



UNIMORE
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI
MODENA E REGGIO EMILIA

Dipartimento di Economia
Marco Biagi

DEMB Working Paper Series

N. 227

Building an inclusive environment:
exploring lecturers' experience in inclusive and innovative academia

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October 2023

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Abstract

As universities become more aware of diversity, with greater access to diagnoses of specific learning difficulties and increasing attention to multiculturalism, it is essential to adapt teaching methods to include everyone with their unique characteristics. However, despite Italian ministerial guidelines, many aspects of university inclusion, apart from examinations, are left to individual lecturers' discretion. In order to understand their experiences, the research team carried out 18 semi-structured interviews with lecturers in the role of full professors, associate professors and assistant professors at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE). Non-probabilistic snowball sampling was used to recruit lecturers who had used or were currently using non-traditional teaching methods, with frontal teaching being considered the traditional method. The interviews were then analysed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological analysis to explore lecturers' feelings and personal experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). This paper aims to raise awareness of the psychological and phenomenological aspects of applying innovative methodologies in higher education and to fill the existing research gap regarding the lack of qualitative research on the application of innovative and inclusive methodologies in higher education.

Keywords

Innovative and inclusive teaching, university, descriptive phenomenological analysis, Italy, higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR) reported the need for a more inclusive university but one that does not give up on excellence and quality and the need to focus again on the idea of a university as an instrument of social transformation by overcoming economic and cultural barriers (MUR, 2020). The topic of inclusion and innovation in higher education has been studied for years, whereas it is only recently gaining attention in Italy. Some teaching strategies which are commonly applied abroad, are still not widely used. For example, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – an inclusive approach that embraces a broad definition of users, emphasises the unique characteristics that differentiate individuals and promotes inclusion for all – has only recently begun to spread in Italian universities, although it is very widespread in Europe (Baroni & Lazzari, 2022). For this reason, research on UDL is still limited and so is the research about innovative and inclusive academia. Nevertheless, there are numerous studies about primary and secondary schools, which are a valid terrain for studying didactic innovation and inclusion (Saloviita & Consegna, 2019; Ianes et al., 2020). The studies that already exist about universities – considering not only Italy – usually rely on checklists and surveys administered to the students (Woodley, 2020) or on the measurement of student's performance (Nikolaev, Artemiev, Parfenov, & Radnaeva, 2020). Since scientific research mainly focuses on quantitative contributions, the need arises to use qualitative methods to analyse not only the perspective of the students but also that of lecturers, educators or remedial teachers (Soresi et al., 2013). Even if the point of view of faculty members has already been addressed abroad (Morina, 2017), there is a lack of scientific contributions dealing with the Italian context. This study intends to fill this gap and provide insights into the point of view of lecturers about didactical inclusion and innovation at the university.

Specifically, this paper aims to explore the experiences and perceptions on the theme of inclusion of lecturers applying non-frontal didactics. In particular, the research team intends to answer the following research questions:

1. How do lecturers apply their didactic methodologies?
2. Why do lecturers choose an inclusive and innovative methodology?
3. How do lecturers perceive the concepts of innovation and inclusion in their didactics?
4. From which point of view do inclusive and innovative didactics affect lecturers and students?
5. What are the future perspectives on inclusive didactics at the university from the point of view of the lecturers?

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the methods and design of the study. Sections 2 and 3 focus on the presentation and discussion of the results. The limitations and conclusions are described in Section 4 and Section 5 respectively.

1. METHODS AND DESIGN

Design

This study applied a phenomenological descriptive approach by Colaizzi (1978) which allows the personal experiences and emotions of the interviewees to be explored. The research team performed an analysis of lecturers' narratives to obtain an accurate picture of their experience (Sundler,

Lindberg, Nilsson & Palmér, 2019; Jackson, Vaughan, & Brown, 2018) in applying innovative and inclusive teaching.

Sample

A total of eighteen lecturers, comprising ten females and eight males, were selected for this study using non-probabilistic snowball sampling (as shown in **Table 1**). Among them, seven respondents were affiliated with the Economics department, three with Engineering, three with Life Sciences, two with Biomedical Sciences, two with the Education department, and one with the Medicine department. Of the eighteen interviewees, eight were classified as full professors, five as associate professors, one as a contract lecturer, four as assistant professors at the university where the study was conducted. Twelve participants were involved in teaching courses within both bachelor's and master's degree programmes, while three interviewees were exclusively engaged in bachelor's degree courses and the remaining three were solely responsible for master's degree courses.

Table 1- interviewees

GENDER	MAIN DEPARTMENT	ROLE	BACHELOR/MASTER'S DEGREE
F	ECONOMICS	FULL PROFESSOR	BOTH
M	ECONOMICS	ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR	BOTH
F	EDUCATION	FULL PROFESSOR	BOTH
F	BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR	BACHELOR'S
F	ECONOMICS	ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR	BOTH
F	ENGINEERING	ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR	BACHELOR'S
M	LIFE SCIENCES	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR	BACHELOR'S
F	LIFE SCIENCES	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR	MASTER'S
M	ENGINEERING	FULL PROFESSOR	BOTH
M	EDUCATION	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR	BOTH
F	MEDICINE	ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR	BOTH
M	LIFE SCIENCES	FULL PROFESSOR	BOTH
M	ENGINEERING	FULL PROFESSOR	BOTH
F	BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES	CONTRACT LECTURER	MASTER'S
M	ECONOMICS	FULL PROFESSOR	MASTER'S

F	ECONOMICS	FULL PROFESSOR	BOTH
M	ECONOMICS	FULL PROFESSOR	BOTH
F	ECONOMICS	ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR	BOTH

In the first phase of recruitment, thirteen participants were identified based on their expertise in applying non-frontal teaching methodologies, which are believed to be more innovative than traditional frontal teaching methods. After the initial thirteen interviews, the participants were asked to suggest further colleagues who utilised non-frontal teaching techniques. Subsequently, an additional thirteen lecturers were invited to participate in the study: five of them were recruited, two had to cancel their interviews due to unavoidable circumstances, and six did not respond to the recruitment email. Ultimately, the study comprised a final sample of eighteen interviewees from different departments.

