

Storytelling for Teachers' Professional Development. Narrative Reflections on In-Service Teacher Training Pathways

Daniela Di Donato¹, Laura Ceccacci²

¹University of Tuscia, Viterbo, Italy

²E-Campus University, Ancona, Italy

Abstract

As part of the initiatives linked to the PNRR, Ministerial Decree 66/2023 has been a key milestone for schools in promoting a system of continuous professional development for Italian teachers, with the aim of strengthening their professional, pedagogical and digital skills with a view to innovative and reflective teaching. In this context, the need to recount experiences from different perspectives offers one way of capturing the complexity of adult learning and teachers' professional development. The personal and professional narrative of training, viewed through the eyes of the trainer, emerges as a methodological tool for promoting transformative learning and teachers' professional identity. The approach proposed in this paper is based on Narrative Inquiry and narrative-oriented practices, which develop an interconnected framework between narration, guidance and the development of educational practices. The process of reflection and support that uses stories and narratives to foster the construction of meaning and skills in training contexts reveals positive effects on equity and professional motivation among both teachers and trainers. The experience described here represents an attempt to share structured narratives (logbooks, memes, critical reflections) analysed according to an integrated narrative model, inspired by Narrative Inquiry as a research methodology.

Keywords: *Narrative Inquiry; Teacher professional development; Continuing professional development; Transformative learning; Innovative teaching methods*

1. Introduction

As part of the initiatives under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Ministerial Decree 66/2023 marked a significant step forward in promoting the continuous professional development of school staff, with a focus on enhancing teachers' professional, pedagogical and digital skills. The decree frames professional development within a context of educational innovation and organisational transformation, emphasising collaborative and reflective models of professional learning that are consistent with lifelong learning.

From this perspective, teacher training is not merely a matter of professional updating, but constitutes a process of identity construction and the transformation of educational practices. International literature indeed highlights the link between professional development, reflection on experience and participation in professional learning communities (Schön, 1983; Wenger, 1998; Sachs, 2021). Through narration, individuals attribute meaning to experience and construct forms of knowledge that guide action (Bruner, 1988, 1991). Training thus takes on a relational and narrative dimension, in which learning emerges from the exchange of situated experiences and practices.

Recent European education policies have placed greater emphasis on training models based on reflection, collaboration and the integration of digital skills. In particular, the DigCompEdu framework highlights the need to develop forms of professional learning capable of integrating the technological, pedagogical and critical dimensions of teaching professionalism (Redecker, 2022; Ceccacci, 2022). At the same time, educational research emphasises the importance of structured spaces for shared reflection, in which teachers can collectively interpret their professional experience (Di Donato & De Santis, 2021a; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023).

This paper focuses not on the narratives of the participating teachers, but on the reflective experience of the trainers who designed and observed the training programmes. Their narratives constitute a reflective meta-narrative that allows us to view training as a relational ecosystem, in which the trainers themselves also construct professional knowledge through observation, discussion and the re-elaboration of experience.

The approach adopted is based on Narrative Inquiry, a qualitative methodology focused on the study of lived experience through narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1997, 2000; Ceccacci, 2020). Narrative takes on an epistemic function, as it facilitates processes of interpretation, understanding and the attribution

of meaning to experience. This perspective engages with studies on Transformative Learning, which attribute a central role to critical reflection in the revision of interpretative and professional frameworks (Mezirow, 2003), and with the literature on Communities of Practice, which interprets professional learning as a social process of participation and negotiation of meanings (Wenger, 1998; Fabbri, 2014; Di Donato & De Santis, 2021a).

The research aimed to document how training experiences prompted the trainers to reflect on their professional identity, the effectiveness of teaching approaches and the dynamics of peer interaction. The paper therefore offers a methodological and pedagogical reflection on the value of Narrative Inquiry in teacher training, highlighting how narrative reflection can serve not only as a tool for analysing experience, but also as a practice that fosters continuous professional learning.

