Coping with Ambivalence: Unanticipated Outcomes as Challenges for Experienced Teachers

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Abstract: Within school establishments is almost frequent that one is involved in conflictual situations and interactions and in unanticipated developments which challenge the actor's rationality and lead to innovative learning outcomes for the professional himself. Aim of this essay is to analyse such learning outcomes which grow up in professional situations full of ambiguity, contraddiction, ambivalence, in order to examine the role of teacher as a reflective practitioner. We assume that teachers, as other knowledge workers, are not able to became reflective practitioner in every situations, but they do it only under given conditions. The essay starts from the description of some study cases (teachers coping with unanticipated learning outcomes); deals with the concept of sociological ambivalence in R.K. Merton, and moves to an interpretation of the empirical cases by applying a model, in order to verify what kind of "oscillation" strategies teachers are able to use for balancing opposite values at stake (tradition/innovation; ripetition/variability, etc.).
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"A new teacher realizes that she is not able to redeem a 'bad student' notwithstanding a number of caring actions taking in favour of that girl; she believes she's not good at teaching".
"A young teacher fights with the headmaster to obtain respect from the school organization: she looses the struggle but earns in sensibility and self-confidence".
"An experienced teacher acts as a dictator to gain trust and legitimisation from students; she risks loosing her face but learns how to take distance from her own role".

What do these stories have in common?

The study carried out by the Milan research unit within the BA project (2005/06) focused on *typical situations* in classroom or school life during which unanticipated outcomes emerge. Given the social nature of teaching and learning, all unexpected events are pushed by interactive situations that involve teachers as "rational agents", together with other people (colleagues, pupils, parents, school representatives, etc.) and within a framework of constraints or opportunities for learning that are given by the lived context. Through narratives and post-factual interviews, a range of different cases were brought into focus; such situations can be classified according to the typology of challenges for the rationality of the agents, i.e.:

   -Situation 1 (failure) When an agent experiences that the current situation requires different prophecies or expectations from the ones that he/she had (from qualitative or quantitative point of view); there is, therefore, a close, short, reductive vision of the facts in the evaluation of the course of action;

   -        Situation 2 (serendipity) When one experiences a discovery, i.e. he/she extracts hidden parts from a given situation or context; here the actor acknowledges that he/she lives under a veil of ignorance and recognizes inspiration, illumination, new elements of certainty;

-Situation 3 (lack of authenticity): when one realizes that the previous vision of a social object is deceptive or stereotypical, so there are false values in play.

In order to proceed from a description of the cases to a deeper interpretation of the learning processes and mechanisms that underpinned them, a theoretical input is needed. The aim was to reach a comprehension on what really happens to the "rational agent" (§ 1). Such a theoretical frame – drawn from the sociological literature – opens a new focus: ambivalence as a constitutive feature of ordinary life and professions (§ 2). Looking to the narratives from this point of view, it will be clearer how hard the professional exercise for experienced teachers is today, balancing every day between opposite values and searching for new securities (§ 3).

The comprehension of *unanticipated consequences*

The purpose of the study is to improve the comprehension of unanticipated consequences as facts or situations. According to the "lived experience" paradigm (see Chambers' BA Report 2006), an unanticipated outcome is first of all an *experience* more or less acknowledged by the actors involved in it. So what kind of experience? In terms of doing, what happens? How does the actor deal with the uncertain and unexpected? In terms of learning, what is the main lesson that can be drawn from such a situation? For the moment, according to the "individualistic methodology" scholars, individuals are facing something that goes beyond their inner capacity to plan, to preview, and to keep all variables under the control of rationality.

The agents can have positive or negative feelings towards the unknown (comfort/discomfort), being more or less willing to consider it into their mental/behavioural setting. As a matter of fact, it must be an *extraordinary experience of contingency* (Dant – Francis 1998) that highlights: 1) the limits of rationality/cognition, and 2) the strength of the interaction between opposite elements: rational and irrational; known and unknown; causes and effects; subjective needs and objective dispositions, etc. What is not foreseen here is the result of this interplay: who can anticipate which one of these elements will prevail?