Context

The University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE) was founded around 1175 and is one of the oldest universities in Italy and in the world. It is a "multidisciplinary, active and dynamic university", as defined in its vision and mission. UNIMORE is a prominent academic institution, welcoming a student population of around 30,000 people enrolled in Level I, II, and III courses. With over 1,400 employees, including teaching, research, and technical administrative staff, it is one of the Italian Large-scale Universities. UNIMORE consists of a network of campuses in Modena and Reggio Emilia, comprising 13 Departments and 2 Faculties/Schools, in addition to accredited degree course sites in the cities of Mantua and Carpi. Furthermore, it has interdepartmental centres located in the territory of the two provinces of Modena and Reggio Emilia, offering teaching, research, third mission, related support services and technology transfer activities to promote scientific innovation and development. UNIMORE aims to combine innovation with wide attention to inclusion and performance "to train people capable of contributing with ideas and critical spirit to design and implement concrete actions for a better society." (UNIMORE, 2023)

Data collection

The 18 semi-structured interviews were administered and recorded via Microsoft Teams between November 2022 and August 2023 and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. They were transcribed using an automatic transcription software embedded in Microsoft Teams and then fixed by the researchers during the familiarisation phase. After selecting the first 13 participants, they were invited to take part in the research, via email and invited to schedule a video call with one of the researchers. Both the interviewer and the participant were at home or work during the video call. At the end of the video call, participants were asked to propose other colleagues applying non-frontal teaching. The recruitment stopped when the participants began signalling already interviewed people. Some of the proposed candidates were never actually interviewed due to adverse circumstances (for example the researchers and the interviewee were not able to find a suitable date for the interview) or failed to answer the recruitment email.

The interview followed the topic guide illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2- Topic guide

PRESENTATION	Good morning, can you tell us who you are and in what field you work?
METHODOLOGY USED AND MOTIVATIONS	We know that you apply the XXXX methodology. Can you tell us what made you choose it, what is the potential of the methodology and how you apply it in the context of your university teaching?
INNOVATIVE ASPECTS OF THE SPECIFIC METHODOLOGY	Do you think that the XXXX methodology has the potential to be called innovative? Why?
INCLUSIVE ASPECTS OF THE SPECIFIC METHODOLOGY	Do you think that the XXXX methodology has the potential to be inclusive? Why?
CONCEPT OF INNOVATION	What, in your opinion, makes a teaching methodology innovative?
CONCEPT OF INCLUSION	What, in your opinion, makes a teaching methodology inclusive?
EXPERIENCE WITH OTHER METHODOLOGIES	What, in your opinion, contributes to an inclusive teaching methodology?
COMPARISON OF METHODOLOGIES ON INCLUSION	Which, among the various methodologies you apply, do you find the most inclusive and why? (if you do more than one)
EFFECTS OF INNOVATIVE METHODOLOGIES	Referring to your experience, what, in your opinion, have been the effects of applying innovative teaching methodologies?
FUTURE PERSPECTIVES	Are there any changes you are thinking of making to your teaching methodology to make it more innovative, more inclusive or both? Which ones?

Data analysis

Data was processed using the software MaxQDA 2022 (Release 22.8.0). As the methodology suggests, during the first step of the research, the research team performed an accurate familiarisation with the interviews: they watched the videos multiple times, fixing issues in the automatic transcription and reporting commentaries about the themes addressed by the interviewees. During the second phase, they underlined the most relevant sentences expressed in answering the defined

research questions. After discussing the meaning of the most significant phrases, they clustered the themes, defining and organising the emerging themes. The themes that emerged, were then rediscussed to develop an exhaustive description. The last step of the process was producing a fundamental structure aimed at representing the phenomena the team wanted to address.

Rigour and reliability

Throughout the interview process, the research team ensured that all interviewees, even though some were associated with or colleagues of the team, were treated with respect and their opinions were valued. The team members made a conscious effort to suspend personal judgement and bias to collect unbiased data, emphasising the non-judgmental nature of the interviews and promising confidentiality to encourage open sharing of experiences and opinions. This approach contributed to the validity and reliability of the study. To achieve credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmability (Lincoln, Guba & Pilotta, 1985), the data were processed independently by four researchers and rediscussed until reaching consensus. The interviews were also transcribed word by word and the quotations are reported after an accurate translation.

2. RESULTS

Application of the methodology: How do lecturers apply their didactic methodologies?

Respondents reported using a wide variety of teaching methods as alternatives to frontal teaching: evidence-based methodologies (e.g TBL, CBL and PBL), blended methodologies (e.g. flipped classroom, teamwork) and participative frontal lessons (e.g. podcast, workshop, experts) as shown in **Table 3**. All these didactic methods show active and participative involvement of students.

Table 3 - Didactic methodologies

MAIN THEME	SUB-THEMES
EVIDENCE-BASED METHODOLOGY	TEAM-BASED LEARNING
	CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING
	PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING
	PROJECT-BASED LEARNING
	GAME-BASED LEARNING
	CASE-BASED LEARNING
	DESIGN THINKING
	FLIPPED CLASSROOM
BLENDED METHODOLOGY	FLIPPED CLASSROOM
	ACTIVITIES BOTH ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE
	TEAMWORK
	PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES
	ADOPTED IN THE WHOLE COURSE OF STUDY
PARTICIPATIVE FRONTAL LESSON	PODCASTS

	METAPHORS
	INTERACTION, COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK
	SIMULATIONS, GAMES AND ROLE PLAYING
	AUDIOVISUAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA
	EXPERT TESTIMONIES AND EDUCATIONAL VISITS
	WORKSHOPS AND PRESENTATIONS
	SELF-EVALUATION
	EXERCISES, CASE STUDIES AND PROJECT WORK

Motivation: Why do lecturers choose an inclusive and innovative methodology?