2. Theoretical Framework

Narrative Inquiry is one of the main qualitative approaches for investigating educational and professional experience. According to Clandinin and Connelly, storytelling enables individuals to attribute meaning to their experiences over time and within social contexts, thereby facilitating the construction of professional identity. Narrative knowledge is not limited to the description of events; rather, it enables an understanding of how individuals interpret and reorganise their professional experience. Riessman (2008) also highlights the interpretative and relational nature of narration, whilst other authors (Barkhuizen, 2014) emphasise its value in teacher education contexts, where professional stories become tools for self-reflection. In the present study, narration serves a dual function: as a means of collecting qualitative data and as a space for reflection through which the trainers critically process their own professional experience. Professional reflection is a central element of continuous professional development. Schön (1983) interprets professionalism as the ability to reflect on action and within action, developing forms of situated knowledge that are useful for addressing the complexity of educational practices. The perspective of transformative learning broadens this dimension, highlighting how critical reflection facilitates the revision of interpretative and professional frameworks through the reinterpretation of experience (Mezirow, 2003). From this perspective, training takes on a transformative function insofar as it promotes critical awareness and the re-elaboration of professional meanings. In the context of this research, reflexivity concerns the trainers, who are engaged in the observation and critical re-examination of their own training practices. Professional learning is also interpreted through the lens of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). The shared narrative practices among trainers have triggered collaborative processes of interpreting experience, shaping a professional space in which training knowledge is collectively constructed and redefined. Research on Professional Learning Communities confirms that collaboration and shared reflection are fundamental conditions for sustaining lasting transformations in educational practices (Di Donato & De Santis, 2021b; Stoll et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Finally, this contribution is situated within the framework of practitioner inquiry, which views education professionals not only as recipients but also as producers of professional knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). From this perspective, the trainers' narrative reflection is interpreted as a practice of professional inquiry aimed at the critical understanding of training practice and the shared construction of professional meanings.

3. Methodology

The research takes the form of a qualitative study using the Collaborative Narrative Inquiry approach, aimed at gathering reflections arising from the trainers' experience in organising and delivering teacher training courses carried out under Ministerial Decree 66/2023. The methodological approach adopted is based on the idea that professional knowledge emerges through processes of narration, reflection and shared interpretation of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The research design therefore adopts an interpretative and reflective perspective, consistent with qualitative approaches aimed at understanding the meanings attributed to professional experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Between June 2024 and September 2025, the two trainers designed and delivered 111 training courses, all within the thematic area of digital transition, both face-to-face (45.9%) and remotely (49.5%), covering almost all Italian regions. The courses were aimed at school staff from both comprehensive schools (60.4%) and higher education institutions (39.6%).



Fig. 1. Generated using Claude (Anthropic, 2026)

The map shows the distribution of schools: comprehensive schools (primary and lower secondary schools) are highlighted in green, whilst upper secondary schools are shown in purple. The trainers delivered a total of 111 courses, of which 55 were face-to-face workshops and 51 were online courses. A total of 1,714 teachers took part.

From an epistemological perspective, Ministerial Decree 66/2023 adopts the European DigCompEdu framework as a binding scientific and methodological matrix for the standardisation of training courses, moving beyond the ad hoc use of technologies in favour of the systematic development of professional digital competences. In line with this regulatory framework, the research design adopts the multidimensional structure of DigCompEdu, organised into six strategic competence areas, in light of the taxonomic progression of proficiency levels set out in the framework (from Novice-A1 to Pioneer-C2):

Area 1: Professional Engagement; Area 2: Digital Resources; Area 3: Teaching and Learning; Area 4: Assessment; Area 5: Empowering Learners; Area 6: Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence.

Segmentation was initially used to identify the training needs of the sample of teachers involved in the research, by assessing their self-perception of digital competences and identifying the main gaps in those areas of DigCompEdu most in need of methodological support. The data collected made it possible to define training priorities and to structure the subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis protocols. The materials were treated as qualitative data of a narrative nature, useful for capturing both the trainees' self-perception of their skills and the interpretations developed by the trainers. The use of different narrative tools facilitated a multifaceted and context-specific representation of training needs, both explicit and latent.

The document corpus was subjected to Qualitative-Thematic Content Analysis according to the model by Braun and Clarke (2006). In line with Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the unit of analysis was identified as the narrative fragment or visual artefact possessing autonomous meaning. Coding followed a hybrid approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006): deductive, anchored to the areas of the DigCompEdu framework; inductive, aimed at capturing emotional experiences and processes of identity revision. Data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018) led to the identification of three interpretative macro-axes: the epistemological-methodological dimension, relating to application gaps and requests for methodological support; the reflective and transformative dimension, focused on processes of redefining professional identity in line with Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2003); the relational and social dimension, oriented towards the analysis of collaborative dynamics and cultural resistance to innovation within Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998).

The empirical materials, collected longitudinally throughout the entire training programme, constituted a heterogeneous narrative corpus divided into four main sources: reflective documentation by the trainers, comprising logbooks, critical notes and ethnographic notes on the dynamics that emerged during the

sessions; informal interprofessional exchanges, such as narrative conversations, debriefing video calls and immediate communications aimed at co-designing and monitoring the programme; narratives from course participants, collected in person and in digital environments, relating to teaching practices, methodological challenges and experiences of using the tools; artifacts and multimedia productions by the trainers, including digital works and interpretative memes (Di Donato, 2023), used to represent, in a visual and ironic manner, experiences and difficulties linked to the digital transition. To ensure greater reliability and reduce interpretative bias on the part of the researcher-trainers, a triangulation approach involving two blind analysts was applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The independent coding of the corpus yielded an inter-rater agreement index (Cohen's K) of over 0.80. The empirical analysis highlights a marked polarisation of training needs: teachers demonstrate greater proficiency in areas relating to communication and the selection of digital resources (Area 1 and Area 2), whilst the main challenges emerge in Digital Assessment (Area 4) and Facilitating Student Skills (Area 6). The data reveal the difficulty in transforming the instrumental use of technologies into pedagogical practices geared towards advanced assessment and the critical co-creation of digital content (Figure 2).

