en un entorno de dinámicas educativas interactivas.*

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## 1. Introduction

The present work aims at sharing some reflections and results concerning some experiences carried out by the UniGe Teaching and Learning Center (UTLC) of the University of Genoa, and a European interdisciplinary project (Erasmus+ Cooperatively Transmediate aCT)<sup>2</sup> that lasted 29 months. Among the goals of the project, there was a close connection between education and training and between the academic and non-academic worlds thanks to the use of innovative educational methods and applied research tools, in order to foster skill development among social workers in relevant sectors and among university students. Both collaborated on the co-construction of Intellectual Outputs (IOs).

In this article, the project main themes, community mediation and peer mediation, are analysed from the perspective of educational innovation and experimentation. Within the European project, these merged into one macro-theme, that can be called “community peer mediation”. We will present it from a theoretical and methodological perspective in the following paragraphs.

### 1.1. Soft skills and community peer mediation

The University of Genoa's *Three-year plan 2021-2023* (DM n. 2503, 09/12/2019) identified the development of soft skills as one of its main goals. These skills go under many names: transversal skills, life skills, key competences, and social skills; yet, there is no shared agreement, within the Academy, upon a general model. Thus, a great variability of definitions, classifications, clusterizations exist (Cinque, 2016; Magnoler, 2018).

A focus on soft skills has often been linked with the need to promote access to the job market. As Cinque says

Companies need a more skilled workforce and opportunities should be given to young people to develop those soft skills, such as entrepreneurial skills, coping skills (i.e. the capacity to deal with a problem in a creative way), learning to learn and other skills that will help university students to make a successful transition from full-time education to entering the labour market. (Cinque, 2016, p. 391)<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, within the community-mediation framework of this article their social and relational value will be addressed, in particular those aspects that promote dialogue, personal and collective empowerment, and conflict management within groups and communities.

Several initiatives have been carried out to promote the introduction of soft skills as learning goals at different levels of the curricula of the University of Genoa, under the responsibility of the UTLC, consisting of four teams charged with the promotion of educational innovation through faculty training and support.

Different active, interactive, and constructive methodologies have been experimented, following the ICAP Framework (Chi, 2009). These methodologies promote responsible learning, fostering personal engagement, critical thought, and team-working (Akinoğlu & Özkardeş Tandoğan, 2006). They allow for a greater development of skills at curriculum exit (Knight & Wood, 2005; Michael, 2006): if compared with the traditional approach (passive learning), the students that experiment a first-person participation with their classroom experiences (active learning), work in groups on artefacts or projects (constructive learning, interact with the teacher and their classmates (interactive learning) learn in an increasingly deeper manner. Community peer mediation in university settings can intervene directly on the third level, the interactive one, since it requires participation in the class debate aiming at managing a problem or a conflict.

According to the UTLC, many of these methodologies foster the development of soft skills, in parallel with the necessary discipline-specific skills. The inter-university research project *Didattica per la*

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, see: <https://act.unige.it/>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, *An agenda for new skills and new jobs in Europe: Pathways towards full employment*, 2012, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52010DC0682&from=> European Commission, *Rethinking education strategy: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0669&from=EN>

*trasversalità*<sup>4</sup>(*Education for soft skills*) aims at identifying the correlations between these strategies and soft skills. The soft skills model adopted by the University of Genoa is that presented within the *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning* (2018/C 189/01). The document describes eight fundamental skills for lifelong learning in a student-centred perspective that foster autonomy on the part of the student during their lifelong-learning process.

In this paper, we will try to take these skills into consideration for their value in a collective dimension rather than an individual one: we will study the acquisition of these skills aimed at a better relationship with the Other, and the community<sup>5</sup>.

Within this work, we selected four skills for their close connection with community-mediation processes. For each of them, we will present the characteristics as identified by the Council of the European Union and we will relate them to community peer mediation, as follows:

- Multilingual competence, that includes:

The ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts according to one's wants or needs (...), the ability to mediate between different languages and media (...), an awareness of the main types of verbal interaction and registers of languages (...), the appreciation of cultural diversity, an interest and curiosity about different languages and intercultural communication (...), respect for each person's individual linguistic profile, including both respect for the mother tongue of persons belonging to minorities and/or with a migrant background and appreciation for a country's official language(s) as a common framework for interaction. (EU Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, 2018, p. 8)

Within community-mediation processes, communicative exchanges can be multilingual, intralingual, interlingual, metalingual, and plurilingual at the same time: within a heterogeneous yet (essentially) monolingual group, different qualifications, professions, roles, and communicative attitudes, can encourage work on this skill.

- Personal, social, and learning-to-learn competence

The very name of this skill shows three fundamental aspects that are often kept separate in other soft-skill models: personal and relational development and meta-reflexive skills. The features of this competence that are relevant for the present work are:

(...) the ability to reflect upon oneself, (...) work with others in a constructive way, (...) the ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity, learn to learn, (...) to be able to (...) empathize and manage conflict in an inclusive and supportive context (...), be able to communicate constructively in different environments, collaborate in teams and negotiate. (EU Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, 2018, p. 10)

Many of these abilities are necessary within community-peer-mediation processes; personal and reflexive skills are always developed within a relationship, an exchange, a conflict, an encounter with the Other and their perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> This project was presented during the SIRD National Conference 2022 and is included in the Book of abstracts (session 2, 2/07/22)

<https://www.sird.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/book-abstract-sird-2022.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the key competences described by the Council of Europe, see:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal->

[content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&rid=7#:~:text=The%20Reference%20Framework%20sets%20out,social%20and%20learning%20to%20learn](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&rid=7#:~:text=The%20Reference%20Framework%20sets%20out,social%20and%20learning%20to%20learn)

- Citizenship competence

This skill is focussed on the knowledge and the adoption of the European citizenship's model where are inscribed the common European values described in the Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union<sup>6</sup>. Some of its features, though, address the search for peaceful collective life within the community and the society at large. This is the case with:

(...) the ability to engage effectively with others in common or public interest, including the sustainable development of society. This involves critical thinking and integrated problem solving skills, as well as skills to develop arguments and constructive participation in community activities, as well as in decision-making at all levels. (EU Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, 2018, p. 11)

Community peer mediation was born as a process aimed at conflict management within a community, in those contexts where a civic dimension as the basis for existing and future relationships is considered as the first step to make a dialogue possible. In this sense, mediation can be seen as a practice rooted in the notion of "citizenship"<sup>7</sup>; the people involved in mediation can work on the skills and the behaviours mentioned above.

- Cultural awareness and expression competence

Once more, one of the chosen skills focusses on the intercultural aspect of communication; this time, interculturality is seen as belonging to oral communication, but also other expressive and artistic languages, that are fostered by:

(...) an open attitude towards, and respect for, diversity of cultural expression (...) curiosity about the world, an openness to imagine new possibilities, and a willingness to participate in cultural experiences. (EU Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, 2018, p. 12)

Within the aCT project, characterized by a high level of interdisciplinarity, the design of educational activities and the organization of training events (e.g., during the creation of the IO2<sup>8</sup>), included different artistic languages (music, photography, painting) within a collective exchange, mediating different languages and (cultural) perspectives. In taking community peer mediation as our theoretical framework (see § 1.2 and §1.3), new possibilities for communication can emerge that use other codes from the linguistic one. Expressing and observing the perspectives that thus appear within the group, the acknowledgment of difference is promoted.