The dualism between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is well-known in psychology. Even if multifaceted theories exist, (Reiss,2012) extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have been widely addressed in psychology and education shedding “important light on both developmental and educational practices” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The interviewees reported both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as shown in **Table 4** in applying (or not) innovative and inclusive didactics. Motivations are both intended as reasons for starting to apply this kind of didactics, for continuing to use the applied methodology or for changing it.

- **Intrinsic motivation**

NEED FOR NOVELTY OR CHANGE

“Obviously, though, I think (...) [innovative didactics] is the best way not to get bored. My worst enemy is boredom. So, I change every year because I enjoy it.” (Int. 15)

“The motivation was also there to try to make a little change to a course that I had been teaching for years, you know because it is not a course that I have just started teaching. I’ve been teaching this course for many years and so [changing my methodology] I was also motivated to have a go at it.” (Int. 18)

DISLIKE FOR TRADITIONAL DIDACTICS

“Why does one do these things? I mean, why does one set out to look at- to read books, to ... how should one say, to try to understand and compare oneself with people who already use or are very good at training on this? Because, I mean, the basic truth is that I don’t like classic-style didactics, I don’t like it, as a lecturer, and I didn’t like it as a student either.” (Int. 2)

“I never liked it, when used on me as a student, ah...Notion-based teaching!” (Int. 7)

PROMOTING ATTENTION, PARTICIPATION, PASSION

“I tried to make some effort in this direction, uh – I mean – let’s try to get these students interested in an activity that is central to their work but which is very complex: the activity of designing – designing! – educational activities.” (Int. 10)

MAKING HARD CONCEPTS SIMPLER

“[The use of metaphors] bridges what we know and what we don’t know... And therefore, this has an important use when it comes to understanding somewhat complex, abstract concepts. Metaphors allow us to make what is abstract more concrete.” (Int. 3)

PROMOTING A MOTIVATING, COLLABORATIVE AND POSITIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

“As I applied it, I saw the results from the point of view of, let’s say, the climate that was generated in the classroom, especially during the times when there was this experience of teamwork.” (Int. 1)

“Now the situation is a little flatter and so we need to change the course somehow.” (Int. 16)

LECTURER’S PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND DESIRE TO INSPIRE STUDENTS

“The lecturer, in my view, should also be...He should be a source of inspiration.” (Int. 7)

IMPROVING STUDENT’S KNOWLEDGE AND PERFORMANCE

“The other very nice thing is that even the performance of the group from the very first times [of practising TBL] was superior to the performance of the individual, but increasingly so over time. That is, they become better and better not only at talking to each other but also, I repeat, in terms of results, and when talking about the - when mentioning the results, they also do much better in exams.” (Int. 18)

- **Extrinsic motivation**

CUSTOM OF THE COURSE OF STUDY/COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

“I adopted the blended methodology, obviously not by choice, but because it was a direction taken at the level of the overall study course. Therefore, so to speak, I adapted.” (Int. 5)

“So, let’s say economists from my point of view have always used non-frontal teaching methods which may or may not be innovative. I have never even asked myself this, that is, it is customary for us economists to perform a type of analysis that is quite dynamic.” (Int. 16)

FOUNDING AND SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGES

“The choice, let’s say, was linked to a university project that was financed by the MUR and which also allowed us to have tutors who accompanied us in this experimentation.” (Int. 1)

“I introduced it [the TBL] because the department had decided that it had to join a University project: a three-year -five-year- university plan linked to teaching innovation for which the then rector’s delegate for teaching asked the various departments to offer people, that is, courses to experiment with this new teaching method and it seemed then that- what was said at the time- was that the most suitable courses for this type of thing, for some reason, had to be first-year courses and so, being a

first-year lecturer, I was basically asked to collaborate. For this reason, I chose experimentation in the course called Applied Mathematics.” (Int. 9)

“[It takes] money, to invest in lecturers’ time because if you propose to a lecturer to be innovative, reflect on his/her innovativeness, change the type of teaching, you have to give him/her incentives. Educational innovation is often blocked by two things: namely the lack of funding to allow people to have time to dedicate to these innovations and the credibility of the institution to pursue these innovative teaching goals in the long term.” (Int..16)

“You don’t have the possibility to also ask them to promote innovative teaching experiences, in my opinion, unless you actually give incentives, in the end you find that those who have time are also those who are probably even less dynamic, in certain respects.” (Int. 16)

“I was basically interested in it: it was a university project and we were all urged to join this project voluntarily, of course.” (Int. 18)

DISCUSSION WITH COLLEAGUES OR OTHER PROFESSIONALS

“I was involved by a colleague by chance who told me about this project that was at the university and I wanted to try it so I took part in the course.” (Int. 6)

“I compare myself with others, well, I compare myself with other lecturers. This is if you want another important channel of communication, that is, of obtaining information.” (Int. 7)

“If someone already has good performance in terms of evaluation, in the absence of serious and credible monetary and non-monetary incentives, they will never choose to participate in innovative teaching projects.” (Int. 16)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TEACHING PROGRAMME

“It’s a basic fact that I believe depends on the subject itself and in my case also on age, perhaps there are subjects that are better suited.” (Int. 9)

“A subject like Physics perhaps is not so suitable for this mode [TBL] and neither to the topic of the flipped classroom: You [a.k.a the students] will take the test, I won’t explain it to you, you just study it. These things are quite complex. Therefore, I didn’t do this step either: I explained it to them anyway.” (Int. 6)