As Merton said, unanticipated outcomes belong more to the structure of action (*setting*) than to the actors themselves: *"The consequences of purposive action are limited to those elements in the resulting situation that are exclusively the outcome of the action (..) However the consequences result from the interplay of the action and the objective situation, the conditions of the actions"* (Merton 1976: 146). More in general it can be stated that wherever there is a dilemma, a contradiction, or an antinomy, a specific structural condition will be created - a new "factor" or " set of factors" that is relatively independent from the actor and his/her intentions or rationality. This is what Merton called *the emergency principle*; R. Boudon (1977) named the same principle *the aggregation effect,* i.e. it occurs when one or more individuals, pushed by "good reasons", don't produce a reasonable but a perverse situation. In the light of this study, it is useful to observe that the aggregation effect marks a social and phenomenological discontinuity or "distance" (*screen)* between intentions and behaviour, past and present, both within and outside the agent.

Facing an objective situation in which there are unanticipated outcomes, therefore, does not always mean to *be aware* of the unforeseen. The prediction analysis in itself could be desirable or not desirable for the agent, but as a matter of fact people decide to cope with it, to go in depth, and make sense of the unexpected event. For our analysis it is crucial to examine how one becomes aware and reaches a positive attitude towards a similar situation. For Merton it means:

- To be conscious of *failures* (that you are failing) in planning;

- To discover that ordinary habits – although aimed at maintaining a predictable course of action – aren't forcefully related to rationality, because *"habitual actions are characteristically performed without such awareness"* (Merton 1976: 147);

- To accept that whatever one's prevision is, the range of foreseen consequences is limited (for instance because of the short range of past experiences), so the knowledge about the situation is always partial, i.e. the actor is "ignorant" because *"he doesn't know the amount of knowledge necessary for the foreknowledge"*(Ibid: 150);

- To recognize that if one is so strictly concerned with an immediate urge to realize one's personal interests, then he/she doesn't take into consideration the further or other consequences; in other words, the actor is

ego-centric by nature or, quoting Merton , *"any particular action is not carried out in a psychological or social vacuum but its effects will <u>ramify</u> into other sphere of values and interest"* (Merton 1976: 153).

The image of a "ramification" (into various beliefs, values, interests, needs, attitudes, etc) seems an illuminating suggestion for the comprehension of the state of confusion that is generated by such intricate situation.

The rise of the *ambivalence*

Several stimuli drawn from Merton's work are useful to us. He put in evidence the contrasting feelings that invade the agent when facing an unexpected situation: sense of ignorance but also desire of conformity, mistakes and sense of weakness but also egoism and neglecting mechanisms, desire of continuity but also curiosity for new knowledge and experience, and so on. Generally speaking, an unexpected situation can be seriously threatening for the agent, and implies a double way out: 1) If recognized, the rising of the unknown leads the agent to admit his/her own ignorance, failure, or limited rationality; as a consequence, he/she will open up to the new experience even though the personal view (the *looking glass self* by Cooley, 1909) might be compromised for some time;

2) If neglected, the actor won't take the chance to let the latent side of him/herself arise and will probably search remedy in a usual course of action, a sort of normalization of the risk. He/she turns to ordinary life on the basis of a personal "old" image that is inadequate for future situations. The first option is preferred when the agents are ready to change at any price; the second is more probably chosen when adopting new habits is too expensive (in terms of time/energy) or when the factors at stake are perceived as too dangerous, either for the actors or for the situation in itself. In this context, Merton spoke about "*self defeating prophecy*", i.e. when a latent variable comes to the surface and modifies the current events, revealing by no means its own inefficacy. [This is the case of a cheat: when it is discovered and becomes evident, it loses its effectiveness (it gives up to threaten its victim)].

