

Jonathan Larson

Department of Education, Grinnell College

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4114-5532>

Of Skills and Infrastructure: Visions for Education and Society in a Recent EU Policy Initiative

ABSTRACT: The recent launch of the *Union of Skills*, a major policy initiative touching on education across the European Union, begs the question of how to make sense of its scale. This article reviews and offers an adjustment to the “epistemic infrastructure” framework recently proposed for understanding transnational public policy. Taking a different perspective on the structure of infrastructure itself, this article’s close reading of a foundational text in the Union of Skills initiative argues for a complementary perspective that looks more closely at how “skills” discourses can generate shifts in concepts of how individuals are socially situated while these discourses transform our vision for the purpose of education and the ways it is supported at different scales.

KEYWORDS: epistemic infrastructure, European Union, discourse analysis, Union of Skills, European educational policy space

Kontakt:	Jonathan Larson larsonj@grinnell.edu
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INTRODUCTION

It has been a long day, but I am certainly happy to be here with you. Such a huge crowd, such a huge community of people who are definitely passionate about skills and, I think, great supporters of social rights. As I walked into this room, I really felt the sense of network and community. I see that the feeling of community, the energy, the vibe, and the scale are high. I think this is really important as we go forward with our agenda on skills and social rights.

Take a moment to linger on this statement and try to imagine the scene that produced it. Can the reader guess the speaker and the audience? What “crowd” might the speaker be addressing that could be hailed as “passionate about skills”, and what might be the reasons for their enthusiasm? What is the significance of the pairing with “social rights” in the alluded agenda? What might be some of the shared suppositions between the speaker and the audience before the speaker has even begun the substance of their address?

The speaker is Roxana Mînzatu, Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs, and Preparedness of the European Commission. The audience is the March 2025 European Employment and Social Rights Forum.¹ The topic is a new major policy initiative, part of the rolling out of the Commission’s agenda for the next five years, called the *Union of Skills*, which Mînzatu was introducing for discussion across European Union institutions and for input from its member states. The name of the policy initiative at the center of this event, however, only puzzles more than it provides answers to some of the questions above. If we linger over the name of this initiative, we might ask, what do “skills” have to do with a “union?” One reference point for varieties of English used in Europe, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), defines “skills” as “capability of accomplishing something with precision and certainty; practical knowledge in combination with ability; cleverness, expertness.”² This definition, conceiving of skills as inhering in individuals, might be familiar to readers with backgrounds in other European

¹ Video of the speech: Skills for a competitive Europe [Wideo]. (2025, 10 czerwca). EU Social Forum. <https://www.eusocialforum.eu/2025/v/s-2854255>

² https://www.oed.com/dictionary/skill_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#22391850

languages. Consider this explanation alongside the OED's definition of "union" as "the action of joining or uniting one thing to another or others, or two or more things together, to form a single complete body or unit".³ To bring a "union" into the same conceptual space as "skills" is an act of identifying points for decoupling the integrated structure of one body in order to find ways to assemble a set of similar-sized bodies into a larger structure. Does another concept invoked – "social rights" – play a role in this reassembly? What might be some elements of the worldview that informs this vision of, in essence, a different conceptualization of a social order formed from acts of learning?

This article offers an initial analysis of a recently launched major European-level policy initiative that involves and has bearing on national educational systems, and of the educational philosophy that animates it. In particular, I explore how two concepts that have received recent attention from qualitatively informed researchers of education – epistemic infrastructure and discourses of skill in higher education – offer tools for making sense of the ideologies that make the "union of skills" a compelling enough framework for what the European Commission has characterized as a current "flagship" initiative in the policy "world" (Shore et al., 2011) or space of European-level educational policy. The analysis that I offer here of the Union of Skills initiative may help us understand some of the current EU-level orientation to education that has bearing on how individual schools across the EU are informed by policy authorities and supplied with resources to do their work with students.