## 1.2 Community and peer mediation

The *enfoque cultural de la mediación*, that is, mediation's cultural approach, as expressed by experts in Latin America (Pesqueira Leal, 2005; Vezzulla, 2015) and employed by De Luise & Morelli (2015), describes mediation not as a technique (or a set of techniques) but as a cultural and pragmatic approach that sees conflict as an experience that affects the community as a whole, and not just the parties concerned; mediation is something that involves the whole community.

De Luise & Morelli (2015) propose a definition of community mediation, starting from the conception related to Giménez's notion of sociocultural mediation (2010): this is understood as a process consisting of actions of a cultural, social, educational and other nature which aims to build a social relationship within the

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<sup>6</sup> See [https://lparency.org/eu/TEU/ART\\_2/](https://lparency.org/eu/TEU/ART_2/); [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> This skill highlights an important issue: the marginalization of those people who, while living in a given territory, are not citizens according to the national legal framework. The term "citizenship" is then partially restrictive or non-representative, also from the perspective of community mediation and its goals.

<sup>8</sup> An on-line course in community and peer mediation. For further information, see: <https://ipb-mediacion.herokuapp.com/>

territory to face conflict management and co-build transformation strategies. Santi (2018) also proposes community mediation as

a dynamic and constantly changing process, which in the context of individual and collective reflection expands on the action of actors within a 'community'<sup>9</sup>, thus activating resources, awareness, and the ability to respond peacefully, transforming conflicts. (Santi, 2018, p. 40, our translation)

The following lines present the elements that are at the core of the horizons of meaning of what we call "community mediation".

First, relationships. They are not limited to interactions: natural elements, both organic and inorganic, interact, and react. Relationships are something more, something different. They do not comply with physical or chemical laws. They can begin within these laws, yet their complexity, increases. We may take as an example some spheres entering into contact the one with the other. They touch, clash, react, interact; they bounce. Relationships cannot be limited to that. They are imbued with awareness, purpose, consciousness. They guide, exchange, involve, can introduce dependency, they project, they acknowledge. They demand conscious actions, thought, reflexivity. They open themselves up to creativity and difference; they are meaningful.

The second element reminds us that living together is not synonymous with coexisting – even though the two are often taken as having the same meaning. Coexistence is based upon separation. We can occupy the same space as somebody else and not have a relationship with them – we can avoid any possibly bothersome interference with the other. Coexisting means that an "I" occurs alongside a "not-I", a "we" alongside a "they". Coexistence is made possible by tolerance: I will bear your behaviour and you will bear mine, we will bear your customs, and you will bear ours. In such a scenario, (minimal) interactions do exist; relationships, don't. According to Remotti (2019), living together, instead, is based upon similarity, upon the idea that everything is a little bit like something else – the others are a little like me, and I am a little like the others, the others form a part of me, and I form a part of the others. We share some parts; we share some things. Living together means sharing, being involved and interested, overcoming limits, trespassing, relationships. Living together, people can create common projects and live a constructive interdependence. In this case, people build communities.

Community and peer mediation is another crucial ingredient of this model. When people live in the same environment, even with different roles, tasks, and backgrounds, a knowledge is built that deserves to be acknowledged and used to re-think such contexts and conditions for collective life. Thus, becoming aware of the actions that are carried out among peers becomes part and parcel of community mediation: it implies transcending structural and systemic inequalities, and it is a way to (re)compose the community. Working among peers can restore the voice of those who belong to a community; thus, a dialogue can emerge as well as a "savoir-faire" that is acknowledged as legitimate and authoritative by the other community members. Being "among peers", then, is part of an "attitude" that is aimed at facilitating an equal relationship among all the community members.

Dialogue – the key instrument of these experiences – can be fostered by a "peer approach" (promoted by different dynamics and methodologies, such as those used within peer education, Cooperative Learning Groups, and talking circles, among others). These settings can trigger collective and personal reflection, and a co-construction of contents, activities, and plans to plan a "way out" from what is originally brought by the single community members. Of course, this is also the case with coordinating, team, and supervision meetings where the facilitators/mediators re-think their actions, as it is the case with Fabbri's Community of Practices (2007). The experience of Communities of practices within an academic setting is an occasion for empowering the faculty. As Lotti reports in describing the experience of UniGe's GLIA (*Gruppo di lavoro sulle tecniche di insegnamento e di apprendimento*, Working Group on Teaching and Learning Techniques), "this willingness to meet grew because some professors, who had begun to use methods and techniques learnt during seminars and workshops, wanted to share these experiences with their colleagues" (Lotti, 2020:

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<sup>9</sup> This word is placed within quotation marks by the author to indicate the dynamic nature of this notion.

208). The creation of Communities of Practices within an academic setting is considered as one of the main ways to promote Faculty Development (Steinert, 2011)<sup>10</sup>.

When one embraces this cultural approach to mediation and the features of its conceptual framework, the declaration-provocation of Vezzulla sounds self-explaining: “mediation can only be community mediation” (personal communication, 2016). This and other provocations should not frighten: on the contrary, lively criticism (or “irreverent vivacity” as in Freire’s formulation, 1996 [2004]: 27, our translation) is useful because it forces us to think, it challenges perceptions of our actions, it pushes us to reflect upon what we do (our actions) before (during, and after) a mediation process; it reminds us that our actions need always be planned as community actions. If reflection upon action is one of the components of this approach, it is then necessary to create some contexts where individual and collective reflection can deal with the (possible) challenges experienced by a community. Reflecting upon such challenges is an action in itself: in this way, the community can propose common and dialogic actions.

### **1.3 The aCT project**

#### **1.3.1 Presentation of the project**

The aCT project (see note 2) worked not only on the elaboration of IOs with a strict task distribution among partners, but it also tried to enact a mediation process among peers and semi-peers<sup>11</sup>, prioritizing processes rather than products. The national working groups were the core unit of the project. In the funded proposal, the national working groups were described as such: 4 professors of the Universities involved, 4 students and 2 workers of the local non-academic partner organization. The Italian working group involved more than ten people at any given moment: the first selected students were six (BA in Educational and Training Sciences, and in Communication Sciences; MA in Pedagogy and Educational Design and Research). Other students joined the project, and some dropped out because of their work. The same happened with the partner association’s and the faculty members. In this second case, this was due to the one member changing her place of work. She could not be replaced for personal reasons. The professional who worked as an external member on the project’s translation has always been an active member of the group and became a member of the teaching staff during the last months of the project. Three members belonging to the partner associations stayed during the whole project (the project manager and two educators/collaborators), while a fourth worker was replaced after the first four months with somebody who had the same educational background.

The data analysed in this paper are drawn from two on-line meetings of the whole working group.