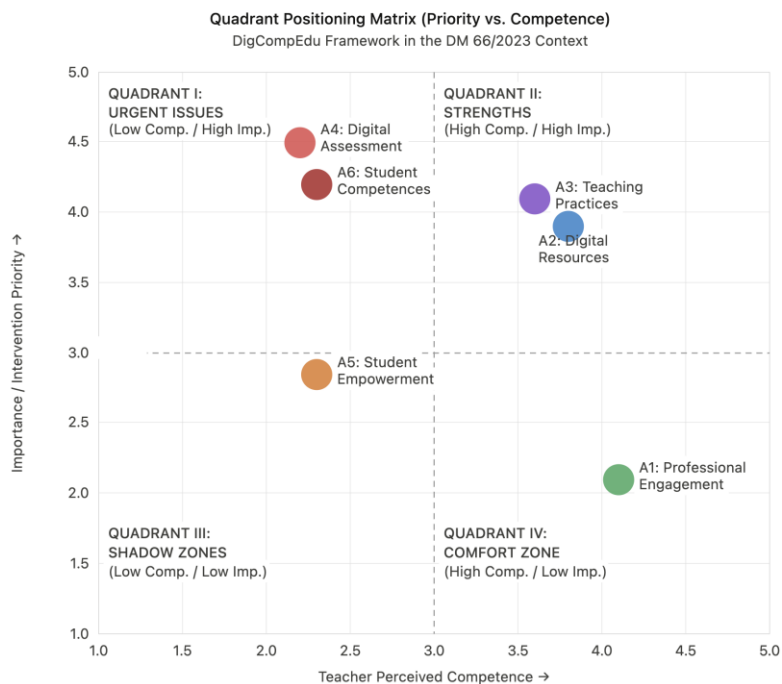


Fig. 2. Compiled by the authors

The intersection of self-perceived digital competence (X-axis) and the methodological and pedagogical importance attributed by teachers (Y-axis) provides a map of the main identity-related tensions and training needs that emerged from the analysis of the DigCompEdu framework (Figure 1). The positioning of the six macro-areas across the four quadrants highlights a marked polarisation of training needs.

Quadrant I – Urgent issues (low competence/high importance) concentrates the main professional weaknesses and the ‘disorienting dilemmas’ described by Mezirow (2003). Area 4 (Digital Assessment) has the lowest perceived competence level (X: 2.1) compared to the highest importance attributed (Y: 4.5), followed by Area 6 (Student Competences) (X: 2.2; Y: 4.2). Teachers’ accounts and the trainers’ ethnographic observations reveal a widespread difficulty in translating the technical use of technologies into advanced assessment and training practices, accompanied by requests for immediately applicable tools.

Quadrant II – Strengths (high competence/high importance) includes Area 3 (Teaching practices) (X: 3.5; Y: 4.1) and Area 2 (Digital resources) (X: 3.8; Y: 3.9). These dimensions represent teachers’ operational ‘comfort zone’, linked to the daily use of digital tools for managing teaching. However, the proximity to Quadrant I suggests the need to transform these skills into practices geared towards assessment and the critical development of students’ skills.

In Quadrant III – Grey Areas (low competence/low importance), Area 5 (Student Empowerment) (X: 2.3; Y: 2.8) emerges. The data indicate limited attention to digital inclusion and personalisation, often delegated to support teachers and rarely perceived as a shared responsibility of the entire class council.

Quadrant IV – Technical comfort zone (high competence/low importance) contains Area 1 (Professional engagement) (X: 4.2; Y: 2.1). The use of institutional tools and school digital channels now appears to be established as a standardised bureaucratic practice, perceived as a technical prerequisite rather than an area for professional development.

In the second phase of the research, the trainers’ narrative accounts were interpreted as heuristic tools useful for investigating the meanings attributed to professional practice in different training contexts. The study engages with Transformative Learning, which assigns a central role to critical reflection in the revision of professional frameworks (Mezirow, 2003), and with Communities of Practice, which interpret teacher learning as a social process of participation and negotiation of meanings (Wenger, 1998).

The aim was to document how the training programmes under Ministerial Decree 66/2023 triggered processes of mutual reflection between trainees and trainers. The trainers shared experiences, methodological challenges, metaphors of learning and the outcomes of teaching experiments integrated with the DigCompEdu and DigComp 2.2 frameworks. These narratives prompted the trainers to engage in second-order reflections on professional identity, the effectiveness of the training proposals, and the dynamics of peer-to-peer dialogue. From this perspective, the trainers’ narrative reflexivity is not merely a reporting of experience, but a generative practice of continuous professional learning.