My analysis here proposes an elaboration on the concept of "epistemic infrastructure", which Marlee Tichenor, Sally E. Merry, Sotiria Grek, and Justyna Bandola-Gill have defined as the "complex interplay of material, techno-political and organizational structures within which (statistical) knowledge is produced, disseminated and translated into global public policy" (2022, p. 435). First, if infrastructural thinking in transnational education policy communities indeed seems compelling, closer attention to its discursive formulation offers an alternative perspective on how we view the *structure* of infrastructure. What analytical value might there be to understanding "infrastructure" not only in terms of visible, readily graspable pieces that are put together, but also – for instance – from a more molecular compositional perspective of how its elements are named and debated?

In what follows, I outline a few key features of recent work by an interdisciplinary set of scholars on epistemic infrastructures in transnational public policy. My own evaluation of this work leads me to introduce some of the writing of linguistic anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli on grammatical and semiotic features of "skills" discourses in U.S. higher education. I then apply this theoretical framework to an analysis of a key introductory text of the Union of Skills initiative, complemented by attention to other public framing activities such as the event described at the opening of this article. This article trades breadth of range and number of policy

3 https://www.oed.com/dictionary/union_n2?tab=meaning_and_use#16667462

documents for a close focus on the key text of this new initiative of education and training; it is also necessarily limited in the scope of its conclusions while aiming to be taken up further by other scholars in larger-scale policy analysis. I conclude with thoughts about what this analysis suggests about the impact of infrastructural thinking and discourses on the national education systems of Europe. In the background, a further question haunts my account of this initiative and how it proceeds: what is the place of “skills” in twenty-first-century visions for education and training?

KEY CONCEPTS

Anthropologists working on issues other than education began to take an interest in problems of “infrastructure” in the 2000s. Brian Larkin defined them as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (2013, p. 328). To study infrastructure, he added, is to study a system that, of course, involves the users of that system at all levels, but also centers on the politicians, technocrats, economists, and engineers of that system. The idea of “epistemic infrastructure” serving educational policy was introduced by Tichenor et al. (2022) regarding the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Grek has argued in detail that the SDG concerning education represents a paradigmatic policy shift in the quantification of policy governance from measuring “schooling” to measuring “learning”. To the extent that education has become a focused object of integration into a unified model of economic, social, and environmental goals and best practices, this is the result of a consensus around the production of new metrics in response to the perceived failure of the metrics of the preceding Millennium Development Goals. These pieces note different “levels” to the structure of an infrastructure and the role that formal, regularized “meetings” of experts have played in turning them into dynamic action (see especially Grek, 2022).

While some of this recent work on epistemic infrastructures has noted the utility of discourse analysis (Grek, 2022; see also Grek & Russell, 2024), it has not yet taken a deeper dive into the nature of any formative discourse. On the one hand, discourse is what forms both the “interlinkages” and the “paradigms” that are two of the three levels (materialities being the third) that Tichenor et al. (2022) have proposed for the analysis of epistemic infrastructure. On the other hand, this concept of epistemic infrastructures, as explored to this point, might benefit from rethinking the very place of discourse in its conceptualization of the structure of infrastructure. Consider what Tichenor et al. have identified as a “first-order level” of analysis: the “materialities” of data and indicators. They proceed from this level toward a “second-order level” of “interlinkages”, followed by a “third-order level” of a “[new global public policy] paradigm” (Tichenor et al., 2022, p. 433). This model reflects a classic understanding of scale: from a micro of data, indicators, and “all other relevant inscriptions” (Tichenor et al., 2022, p. 435) to a macro of

“global”. However, recent critical reflections on the concept of “scale” problematize the naturalness of these gradients. Part of the problem is that there is much more to human communication to examine than that which takes the form of the genres and other graphic forms of organizational labor at the center of “inscription”. Indeed, recent arguments in linguistic anthropology on scale (Carr & Lempert, 2016; Lempert, 2024) point to the indispensability of various aspects of language and communication for the epistemes that form any infrastructure, let alone an epistemic one. This might lead us to consider the *structure* of infrastructure from a different angle: for instance, one that examines more molecular cross-sections of what makes up these building blocks, or even how the affordances of these units depend on the forms of talk (expert pronouncement or other) that render “data” interpretable as such.