#### **1.3.2 Reflexive writing on the aCT project**

Reflexivity is the process of thinking about one’s own experience, including feelings and thoughts. In not drawing a clear-cut distinction or a hierarchy between the cognitive and the affective dimension, reflexivity accounts for the complexity of human beings and their relationships, that are revised for meaning-making: indeed, reflexivity is the “questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about oneself, one’s group, or the conditions in which one operates” (Boud 2001: 13). As shown in the well-known Gibbs’ reflective<sup>12</sup> cycle (1988), reflexive thinking implies several steps to reach its goal, that is, strategic thinking towards improvement of one’s practice.

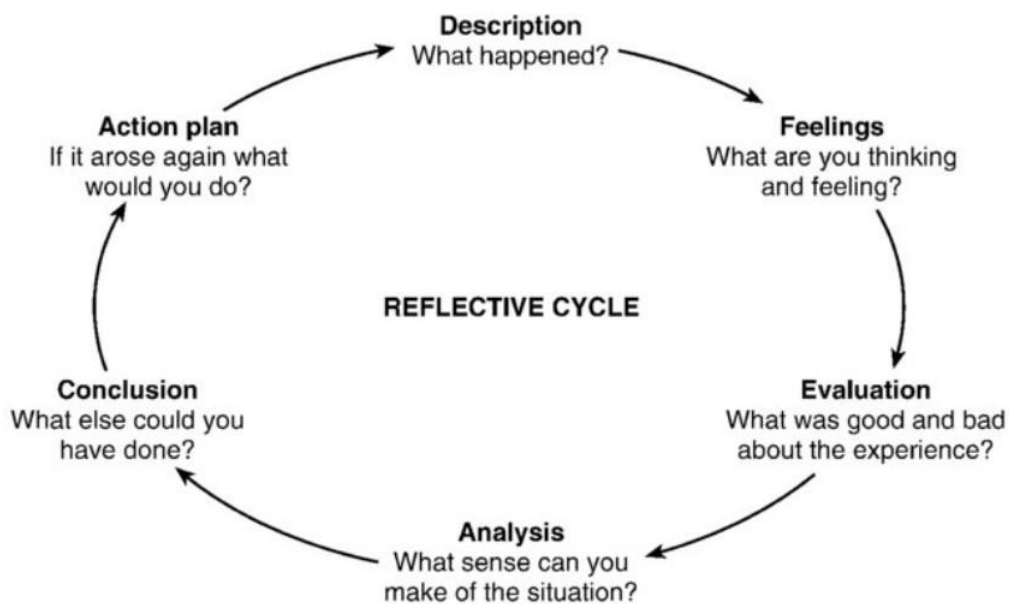
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<sup>10</sup> An example of work among peers and semi-peers (see note 11 for a comment upon the notion and denomination of peers) is described by one of the students of the Italian team in Benassi, E. La mediazione come strumento educativo: focus groups ed esperienze in tempo di Didattica a Distanza in A. Ferreira, G. Frías Ojinaga,, E. Salazar, M. Morelli and S. Vecchi, S. (eds.) *Voci e silenzi della mediazione in tempi difficili. Esperienze e vissuti. Voces y silencios de la mediación en tiempos difíciles. Experiencias y vivencias*. Editrice Zona, 96-122, forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> In Italian, we used to call ourselves a group of ‘*pari e dispari*’, that is, ‘odds and evens’. The joke was based upon the polysemy of the Italian word ‘*pari*’, meaning at the same time “peer” and “even”, and it wanted to acknowledge the challenging nature of working ‘among peers’ where asymmetries (concerning roles, age, knowledge...) are present.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on the difference between “reflectivity” and “reflexivity”, see aCT Handbook IO4: [https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual\\_0.pdf](https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual_0.pdf)

Figure 1. Gibbs' reflective cycle



Source: Gibbs, 1988.

Reflexive processes, though, are carried out by individuals that should think of themselves as agents involved in a group or community whose practice is placed under scrutiny. Reflexivity is a powerful, potentially painful process that can be enacted by groups<sup>13</sup> aiming at understanding and transforming their practice.

## 2. Methodology

The methodological framework is action research. The researchers take part in a system of social relationships and are aware of being part of a situated context, influencing their choices in terms of the chosen paradigms, procedures, and data analysis. This involvement does not make for a double role of research participant (whatever the role, as we will see) and of researcher; nor do the two coincide. Rather, this makes for a higher level of effectiveness where the goal of the research is transformation. In our case, the goal was to promote awareness and self-reflexivity within groups working on the macro-theme of community peer mediation, discussing the ideas and theoretical frameworks adopted by the three national groups, allowing for differences to emerge (see §4). Participation, engagement, and fostering of a better self-awareness (Modugno 2017) were both the goals and the resources to be used to learn how to learn and mediate among (semi-)peers.

Within this process, mediation is both the scenario and the horizons of meaning (see §1.2), but also a methodological element of continuity aiming at the engagement and support of heterogeneous profiles and roles in their educational and training experiences. This means fostering positive interactions among the participants, even when this means that conflicts can emerge; listening to the needs and observing the attitudes of all the process's participants; promoting reflexivity and empowerment. It is then possible to draw a connection between mediation and education on two parallel plans: mediation can become a goal, a topic, a theme within a discipline, as it happened with the aCT project; at the same time, mediation can be a cross-disciplinary methodology applicable to courses dealing with different topics. The collective

<sup>13</sup> Careful guidance (models, guidelines, supervision and discussion) before, during and after reflexive processes should be sought or offered. In this sense, during the aCT project several grids were designed to guide reflexive group processes. For an example, see <https://ipb-mediacion.herokuapp.com/curso/0/page/2>

construction of meaning can become a way to acquire knowledge, abilities and attitudes while the participants are involved within an interactive, constructive and reflexive educational dynamics.

If we want to explore the personal and interpersonal embodied experiences of human beings involved in intertwined relationships (see §1.2), the quest for causality, typical of sciences investigating 'things', proves unsatisfactory, since no clear-cut separation between 'Self' and 'world', between observed and observer, perceiver and perceived can be drawn.

For this reason, the most consistent methods for analysing communicative data can be description, analysis, and hermeneutics. This is not synonymous of a non-scientific approach. It only means that it remains imbued with ambiguity and variability (Galimberti, 2005 [2019]). Hermeneutic approaches do not presume relativism, but plasticity. Openness to emergent meanings and the capability to adapt the research to the unknown and the unpredictable are the fundamental values of hermeneutic approaches (Gattiglia & Morelli, forthcoming). The same is true for mediation and for some ways of approaching educational research (Trincherò, 2004).

This hermeneutic approach is based upon the idea that human beings structure their experience in narrative forms, moulding their experience into reconfigured structures that help them making sense of what happened, and that at the same time are decisive in structuring the individual's identity (Ricoeur 1990). In this sense, the present analysis will be carried out through a thematic analysis and narrative inquiry of the conversational data of two meetings. While thematic analysis highlights the recurrence of topics among the participants to the interaction, narrative inquiry is concerned with the structures of the personal narratives that are woven by individuals and by the groups in which these are situated, that is, the public narratives that shape and are shaped by each individual's story. Personal narratives within a group help understand how the different group members understand their experience within the group itself, for example in the ways they explain their work processes, give reasons for the choices made, and recapitulate past discussions. Groups try to build personal narratives into a collective narrative through conversational actions: requests for clarification, negotiation of meanings, self-translation, ascertaining of mutual understanding, to name but a few. In following these actions and the content that is expressed, we can give attention to the mediation of personal and group meanings.