Unanticipated consequences are, therefore, typical instances where the level of ambiguity that pervades today's living experience is revealed. How

do I react? Understanding or not what is happening? Acting by traditional or new conduct? Here Merton becomes useful again, providing a suggestion with the concept of *structural ambivalence*. According to him, there is a psychological point of view, which refers to "*the experience tendency of individuals to be pulled in psychological opposed directions*". The notion of sociological ambivalence, instead, refers to "*incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour assigned to a status (i.e. social position) or a set of status in a society. In a more restricted sense, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations incorporated in a single role or a single social status.*" (Merton 1976: 6)

When experiencing the "sociological ambivalence effect", actors do not only perceive a difficult setting in which they have to act, react, decide how to act, comprehend, and evaluate various and contrasting types of data (the so-called internal side); they also have to cope with it as inherent to the social relation structure, "navigating" between concurrent functions assigned to roles (the external side). This ambivalence is provoked by an intensive crisis of the traditional normative structure, which entails nowadays role assumption.

The more the inter-dependence between subjects and structures increases (because of the globalization process), the more social roles, and particularly those associated with professions, evoke distinctive and opposed expectations in society and other subsidiary roles. The modern theory considers the notion of role not as a "*combination of dominant attributes*" but as a "*dynamic organization of norms and counter-norms*" (Merton 1976: 17). We can point out that norms refer to the general set of values dominating a given society; counter-norms are those arising from individual needs and viewpoints. When norms and counter-norms put contradictory demands upon the occupants of a status-role in a particular social relation, the result is an "*oscillation of behaviour*" (Merton 1976:8).

Ambivalence while exercising the teaching role is largely acknowledged in literature: Hoyle (1983) related on the paradox of professionalism within teachers. The more skills and knowledge they have, the fewer the benefits, even though their students will obviously draw benefit from it. Also reflective approach scholars underline the persistence of contradictory situations in teaching: Schön states that "reflection in action is a contradiction in terms" (Schön 1993: 285), while Van Maanen sees the

teacher's daily job as a "puzzling phenomenon" (Van Maanen 1992). Further evidence of the constitutively non-linear characteristics of teaching is provided by the metaphor of teaching as "bricolage" (Hatton 1992), whereby different tools, methods and techniques are used to construct, reform, and change the outcomes of the work.

Merton has identified 6 typologies of ambivalence: 1) conflicting normative expectations that were defined for a particular social role and associated with a single social status (i.e. teacher as discipline / permissiveness oriented), 2) conflicts of interests or values incorporated in a different status occupied by the same person (i.e. teacher and parent at the same time; teacher and supervisor), 3) conflicts within several roles associated with a particular status (i.e. teacher and researcher, teacher and administrator), 4) contradictory cultural values held by members of a society (i.e. achievement / solidarity; to be successful / to be honest); 5) disjunctions between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues to realize such aspirations (i.e. for a teacher, the aspiration to be prestigious and respected as a lawyer or a doctor conflicts with certain social and economical opportunities), 6) different sets of cultural and social values inspiring people who have lived or are living in two or more societies (immigrants, cosmopolitans, etc.).

How can one surmount an ambivalent situation? Because the sources of ambivalence are various and intricate, sociologists emphasize the *balancing strategy* of social actors as a way to cope with duality, accepting frustration and anxiety in order to live up to one's role (Calabrò 1997).

Being school professionals: coping with ambivalence and unanticipated learning outcomes

Methodology
Let's concretize the lessons drawn from Merton's work by applying his categories of ambivalence to the study of the teachers' job. By hypothesis, it is supposed that unanticipated outcomes and sociological ambivalence are joined together in critical professional situations. Whereas sociological ambivalence is hard to be reduced by a single actor, unanticipated events are psychological and cognitive sources of creative and "affirmative" actions in order to cope with insecurity and ambivalence. Secondly, it is

supposed that a reflective use of unanticipated outcomes for learning will vary among teachers depending on gender, age, experience, kind of school, etc.

Within a group of teachers attending a Master class for "Management in dropout problematic and prevention projects", we gathered case histories focused on critical incidents and role disputations (i.e. between teacher/educational assistant; teacher/headmaster; teacher/parent). The result was a collection of approximately 30 stories in which the focus lied on the interplay between the internal and external dimensions of teaching (attitudes, beliefs, feelings *versus* social expectations, rules, norms, other role positions). A feeling of discomfort was interpreted as an indicator of the "unexpected". The narrative reported also on the ways by which the professionals dealt with insecurity, in order to emphasize how they acted (traditionally or creatively?) and what/how they have learned from it.