The Union of Skills initiative certainly suggests structure, and to the extent that this concept consists of forms and functions, it would seem to also suggest an act of engineering akin to developing infrastructure, even down to Larkin’s general functional detail of “flow”. For decades, when the EU has discussed skills and training, these conversations have usually accompanied rhetoric about the benefits of removing barriers to mobility, whether to goods or to the supply of workers. Do we need quantification to identify an epistemic infrastructure, or has the initial work on the concept simply given us a helpful starting point?

The imagery of a Union of Skills, I have noted, suggests a structure akin to infrastructure. Another scholar may help us pay closer attention to the nature of the “skills” discourses at the center of this concept. Bonnie Urciuoli’s work in the early 2000s on the trending discourse of “skills” in U.S. higher education noted several shifts in the linguistic usage of “skill” or “skills” as evidence. For instance, she noted that in American English there seemed to be a growing use of “skill” as a count noun (in the plural) rather than as a mass noun that cannot be made plural: the difference between the discussion of “basic skills” and that of stating that a certain type of work (such as carpentry) takes “a lot of skill”. The use of “skill” as a verb, as in formulations such as “upskilling” and “reskilling” may be a recent complement. Urciuoli, drawing on the work of other scholars in this area, noted further, “The noun *skill* once denoted a specific manual or machine operation and now denotes any practice, form of knowledge, or way of being constituting productive labor” (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212). This observation tracks with the development, for instance, of dividing skills into categories such as “hard” (linked to a particular job or trade) and “soft” (those that are more transferable, such as communication).

Urciuoli situated this discursive shift within larger shifts in the organization of work, with implications for how the goals and purposes of education are discussed. To the extent that workers are increasingly exhorted to conceive of themselves as free agents or commodities in the job market (Gershon, 2017; Larson, 2008; Urciuoli, 2011), their prospects might rise or fall based on their ability to accumulate skills. This notion of personhood has been characterized by a great body of work as reflective of neoliberal technologies of the self (see also Foucault, 1988;

Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212), framing individuals as autonomous, isolated, enterprising selves cut loose from a previous conceptualization of personhood as socially embedded and supported by the state (Makovicky, 2014). Recognizing this change should spark questions about whether these changes are ones we want to take place, particularly because of their implications for self-realization and pluralism. In her work, Urciuoli also notes how these skills discourses, to the extent that they are taken up by students, have further implications for the role that education plays in the fashioning of the self: as something more expansive and imaginative or as something more utilitarian (see also Ahmed, 2019; Handler, 2013).

Urciuoli's most important analytical insights from her work in this period come from her perception of a different linguistic or communicative aspect of shifts in how the words "skill" or "skills" are discussed. Drawing on insights from other linguistic anthropologists, she noticed a pair of features germane to my analysis here: their "denotational vagueness", drawing meanings from "associational chains of terminology" (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 213). To elaborate, the shift in discourses of skills that she noted in her research during this period tracked with other shifts in ways of talking about "education, work, technology, and change", quite like Raymond Williams's concept of keywords (Urciuoli, 2008, pp. 213–214). Urciuoli, however, elaborated significantly on Williams's concept to provide a more robust semio-pragmatic understanding of how such words generate social action. Thus, she saw "skills" and other terms such as "leadership" and "diversity" as clustering to form a particular "register" of neoliberal discourse linking spaces of higher education with workplaces beyond. Building on Roman Jakobson's (1956) and Michael Silverstein's (2003) writing about linguistic tokens that function as "shifters" (drawing their meaning from context), Urciuoli has argued that reference to "skills" or words clustered with it accomplishes social action as a "strategically deployable" shifter, drawing content to its indeterminate nature through uses in concrete situations that also reference or index social alignment with other persons and ideas (see also contributions in Gershon, 2025; Urciuoli, 2003, 2008, p. 214). Urciuoli writes:

The defining elements of skills discourses (...) do not make up a coherent semantic field, but a loose associational chain, a cluster of mutually enregistered usages that are referentially successful to the extent that users share, or buy into specific presuppositions about workers and labor: who workers should be, how they should work, and how they should be evaluated (Urciuoli, 2008, pp. 212–213).