### **3. Corpus of analysis**

The corpus consists of the videorecordings of two on-line meetings of the aCT project that were carried out during the last year of the project (2021). While the videos' visual information corroborated the analysis of the interactional dynamics, speech played a major part due the limitations of video-mediated conversation. The "fragmented ecologies" (Mondada, 2016) that are typical of video-mediated interactions imply a greater reliance on the verbal and linguistic code to make explicit all those meanings that would be expressed non-verbally (body language, proxemics, space management...) in on-site interactions. Mediation in on-line settings, then, presumes a greater effort in verbalizing affects, stances, and affiliations, something that could be difficult for neophytes, especially during meetings to whom only some time can be allotted (in our case, a maximum of one hour and a half). This is why we chose a thematic and narrative analysis of the videos, while at the same taking into account the researcher's personal recollections.

#### **3.1. Goals of the meetings**

Both meetings were group meetings where the whole Italian group was asked to take part (sub-group meetings were attended only by the people working on that particular part of the project). They have the following characteristics:

Group meeting 1 (13/04/2021, GM1): 55 minutes, 10 participants, aim of the meeting: to describe and discuss the proposal related to objectives and competences of the IO2: an on-line course in community and peer mediation<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> For the final version of this output, see <https://ipb-mediacion.herokuapp.com/>



Group meeting 2 (28/04/2021, GM2): 81 minutes, 9 participants, aim of the meeting: to describe and discuss the proposal related to the IO4: the handbook of the project<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.2. Participants to the meetings

The following table shows the participants to the meetings and some personal details: age, gender, professional role and area of expertise<sup>16</sup>.

**Table 1.** Meetings' Participants

	Meeting	Age	Gender	Professional role	Area of expertise	Previous experience in mediation
<b>HB</b>	GM1	31	F	Pedagogist/ Educator for San Marcellino NGO	Pedagogy	Y
<b>JB</b>	GM1	45	F	UniGe student	Media and Communication	N
<b>FB</b>	GM1	48	M	UniGe academic staff (associate professor)	Psychology	N
<b>DDL</b>	GM2	58	M	Cultural and social activities director for San Marcellino NGO	Social work / Family and Community mediation	<b>Y</b> <sup>17</sup>
<b>NG</b>	GM2	37	F	Translator UniGe teaching staff	Translation and Interpreting (FR-IT)	Y
<b>GG</b>	GM1 GM2	30	M	UniGe student / Music educator	Music Pedagogy	N
<b>MM</b> (Coordinator)	GM1 GM2	54	F	UniGe academic researcher	Translation and Interpreting (ES-IT) / Community mediation	<b>Y</b>
<b>JPS</b>	GM1 GM2	41	M	Cultural manager/ San Marcellino collaborator for research, communication and cultural activities/ Project manager in mediation projects	Social and Political Sciences Community mediation	Y
<b>PAL</b> <sup>18</sup>	GM1	39	F	Unige academic staff (post- doctoral researcher)	Pedagogy	N
<b>PS</b>	GM1	24	F	Unige student	Education and Pedagogy	N

<sup>15</sup> For the final version of this output, see [https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual\\_0.pdf](https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual_0.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> We are aware that this kind of information cannot stand for the complexity of each individual and should not be taken as having any predatory value. We chose to indicate the criteria that seemed to be relevant for our analysis, with the exception of gender, that was indicated to avoid any involuntary predominance of the masculine gender in the reader's reconstruction of the events. The team members are here ordered according to participation in the conversations: those who contributed by taking the floor are listed before (in alphabetical order).

<sup>17</sup> Bold indicates more than 10-year experience in mediation.

<sup>18</sup> This person was supposed to join the working group some months after the meeting we are analysing. Nevertheless, in the end this was not possible.

<b>MB</b>	GM1	22	M	Unige student	Education	N
<b>FK</b>	GM2	37	M	San Marcellino social worker	Diplomatic Sciences Education	Y
<b>CC</b>	GM2	24	F	Unige student	Media and communication	N

Source: our creation

### 3.3. Analysing the meetings

In analyzing interactional data where one is involved, researchers are confronted with difficult choices: one could opt for an analysis of conversational routines and meaning-making emerging on a turn-by-turn basis, without adding further interpretations from an external point of view. While this methodology has its merits, we felt that a reflexive process could not be avoided alongside our thematic and narrative analysis. In watching, listening and reading the conversational data from our group’s meetings, we could not avoid asking ourselves what this revealed about ourselves as social agents within that particular group, how our actions had affected the whole project and the single meeting, what kind of conversational practices we chose and to what effect, what roles we took on, sometimes with lesser awareness than what could be hoped for...

In doing so, writing this article turned into a collective reflexive process. Collective reflexive processes in research are demanding: they imply self-exposure and self- and hetero-analysis aiming at negotiating a collective meaning, rather than relying on the individual’s impression of what happened and what constitutes data. In this sense, they require a conscious effort in mediating personal meanings, including emotions and self-representations, in order to ask the relevant questions and unveil intentionality. Such a degree of self-exposure is possible if the whole group embraces mediation as both an ethical stance and a practice.

In working on the conversational data of our group’s meetings, we had to decide how to address them: should we rely on pre-existing categories for the analysis of turn-taking and on-line conversation, trying to frame what we saw in an orderly manner, perhaps using our own interpreting grids that were designed to guide reflexive process and data interpreting during the project, as the one indicated in note 13. We decided to begin from a collective brainstorming about the main assets of the project; then, each of us watched the recordings, and analysed what seemed to be relevant for this article. Each of us produced a different interpretation, using different tools: the two linguists within the group<sup>19</sup> worked within a thematic- and narrative-analysis framework; the pedagogist focussed on the balance between professional and conversational roles; the psychologist reviewed the article from a more external position. Instead of merging the individual’s meaning into a homogeneous narration, we decided to signal every lack of uniformity in interpreting the experiences we lived. We strove to preserve individual’s difference within a group narration that could account for the diversity of each perspective rather than producing an artificial hodgepodge just to show that harmony has been achieved at the end of the mediation process. Rather, and as we will show in this article, mediation is about being able to experience disagreements, conflicts, and otherness in such a way as not to feel menaced by them.