TRAINING ATTENDED OR SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE METHODOLOGY

“In my opinion the context must be one where a lot is invested in the training of lecturers. And, in my opinion, this is the key element, training and motivation of lecturers and with motivation I also refer to the weak point of this system of ours which essentially does not value a lecturer who spends time investing in these methodologies.” (Int. 4)

“What we know from research, that the most effective methods are those that are engaging and that give feedback and that put students in an interactive position and therefore make them teach others.” (Int. 11)

“It takes money and serious professionalism [for training] because otherwise a lecturer will tell you rightly but, in short, I’ll do it on my own.” (Int16)

LABOUR MARKET DEMANDS

“Companies also ask us for teamwork skills. They see that there is a lack of this in new hires.” (Int. 16)

REQUESTS AND FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS

“I pay close attention during lessons to see what the students’ feedback is.” (Int. 7)

“The evaluation is done with questionnaires that I propose anonymously, which give me feedback: the positive aspects can already be seen in the session.” (Int. 11)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SETTING

“We didn’t do the flipped class because there were too many, [it was] impossible to manage... the situation was chaotic. Managing the class when we were doing the TBL, doing it alone and with the classrooms we have, which are not particularly large. Working in a group didn’t become very fruitful. There was a lot of confusion. In the end, the students ran away because after two hours they wanted to leave” (Int. 6)

“Then clearly, adequate settings and organisational flexibility are also needed which must allow the application of certain rules, starting from the calendar.” (Int. 4)

“A constraint that binds everything is the nature of our classrooms. So, the TBL by its nature is made in such a way that it requires the collaboration of the students and for this reason, we have no spaces, our classrooms are linear, the students are arranged in rows with seats secured to the floor and oriented towards the blackboard or the projector screen.” (Int. 9)

“The physical constraints made it difficult to work in a team because there was the person in the centre, who was the one working. Two people [were] on the side and worked a little less. Then, moving away from the centre, there was exponentially less commitment.” (Int. 9)

“A great energy had been created in the classroom. The students had got together in the various groups uh with all the various technical difficulties regarding the desks; the fact of organizing themselves for a moment, logistically, in the classroom.” (Int. 13)

“So, in my opinion it is partly linked to space, that is, when you don’t have spaces that allow group work, you don’t do group work, and furthermore you don’t feel the need for it.

What I seem to have understood is that in all this demagogy of innovation etc., if you don't have suitable spaces you won't have optimal results and, in my opinion, my department doesn't have suitable spaces.

The spaces are fundamental. So, first you ask yourself if you have the resources to propose these innovations.” (Int. 16)

Table 4- Motivation

MAIN THEME	SUB-THEMES
INTRINSIC MOTIVATION	NEED FOR NOVELTY OR CHANGE
	DISLIKE FOR TRADITIONAL DIDACTICS
	PROMOTING ATTENTION, PARTICIPATION, PASSION
	MAKING HARD CONCEPTS SIMPLER
	PROMOTING A MOTIVATING, COLLABORATIVE AND POSITIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE
	LECTURER'S PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND DESIRE TO INSPIRE STUDENTS
	IMPROVING STUDENT'S KNOWLEDGE AND PERFORMANCE
EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION	CUSTOM OF THE COURSE OF STUDY/COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE
	FOUNDING AND SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGES
	DISCUSSION WITH COLLEAGUES OR OTHER PROFESSIONALS
	CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TEACHING PROGRAMME
	TRAINING ATTENDED OR SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE METHODOLOGY
	LABOUR MARKET DEMANDS
	REQUESTS AND FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS
	CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SETTING

The concepts of innovation and inclusion: How do lecturers perceive the concepts of innovation and inclusion in their didactics?

Innovation and inclusion are terms that are broadly used in academic circles, but their precise meaning can be somewhat ambiguous. While some lecturers view innovation as being primarily driven by technology, others believe that analogical innovations can have just as much impact on teaching and learning. In terms of inclusion, there are those who feel that it should be focused on specific groups

of students. However, the majority of lecturers believe that inclusion should be universal and that it should not exclude anyone. Topics covered are shown in **Table 5**.

- **Analogical Innovation**

INTERACTION, ACTIVATION AND FUN

“Innovation is based on – here again I quote – on conversations, i.e. to innovate you have to interact.” (Int. 2)

“They have to find a method for – a method?! – They have to find their own, entirely individual, approach to try to – how to say uh – go within this path which can then help them in their future, in our opinion. That is, at least, ... this is the basic idea.” (Int. 2)

GOING BEYOND FRONTAL LESSON

“Innovative teaching is teaching that tries to go beyond the frontal lesson to which we have been accustomed.” (Int. 3)

NON-CONVENTIONAL TOPICS OR ACTIVITIES

SENSORY, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, LEARNING BY TRIAL AND ERROR

“Alongside this there can also be, within the lessons, more interactive moments when the students are more participants, they are more active where there is also a moment when they do, do something and not just listen.” (Int. 3)

STIMULATING THE ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS

“The lecturer does not consider this aspect to be important...that is, [the aspect] of autonomy, of being able to move forward: autonomy. So, the aspect in my opinion of... Which here, perhaps I should say, emphasises more the parallel between play and learning.” (Int. 10)

“There was a time when the university realised that soft skills are important, right? And so lecturers were asked to use a teaching method that also developed these transversal skills.” (Int. 15)

AIMING FOR PROGRESS

“Innovation is any individual or group action (...) that does not – I mean – that abandons itself to change.” (Int. 15)

“And innovation for me is always moving forward.” (Int. 8)

PRESENTING TOPICS IN AN ALTERNATIVE, FLEXIBLE MANNER

“Something that for me is also fundamental is the sedimentation of the information, so I give you the information. With a methodology, uh, with a channel of dissemination and I let it sediment. So, much sooner or later, it will come back, uh? Precisely because the lesson is also transversal, so information is often taken up to integrate it into an increasingly complex context.” (Int. 7)

- **Technological innovation**

ONLINE DIDACTICS

“Innovative teaching today also includes teaching that uses all the multimedia tools available, so the possibility of distance learning, but also the use of interactive tools to involve the students in the classroom, because the students themselves can be involved in the classroom through the interactive tools that are available to them: their tablets, their smartphones.” (Int. 3).

