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Service Learning and LifeComp framework: analysis of experiences in distance education

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Abstract

In the context of the COVID-19 emergency, the closure of Italian schools from March 2020 has imposed the full use of distance learning, as well as a general rethinking of time, space and teaching/learning methodologies. In this study, we will introduce the outcomes of an analysis carried out on the planning of Service Learning (SL) activities that took place during the professional training course called 'All' Avanguardia per l'innovazione'. The course, which was designed before the pandemic, has been redesigned during the health emergency and required teachers to write a project work on didactic planning in SL. From the perspective of distance learning, didactic planning has integrated the 'virtual' component and become E-Service Learning or Virtual-Service Learning. This planning has been analysed in relation to the LifeComp framework because it fosters the development of the competences that are necessary to manage the complexity of the current scenario, it perfectly integrates with the identifying elements of SL and includes some indicators of the DigComp framework that aims at the development of student, teacher and school digital skills that are necessary to manage distance learning. The first outcomes of the analysis highlight how didactic planning covers the development of the different competences promoted by the LifeComp framework.

Keywords: *citizen participation, distance education, learning to learn, social competences, service learning*

Introduction

In the context of the COVID-19 emergency, the closure of schools has imposed distance learning. Teachers have continued to supply lessons to all students remotely, although the social and digital divide in the country has impacted students' involvement somewhat. This way of teaching and learning has confronted teachers, students and families with new challenges. First of all, technology: the availability of appropriate connection and devices for schools and families. But familiarity with distance learning approaches is also an important focus. Teachers have found new ways to keep students engaged and balanced between live lessons and self-study. Families have heavily supported teachers, acting as tutors at home. Students have been asked to cope with totally different ways of relating with teachers and classmates.

The idea 'Dentro/fuori la scuola-Service Learning' (Inside/Outside the School-Service Learning) of the Avanguardie Educative (AE) movement is focused on schools that are experimenting teaching and learning practices to connect the school with the community around. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have observed the actions they have carried out to manage Service Learning (SL) projects even remotely and documented how these experiences have been redesigned or reoriented by the schools in a virtual way (Chipa et al., 2020).

From the end of 2019 to the end of 2020, AE movement with INDIRE realised 'All'avanguardia per l'innovazione', a national blended training for teachers on innovative teaching and digital technology that #25 course of Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale (PNSD)[1] funded. In this contribution, we analyse the final project work of these teachers with the mirror

[1] PNSD is the Ministry of Education document addresses to improve a combined innovation strategy for school system in the digital age. It is a pillar of the law n. 107/2015 for school innovation and digital age opportunities (called 'BuonaScuola'). The #25 and #28 actions concern training for teachers www.istruzione.it/scuola_digitale/prog-formazione-personale.shtml

of LifeComp framework to find out if SL and e-Service Learning (E-SL) could be a pedagogical reference for this new European framework and its cross with DigComp.

1. From SL to E-SL linked with the LifeComp framework

In this period, schools have had to redesign their didactic planning, the organisation of learning times and the configuration of spaces, integrating the home environment with virtual environments and platforms. The full use of distance learning has imposed to schools both a 'deterritorialisation' and an appropriation of other spaces, from home environment to video communication platforms. Classroom time has expanded to other times of the day and has been 'remodelled' according to a timeline that was not identical to that of face-to-face lessons. Teachers have confronted the need to detect suitable teaching methods for distance learning (MIUR, 2020a). Real time and space have become more and more interconnected with digital time and space. The use of sharing platforms and tools for socialisation has led interpersonal relationships to a different level to that experienced until then.

When the schools reopened in September 2020, the need to ensure distancing in classrooms led schools to reorganise the learning environments, teaching in places that were never used as classrooms previously (corridors, school canteens), in external places belonging to schools (gardens, school playgrounds) and in places spread throughout the territory (parks, museums, venues of associations), thanks to regional pacts (MIUR, 2020b; Cerini, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) ended the process of development and published LifeComp, which offers a conceptual framework for the 'Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn' key competences for education systems, students and learners on the whole. As a conceptual reference framework, it '*constitutes the base line, as it deals with life skills – the skills and competences that everybody should continually develop throughout life'* and is '*a crucial complement to the already consolidated Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, also known as DigComp, and the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, EntreComp'* (JRC, 2020, p. 4).

In relation to this, the research group wondered how it was possible to carry out SL activities in an exclusively virtual context and more, if and how they supported the LifeComp competences.