## 4. Analysis of the corpus

### 4.1. Peer mediation in asymmetric contexts: who is a “peer”?

A first definition of a peer group is a group of people who are united by some relevant aspect, such as: interests, socio-personal conditions, experiences, social status. Yet, each group is unique. Forsyth (2010) draws a list of some typical characteristics of peer groups, such as (a) an alternation between two types of interaction (Bales 1951), that is, relational interactions (aimed at strengthening emotional and interpersonal bonds), and activity-focused interactions (aimed at optimizing resources to achieve the group’s goal); (b) the existence of more or less explicit objectives, which could be instrumental (e.g., performing a task),

<sup>19</sup> For a better description of each person’s role, see Table 1.

intellectual (producing and processing knowledge) or relational (building bonds); (c) varying degrees of interdependence, depending on the objective: for example, in projects implying individual participation to group work, interdependence will be high. (d) a particular set of roles (what is expected of people) and norms (what is deemed acceptable within the group); (e) a sense of collectivity that allows individuals to perceive the group as a different entity and greater than the simple sum of individuals (aCT Handbook, 2021<sup>20</sup>).

The goal of the aCT project was to empower students into becoming peer mediators; thus, at least originally, the project meant “peers” to be university students working with people in their same condition in both national and international groups during the International Partners’ Meetings and the Summer and Fall Schools that were part of the project<sup>21</sup>.

At the same time, the students were supposed to take part to the national group meeting, where older and more experienced people were present: the coordinator of the project, academic research and teaching staff, social workers. This first difference in (social and project-based) status made for different degrees of conversational authority (Heritage 1997), that is, the conversational roles taken (e.g., “questioner” vs answerer”), the possibility to select relevant topics and to discard non-relevant ones, the time and place one’s turn (i.e., the utterance) takes within the interaction: for example, opening and closing turns receive higher attention and affect the following conversation more deeply, because they select the topic and establish the norms for what will follow (openings) and decree the ending of the discussion and recapitulate selected relevant issues for the group (closings). This underlines the very concrete nature of speech; when we speak, we ask, answer, order, offer, persuade: we act. It is in this sense that being asked to speak means being asked in partaking authority and power, that is, the possibility to affect one’s own environment (Arendt 1958 [2019]).

This is the case in the project’s meetings such as the two we have analysed. Since the first steps of the project<sup>22</sup>, the students were not only asked to join the group meetings, but they were involved in the creation of the project’s activities and outputs with the whole group. They were asked to design, assess and implement the teaching-and-training activities, the international meetings and the IOs, with no role difference between students, social workers, and academic staff.

Students and non-academic research staff took a key role in the designing of the project’s training activities, and IOs. These were designed freely, according to the project’s goal as known by the whole group, and then presented to the whole group during a general meeting. The proposed activity or output was then discussed and amendments proposed after a group debate<sup>23</sup>.

This structure suggests a great responsibility being given to students and non-academic research staff in producing content and activities that would in a second moment being submitted to the other international partners. This highlights one of the main characteristics of the project: while university students were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the project and to “receive” training, they were instead put at the forefront of the project alongside other non-academic research staff, calling into account a different notion of “peer”. On the one hand, a community of practice was formed that involved people with different areas of expertise, varying degrees in being involved in mediation projects, and different roles in the University setting. This allowed for an exchange between specialist and non-specialist knowledge and skills, as in the following example:

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<sup>20</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of peer groups and for the references cited in this paragraph, see [https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual\\_0.pdf](https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual_0.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> The Summer School was held in July 2021 and the Fall School in September 2021. For more info, see <https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-06/Summer%20School%20July%202021.pdf> and <https://act.unige.it/node/29>.

<sup>22</sup> Unige students were selected in February 2020, that is at the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy. Some reflections on the impacts of the pandemic on the project can be found in Intellectual Output 1, p. 14 (<https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2021-10/IO1%20def.pdf>) and Intellectual Output 4, Introduction ([https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual\\_0.pdf](https://act.unige.it/sites/act.unige.it/files/2022-03/aCT%20IO4%20Handbook-Manual_0.pdf))

<sup>23</sup> An example are the introductory videos to Intellectual Output 2 units, created by working group’s students, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9cTaLK0UMQ&feature=youtu.be>. Also the Newsletters and other dissemination material of the aCT project saw students playing an active role. See <https://act.unige.it/Notizie>.

HB: [GM1 4'34"] (...) And then, on the right, you'll see the accordion part, we love it, we love the accordion part, then we thought about some jolly activities, bonus activities if you want... that can be used within each unit to dilute or to implement the time the users spend on each activity. So, we made some proposals that seemed to us to be the more... we'll say, asynchronous, as possible, both on a community level and on an individual one. This is the idea that we had, that we had together. I don't know if GG is there and wants to add something more... (...) <sup>24</sup>

GG: [GM1 14'58"] Well, I think that the good thing, well, of the Portuguese proposal that I didn't read in detail, but this is what is the first step that we'll need to do, that is, articulating our two units, so, the first two; defining our goals, their goal, because this is how one does educational design: one says, right, a student, an association's worker doing our first unit needs to conclude this unit and he will know, he will be able to do these things, these few things. They have made them clear, haven't they? This is the first step. (...) [19'08"] A last thing – I'm sorry, it just came to my mind this very moment – well, I don't know if you talked about it in the international steering committee: the assessment issue, right? We'd thought about a last hour, more or less, of... peer assessment, that means, as we imagined it, an assessment carried out among the students that will lead to an assessment by the teacher; but first, we need to know if this is in line with the output's criteria, if it's feasible and how... well, basically if we agree upon that, because this is quite important and we'd need to discuss it beforehand. After that, how we assess all that, that is, within the course or not, who carries out the assessment, how, et cetera.

MM: [GM1 20'05"] Yes, excuse me, I'm taking the floor for another three minutes because it's something about what GG has said, and also HB (...) [20'44"] As an answer to GG... No, absolutely; we didn't arrive at the assessment part, yet. When we shared all this, we only said that the peer-assessment part should be carried out in peer-group activities, that is, the idea is that this is not a self-training course, this is a course where there'll always be some human beings, perhaps there'll be on-line tutors, or on-site tutors... We hope that there'll be lessons taught or co-taught in presence... So, at this point... the idea of assessment is still, we might say, in the air, but I think that with a view to uploading materials on a platform (we talked about that, shortly – if you want, I can tell you), well, clearly the structure is going to change if, say, we do something that... what kind of assessment, well, with PAL we talked about it before and we were thinking of something more formative, right?, that'll help with this work, the reflexive work that it's so important for us.

In this extract, a sub-group formed by a university student in Pedagogy and Educational Design and Research (GG) and a pedagogist with a background in educational design (HB) explain their proposals for the IO2, the on-line course in community and peer mediation. What is remarkable in this excerpt is the expert role that is given, and taken, by the two sub-group member. Their role as experts in educational design is highlighted by the use of: (a) domain-specific terminology („PBL“, „accordion“, „peer assessment“<sup>25</sup>); (b) domain-specific practices that are introduced as norms: „ the good thing, well, of the Portuguese proposal that I didn't read in detail, but this is what is the first step that we'll need to do, that is, articulating our two units, so, the first two; defining our goals, their goal, because this is how one does educational design“<sup>26</sup>.

This appeal to the tenets of educational design is paired by a more traditional perspective on how peer assessment should be designed and carried out. The expert knowledge is then challenged by the coordinator,

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<sup>24</sup> At this point, a new member (PAL) joins the videoconference.

