



Interview with Dr. Alberto Cattaneo and his team (Elisa Motta, and Nicola Piatti, Prof. Dr. Jean-Luc Gurtner)

Winner of the 3rd Research and Practice Project Award 2014

Using mobile technologies for helping apprentice chefs to assemble learning experiences from various arts and places – a project of the Leading House “Dual-T – Technologies for vocational training”

1. Can you please tell the EAPRIL community something more about yourself and your research background?

At the moment I am responsible for the Research Field “Innovations in VET” at the Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (SFIVET, www.sfivet-switzerland.ch), the Swiss governmental center of competence for vocational and professional education and training (VET/PET). I started dealing with such themes in the mid-Nineties, when I began studying distance and e-learning. From this perspective, I developed my Master thesis analyzing in what ways group structures develop their identity through email conversations. After obtaining my Master Degree, ten years ago I’ve obtained my PhD in Social, Developmental and Organizational Psychology, discussing a thesis on Blended Learning and Virtual Learning Environments. Nowadays, my research interests are focused on the integration of technologies in teaching-and-learning processes, instructional design, multimedia learning – especially video-based –, integrated learning across locations, teacher education and teachers’ competence development. In the last years, such interests have been concretized mainly within two umbrella projects, one about the use of interactive videos (www.scuolavisione.ch, soon www.ivideo.education), the other – shared in the Leading House “Technologies for Vocational Education – Dual-T” – referring to how to exploit the potential of different kinds of technologies to better articulate learning across VET locations. The awarded project at the EAPRIL Conference 2014 grew out of this second project, which is sustained by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation SERI.

2. Can you please tell the EAPRIL community something more about your awarded project?

The project is embedded within the Swiss dual-track vocational system, where learning is distributed over at least two different learning contexts (a workplace and a vocational school). As a result, apprentices often have difficulties to aggregate such different information and experiences into a coherent body of competence; thus, they often experience gaps within their learning depending on where it took place. They also regard what they learn at school and what they experience at the workplace as two separate and different worlds.

Based on this situation, the project aims at exploiting mobile devices for offering apprentice chefs original ways to build bridges between these gaps and to reassemble information and learning experiences made across locations into aggregated learning units. Since transfer of learning will hardly spontaneously occur and knowledge often remains context-specific, these aggregations have to be stimulated on both sides of the bridge, by apprentices' supervisors at the workplace and teachers at school.

Mobile devices seem to be particularly useful for our purpose: they have a high potential to support the integration of non-formal and informal learning, allow just-in-time information retrieval whenever you need it and make note- or picture-taking easy wherever you are. We started exploiting these affordances in the chefs' apprenticeship. Throughout their training, apprentice chefs are requested to elaborate a recipe book and a learning journal of the significant workplace experiences they've encountered. We've taken the advantage of this requirement to allow apprentices to capture such experiences during their workday by using a Smartphone or in some cases a headband camera directly in the kitchen. At the same time, apprentices were trained to exploit such captured material for the realization of their personal recipe book and learning journal in an electronic environment made for this purpose. The resulting e-learning journal can then be shared both with the supervisor at the workplace – used to support the periodical meetings on the training – and with the teacher and the schoolmates at the vocational school. This latter opportunity is particularly interesting, as it allows the workplace to enter the school: in the construction of his lessons, the teacher repeatedly took the advantage of the materials available on the platform to include them in his lesson, and tested different learning scenarios.

3. What was your motivation to apply for the Best Research and Practice Project Award?

The motivation was manyfolded, but I could summarize this issue as follows: Very often you have separated tracks for appraising research and practice projects: you publish on ranked scientific journals your research results, and you disseminate the practical values through workshops and other events. But in so doing, in some sense you make an improper operation, as you artificially and definitely separate the two sides of a same coin, rather than treating it as a consistent whole. This award was a very interesting chance to present a project as such, giving relevance to the whole coin.

4. Why did you feel that your project made a good chance to win the Best Research and Practice Project Award?

When I read the call for the award I immediately thought that this project was a wonderful example of effective interplay between researchers and practitioners. It is innovative with respect to the solutions proposed to the practice and at the same time it expands educational research towards areas and contexts still underexplored compared to general education; moreover, it contributes to the improvement of the quality and effectiveness of basic vocational training, both in terms of learning and learning solutions for apprentices and in terms of new and renewed connections among the main stakeholders of the vocational system. Also thanks to the approach selected, namely Design-Based Research, the project found an effective way for researchers and practitioners to really work together, without a real predominance of the formers nor the latters, but really collaborating together in co-design activities and enriching each others' knowledge, skills and competences, starting from real needs of the field. In so doing, practice could profit from research, but at the same time research could profit from practice.

Then, considering the impact of the project on the field itself, the project also shows its effectiveness at the micro, meso and macro levels, starting from small interventions within one class and progressively involving the school, the companies, the Canton, up to the national corporate association. This networking job took time and energy, but the results achieved is also a proof for the relevance, the quality and the validity of the project. And I would profit then for explicitly thanking here, beyond the persons directly involved (Nicola and Elisa above all!), the helpfulness of the Vocational School in Trevano, in the person of the principal Roberto Valaperta, of the "Polo dell'Alimentazione e dei Servizi della Svizzera Italiana" within the school (Valerio Nicora and Saverio Pezzi), of the VET department of the Canton Ticino (Silvia Gada) and of the Hotel & Gastro Union corporate association (Eodardo Casasopra, Guido Zanchetta, Urs Masshardt). I certainly forgot somebody, they hopefully apologize me, but without such a precious support and collaboration the success of the initiative would have not been the same!

5. How has the EAPRIL Research and Practice Project Award and/or the experience of competing for this award (i.e. presenting your application at the conference in several timeslots?) helped you and your research activities as a researcher?

The experience of presenting the project not only in different timeslots but also in different formats (elevator pitch, poster, paper) was interesting and at the same time a challenge to really focus on the main added values of the project from the two perspectives of research and practice on one side and on the other side to avoid repeating three times the same contents or– differently said – to find a good way to give complementary information which could also stand-alone as well. As a researcher I could also profit from the opportunity to get in touch with interesting people, experiences and projects and increase my professional network. To this respect, I would like to emphasise an additional aspect: there were six of us in the shortlist; Of course it was a competition, so we could have perceived each other as opponents. On the contrary, there was a very nice and good atmosphere, I felt the support of the other finalists, and we frankly and serenely spoke with each other from the beginning to the end. This is not always to be taken for granted and I appreciated it a lot!

6. Why would you recommend the EAPRIL Conference to your colleagues?

As I've already mentioned this community is unique in its genre in bringing together - with the assurance of continuity and proper quality standards - two different communities of practices which can effectively work together.

7. What makes a good practitioner researcher according to you?

It is not easy to answer this question in two minutes without stating the obvious. I will run the risk of simplifying too much and say that it's the combination of the qualities a good practitioner and a good researcher should have. Just to select a few of them, I would cite accuracy, rigor, open-mindedness, founded theoretical and methodological grounding on the research side; and keeping in mind the relevance for the needs of - and the usefulness for - the field, to generate a significant impact on the field itself, to act with motivation, engagement, and specific (professional) competence on the practice side. In one word for both profiles? A well-grounded and constantly improving professionalism.

8. Finally, what would be your advice for the applicants of 2015?

If you feel your project is worthy of being shared with this community, don't hesitate to submit your application! Take it easy and enjoy this opportunity!

Thank you!

I thank you ☺

Interested in applying for the 2015 Best Research & Practice Project Award?

Visit our [Conference Website](#) and download the application form!

Deadline June 1, 2015

Decision nomination, beginning of July, 2015