The students were asked to underline: events, 'impact factors', personal feelings, values at stake, reactions to the factors, conclusion of the event, learning outcomes, and final change[2]. From this collection, five significant accounts have been selected that are considered to be representative for typical situations of insecurity and complexity at school:

1)   Coping with dropping-out students;
2)   Coping with inflexible students;
3)   Colliding with hierarchy;
4)   Colliding with peers/colleagues;
5)   Living in a farce[3].

A comparative text analysis has been carried out on these five stories in order to extract "semantic clusters" related to the *concepts of ambivalent* and *unexpected.* As a matter of fact, not all of them were "successful" stories (Birkeland 2005); however, each situation required an increase of professional acknowledgment in order to be surmounted.
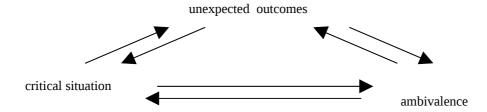
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[2] The last point (final change) has been the most difficult one to accomplish because most histories did not generate positive results. The students were therefore unable to recognize where a change had occurred; they tended to identify the change in the external environment, i.e. in the situation or in the relationship between the objective situation and themselves.

[3] These 5 accounts are entitled: 1) *The new teacher and Margherita*, 2) *Why don't you practice physical education*? 3) *Restoring the hierarchy among teachers*, 4) *The nice statuette*, 5) *The experienced teacher in the backstage.*

Model for interpretation

The accounts were read applying a triangle model of interpretation: in each text, three topics were identified: 1) the meaningfulness of the critical situation for the actor; 2) the particular ambivalence emerging from the situation; 3) the unexpected learning outcomes connected to the situation's development. In our model, there is supposed to be a circular tie between the three elements, even though a linear tie is more common: a critical situation becomes a source of ambiguity/ambivalence and – after that – it develops in itself becoming a source of new learning outcomes:

critical situation → ambivalence → unexpected outcomes

unexpected outcomes

critical situation

ambivalence

We suppose multiple and circular connections between the unexpected outcomes, the ambivalence, and the critical situation, whereby the amount of ambivalence existing in that particular situation/relationship or, vice versa, the presence of various elements associated with the unexpected (failures, uncertainties, ignorance, narrow range of expectations, personal values, etc.) can act as push factors (causing bad feelings in the people involved).

Outcomes

Let's go through the text analysis on the teachers' accounts. Starting by the meanings attributed to critical moments, it can be said that all the reports deal with *bad feelings* associated with the incidents: general discomfort, perception of inadequacy facing a given task, anxiety for a new situation, and frustration because of facts remaining unchanged despite caring actions. In other words, living a critical moment truly is an "*emotionally strong situation*" (case 3). In that moment, ordinary skills, new ideas, all energies are focused on how to overcome the impasse, how

to solve the problem. Not only feelings but also various *meanings* are associated with the incidents: in some cases the incident highlights the strength of habits and rules underpinned by ordinary life (i.e. case 2 and case 3); in others it makes one feel inadequate or fragile (i.e. case 1 and case 4); it challenges ordinary expectations or the charismatic leadership over the class (i.e. case 5). Of course, the impact of a critical moment on one's own life career can be positive as well as negative.

Considering the *perceptions of ambivalence,* various ambiguous frames are reported in our accounts. In all cases, teachers are exposed to the ambivalence of the setting in which they're operating; however, also the ambiguity internal to the teachers' role (like a "mirror effect") is a frequent case.

In case 1, there is an ambivalent behaviour both by the teacher towards the "dropping out" student and by the student and her mother towards the teacher.

"Even though expressing goodwill towards her, I asked her firmly to at least show respect during the lessons".

"I asked the girl for a more positive attitude. The mother agreed (..). However, the situation didn't improve (…). Margherita abandoned school."

In case 2, we notice that the ambivalence in the student's behaviour is reflected at an internal level when the teacher refers to the contrast between ideal/real professional standards:

"This situation was obviously frustrating for me because I was not able to accept that these students were refusing to take part in the lessons, despite my attempts to teach in an interesting and intriguing manner".