<sup>25</sup> The terms are not explained. This may result in an increased knowledge gap between the two peer-experts and the peers having expertise in other domains. During the same group meeting, FB makes a further proposal, explaining the meaning of some terms and of the proposed activity – thus operating a mediation between specialist and non-specialist knowledge.

<sup>26</sup> The IO2 was coordinated by the Instituto Politécnico de Bragança who had already sent a general proposal and structure of it, based on more traditional mediation issues.

a non-specialist, that expresses her views: the project should give more attention to the “peer” over the “assessment” part; and the peer assessment should make a further step towards reflexivity, that is, the ability to analyse past actions to find weak points and propose better courses of actions for the future. In this case, the expert knowledge is enriched by a non-specialist contribution: the de-centred, oblique perspective of the non-specialist can uproot ingrained praxis and subvert it to create something new and more relevant for the group goals.

On the other hand, this very same blend of people involved with an academic setting (being they students, researchers, teaching staff or academic staff) and people who were outside this setting (social workers, independent researchers) made for a peculiar asymmetric setting that was not based upon age or the (supposed) beneficiary role of students, but one that relied on the existence of an academic affiliation of sorts and lack thereof.

The “peers” within the project, then, could not be identified as one single group made up of students of more or less the same age, but could also be seen in terms of different affiliations and identities. This justifies the definition of the communicative environment we are analyzing as asymmetrical contexts, where academy-affiliated participants (notably, as can be expected, the senior participants) had a greater procedural authority as they knew more about the dynamics of international academic projects such as an Erasmus+ project.

A third asymmetry can be linked to the previous experience in mediation settings. Irrespective of their social status and academic role, some group members were novice in mediation, while others had several years (or decades) of experience in community mediation, and had been working together for some time in other projects. This meant that an epistemic asymmetry was present, a difference in the experience and knowledge concerning the topic that was at the centre of the project. The group members (or “peers”) had to negotiate that and to find out what community and peer mediation was and could be for that very particular community.

#### ***4.2. Doing mediation: empowerment through collective action and reflection***

We will borrow from the notion of guided discovery, intended as the inductive method through which students will ‘discover’ the meaning of a particular item or concept (such as a language unit, or psycho-social phenomena like conflicts), to describe the process of learning about mediation thanks to the immersion within a community of practice. By engaging in lessons and group debate, the participants with less epistemic authority concerning community and peer mediation learnt about the approach of their peers with greater experience; at the same time, though, the whole group was experimenting mediation: the organization of the working process (as described above) and the group meetings show that the participants were engaged in a meaning-making process, trying to answer to the question “What is mediation?” while at the same time doing mediation in their group activities.

The two videorecordings show several instances of this meaning-making process:

HB: [GM1 4’15”] We believed that it could be interesting, as a proposal, to begin with a collective methodology. On the side, you see a short explanation of the introduction and the different methodologies that we proposed. (...)

GG: [GM1 5’52”] This is an idea that, as you said, is about a general approach, that is, it’s a proposal that needed to be discussed and I think it has been discussed with the international group to create a committee and coordinate everything... well, the road we are choosing to take... mediation not just as contents but also as an educational approach in this sense.

“Mediation”, then, is a form of experiential knowledge – and, as such, it can be learnt as a topic; but it is also a theoretical, pragmatic, and ethical framework that can be learnt and appropriated only within a group through practice and self-reflection. While this may seem obvious – how can one learn about community and peer mediation without a community or some peers? – courses on mediation abound that treat it as a set of techniques that can be approached in isolation, to be subsequently applied whatever the context. Moreover, “mediation” is not about some content to be exposed; rather, it is essential a way of being and of behaving. What is interesting, here, is that GG talks about an “approach”, rather than a “method”. A philosophical

stance, then, and an ethical (that is, both axiological and political) one, rather than a structured framework of rules and behaviours to adopt. This is why mediation cannot be univocally defined:

GG: [GM2 19'33"] I believe that this could be something, maybe not something easy to arrange, but surely interesting... the fact that we discuss ideas, that is, the ideas that come up from the exchange, from personal narratives... we could discuss them in small transnational groups. For instance, I'm thinking about a small meeting, right?, like today's meeting, with two people from Italy, two from Spain, two from Portugal, and we'd try to share the stories, right?, that is, everybody thinks of their experiences with mediation within this project and then shares and tells them within different groups, that is, with people belonging to... It's not easy, but this could be something interesting to experiment with. Then we could see, we could set up some mini-focus groups, transnational ones... Well, it's an idea that I'm sharing with you; and the fact perhaps to try... to try and look for different ways to tell something... Sometimes, it's the language of photography that is used, or other languages; so, we'll talk about what mediation has been for us, so why not finding other forms, other media than verbal speech – because of that, we have plenty, we use it a lot, but maybe some other contents will come up. These are the two thoughts that came to my mind.

In this sense, mediation means being able to acknowledge the differences that exist among different people – in this case, the differences between the three international partners:

GG [GM2 31'43"] (...) let's define the criteria. And then, each partner brings, creates its own point of view... that will be necessarily different from that of the others, because of the topics and above all because in the IO2, where we are now, everybody is working on a different topic, and with the approaches that suit them best... and maybe we could form a group, a fourth group that follows the whole thing, that tries to, in inverted commas, reflect on what is emerging, on the similarities and also on the things that are different, without judging on right and wrong, of course. We are talking here of mediation, but mediation in showing our differences. (...) And it's from all that that, in my opinion, mediation comes out, also from making these things co-exist<sup>27</sup>, with a comment maybe, or a further analysis on the part of a smaller group working on the connections between the parties.

Allowing differences to emerge, though, is not easy, both on an organisational as well as on a personal level. During the aCT project, the partners had to deal with differences that threatened to trigger conflict, as they revolved around the very nature of mediation.

### ***4.3. Acknowledging differences and conflicts: a practice of belligerent mediation for peaceful times***

Within an Erasmus+ project, partners are supposed to share a common view on the topic and to work accordingly; in the aCT project, this was not the case, or not in such a straightforward way. partners had different experiences in mediation<sup>28</sup>, a different scientific and disciplinary background<sup>29</sup>, and a different idea

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<sup>27</sup> During the article-writing process, the use of this term stroke us as dissonant with the perspective on mediation that was at the core of the project, and that has been illustrated in §1.2. Debate ensued among the researchers to understand the meaning of the notion employed: we tried to avoid misunderstanding the meaning of this notion as well as overlooking what could have been a sign of a different perspective and, as such, a source for debate. One of the researchers tried to reformulate her understanding of the turn: "Here I think that GG wanted to say 'co-existing', 'acknowledging that there can be multiple contemporary possibilities'. Have I got it right?". GG answered to elaborate more on his thought: "Yes, I think that I was speaking of a multiplicity of visions, of parallel and different experiences that co-exist and that need to be understood and respected, to find a complex synthesis. The term 'polyphony' is perhaps more representative of this concept". In this exchange, doubt, interrogation, reformulation and self-translation are all instances of (reflexive) mediation within a group.