Urciuoli's analysis of skills discourses in higher education has taken place in the context of the U.S. In what follows, I explore the utility of the analytical tools that Urciuoli developed, not to offer a definitive conclusion about what animates the Union of Skills initiative, but to point toward a possible one while identifying

where there is room to elaborate on the concept of epistemic infrastructures in transnational educational policymaking.

ANALYSIS

I return now to the scene of the opening paragraphs of this article: a performative launch of the Union of Skills initiative at a semi-regular annual policy “forum”.

The speaker, Roxana Minzatu, was introducing this initiative early in her mandate as part of what seems to have been a carefully orchestrated moment, the first of this two-day event. As is common for EU policy, the key referent for this introduction was actually a formal text made public on that same day: the Communication from the European Commission on the Union of Skills (European Commission, 2025). How was this framework of “skills” presented in the formal text of the Commission Communication published earlier that day?

The Commission Communication proposes, “The Union of Skills aims to support the development of quality, inclusive and adaptable education, training and skills systems to increase the EU’s competitiveness” (European Commission, 2025, p. 1). It argues that the member states of the EU do not produce the right balance of skilled graduates, are not helping enough people “upskill or reskill throughout their working lives”, and fail to integrate “persons with disabilities or with a migrant background” who “often encounter additional obstacles in developing their skills”. It goes on to state that “building solid skills foundations and engaging in lifelong upskilling and reskilling” is “in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights” (European Commission, 2025, p. 4).

We see in these excerpts from the opening pages of this twenty-one-page document how “skills”, as Bonnie Urciuoli argued is the case for discourses of U.S. higher education, are presented in relation to other concepts, such as “quality, inclusive and adaptable education” or “social rights”. Populations lacking sufficient access, as suggested by the need for “inclusion”, appear as references to “persons with disabilities or with a migrant background”. The term “skills” itself is defined somewhat in a footnote as “understood in a broad sense through the entire communication (...) It encompasses skills, knowledge and competences for life, well beyond the skills needed for the labour market” (European Commission, 2025, p. 1). Right here, we see an interesting problem: this gesture toward a definition used in the document stumbles with uncertainty about the referent (does the “it” in the second sentence refer to the pluralized “skills” or “the entire communication” from the first sentence?) as well as a tautology of defining “skills” by referring to “skills (...) well beyond the skills needed for the labour market”. The referential content of what “skills” is supposed to mean here is treated as less important than this term’s relationship with other keywords that form the context the document is providing.

We see here what Urciuoli characterized as a “mutual enregisterment” taking place, in which the relative referential content of a word such as “skills” draws

meaning from its co-occurrence with others. In this article's efforts to fire the imagination regarding what we can see in a cross-section of the composition of this infrastructure, I note that "skill" does not just draw meaning from its co-occurrence with other terms in the communique; it also draws meaning from its appearance in an intertextual chain. As has been seen elsewhere with policymaking in the EU (Larson 2026), the intertextual chain of events, initiatives, and pieces of EU-level legislation invoking "skills" also prepared conceptual space for a possible paradigm shift. This first chain includes a 2010 Commission Communication on A New Agenda for Skills and Jobs, a 2016 Commission Communication on A New Skills Agenda for Europe, and a 2023 European Year of Skills. However, a different intertextual chain is actually invoked on the first page of the Communication on the Union of Skills, which references three recent reports on competitiveness, a sustainable future, and civilian and military preparedness by long-time influential EU figures Mario Draghi, Enrico Letta, and Sauli Niinistö (European Commission, p. 1). The convergence of different, long-term intertextual chains in this initiative was emphasized by Minzatu's role as a relative "animator" of ideas that had been authored by others: the Union of Skills was included as a major responsibility in Minzatu's "mission letter" from Commission President Ursula von der Leyen of 1 December 2024, which was a public explanation of her appointment before she was confirmed by Parliament.⁴