INTERACTIVE TOOLS (MENTIMETER, WOOCCLAP)

“Innovative teaching today includes teaching that uses all multimedia tools” (Int. 3)

USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA (VIDEO, IMAGES)

“Often digitization is almost a disguise of an old technique with a frame. Just because you put it on Youtube. Sounds innovative? When it is the same class you had 10 years ago? In the sense, therefore, digitization almost risks being a double-edged sword, in the sense that you don’t do real innovation because you have already done digitization, which is easy and instead.” (Int. 13)

“That is, I use videos, photos, no, I’m talking again about our teachings, that is, in the Bachelor’s degree in Economics, that is, with respect to these here, I can say innovative, Isn’t it? Innovative compared to my experience so far.” (Int. 18)

- **Inclusion of specific categories**

LEARNING DISABILITIES

“In my context there are usually some students with SLD. When they arrive, they have usually already learned to manage it, so I have never encountered any major difficulties.” (Int. 4)

DISABILITIES

“Inclusive? Certainly, if I think of children with disabilities, [I think of a didactic method] focused on their abilities and their learning needs, but this requires a work of personalization, a level of support, perhaps broader than what we have today, in short.” (Int. 5)

“And while for the classrooms, that I am teaching in, the accessibility of the classrooms is decidedly good, uh, even for people who have difficulty walking or accessing - in general they are all on the ground floor or in (...) structures equipped with adequate lifts - I was thinking, there is only one room which, however, in my opinion, can be reached via a different internal path which is at the top of a staircase” (Int. 12)

ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGES

“Simply put, last year I had a student with financial difficulties who didn’t have a PC so I brought her the one from the degree course, so you know.” (Int. 4)

WORKING STUDENTS/ STUDENTS AT HOME

“These are moments when those in the classroom work on their own or work in pairs, or in groups and therefore those who are at home are certainly excluded.” (Int. 10)

“Those who work or have difficulties with their family are happy because this course, being a blended course, is organised in such a way that facilitates them.” (Int.11)

“I try to meet the needs of working students in two ways, namely by allowing them, and only them, to choose in which group and at what time to participate in the exercise by notifying me in advance because I have participation limits; therefore, I have limits on the capacity of the laboratories.” (Int. 12)

DISADVANTAGED GENDER DURING THE COURSE

“Women are a very small number and so perhaps it is this, that is, being in the minority, it is obvious that you have more difficulties” (Int. 6)

FOREIGN STUDENTS

“The source of learning is trying not to be, not to offend the sensitivity of people with a different culture, when I have to explain that a certain answer was not correct.” (Int. 5)

“I have had students who were objectively slowed down in their progress because they had moved for study reasons and did not speak the Italian language adequately to be able to take my exam.” (Int. 12)

FAMILY PROBLEMS /CAREGIVING

“I have also had students who spoke to me about family problems because they had to look after a person at home and so, in short, here’s – how I can say – let’s say people, students who arrive with specific needs, I have always encouraged them to contact me privately to look for... to seek – how can I say? – a solution that allows them, as far as possible, to look after these people.” (Int. 12)

- **Inclusion for everyone**

INTERACTION BETWEEN DIVERSE PEOPLE

“The groups are formed in respect of the heterogeneity of the people who are its components and therefore, in this sense, I think that, thanks to this innovation, it has also been able to develop an inclusive capacity within the groups.” (Int. 1)

FLEXIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE ACTIVITIES

“In the different methodologies, I find the one that suits me best: it’s a bit like learning styles, if you will. That is, if I have many different ones, I will also find the one that is most in line with my basic way of functioning, it being understood that sometimes I will also need the others, but in the meantime, if I want, in short, the first experience is positive.” (Int. 10)

BEING EMPATHETIC AND CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

“[Inclusion is] a meta-cognitive process for the lecturer, because if you say *I have found my way and that’s it*, you will hardly be inclusive” (Int. 10)

SENSITIVITY AND NO JUDGEMENT

“Innovation and inclusion is listening, understanding.” (Int. 16)

MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY

“I let them know that I will use this method [a.k.a. exercises performed by randomly called participants] and I ask students to write to me confidentially if they prefer to be excluded from the drawing lots.” (Int. 12)

RELEASE VIDEOS AND RECORDINGS OF THE LESSON

“The method and the best part is to be in the classroom to be able to interact with me. But if in addition to that then my lesson, with also the interactions with the students, remains to be listened to again and again. Where is the problem?” (Int. 7)

USING DIFFERENT MEDIA

“Furthermore, I believe that today inclusive teaching also involves a lot of new technologies. Here, through intelligent use, obviously an appropriate use of new technologies, including information technology.” (Int. 3)

“I think we should focus on devices, that is, on having better equipped classrooms precisely from the point of view of the PCs on the network.” (Int. 4)

“With Wooclap I can [make the lesson inclusive].” (Int. 7)

ENGAGING AND ENHANCING THE VALUE OF EVERY STUDENT

“[Inclusion is] To be open to all those who want to listen to me or who want to participate, to allow all those who are interested – or who are not interested, but who must, because they have to – to participate in this course, obtain from the course what is considered to be part of the course (...) within the limits of human possibilities, of abilities” (Int. 9)