<sup>28</sup> Unige and San Marcellino have been carrying out community mediation projects jointly since 2007 (see <https://www.sanmarcellino.it/presentazione-mediazione-comunitaria/>). Universidad Complutense de Madrid has huge experience in family and organisational mediation (see <https://www.ucm.es/adrsxxi/>). Their academic and teaching staff have been collaborating with Federación Red Artemisa (Madrid NGO partner in aCT) for many years in

of what mediation was: Who is going to give an ultimate definition of mediation? How can the IOs be produced without suffocating the differences within the consortium?

JPS: [GM2 47'17"] That one is there that sums everything up, that's normal, but always bearing in mind that they need to involve the others... Well, I, on the IO1 that is super-practical and it's already there, we have this document that's eternal, well, I imagine that after a short explanation about how we made the document, we'll bring up some theoretical elements that... You know, a good thing is that the people in Madrid tell us what is the key concept for them or... or another option could be that everyone reads what the others have written and then they sum the others up, of course in an interaction that is built together with the others... Those who are leadering (*sic*) tell the others, and then the others say yes or no... I'm done.

DDL: [GM2 48'25"] I'm all for a Castroist model.

GG: The problem is that this is not mediation (*grins*), this the matter here... it's effective, but it's not... well, because also when you select an issue, when you make a selection in some way you make some choices that are just yours, they're not...

How, then, could one avoid taking on the powerful role of „definitor“, deciding upon the true meaning of mediation? How can the IOs be true to the differences existing between the partners, rather than opting for a compromise between the three positions? During the second meeting, we found some examples of how to acknowledge differences and give them meaning and value, rather than obliterating them:

NG: [GM2 9'24"] Another possible activity, that's not a reflexive activity, but an activity... that partially is reflexive because it brings us to think of the internal differences and to treat them as themes, but as Mara was saying in one of our exchanges, that's of course a demanding work, a work that may demand some specific tasks: a glossary on mediation, so... a glossary that may not produce a synthesis but rather a polyphony, a plurality and then with glossary entries that may have different definitions.

The idea of a glossary with different meanings for each entry<sup>30</sup> shows how mediation is seen as a way to make space for diversity – a practice allowing for differences to be acknowledged and given dignity and value. Conflicts (be they about ideas, attitudes, methods...) do not need to be forcibly sedated – they can become a source for mutual knowledge, a knowledge that can be transformed into a meta-learning tool, mediating mediation. In this sense, the idea of not being able to account for the different views existing between the partners deviates from a mediating attitude:

GG: [GM2 36'08"] I think that if any national group goes back to that and creates, really, something very small, very simple, where one explains the development of these experiences... it could be interesting, and the fact that every group is involved is a way to make them participate, much more than having two or three of us sitting there to operate a synthesis. In this way, we'll have participation, I think.

NG: [GM2 41'13"] (...) I believe that the risk here is to operate a synthesis as in a summary, and not to operate a synthesis as in... understanding what is aCT's perspective...

Of course, this is not an easy task. Unveiling differences means engaging with complexity, negotiating one's own idiosyncrasies, revealing conflicts:

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intercultural and community mediation projects. The Portuguese partners (Instituto Politécnico de Bragança and Centro Ciência Viva de Bragança) have a sound partnership experience in carrying out local and transnational projects, although they were novel with respect to community mediation.

<sup>29</sup> For Spain, the Social Work and Law School, together with the Nursing bachelor's course; for Italy, the Departments of Educational Sciences (including the Media communication bachelor's course), Medicine, and Modern Languages and Cultures; for Portugal, the Translation and Language Master's Degree Courses, as well as the Nursing bachelor's course.

<sup>30</sup> The idea was discarded due to time constraints.

NG: [GM2 52'20"] Designing questions, underlining affinities and divergences. Perhaps one needs some courage to underline the affinities and the divergences but really, in my opinion this wouldn't be something bad, because otherwise we'd somehow give... well, we give an impression of uniformity within a process that was not uniform at all, but not being uniform is not a problem – this is what I think, I that wasn't in charge of coordinating the project and all that stuff – because these affinities and these divergences can be made explicit. And perhaps when they are made explicit, they become less painful. Possibly.

Differences should not be suppressed or ignored; peaceful coexistence is not to be preferred over mutual understanding and clarity. It is in this sense that mediation can be made, learnt, and taught. The same can be said for conflicts: the need for the people involved is not to avoid conflict at all costs, but to be able to live through conflicts in a better, more communicative way. Conflicts are an instance of communication: they retain a dialogic attitude in acknowledging the other as somebody to confront, even to clash with.

While mediation is often seen as a way to prevent conflicts from arising, the Italian group prefers to see conflict as a chance for learning something about oneself and the others; a natural feature of living within a community:

JPS: [GM1 27'35"] From the presentation of the general structure, I got the idea that this is something very interesting; and thinking of the document that was sent by the Portuguese, the example of Portuguese-Spanish border is also very interesting – because this overcomes the idea that we have of a triadic mediation, so... well, on the last document I'd add something about taking care of the context. Well, I'm very happy that the idea of conflict is not that explicit in any of the points and so, it's fine, let's say, to stay within the conflict, to manage and to control it, without resolving it...

Once this is acknowledged, one can also take a step further, as underlined by the same person (JPS) who carries on his turn:

... but I believe that maybe (...) an empowering – I use this word even if it's complicated – approach, well, even if it's difficult... but this output should bring those who are following the course to a reflection about oneself and about the group, both in a passive and in an active way – in the sense that one could take on the responsibility and take care of the context.

Here, we see how a particular approach to conflict is drawn, where conflicts are not to be excluded from community action; on the contrary, groups should learn how to “stay within a conflict” and to actively take care of their “context”. A definition of “empowerment” is then proposed as a passage from passive to an active attitude towards conflicts and the context of the group. In this sense, “being empowered” is seen as having the power to act, means taking care of the group and of its context.

## 5. Results

From the two group meetings, one can apprehend mediation from two different, but complementary perspectives. On the one hand, “mediation” is treated as a topic: the participants debate around the meaning of mediation, trying to define it on their own terms, to make themselves understood and to understand each other. It is through these conversational moves that another perspective on mediation comes to light: mediation as a practice, a strategy for teaching and learning that is based on the exploration of personal meanings and on group debate to negotiate common (although not necessarily identical) meanings. Peers who have different authority, knowledge, status, and age, such as the faculty within the aCT group, can work as mediating actors within a group debate; at the same time, they invest part of their authority in creating spaces for the expression of students and other participants. In both cases, the duty of these peers is that of the Freirean teacher, that is, the duty to

challenge (...) those who are educated, with whom he is in communication and to whom he communicates, to produce their own understanding of what is being communicated. There is no



intelligibility without communication and intercommunication, none that is not based upon Dialogicity. (Freire, 1996 [2004]: 36, our translation)

Such spaces can also take the form of projects, as in our case – where sub-groups made of students and social workers were charged with the design of educational activities, thus allowing both for a meta-discourse on teaching and learning where the two roles were somewhat blurred; and for empowerment seen as both the responsibility taken in playing a more active role (a responsibility towards becoming an active subject of learning), and in creating something for the rest of the group, national and international. A transition is made from individual power (the power of affecting others) to care (the power of showing affect for others, also in the management and attention given to group situations).