In case 3, the "situational" ambivalence evokes a very interesting reflection in the professional: for the first time the teacher acknowledges an internal ambivalence between needs and fears:

"A situation where communication was impossible (…), and my first reaction was to end my temporary collaboration with my colleagues and the director (…): I didn't even feel the need to ask for directions. Perhaps, unconsciously, I was afraid of a confrontation".

In case 4, the writer talks about a multiple ambiguity: in her relationship with the student, with her colleagues, and within herself:

"When I was in the classroom, Antonio didn't accept me as a "supporter teacher", but outside of the classroom he was really friendly and ready to learn".

"When I used to talk with my colleagues on how to manage the work with Antonio it seemed that they agreed, but each time that I arrived in the classroom one of them gently asked me to do it differently".

"I firmly desired to work with Antonio in the classroom – with his mates – but I was not able to stay close to him, so I played the 'nice statuette' in the corner of the classroom".

In case 5, the entire situation is ambiguous, reporting a dissimulation played by the teacher herself.

"I'm under scrutiny. It's better to dissimulate, to go back to the "backstage" maintaining my self-control."

Let's now analyze perceptions and interpretations of *unexpected learning outcomes (ULO)* as reported in the five accounts. The most common acquisition consists in new professional capacities and skills that made the actors grow, increasing their self-confidence and maturity during their professional exercise:

(Case 1) *"I have discovered skills in myself that I didn't think I had: determination, character, charisma, and influence on the students, motivation, the wish to transfer and to educate."*

(Case 2) *"Now I feel fortified and much more prepared to cope with similar situations." "I have learned the importance of turning critical moments into favourable occasions for personal growth".*

(Case 3) *"I've gained an experience in my relationship with colleagues and directors, (…) I've learned that I should have been more attentive to respect the dynamics and the habits of the school. I should have asked and confronted myself more with my colleagues."*

(Case 4) *"I've learned how and when one must take decisions: I decided very late to stop my worst, frustrating situation. I should have asked the director for a suggestion much more in time, before feeling unmotivated in my job".*

(Case 5) *"Without this incident, I would have made the mistake to consider my charismatic leadership over the class as totally achieved while, evidently, this wasn't the case."*

Only in two narratives, by no coincidence belonging to more experienced teachers, a general *change of attitude* becomes explicit; a new image of self as a teacher had developed thanks to the critical situation and the subsequent reflection. In case 2, the teacher accepts to be set under discussion at any time and declares to view himself no longer as "unchangeable": "*The value that I am now able to attribute to this experience is the need to always be ready to discuss and experiment all knowledge without considering it unchangeable*". In case 5, the narrator re-evaluates some personal and professional skills that she had disconfirmed during the situation, such as improvisation skills, good relationship with the class group, flexibility. In other words, only upon reflection she recognizes her own strengths, while in the "bad situation" she had lacked trust in herself and was therefore in the ambivalence's power.

Even though all the outcomes were unexpected (no matter the reason for lack of expectation: failures, habits, ignorance, or attachment to personal values, see in § 1), teachers appear truly open to include these acquisitions into their professional life. The very meaning of these ULOs is *novelty* (from now on they do act in an innovative manner facing similar situations) and *opportunity*, the willingness to take the chance not only for the development of the situation (as in case 5: "*I took the opportunity to redefine the borderlines between their and my role. The routine has immediately been taken up again and as of that moment my relationship with the group-class has made a further quality step forward.*") as well as for the development of the professional self. This is the case 2, in which the author regrets not to have grabbed the opportunity on the spot to "*create an interactive and constructive dialogue with former students*", but recognizes that the experience "*triggered in me the need to look for new paths through professional training, not just linked to the subject taught or the utilisation of the newer technologies*".