The relationship between school and territory and the implementation of activities with the involvement of the community are features that distinguish the SL from other activities that take place outside the school (Sigmon, 1979; Furco, 1996; Tapia, 1996; NYCL, 2004; CLAYSS, 2014).

1.1 The E-SL

The literature on the realisation of online SL activities refers to electronic-SL (E-SL) or Virtual-SL (VSL) as: '*an electronic form of experiential education and incorporates electronically supported service learning. It is delivered online and uses the Internet and state of the art technologies that permit students, faculty, and community partners to collaborate at a distance in an organized, focused, experiential service-learning activity, which simultaneously promotes civic responsibility and meets community needs'* (Malvey et al., 2006, p. 187).

In the paper *E-Service-Learning: The Evolution of Service-Learning to Engage a Growing Online Student Population* (Waldner et al., 2012), the authors identify some SL models in relation to the combination of presence and distance activities (Fig. 1).

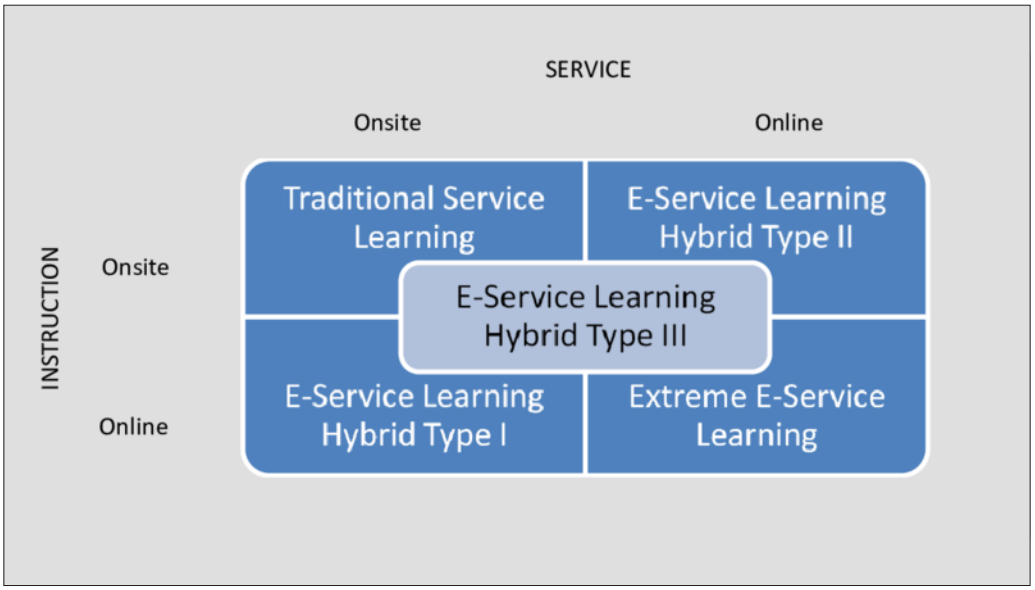


Fig. 1. e-Service Learning models (Waldner et al., 2012, p. 12).

The figure shows five SL models that combine real and virtual, specifically:

1. Traditional Service Learning (T-SL), learning and service activities are realised both in presence;
2. E-SL Type 1: learning activity is realised at a distance and service activities are in presence;
3. E-SL Type 2: service activities online and learning activities in presence;
4. E-SL Type 3 is a blended model: some learning activities are in presence and some online, some service activities are in presence and some online and
5. Extreme Service Learning (XE-SL): learning and service activities are totally online.

Therefore, there are three blended models between the two extreme models, T-SL and XE-SL, in which activities in presence and at a distance are designed in relation to the project needs (contents, services realised and learning objectives).

The difference from T-SL is that e-SL requires that the service or learning component takes place partially or completely online.

1.2 The LifeComp

The LifeComp framework regards 'Personal, Social and Learning to Learn' as a set of competences applying to all spheres of life that can be acquired through formal, informal and non-formal education and can help citizens to thrive in the 21st century (JRC, 2020). It is the third framework for individuals, which was developed by the JRC following the revised Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning of May 2018. The previous frameworks were DigComp (Digital Competence) and EntreComp (Entrepreneurship). Throughout the revision process of the Recommendation, stakeholders and experts voiced the pressing need to take stock of the importance of personal and social development aspects, which were given a variety of names in international studies and competence frameworks, such as '21st century skills', 'life skills', 'socio-emotional skills', 'soft skills' or 'transversal skills'. The report of desk research was presented to a workshop, and all relevant crossings that have underpinned and guided the development of the conceptual LifeComp framework were discussed (JRC, 2019).