The two notions of empowerment and care were adopted by each participant and embodied in their self-expression. The free expression of one's ideas was made possible by the care shown by the other group members, listening without prejudices or rigid attitudes. This led to a re-creation of the context, and a re-definition of the experience and of the roles of the people involved. Reviewing the ideas expressed by oneself and the others, justify them, interpreting them from different perspectives: this collective process has much to do with communication, but also with invention. The constant reformulation of the process and of the group itself encouraged the participants to look for new connections between the ideas, to create new passages to find a new way towards a common goal. Mediation as a practice worked, then, as a trigger for the participants' creativity. Meeting the Other through dialogue and mutual perspective-taking can provoke a momentary loss of one's reference points. A feeling of being lost is then natural – or, better, a feeling of being disoriented, as it happened sometimes during the second group meeting analysed here. Disorientation, though, is not a negative experience in itself: rather, it should be seen as an Elsewhere, a starting point for invention, novelty, creation of a new thought (Rodari, 1973).

Nevertheless, in order to conclude the creative process and to turn the idea into something tangible, momentary inspiration is not enough: a model for planning is needed (Munari, 1981). Mediation offers this possibility as well, since sharing an idea within a community can become a method for collective planning, where the individual creativity is supported and enhanced within the group.

Coming back to the educational background that we took as our starting point – that is, the key skills described above, we can identify several connections between mediation and the development of those skills for all the participants, whatever their role:

- Multilingual competence: having to deal with a variety of registers, topics and disciplinary approaches, and with multilingual materials, the participants improved this soft skill, adapting their peculiar communicative codes to the context.
- Personal, social, and learning-to-learn competence: on a personal and self-learning level, the dialogue empowered the participants into having a greater ability to deal with doubts and their resolution; a development of the social competence follows, as it was nourished within a community process.
- Citizenship competence: being a European project, aCT was organized along international collaboration and coordination. In this case, community mediation was not intended as a mere topic, used to think about the theme of European citizenship: rather, it was something that the students could put into practice, as they felt intimately connected with the partner working groups.
- Cultural awareness and expression competence: meeting the Other, debating one's own perspective, searching for a common ground for the project were all occasions to meet what is different from oneself in terms of culture, generation, role, disciplinary area, nationality, and language.

Nevertheless, a consideration needs to be made about the description of the key competences in the EU document: in their official formulation, it is the individual dimension that is more prominent. Thus, a student-centredness is fostered that focusses on the single student as if the learning path could be carried out in complete isolation from the context and the community. In the present work, we insist on the collective dimension of the learning process: we chose to talk about what a group learns and how the group fosters learning when a particular communicative environment is created. This means being able – and being encouraged – to ask questions, to explore alternative points of view, share doubts and criticism, creating a personal view on the matter while leaving it open to change through dialogue. Individual

empowerment is possible within a particular system of relationships with the (semi)peers that make up one's group. The development of soft skills could be conceived and promoted by an educational approach that is group-centred; when considering the educational planning, this means a re-definition in collective terms of the learning activities and the assessment processes. Community mediation as an educational practice goes this way.

## 6. Conclusions

The first results of the experiences that were analysed here show an increased awareness, within the people involved, of the importance of not avoiding nor removing difficulty and conflict, but to face them together, in a non-destructive manner, to transform them collaboratively. Mediation proves its usefulness in supporting faculty, but also students and professionals, in their updating and harmonization of methods and tools concerning the innovation of teaching-learning methods, on all levels.

Community peer mediation is a process engaging the individual on several levels, through reflection (intrapersonal level), listening and dialogue (interpersonal level), and the re-definition of the context (community level). As a consequence, it can be seen as a constructive and interactive competency-oriented methodology. It allows to focus more deeply on competences, meant as the combination of knowledge, skills and self-image. If we rely on the iceberg metaphor as described by Spencer & Spencer (2017), the first two components can be observed (they are the tip of the iceberg), while the third remains underwater. We showed as the practice of mediation brings people to work on this deeper level, transforming one's perspective and attitudes within the group. We believe this is relevant, especially when one thinks of the difficulty in promoting and assessing the development of soft skills in their being centred on the skill and self-image dimension. Considering mediation as a soft-skill educational practice means to implement a student-centred approach having the group, at its core, rather than a single discipline.

### 6.1. A few conclusive words on reflexive article-writing

We see reflexivity as a vital feature of mediation – since mediating means understanding one's own ideas and goals and those of the others; and since mediation strives for a common goal, for a change in the community and its life. In our case, this meant writing a scientific article where we analysed (also) our own conversational habits and actions. We relived the emotions and ideas that fuelled the discussion. In the analysis, this meant being able to unveil unspoken motives and feelings.

Unfortunately, scientific writing does not usually highlight this kind of processes. Objectivity is seen as one of the tenets of science: how could we talk about covert feelings, hidden goals and on-going relationships in a 'scientific' manner?

The answer is that we cannot, not in the way that Science is supposed to work. Scientific discourse is about producing accurate descriptions of things and investigating the causal relationships between phenomena; yet, while this can be the most appropriate way of knowing 'things' and events, this proves unsatisfactory when one wants to explore the embodied experience of human beings.

On the contrary, the disciplines that investigate the ways human beings inhabit the world concern themselves with meanings: we chose a hermeneutic approach based on description and reflexivity in order to come closer to some of the possible meanings of the events under scrutiny, that is, our own meanings, imbued with personal stories, feelings, knowledge. While this clashes with traditional scientific discourses, this is not synonymous with a lack of rigour. In accurately analyzing and describing the process through which we make meanings emerge, we rely on a different rigour, one that can leave some room for plurality and indefiniteness.

Our 'data' are lived experiences that can be understood through a phenomenological perspective (Galimberti, 2005 [2019]) rooted in collective reflexivity, intended as a tool to retrieve personal meanings and work on them to find a common perspective. "Common" as in "shared", and not as in "homogenous". As we have shown in this article, mediation is not about collecting different opinions and merging them into a dominant narration of the facts. It is rather the ability to enter into a dialogue and preserve the polyphony of voices while understanding the Other's way of being in the world. In following a hermeneutic approach, we cannot talk about "results" and "conclusions" in the common sense of this notions. We can – and we do – show how a mediation process can be carried out within a group; the meanings that can emerge; and how

these meanings can be re-signified within a research process. This is something that cannot be separated from the educational experience, as both teachers and students. In doing research, knowledge is increased about and within a process that continues beyond the educational experience and the post-hoc (partially) eccentric perspective that is required of the researcher. The two are closely inter-related: as Freire (1970 [2018]: 89) points out, in educational contexts teacher-researchers are not taking two different roles, those of a “knowing subject” while doing research, and a “narrating subject” during class. On the contrary, the two epistemic and communicative positions enter a cycle where knowledge is increased when we act and when we reflect. This cycle is indeed enriched by reflexivity, as Dewey (1916: 139) wrote:

Mere activity does not constitute experience. It is dispersive, centrifugal, dissipating. Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences that flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something.

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