One other linguistic feature of the communication document, a grammatical one, is further consistent with Urciuoli's analysis of how recent skills discourses in U.S. higher education have entailed a shift in language. The document refers to "upskilling and reskilling", processes of doing something to a person that sound reminiscent of how we speak about "updates" and "upgrades" when it comes to technology. Consider the following graphic at the bottom of page 5:

4 https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4cf63610-ed00-498a-a7c1-a2af5fd23173_en?filename=mission-letter-minzatu.pdf

Figure 1. The Union of Skills as a process⁵



Note. From the European Commission document "Skills Union" (COM/2025/90 final), 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0090>

The graphic, reminiscent of turning gears or a SmartArt design for "process" available in Microsoft Word, takes the reader from the lightbulb of an idea to the handshake of celebrating completed teamwork. The four phases touch on key-words or phrases that are recognizable as legitimate domains of activity: quality of life, the digital and green transition, competitiveness, and safeguarding the future. "Upskilling" is used thirteen times in the document, and "reskilling" is used fourteen. "Skilling" on its own appears twice – once in the formulation "The Union of Skills is an ambitious strategy to deliver education and skilling in the EU" (European Commission, 2025, p. 4), and once as "the Commission will engage with education and training, employment and labor market actors, social partners and other stakeholders to bring education and skilling governance under the Union of Skills" (p. 6). Explanation elsewhere (especially on p. 18) of what "skilling governance" refers to notes insufficient coordination between ministries at national and regional levels, industry, public employment, and civil society. The first element of improved governance that then follows is the creation of a European Skills Intelligence Observatory "providing necessary data for a well-informed policy" or "strategic data" and "timely data reporting" to generate "early warning alerts regarding skills shortages in critical or strategic sectors for the EU".

5 (European Commission, 2025, p. 5)

These last points on governance certainly suggest a project of constructing an EU-level scale for skills coordination. It is worth noting the resemblance to features of infrastructure, or as Larkin defined it, "Built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space." The architectural features of the Union of Skills initiative reflect an attempt to convey urgency in delivering needed skills to areas of the EU economic sphere more efficiently, whether to fight climate change, advance security, or address gaps in the labor force due to an aging population. How is this infrastructure not epistemic? Following the definition of epistemic infrastructure provided earlier by Tichenor et al. – the "complex interplay of material, techno-political and organizational structures within which (statistical) knowledge is produced, disseminated and translated into global public policy" – we can see here the desire to use statistical knowledge to "drive" a techno-political management of the economic field as a skill-based one. "Drive", a verb of both guidance and mechanical motion, is used in the Communication to describe these relationships. Under the heading *Driving the Change – A European Skills High Level Board*, the Communication envisions that this Board will bring together key stakeholders, including business leaders, education and training providers, and social partners, to provide comprehensive, cross-sectoral insights and guidance on skills to EU policymakers. This will ensure a coordinated vision and the identification of the bold action necessary to strengthen our human capital, building on the findings of the European Skills Intelligence Observatory (European Commission, 2025, p. 19). This vision, in a document that acknowledges social concepts like "social rights" and "quality, inclusive, and adaptable education, training, and skill systems" (European Commission, 2025, p. 1), is noticeably top-down in its convening of representative experts. Allowances for "reskilling" and "upskilling" seem intended to meet the expectations of those wishing for themselves a role in the strategic direction of a macro-level workforce, rather than those seeking resources for self-realization in meso-level workplaces or creating opportunities for self-employment.⁶

DISCUSSION

Attention to Bonnie Urciuoli's analysis of skills discourses in U.S. higher education has offered us conceptual tools for a preliminary exploration of how a recently launched EU initiative, the Union of Skills, employs language in the development of a particular material, techno-political, and organizational structure. As the core

6 My analysis of the March 2025 Commission Communication on the Union of Skills is not intended to be comprehensive, but to open a path for further analysis. Among the formulations with "skills" that I do not explore here is the idea of a "skills gap". This formulation does not appear in Bonnie Urciuoli's analyses cited here, perhaps because her focus is on discourses of skills at selective private colleges. In contrast, "skills gap" in the U.S. is a particular discourse of workforce development, one that Matthew Hora has discussed as a neoliberal concept in which the private sector has significantly dropped a previous responsibility it accepted for training and retraining employees (Hora, 2019). Indeed, a "skills gap" is part of the opening argument for the need for a "Union of Skills".