Many of the 2018 Key Competences for Lifelong Learning Recommendation overlap and are interlocked. Interesting for this contribution, three DigComp competence areas are directly connected to the LifeComp framework content:

- DigComp Area 1. Information and data literacy (links with the element of LifeComp 'Critical thinking');
- DigComp Area 2. Communication and collaboration (links with the elements of LifeComp 'Communication and Collaboration') and
- DigComp Area 5. Problem solving (links with the element of LifeComp 'Critical thinking').

The LifeComp framework has nine competences with three descriptors each (see Figure 2) and can be used as a basis for the development of curricula and learning activities, fostering personal and social development, as well as learning to learn. Specifically, in this pandemic context, students need competences that can help them to become more resilient and manage the challenges and changes in their personal and professional life in an ever-changing world.

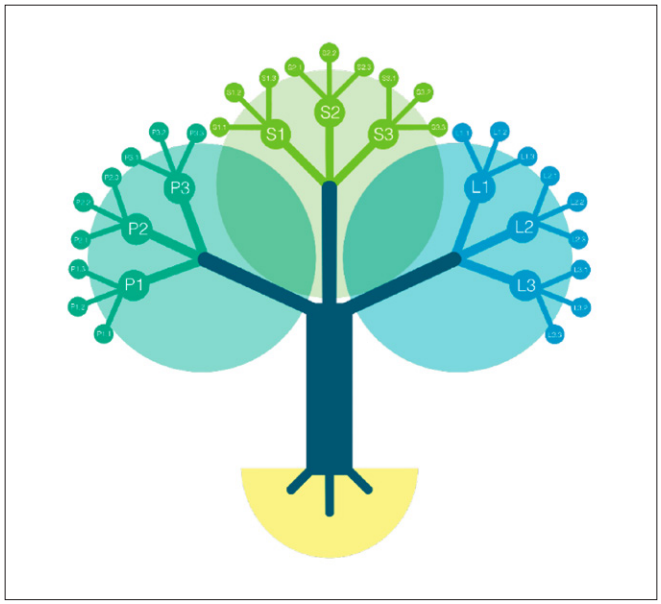


Fig. 2. LifeComp tree.

The benefits of SL have been the subject of many studies. These show that SL increases students' sense of civic responsibility and the development of life skills and academic skills, contributing to learning and cognitive development on social issues (Astin et al., 1998; Parker-Gwin, 1996; Raskoff & Sundeen, 1999). The same students who have experienced

SL recognise it as an opportunity to increase self-esteem and self-confidence and generally recognise its capability to contribute to their growth as people and citizens (Orlandini et al., 2020).

The competences of the LifeComp framework highlight the parallelism with the purposes of SL. This comparison has been made by comparing the results of the research in the reference literature (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison between LifeComp and SL purposes.

Area	Competences	SL
PERSONAL	*Self-regulation*	SL promotes experiential learning. The experience is a powerful contributing force to the development of people's self-efficacy; self-regulation encompasses both cognitive skills and social skills (Billig, 2000) SL promotes experiential learning. The experience is a powerful contributing force to the development of people's self-efficacy; self-regulation encompasses both cognitive skills and social skills (Bandura, 1997).
	Flexibility	SL contributes to form an individual who is able to be a citizen of the world, can interact with the cultural values of everyone and is willing to put his or her professional competences at the service of society, in order to make it thrive and improve constantly (De Pietro, 2019)
	Well-being	SL educational experiences foster school well-being and improve learning outcomes (Furco, 2010)
SOCIAL	*Empathy*	SL has positive effects on prosocial behaviour, acceptance of diversity, development of ethics and strengthening of elements linked to resilience. It stimulates a major capability of empathy and readiness to help others (Billig, 2000)
	Communication	SL improves different competences, including those of communication, leadership and entrepreneurship (Eley, 2003) SL activities 'help to weave the possible interconnections that link both cognitive and emotional sphere, ethics and ability to organize, initiative and communication skills' (Cinque, 2014, pp. 135-136)
	Collaboration	SL allows to arrange good learning experiences that provide contexts where one can develop the ability to think, feel and act with competence in the world, cooperating with others (Mortari, 2017)
LEARNING TO LEARN	*Growth mindset*	SL helps to develop and learn social themes (Astin & Sax, 1998; Parker-Gwin, 1996; Raskoff & Sundeen, 1999)
	Critical thinking	Critical thinking is the element of SL that causes, deepens and records learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009)
	Managing learning	Il SL aiuta gli studenti nella scelta del percorso di studi o professionale, migliorando il proprio curriculum e le opportunità nella ricerca di un lavoro dopo l'università (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2012) SL helps students to choose their course of study or professional career, improving their educational curriculum and their opportunities to find a job after University (Fabbri et al., 2015, pp. 65-77)

SL = Service Learning

In the pandemic context due to COVID-19, SL has turned into e-SL or VSL (Waldner et al., 2012; Strait & Nordyke, 2015), allowing lessons to continue in distance learning or integrated digital teaching mode and strengthening the expected competences by integrating with the LifeComp framework.