The reading of the accounts definitely shows a valuable *discrepancy between beginners and experienced teachers*. Firstly, the events selected for the account are at a different level of significance: while beginners are concentrated on problems affecting "physical" order (space-time organizations, position, division of work, etc.), experienced teachers deal with the "symbolic" order of their profession (satisfaction, gratification, consistency, reputation). Secondly, while the beginners tend to associate the lack of a "happy ending" with a feeling of frustration, the experienced

teachers show major interest in learning from difficulties, admitting that critical moments are favourable occasions for personal growth. Apart from age and experience, no other factors seem to be influent (gender, type of school, subject taught, etc.).

Looking into the strategies to overcome the impasse (those who have taken the chance to grow), this seems to occur in different ways.

Firstly, the importance of having developed *consolidated skills to manage themselves* is evident (it's a matter of "tricks of the trade", see Huberman 1991/2), not losing the face even though the control of the situation is compromised. This allows them to confirm their inner competencies as social enrolled actors (improvisation, imagination, adaptation, engagement, critical-mindedness, etc.) (see also Fettes 2005).

Secondly, they acknowledge that frustration, anger, and anxiety are congenital to the job: *any task in teaching is risky* because of the ambivalent expectations in social definitions of roles (teacher-student-parent, etc.). The only way to overcome this is by reaching the willingness to bear the risk and assume the contradiction within themselves; i.e. there's no integrity to gain/maintain but only unpredictable events when one tries to put in action both terms in an ambivalence: social values and personal interests, long-terms and short-terms purposes, functional and emotional needs, etc. In case 5, the teacher has to deal with the disruption of her self-esteem based on charisma: *I shouldn't take anything for granted, not even my charisma.* In case 2, the teacher became gradually conscious of the limits to his best teaching practise, what he calls *intriguing and pleasant lessons*; both were persuaded to be on the 'right side' and had to see in the mirror (reflected by the situation) the 'wrong side' of themselves.

Thirdly, linking together the unexpected and the ambivalent in everyday life is no doubt an *"affirmative" action* for the professional, but unfortunately it is neither easy nor frequent. As demonstrated in our accounts, only when all is lost (problematic events) and all has been tempted (experienced teacher), the willingness arises to accept the possibility of failure, ignorance, invalidation of professional securities, etc. and to turn it into a benefit for the future career life. Reflection on what has happened in the situation and in oneself is the sole medium to resist to and overcome the bad feelings.

Reflective "balance" strategies

As Merton showed in his works, the implications of the structural ambivalence for the professionals' behaviour are serious. An adequate level of flexibility is needed to cope with alternative and opposite issues in endlessly varying contingencies, not to surrender to a dominant attribute but rather to bring both into play and choose for "*oscillation behaviour*". In practice, it means not to go straight for a "happy middle way" (mediation strategy) or to accept one or the other point as winner or hegemonic (assimilation strategy), but to balance between the two poles in line with the contingency. This could be provided and accepted also by the same structure of social relations, although individuals are not aware of this opportunity.

What does this mean for the experienced teacher, concerned with daily fights between opposite expectations? As a matter of fact, teachers frequently adopt an oscillation conduct in the classroom, i.e.:

-      Teachers behave as "cultural guardians" (social expectation) but also ignore a lot of data about the subject and the social use of the subject, and may perceive such ignorance (personal vision);

-      In the pedagogical rhetoric, teachers are expected to be creative constructors of knowledge (social expectation) but they actually are often repetitive (personal vision).

What makes the difference between an indolent and a fair balance strategy? The degree of reflection on the contingency leading the actor to oscillate towards one or the other term. The starting point of this reflective strategy must therefore be the occurrence of an unforeseen element and the recognition of the "screen" between the predictable and the unpredicted. As we noticed throughout the case-stories above, this "screen" (deriving from the structural ambivalence as well as from the limits of the rationality/cognition) has three main features (following Merton 1987):

1)   It is *unanticipated*: it has the power to challenge the actor's previous plans;

2)   It is *anomalous*: it puts under discussion his/her causality theories; and

3)   What is most important – it is *strategic*: it allows broadening the vision from a particular to a universal level of interpretation.

We firmly believe that a full recognition of these empowering features can provide teachers with the most optimal conditions to cope with complexity and ambiguity in the classroom, applying the entire repertory of strategic actions (Woods 1980).

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