EFFECTIVE EVALUATION

“In my opinion, we should go beyond summative assessment and give much more importance to formative assessment.” (Int. 11)

GETTING TO KNOW THE CLASS GROUP

“I think it was very important to administer a questionnaire at the beginning of the course to get to know who we had in front of us” (Int. 1)

Table 5 - How do lecturers perceive the concepts of innovation and inclusion in their didactics

MAIN THEME	SUB-THEMES
ANALOGICAL INNOVATION	INTERACTION, ACTIVATION AND FUN
	GOING BEYOND FRONTAL LESSON
	NON-CONVENTIONAL TOPICS OR ACTIVITIES

	SENSORY, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, LEARNING BY TRIAL AND ERROR
	STIMULATING THE ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS
	AIMING FOR PROGRESS
	PRESENTING TOPICS IN AN ALTERNATIVE, FLEXIBLE MANNER
TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION	ONLINE DIDACTICS
	INTERACTIVE TOOLS (MENTIMETER, WOOC LAP)
	USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA (VIDEO, IMAGES)
INCLUSION OF SPECIFIC CATEGORIES	LEARNING DISABILITIES
	DISABILITIES
	ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGES
	WORKING STUDENTS/STUDENTS AT HOME
	DISADVANTAGED GENDER DURING THE COURSE
	FOREIGN STUDENTS
INCLUSION FOR EVERYONE	INTERACTION BETWEEN DIVERSE PEOPLE
	FLEXIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE ACTIVITIES
	BEING EMPATHETIC AND CHANGING PERSPECTIVE
	SENSITIVITY AND NO JUDGEMENT
	MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY
	RELEASE VIDEOS AND RECORDINGS OF THE LESSON
	USING DIFFERENT MEDIA
	ENGAGING AND ENHANCING THE VALUE OF EVERY STUDENT
	EFFECTIVE EVALUATION
	GETTING TO KNOW THE CLASS GROUP

Impact: From which point of view do inclusive and innovative didactics affect lecturers and students?

Experiential education can help activate lecturers and students; however, the impact is not always positive. In some situations, the lecturer may feel useless or very burdened by the heavy time load

involved in preparation. Similarly, the student may find it tiring to actively engage in inductive learning, without the lecturer dropping knowledge on them from above. In any case, there are many more positive impacts experienced by both lecturers and students when implementing innovative and inclusive teaching. The aspects addressed by the interviewees are addressed in **Table 6**

- **Challenging/ Stimulating**

STIMULATES THE ACQUISITION OF SEVERAL SKILLS

“It is a bridge, a bridge precisely between what we know and what we don’t know, you know, that’s why we make so much use of metaphors, even on a conceptual level: for that reason, because metaphors are precisely bridges. This has, evidently, an important meaning when it comes to mediating somewhat complex, abstract concepts. No, because metaphors instead allow what is abstract to be made more concrete.” (Int. 3)

GETTING OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE, EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY AND OPENING NEW HORIZONS

“University didactics should open rather than close, i.e. open up horizons, give – of course – give tools to put in the famous toolbox, but they should not be tools that are too defined in detail. In this case, not. I mean, it is quicker to download them from the Internet.” (Int. 3)

RISKY FOR THE LECTURER

“I think it was the most innovative course in terms of the choices I made: also, the most risky” (Int. 10)

PREPARATION FROM THE LECTURER (TIME, COMMITMENT)

“Why did I stop? Because managing this much stuff, all alone, was really difficult” (Int. 6)

STIMULATING CURIOSITY AND ATTENTION IN THE STUDENT

“I think that it also stimulates curiosity more, in the sense that passively absorbing rather than instead reasoning together trying to find a way out of, let’s say, a problem that is posed I think can certainly be more stimulating.” (Int. 6)

EXPERIENCE AS AN ADDED VALUE

“The mode is however quite inductive, in the sense that they start from their experience” (Int. 10)

EXHAUSTING FOR THE STUDENT

“Not every academic year, not every group reacts in the same way. Some have actually told me: ‘No, I would prefer to do the classic lesson.’ Most of the time they tell it in the beginning, afterwards maybe they appreciate it a little more but change is slow to get into their minds” (Int. 6)

- **Empowering**

SATISFACTION AND GRATIFICATION

“Not only do you have that feeling of effectiveness that gives you the impression of having done a good job and this always contributes to satisfaction.” (Int. 5)

BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY FOR THE STUDENT

“There is not only an effect in terms of outcome (...) but most of all an effect in the sense of confidence that people begin to experience.” (Int.2)

FEELING USELESS FOR THE LECTURER

“This fact of being in the classroom, but in a way having to wait [for the students to finish their group work] feels like... bah as... I don't say I'm not working, but almost...” (Int. 13)

ENGAGING, INSTILLING PASSION AND MOTIVATING

“When this research bears fruit it is obviously very nice, in the sense that let's say time flies, the students bring their ideas you see them involved.” (Int. 5)

“She couldn't speak, couldn't speak, got anxious, etc. At the end, she said: I'm the group leader. (Int. 18)

“The potential is to reach more students and when I mean reach I mean...My goal is not to let them learn. Which seems absurd. My goal is for them to become passionate about the topic.” (Int. 7)

“They felt motivated and they started helping each other.” (Int. 8)

“It is not so important that he is master of a certain theoretical content of a certain methodology, that is, that is less important and it is more important that during university and above all even later in his life, he is someone who wants to learn, that is who remains in the attitude of someone involved and who wants to do well.” (Int. 10)

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

“Here, perhaps the most interesting thing are the failures.” (Int. 2)

“A mistake is no longer a mistake, but becomes an opportunity. All together we tried to solve one person's mistake, which became an opportunity for everyone.” (Int. 8)

- **Social Dimension**

CO-CONSTRUCTION

“[I like] the idea of creating a space for collaboration between peers, between students and companies through a guided approach and through also, how shall we say, building...of a series of people who are what we call coaches or we can call Mentors who also act as guides...” (Int. 2)