2. The analysis

The in-service training course for teachers was designed before the pandemic. Activities actually began with a workshop in presence during which participants were introduced to the ideas of *Movimento delle Avanguardie Educative*. After this first stage, learners chose two ideas to examine in an online course structured into modules, one for each idea.

The training course needed several adjustments, without losing sight of the objectives of the learning outcomes and the implementation of the learning methodology. In order to facilitate the rooting of the experience in the specific environment of each teacher, the module was organised with the method of 'collaborative dyad' (Kozlova & Große, 2016). This method consists in a close synergy between the experts who held the workshop (the researchers of INDIRE) and an experienced teacher, who was chosen among the teachers of the schools that have been involved in the interventions for innovation. The experienced teacher supports the experts in putting the theoretical contents of the course into practice in the school context of reference.

Fifty participants attended the course on SL. Activities were organised in five webinars on the following subjects: relationship between SL and teaching innovation, roots of SL, how to design a course, transversal processes of reflection, documentation and evaluation, and assessment by skills. Support to design an e-SL course was provided for asynchronous activities for all stages of the SL process.

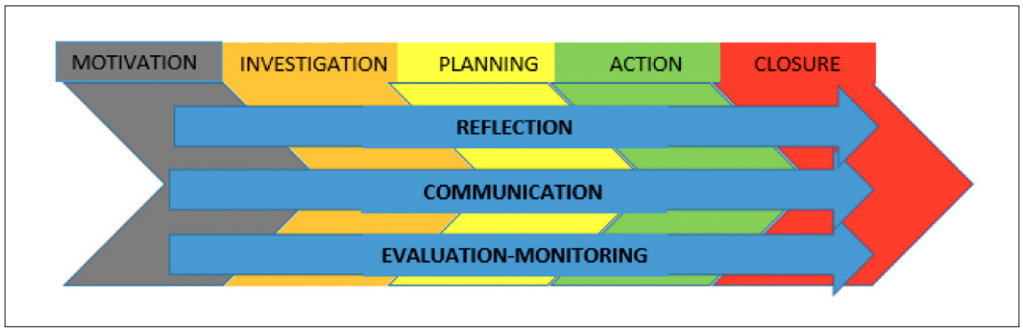


Figure 3. SL design: steps and processes.

The stages of an SL project are: Motivation, Investigation, Planning, Action and Closure. The design and implementation involve three cross-cutting processes: Reflection, Documentation–Communication, Evaluation–Monitoring (Figure 3). Stages and cross-cutting processes are contained in the project work format and presented during synchronous activities.

Each module ended with the delivery of a written paper. At the end of the training course, participants delivered a project work containing the planning of a teaching unit with the two ideas that were chosen. Before the lockdown, participants were asked to deliver the documentation of the experiences planned and actually realised. However, due to the closure of schools and their reopening in September with several restrictions, we opted for the delivery of a project work of the design of the courses, thus giving teachers the possibility to implement them according to the possibilities offered by distance learning.

The design format of the project work was organised in different sections that helped teachers to describe their experience and record the practice, when it took place, though only in part.

The following is the structure of the project work:

- *Introduction:* information on the chosen ideas, previous experiences in using the idea involved in the course
- *Planning:* competences to be developed, topic and planning period, methods of evaluation and assessment, use and role of ICT (Information and Communications Technology), final product or authentic task, if required
- *Experimentation:* methods of experimenting (distance learning or in presence), description of the context(s) of the experience (class, composition, etc.), identification of changes compared to the initial planning, problems encountered and solutions attempted, timeline of activities
- *Collaboration:* description of collaboration with other teachers, colleagues of the school or possible stakeholders
- *Reflections:* theoretical connections during the lessons or discussed during webinars, future perspectives, future changes, activities that were not realised due to distance learning, elements of distance learning that had positive effects on the course, with an eye to the future

Sixteen project works were delivered, and four of them have been selected, according to the following criteria:

- presence in the planning of both the ideas that were chosen during the refresher course;
- presence in SL and e-SL courses of the identifying characteristics of the approach. Quality criteria of an e-SL course are the same as the traditional ones (T-SL) (Culcasi, 2020) and
- experiences that were actually realised, though only in part or at least in a few stages of the planning required by the format that was made available to learners.

