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In merito al talento – La valorizzazione dell'eccellenza personale tra ricerca e didattica
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Abstract

What is talent? Is it something that only a few people possess or is it true that all of us have, in different ways, our talents? And are those talents innate, i.e. are we born with them, or can they be developed?

The book focuses on talent and merit, two much-debated issues. After reviewing part of the wide ranging psychological, pedagogical, sociological and economic literature on this, I interviewed people, and I spent some months investigating how talent is developed in schools and universities here in Italy.

In the end, a very complex framework of talent emerged, ranging from the etymological meaning of talent to the pedagogical background, analyzing the difference between talent and genius in the wide framework of intelligence and the possible relationship between talent and its reward, merit.

In ancient times, in the Bible, talent was both a unit of weight and, as a consequence, a unit of money

There was a development in the meaning of the term, based on a 'metonymic¹ process', for which talent, that originally, in the Greek mythology, indicated scales, later it came to indicate the thing that was weighed and a unit of weight, and later on the value of this weight. During the Peloponnesian War, in the fifth century before Christ, the value of talent corresponded to the amount of gold that a man was able to carry. Each soldier participating in the Peloponnesian War was given a talent of gold. This is why the value of talent could vary very much: from 26 kilograms (57 lb) to 58.9 kilograms (130 lb).

In Ancient Greece the semantic area of talent included words that are related in meaning to the present-day concept of talent. To carry a heavy weight, to work hard, to stand/ to bear a sufferance, the capacity to withstand a long and intense workload, to do repetitive work (such as, for instance, spinning). All these concepts can be related to the modern concept of talent.

"Talent is overrated", according to recent research on this subject. So, the widespread concept of talent (or talents) as personal attributes that represent an advantage or a gift is wrong, according to those scholars. As Geoff Colvin, the author of the book *Talent is overrated*, puts it: What really separates world class performers from 'normal' people is hard work (Colvin, 2009). Geoff Colvin's primary message is that people are not born with all the natural talents and abilities that will make them great in life. Everyone can achieve world-class performance through "deliberate practice" in his or her chosen field - business, music, sports, etc. He mentions the research work of the German psychologist Ericsson who, with his colleagues (Ericsson, Ralf, & Clemens, 1993), studied the musicians of the Academy of Wien and discovered that only those among them who had practised for at least 10,000 hours became great performers. 10,000 hours are more or less 10 years for those who practise 3-4 hours per day.

¹Metonymy is a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated (Merriam Webster online edition, available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metonymy>, last visited October 23, 2013).

This evidence is further reinforced by a previous research, carried out by the economist Herbert Simon, Nobel prize winner, who in the Sixties established the so called 10-year rule, which states that it takes approximately a decade of heavy labour to master any field. For example, Gauss in mathematics, Mozart in music and Bobby Fischer in chess.

This does not mean that everyone can achieve any high level of performance just practising. A recent paper by Marshall (2009) uses the existing model of learning curves to examine the extent to which effort can overcome lack of talent. What is a learning curve? Basing his definition on the literature, the author assumes that different people learn different things at different speed rates. According to Marshall, talent in a given area can be thought of as the ability to learn and progress in a particular area faster than other people around you. Those who have a different learning curve, who have more difficulties in a specific area, have to practise a lot more than the talented ones to achieve the same performance.

This brings us to a second point of the book. The reward for talent, i.e. the theme of merit.

The author of the novel *Meritocracy*, Thomas Young, said that Merit is equal to Intelligence (or Talent) plus Effort. In this vision, as in more recent research, as we have seen, the idea is that one can overcome the lack of talent with more effort, more work. It is not always like that. Sometimes more talented people are more motivated to spend more hours to practise, to invest in their own talents, because results are in themselves rewarding.

So, what I propose in the book is, first of all, to change the sign of addition with that of multiplication. Merit is talent multiplied by effort. What I also propose, is to add another element, opportunities.

Merit is talent multiplied by effort and multiplied by opportunities and, as it happens with multiplications, if one factor is zero, the final result will be zero. So the three elements are multipliers but they all must be present.

What is important to highlight is that anyone has its own talents. The psychologist Gardner demonstrated that there are various forms of intelligence (verbal, mathematical, musical, kinesthetic and so on), not only one. The relevant aspect is that everyone of us has his/her talents and can develop them through deliberate practice. Very important factors in developing one's talent are also discipline, self-control, resilience, that can be defined as the ability to recover quickly from problems, change, or misfortune.

According to Thatchenkery and Metzker (2007) talent consists in seeing the mighty oak in the acorn. The secret to success lies in something that everyone has the ability to do: reframing reality to reveal the hidden potential within even the most apparently unpromising present, revealing the hidden value in people and opportunities when others do not see them.

In this sense talent is overrated because other elements play a key role, not only hard work, but also opportunities and the ability to see them. Many people are given lots of opportunities and are not even able to see them. Some others have very few opportunities and are able to develop them at their best.