MUTUAL TRUST

“I said, I'll give you five minutes, take a sheet of paper, draw the talent.^[1] Then I had them work in groups and something very nice came out, something like sailing boats rather than a flowering tree. Rather I mean er, there was an epiphany, it only lasted 20 minutes, but it was a nice experience

because then afterwards they accepted everything I said. I mean, then afterwards I put down a row of transparencies, basically I did three chapters of the book and they absorbed everything because they trusted me.” (Int. 15)

**BUILDING RELATIONSHIP/ INTERACTION
INCLUSION**

“Before, there was zero... uhm... attempt at inclusion, but mostly not because lecturers didn’t want it, but because they didn’t even ask themselves the question about having to be inclusive.” (Int. 7)

EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSION

“This, however, is what we have done outside, that is, this thing that allows you to always look outside and put yourself in the perspective of others.” (Int.2)

Table 6- The point of view on inclusive and innovative teaching that interests lecturers and students

MAIN THEMES	SUB-THEMES
CHALLENGING/ STIMULATING	STIMULATES THE ACQUISITION OF SEVERAL SKILLS
	GETTING OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE, EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY AND OPENING NEW HORIZONS
	RISKY FOR THE LECTURER
	PREPARATION FROM THE LECTURER (TIME, COMMITMENT)
	STIMULATING CURIOSITY AND ATTENTION IN THE STUDENT
	EXPERIENCE AS AN ADDED VALUE
	EXHAUSTING FOR THE STUDENT
EMPOWERING	SATISFACTION AND GRATIFICATION
	BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY FOR THE STUDENT
	FEELING USELESS FOR THE LECTURER
	ENGAGING, INSTILLING PASSION AND MOTIVATING
	LEARNING FROM MISTAKES
SOCIAL DIMENSION	CO-CONSTRUCTION
	MUTUAL TRUST

	BUILDING RELATIONSHIP/INTERACTION
	INCLUSION
	EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSION

Future perspectives: What are the future perspectives on inclusive didactics at the university from the point of view of the lecturers?

Many of the lecturers interviewed appeared inclined to experiment with new ways to communicate effectively and innovatively with their students, keeping in mind the characteristics of each one. Many of them revealed their willingness to follow training courses or believe they are necessary to keep up to date on the new frontiers of innovative teaching to be more inclusive as shown in **Table 7**.

- **Changes**

IMPLEMENT NEW TECHNOLOGIES

“I feel I am still a bit immature regarding Case-Based Learning and so I feel I need to improve there, but also the cases I put to them, I understand, for example, I am quite lazy about looking for multimedia content that can help in the lesson but that could be, that is, proposing a video instead of the written case, it could be something that for them is more captivating, more engaging, more motivating and so that is a change I would like to make” (Int. 7)

“I would like, before I retire, to do teaching in the Metaverse.” (Int. 15)

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

“I would like to try to convey this content from a perspective that – I don’t know if it is innovative, but at least it is critical – that is to say: don’t take for granted that inclusion is a thing, the rhetoric today is ‘let’s make inclusion’ as it was ‘let’s make wellbeing’, because you will get a more productive, more motivated worker and therefore create value.” (Int. 5)

NEW TOPICS

“At the content level, I would like to try to include themes of inclusion, of diversity management within the course (...) a part that I usually don’t address, but what I would like to start addressing: for example organisational solutions for the inclusion of different groups, which are potentially at risk in work contexts (...)” (Int. 5)

“Then the department goes on and on about emphasising soft skills. I wouldn’t mind being able to teach a whole course – maybe even an optional one – uh... on public speaking.” (Int. 7)

IMPLEMENT A NEW METHODOLOGY

“I continue to think about how, at least in the big one, the 80-hour course, the one in the second year, to include at least one team-based learning event.” (Int. 7)

MODIFYING THE CURRENT METHODOLOGY

“The biggest wish is to also learn new techniques and new ways to be able to - also not... of course I don’t intend to stop at just TBL, maybe then it will be a less pure experiment, but for example in some cases we have also experimented with theatre improvisation.” (Int. 1)

- **Training**

PEER TUTORING/ PEER OBSERVATION/ COLLABORATION AMONG PEERS

“Then I would like to approach peer observation. Not only to have it myself, but also to propose myself to do it, because, yes, looking from the outside you can understand many things, which perhaps we ourselves do.” (Int. 1)

“I am also trying to see what younger colleagues are doing, perhaps to bring something new and something more, but as a first step I think I would call for a little more constant training in innovative teaching.” (Int. 12)

ADVANCED COURSES AND LEARNING FROM OTHER PROFESSIONALS

“I would really like to do it [training] at a high level, because otherwise [if it is not at a high level] I won’t waste my time.” (Int. 16)

“I would like to take wonderful courses held by professionals, psychologists, very good psychiatrists or I don’t know. Real counsellors, very good at making me experience improvements from this point of view, in understanding dialogue and listening.” (Int. 16)

- **Measures**

IMPACT

“I want to bring changes, I want to be able to... You have given me an important indication today, you have told me that perhaps we can also manage to measure more the impact of, let’s say, our attempts at innovation. So, I want to put this idea that you have given me into practice” (Int. 3)

Table 7- The future perspectives on inclusive didactics at the university from the point of view of the lecturers.

