Generating a New Idea of Public Mission for Universities

A Sustainable Communication Paradigm for Community Building

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4 Generating a New Idea of Public Mission for Universities: Two Case Studies

Two projects carried out under the auspices of the University of Florence (Good practices of Job Placement and Generative communication for CsaVRI) made up the experimentation of the research described above. In this context, the CfGC's researchers considered the university and the reference territory as a true living system, where the interaction between the various actors and the community building activities contribute to preparation of common ground where all the subjects can plan together the most effective ways to spread and apply innovation to the territory, giving strength, vitality and health to the whole system. The CfGC sees the services offered by the university as products of a community to be offered to the reference target and starts the communication process at the initial phase of their conception, transforming passive end users into active collaborators. Such services, in fact, must be conceived as real communicative objects through redefining the concept of communication of the product to communication within the product itself (Toschi 2011). In other words, a model of communication that is not limited to the promotion of a finished product, but that guides its design right from the start. For this reason, strategies must be designed to approach communication as a tool of knowledge that continuously improves the services offered, through constant feedback from end users. In this way, the services themselves will be the result of a shared project between the university, which listens to and engages the internal interlocutors, and the outside world, thus responding to the demand for skills and products that enterprises require to improve themselves. Only in this way, can universities finally reaffirm their essence as a place of experimentation where the contamination between students, graduates and researchers, companies and realities of the territory, brings continuous innovation to the whole cultural, economic and social fabric. The case studies presented here exclusively involved the Florentine university. This strong territorialization and limited duration of the projects could be seen as critical elements limiting the impact of the research carried out. However, the basic idea behind the work was that only by intervening on targeted objects (in this case those specific to the Florentine reality) would we be able to define and experiment a reference model able to be adopted on a large scale and in other universities.

5 The Good Practices of Job Placement Project

In 2016, the CfGC started collaborating with the Job Placement service of the University of Florence. This office aims to support students, undergraduates and graduates by guiding them in their career choices, as well as facilitating their integration into the labor market. It also offers services for the business world: institutions, companies and employers can contact this office to receive assistance in finding and selecting students and graduates. The collaboration stipulated the collection and analysis of all the strengths and good practices of that current organization through a listening research process dedicated to all the subjects involved in the services (from the staff who organize the activities, to the students who attend them), so as to provide Job Placement management with the necessary data useful for planning future actions and improving the quality of those already in place. In order to pursue this goal, the research group carried out important community building involving all the subjects who, in different

ways and with different roles, were in contact with the Job Placement service through the use of the "lezione-intervista", a research technique developed by the CfGC to realize a project where analysis and design coexist and feed each other. The *lezione-intervista* represents, among all the tools developed by CfGC researchers, the most effective one in the analysis phase. When the research group first comes in contact with an organization (such as an institution, a company or an association), it uses this technique to get to know its organizational structure, communicative flows, critical issues and strengths; this kind of interview makes it possible to maximize (in quantitative and qualitative terms) the collection of knowledge elements. The *lezione-intervista*, however, is not only an instrument of analysis but also for designing and, as we will see, development and training. It allows identification of the strengths (analysis) of an organization in order to aggregate around them both the subjects responsible and those who feel able to contribute. Thanks to this technique, it was possible in our specific case to agree on a shared operational strategy (design) with all the Job Placement subjects to strengthen the project, to re-launch it and, if necessary, to plan organizational changes. Through a preliminary analysis, the research group proceeded systematically to involve all the subjects that had a role in the galaxy of Job Placement services and activities; this community building strategy gathered the internal and external resources of the university and it helped create a cooperating community engaged in a rethinking of the relationship between teaching, research and the Third Mission. The data acquired during the *lezione-intervista* phase were elaborated through a synthesis matrix. At the end of the elaboration of these data, the research group carried out a content analysis that made it possible to debate the intervention strategy which was elaborated and delivered to the client—the head of the Job Placement service—in a final report.

6 Generative Communication for CsaVRI

In this second case study which involved collaboration between the CfGC and CsaVRI, the objectives and operating methods to achieve them were very similar. CsaVRI is the University of Florence center that deals with technology transfer and, among other things, coordinates and manages the Florentine University Incubator (IUF) which, since 2010, promotes and supports the birth and first phase of development of start-ups and spin-offs based on entrepreneurial ideas with a high rate of innovation and a strong link with university research. Through the activities of the IUF, the University of Florence spreads business culture and entrepreneurship in the academic field. In 2017, CsaVRI requested support for communication of the Incubator's services. Framing the necessary analysis, the CfGC research group proposed a strategy of community building aimed at a wider intervention to redefine the communicative identity of the whole sector. The research questions and convictions underlying this project stem from previous experience gained in the Job Placement project and other initiatives where the CfGC has been involved in technology transfer activities. Two particularly significant elements of knowledge have emerged from our experiences:

1. communication—especially of institutional type—is effective if, and only if, it activates a continuous and prolonged exchange over time, creating a sort of loyalty with the end user;

2. it is essential to identify subjects that are true gatekeepers and active subjects both in the reception of information and transformation of it into contents to be communicated to those who are potentially interested. In any case, dynamics must not be exclusively top-down, but a communication channel must be activated so that end users have the possibility to provide feedback to those who are responsible for identifying the policy, communication strategies and content to convey to users.

Thus, the communication strategy developed by the CfGC was developed through a series of community building activities aimed at creating a common ground where the subjects involved in the organization of services could converge, identifying the most motivated subjects and those potentially interested in the activities proposed by the Incubator, starting with one-to-one communication methods. In order to build common ground that strengthens the communication and quality of services, which in turn contributes to increasing the quality and quantity of applications for participation in training services, the CfGC aimed to:

• identify and aggregate new potential interlocutors interested in services;

• involve different subjects in technology transfer activities;

• keep all stakeholders informed through effective communication methods.

In this case, the research group focused on the development of an effective communication strategy starting from the call for proposals for enrollment in the entrepreneurship training and services that the IUF organizes for the creation of university spin-offs. These calls for proposals are the point of access for services and they were considered as the result of a process of analysis of the needs of Ph.D. students, grant holders, researchers and university professors, on the one hand, and companies and businesses in the area, on the other. The first step in the project was an analysis of the strategies and the channels used by the IUF staff (e.g. the website, social media, events, newsletter etc.). This gave us an updated picture of the system of functions and services, highlighting strengths and weaknesses in the way the Incubator communicates its activities. The research group started monitoring the communicative and organizational ecosystem in order to constantly verify the effectiveness of all the communicative practices and contents. Based on the knowledge that emerged, the CfGC designed and implemented a precise communication strategy, providing the tools necessary for the IUF staff to apply it. The collaboration with CsaVRI is still ongoing, so exhaustive considerations regarding the results of the project are not yet available. However, initial findings seem to justify the added value of a communication project based on community building strategies: it has reinforced the organization by involving and enhancing the role—institutional or informal—assumed by the subjects within it through a series of face to face activities oriented to cross-engagement and empowerment of individual subjects.