literature to date on epistemic infrastructure describes regarding other transnational undertakings, quantifiable “data” and indicators appear central to the vision for this initiative, reflected in the proposal for a skills “observatory”. However, the performative or persuasive work that the March 2025 Commission Communication seeks to accomplish, I argue, occurs through semiotic and intertextual devices that reflect and contribute to a register of policy communication about the education of working persons to serve a vision of a particular social imaginary: a “union of skills.” There can be value in employing additional perspectives on how infrastructures – here an epistemic one that gets to the heart of what the primary purpose of an education should be – might be built from more than material, techno-political, and organizational means. Furthermore, while the semiotic tools introduced here were developed in the context of analyzing the neoliberalization of higher education, semiotic perspectives are helpful for exploring the emergence of multiple meanings, perhaps not only of neoliberalism, but also of contestation. In addition to offering a theoretical contribution to the concept of epistemic infrastructures in education, I have provided a methodological illustration of how qualitative social researchers of education policy can analyze the key texts involved in the ongoing construction of related policy worlds or spaces.⁷

Key research articles that I have cited here first explored the role of epistemic infrastructures in “global” public policy (Grek, 2022; Tichenor et al., 2022) and then in regional, European-level educational policy (Grek & Russell, 2024). Education is, of course, a policy area of interest to states and communities. States have well-established interests in the cultural, social, political, and economic reproduction of their subjects. Communities consist of parents, relatives, and neighbors for whom schooling serves their sentimental aspirations for the next generation. Substantial recent research points to the converging pressures of comparative data and best practices, such as through the OECD and UNESCO (Bromley et al., 2024; Grek, 2024). However, numerous forces also pull the organization of schooling in a more differentiated direction: the resources of tax bases, the nature of employment, religious or secular values, educator input, parental input, and bureaucracy. In this article, I have drawn from writing about skills discourses in the context of the U.S. educational system. That system, at present, is witnessing the dismantling of macro-level federal guidance – guidance that was already generally indifferent to the content of any ideas from UNESCO, let alone Sustainable Development Goals. This article is, therefore, also a reminder of the necessity of caution in international comparisons, both in terms of how we employ lenses in the study of different contexts and in that we are likely to enrich our understanding of these lenses when we do apply them to different contexts.

⁷ Some readers may think of other scholars who have worked in a related vein if with a different analytical lexicon, such as Ruth Wodak (e.g. Muntigl et al., 2000).

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O umiejętnościach i infrastrukturze: wizje edukacji i społeczeństwa w ostatniej inicjatywie politycznej Unii Europejskiej

ABSTRAKT: Niedawne uruchomienie inicjatywy „Union of Skills”, znaczącego przedsięwzięcia politycznego dotyczącego edukacji w całej Unii Europejskiej, nasuwa pytanie, jak właściwie ocenić jej skalę. Niniejszy artykuł zawiera przegląd oraz propozycję dostosowania koncepcji „infrastruktury epistemicznej”, zaproponowanej niedawno w celu lepszego zrozumienia transnarodowej polityki publicznej. Przyjmując odmienne spojrzenie na strukturę samej infrastruktury, niniejszy artykuł oparty na wnikliwej analizie tekstu fundamentalnego dla inicjatywy „Union of Skills” opowiada się za perspektywą uzupełniającą, która dokładniej przygląda się temu, w jaki sposób dyskursy dotyczące „umiejętności” mogą wywoływać zmiany w koncepcjach społecznego umiejscowienia jednostek, jednocześnie przekształcając naszą wizję celu edukacji oraz sposobów jej wspierania na różnych poziomach.

Słowa kluczowe: Infrastruktura epistemiczna, Unia Europejska, analiza dyskursu,, europejska przestrzeń polityki edukacyjnej