MAIN THEME	SUB-THEMES
CHANGES	IMPLEMENT NEW TECHNOLOGIES
	CHANGING PERSPECTIVE
	NEW TOPICS

	IMPLEMENT A NEW METHODOLOGY
	MODIFYING THE CURRENT METHODOLOGY
TRAINING	PEER TUTORING/PEER OBSERVATION/COLLABORATION AMONG PEERS
	ADVANCED AND INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSES
MEASURE	IMPACT

3. DISCUSSION

The application of innovative methodologies

The interviewees expressed a strong desire to make their lessons more interactive and engaging by incorporating a variety of activities and methods. Many of them mentioned the use of evidence-based approaches, such as team-based learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, challenge-based learning, game-based learning, case-based learning, design thinking, or flipped classrooms. However, some respondents expressed concerns about the restrictions these methods might impose and felt that a more traditional didactic approach with a few modifications might be more suitable for their classrooms. These lecturers employ a wide range of strategies, from exercises and case studies to project work, workshops, educational trips, reliable testimonies, and playful strategies. Metaphors are another effective way to make abstract concepts more concrete and comprehensible to students. In addition to experimenting with new methodologies and digital tools, another way to engage students and give them a concrete focus is through the use of audio-visual tools. Although public speaking is emphasised, in one specific case, podcasts were used as a didactic tool to teach public-speaking skills. Using self-assessment can also stimulate student empowerment.

Motivation for adopting innovative methodologies

The interviewees expressed both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations with regard to adopting innovative methodologies at the university. Some of them reported the need to explore new approaches from the methodologies they are accustomed to. Others expressed dislike towards traditional didactic methods and believed experiential learning is more suitable for promoting long-lasting learning and attention from students. They further believed that non-traditional didactic approaches can help make difficult concepts simpler, create a positive and motivating classroom climate, and improve students' performance. Finally, interviewees highlighted the importance of implementing innovative didactic approaches to make the lesson less asymmetrical and more participatory. Some of them selected a particular methodology based on the custom of their course of study or the community of practice in which they are situated. Furthermore, some changes in methodologies were encouraged by funding and sociopolitical changes or by the existence of scientific literature supporting the methodology. Additionally, certain methodologies were deemed to be the most appropriate for explaining the concepts contained in the lesson or supporting the characteristics of the classroom that contribute to choosing or not choosing an innovative methodology. Lecturers may also switch methodologies due to explicit requests from students.

Concepts of innovation and inclusion

Innovation and inclusion are two commonly used words in academic circles, but their meanings are not always agreed upon. Therefore, it is important to widen our perspective and consider various forms of innovation when discussing its role in education. Analogical innovation is often considered to have a great impact on students and teaching in general, not only technological innovation. Similarly, inclusion can mean different things to different people. For some, it may simply mean providing equal opportunities for all students, while for others, it may involve creating a supportive environment where diverse needs and perspectives are valued. It is important to have a clear understanding of what we mean by inclusion and to work towards creating an inclusive environment that benefits all students.

Impact of innovative and inclusive didactics

Innovative and inclusive didactics have been found to have a positive impact on both students and lecturers. They stimulate the acquisition of several skills and force both parties to get out of their comfort zone, embracing uncertainty and opening new horizons. However, such practices can be risky for the lecturer due to the lack of scientific literature and the impossibility of foreseeing the effects on students. Preparation for the lecturer usually requires a significant investment of time and effort, but it is usually a stimulating experience for the student, eliciting curiosity and attention. Experience is surely an added value, even though it could be exhausting for the student, as it helps in building self-efficacy and satisfaction. The difficulty for the lecturer might be the feeling of uselessness during teamwork, but it can also be satisfying to see how engaging, passionate, and motivating these activities can be. Students can learn from their mistakes and co-construct knowledge with their lecturers. They can also build mutual trust, relationships, and inclusion through interaction. A more innovative learning environment stimulates empathy and positive emotions, which can help foster a positive classroom atmosphere.

Future perspectives

Many of the respondents expressed a willingness to make changes to their methodologies: implementing new ones, bringing changes, diversifying topics or simply by changing perspective. Some of the lecturers are interested in digital tools to engage students, while others are willing to take training courses to keep up to date on innovative teaching methods that promote inclusivity. However, some interviewees also emphasized the need for evaluating the effectiveness of these new teaching approaches in terms of different dimensions such as grades, student satisfaction, and sense of belonging. Several interviewees believe that professionals with expertise in evaluating the impacts of non-frontal methodologies are needed to support lecturers in this endeavour.

4. LIMITATIONS

Snowball sampling is a non-probabilistic sampling technique that involves selecting a small group of individuals and asking them to suggest more participants. While it can be useful for identifying individuals who might be difficult to find, it can also lead to sample biases. In the current study, the use of snowball sampling may have resulted in the exclusion of lecturers who were applying innovative and inclusive didactics but were not included in the final group of participants. This could limit the generalizability of the study's findings and may be a factor to consider in future research.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the analysis suggest that the academic environment presents both facilitators and barriers to the implementation of innovative and inclusive teaching practices. Lecturer well-being and involvement, often derived from observing student participation and activation, are factors that encourage the adoption of innovative teaching methods. Additionally, the impact on both students and lecturers appears to be generally positive: resulting in the development of soft and hard skills and better performance during exams. Innovative and inclusive didactics also foster enthusiasm and collaboration between students and the lecturer, and they also build a more positive classroom climate.

However, classroom structures, high workloads, and biases in both students and lecturers, resulting from past education, can hinder the implementation of innovative and inclusive teaching practices. Therefore, it is crucial to incentivize the use of these methods in universities, through initiatives such as funding or the promotion of learning and research projects to ensure their widespread adoption.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding from “Innovative and Inclusive Academia”, FAR 2021 University of Modena and Reggio Emilia FOMO Line – Mission Oriented Supply Chain Interdisciplinary Research Project is gratefully acknowledged. We are grateful to the participants at the “Innovative and Inclusive Academia” International Final Conference held in the Department of Economics Marco Biagi, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia on 19th and 20th October, 2023 for their stimulating comments on a previous version of the paper. Responsibility for errors and omissions rests with the authors.

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