2.1 Outcome

We selected the following four project works:

- *C'è posto per tutti*[2]. The project work crosses SL with the idea of Making Learning and Thinking Visible (MLTV[3]). Students conducted an awareness campaign to improve the living conditions of disabled people. The project was carried out in the two school years of 2018–2019 and 2019–2020.
- *Il cioccolatino dei quattro sensi*[4]. The project work crosses SL with the idea of ICT Lab[5]. Students designed a digital artefact made later in the pastry labs for the centennial of the founding of the Italian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired (*Unione Italiana Ciechi e Ipovedenti* [UICI]). The experience began in the 2019–2020 school year and ended in 2020–2021, covering the last 2 years of the vocational institute.

[2] 'There is room for everyone' (Antonietta Novi's project work, liceo 'Mons. B. Mangino' in Pagani, Salerno, third-grade class).
[3] http://innovazione.indire.it/avanguardieeducative/integrazione-mltv
[4] 'The chocolate of the four senses' (Monica Straticò's project work, Istituto professionale alberghiero 'Ferdinando Martini' in Montecatini Terme, fourth-grade class).
[5] http://pheegaro.indire.it/uploads/attachments/1979.pdf Now Indire's researchers support the evolution of this idea with web portal http://3d.indire.it/

- *Raccontare la solidarietà*[6]. The project work crosses SL with the idea of Technology-Enhanced Active Learning (TEAL[7]). Students created a photographic and narrative reportage of a local association's activities. The experience was carried out throughout the 2019–2020 school year, in the last year of the high school of art.
- *Acqua nelle tue mani*[8]. The project work crosses SL with the idea of MLTV. Students designed a scientific communication on environmental issues in their territory. The project started in the school year 2020–2021 and took place during the last 3 years of the scientific high school.

These plannings have been analysed in regard to the LifeComp framework by carrying out an analysis of the text according to the ecological perspective suggested by Mortari (2007, p. 181). A recursive reading of the planning as a whole has been made in order to identify the units of text related to the elements of the framework and highlight the recurring subjects and connections. The correspondence between the significant units of description and the competences of the LifeComp framework in texts has been selected (Mortari, 2010, p. 50). Table 2 shows the quantitative mapping of the correspondence found. In the intersection between project work and competence, the table presents total number of mentioning (in bold) and the numeric sequence of mentioning with the specification if realised in presence education (PE), in distance education (DE) or both (B).

Table 2. Quantitative mapping of competences in project works.

Area of LifeComp	Competence	C'è posto per tutti	Il cioccolatino dei quattro sensi	Raccontare la solidarietà	Acqua nelle tue mani
Personal	*Self-regulation*	**3** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = PE)	**3** (1 = B, 2 = DE, 3 = B)	**1** (1 = PE)	**2** (1 = B, 2 = B)
	Flexibility	**1** (1 = PE)	**3** (1 = B, 2DE, 3 = DE)	**6** (1 = B, 2 = PE, 3 = DE, 5 = PE, 6 = DE)	0
	Well-being	**1** (1 = PE)	**1** (1 = B)	**4** (1 = DE, 2 = DE, 3 = PE, 4 = B)	**2** (1 = B, 2 = PE)
Social	*Empathy*	**2** (1 = PE, 2 = PE)	**4** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = PE, 4 = B)	**3** (1 = PE, 2 = PE, 3 = PE)	**1** (1 = B)
	Communication (DigComp: communication and collaboration)	**5 (**1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = B, 4 = B, 5 = DE)	**3** (1 = DE, 2 = B, 3 = B)	**2** (1 = B, 2 = B)	**4** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = B, 4 = B)
	Collaboration (DigComp: Communication and collaboration	**5** (1 = PE, 2 = PE, 3 = PE, 4 = B, 5 = DE)	**2** (1 = DE, 2 = DE)	**3** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = DE)	**2** (1 = B, 2 = B)
Learning to learn	*Growth mindset*	**2** (1 = DE, 2 = PE)	**2** (1 = DE, 2 = DE)	**4** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = PE, 4 = DE)	**1** (1 = B)
	Critical thinking – (DigComp: *information and data literacy, problem solving)*	**4** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = B, 4 = DE)	**1** (1 = B)	**1** (1 = B)	**6** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = B, 4 = B, 5 = B, 6 = B)
	Managing learning	**1** (1 = B)	**5** (1 = B, 2 = B, 3 = B, 4 = B, 5 = B)	**4** (1 = B, 2 = DE, 3 = DE, 4 = B)	**3** (1, 2 = B, 3 = B)

DE = distance education, PE = in presence education, B = both

The four experiences were held during different lengths of time, making use of traditional teaching in presence education, distance education or both of them (Table 2).