4. Results: A Narrative SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis was used to systematise the resonances and negotiations of meaning that emerged from the trainers’ narrative accounts. In line with the epistemological approach adopted, the matrix was not used as a quantitative classification tool, but as an interpretative device aimed at highlighting the situated nature of the trainers’ professional experiences, the tensions surrounding identity, and the processes of transformative learning generated by interaction with the course participants.

The picture of training needs that emerged from the analysis — characterised by the critical issues in Areas 4 and 6 and the marginalisation attributed to Area 5 — triggered, through Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), a process of metacognitive reflection among the trainers, who were called upon to renegotiate the meaning of their professional stance in the face of the gaps and resistance that emerged in the training context. The findings of this monitoring and debriefing process have been summarised in the Narrative SWOT Matrix (Figure 3), which links internal factors — professional identity, skills and emotional aspects — with external factors, such as classroom dynamics and institutional pressures, highlighting their connection to teachers’ training needs.

Narrative SWOT: Trainer Professionalism (DM 66)		
	GENERATIVE IMPACT (+)	CHALLENGES / OBSTACLES (-)
INTERNAL FACTORS	<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Peer' identity within the group • Pedagogical value of mistakes • Social and situated learning 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety in managing critical incidents • Technical vulnerability (e.g. AI evolution) • Tendency toward the 'technical assistant' role
EXTERNAL FACTORS	<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual classrooms as transformative spaces • Co-construction of open resources (OER) • Moving beyond bureaucratic logic 	<p>THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand for ready-made recipes/solutions • Resistance to critical reflection • Strong digital divide in the sample

Fig. 3. Compiled by the authors

Generative convergence: strengths and opportunities - The trainers responded to the trainees’ vulnerabilities by redefining their role from the perspective of the Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998). Rather than adopting a didactic stance, they emphasised the peer-to-peer dimension to acknowledge

and rework the teaching failures that emerged in the training contexts. Error was thus reinterpreted as an opportunity for social and situated learning. This professional stance was intertwined with the possibility of inhabiting virtual and physical classrooms as transformative spaces (Mezirow, 2003), in which the sharing of metaphors, diaries and artefacts helped overcome the purely bureaucratic logic linked to Ministerial Decree 66/2023, promoting the co-construction of open educational resources rooted in the concrete needs of schools.

Managing challenges: weaknesses and threats - The SWOT matrix also highlights the systemic and identity-related tensions faced by the trainers. The polarisation of the sample, divided between teachers with advanced needs (Areas 4 and 6) and teachers struggling with basic skills, highlighted the risk of a significant digital divide. This divide fuelled resistance to critical reflection and a widespread demand for immediate solutions, perceived as a response to technological performance anxiety. These dynamics have led to feelings of technical vulnerability among trainers and difficulties in managing critical incidents, exacerbated by the rapid evolution of tools such as generative Artificial Intelligence. Faced with requests for immediate operational support, there has sometimes been a tendency to slip into the role of 'technical assistant', with the risk of reducing the digital transition to mere IT training, thereby undermining pedagogical reflection on student assessment and empowerment.

5. Discussion: Narrative Reflexivity as a Practice of Continuous Professional Learning

The re-examination of documentary materials through SWOT Analysis highlights how the training activities within the DM 66/2023 pathways did not take the form of a simple transmission of content on the DigCompEdu framework, but rather a process of Transformative Learning. The sharing of instances of methodological failure and uncertainty in the use of digital tools acted as a 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 2003), fostering processes of critical reflection among both trainees and trainers. By acknowledging the vulnerabilities and difficulties that emerged in the narratives and professional exchanges, the trainers gradually redefined their own identity, shifting from a role as 'digital experts' to that of facilitators of reflective processes. The knowledge produced thus takes on a social and situated nature (Wenger, 1998), as professional learning is consolidated through shared engagement with error and with methodological and technological uncertainty.

However, critical issues remain. The demand for predominantly technical and instrumental support put forward by some teacher-trainees risks pushing the trainers towards an operational support role, reducing the space dedicated to pedagogical reflection and the co-construction of meaning.

Overall, the findings confirm that Narrative Inquiry is a generative practice for professional learning. The creation of narrative spaces dedicated to the experience of the digital transition makes it possible to address the most sensitive areas of the DigCompEdu framework — in particular digital assessment (Area 4) and the development of students' skills (Area 6) — whilst offering a replicable model for continuing professional development. From this perspective, the digital transition in schools goes beyond the technical compliance requirements linked to the PNRR and takes the form of a process of cultural and professional transformation for the entire school community.

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