In particular, *C'è posto per tutti* began during the 2018–2019 school year, when the stages of Motivation, Investigation, Planning and Action took place. In the school year 2019–2020, the Action ended and Closure was implemented. In the project work, the 'communication' and 'collaboration' skills of social area and 'critical thinking' of 'learning to learn' area are associated with more stages and with the cross-cutting processes of SL. Indeed, they occur in different situations, in presence and distance education. Additionally, even before the pandemic, the project was using instruments of virtual communication (e.g. web forum).

[6] 'Telling solidarity' (Susanna Uguccioni's project work, Liceo artistico with a graphics sector 'Scuola del libro' in Urbino, fifth-grade class).
[7] http://innovazione.indire.it/avanguardieeducative/teal
[8] 'Water in your hands' (Veronica Cavicchi's project work, Liceoscientifico 'A. Calini' in Bresca, third-grade class. She wrote her project work both in Italian and English).

Raccontare la solidarietà experience presents a hybrid didactic design, which takes advantages of school and territorial places in presence with a virtual environment of sharing. Teachers and students increased the use of virtual environment during distance learning, empowering chats and web conferences to replace face-to-face classes.

Raccontare la solidarietà and *Il cioccolatino dei quattro sensi* experiences carried out the central stages of SL during the COVID-19 emergency that had a different impact on them due to the type of service objective. In the first experience, the redesign of Action stage determined the increment of development of 'communication', 'collaboration' and 'managing learning' skills. In the second experience, the pandemic and distance learning caused a different order of laboratory activities and the introduction of a new methodology for this school: 3d design for creative design of the shape and packaging of accessible chocolates, made in the kitchen laboratory at the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year.

Pandemic and distance learning also seem to have had an impact on 'flexibility' competence. In the *C'è posto per tutti* experience, its development is associated with the unexpected events of an Action stage carried out face to face, but in places outside the school. Instead, in the *Raccontare la solidarietà* and the *Il cioccolatino dei quattro sensi* experiences, its characteristics of development are recorded more times, probably due to the interaction with an absolutely new reality.

Finally, *L'acqua nelle tue mani* realised Motivation and Investigation stages at the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, planning the subsequent stages in the second half of the year and in subsequent school years, with the awareness of being able to alternatively use both in-presence and distance learning. For this reason, the development of skills takes place both in in-presence and distance education.

Conclusions

'*During the pandemic, remote learning became a lifeline for education but the opportunities that digital technologies offer go well beyond a stopgap solution during a crisis. Digital technology offers entirely new answers to the question of what people learn, how they learn, and where and when they learn*' (Schleicher, 2020, p. 16). The analysis of these four E-SL experiences highlights the important role of teachers from imparting received knowledge towards working as co-creators of knowledge, coaches, mentors and evaluators. Moreover, they supported personal and social individual students' competences in a collective way: answering together to a social need during a period that required physical distance.

As a teacher of the *Il cioccolatinodei quattro sensi* experience pointed out, 'the new reality of "home leaning" highlighted how it is necessary to structure in a shared way with the students a personal learning path, which respects time and rhythms of domestic life and allows them to find personal spaces and right conditions to devote their own intellectual growth. So, it was necessary to design a distance education based on two pillars: the freedom to explore a digital environment suitably equipped to complete a challenging task and the relationship of extreme trust with the teachers who support the students along the path'.

LifeComp is a conceptual framework and is thus complex. As a consequence, a single educational measure can hardly cover the nine competences proposed. Then again, SL is also a multi-pronged pedagogical approach. The four experiences of the examined project works lasted two school years, involved students in every stage of the process, helped them to solve an actual problem of their own territory, overcoming together the difficulties due to the new pandemic context. There was a good integration between service and curricular objectives, which substantiated in the interaction with another innovative idea proposed in the training course. All of this makes them quality SL experiences, allowing them to cover the LifeComp framework.

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