

What kind of adult education is required in the risk society?

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Abstract

“How can long-term purposes be pursued in a short-term society? How can durable social relations be sustained? How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?” (Sennett, 2007, p.26).

And all of this across the various affiliations of adult life, both in the workplace and outside of it, as well as in the increasingly widespread settings of unemployment or casual, temporary work, etc... I have chosen to open this paper with a series of questions posed by Sennett (2007) that can guide us in exploring, at least briefly and partially, the complexity and problematic *riskiness*¹ of the *post-modern* society we live in.

It is against such an anthropological-cultural, political-institutional and socio-economic background, which represents one of the key themes of this conference, that I set out to reflect on the “state of the art” in education and training, and in particular, the education and training of today’s adults and young adults. Today, adult education is no longer associated with a given age group or life stage, due to the social and societal *liquidity*, as Bauman (1999; 2003) calls it, in which we are all immersed. From this perspective, we cannot avoid addressing the *issue of adult education*, which emerges as an urgent priority, in Italy at any rate, especially in relation to the political-educational decision-making and strategies of the relevant institutional actors.

It seems that a possible, or rather, an objective and realistic direction for adult education to take is that leading to the delivery and implementation, on a vast scale, of adult education practices that might be viewed as excessively oriented towards *adapting* adults to existing circumstances, while losing sight of key dimensions such as contemporary adults’ *relationship with knowledge* (Alberici, 1993) and of the *meaning* that they attribute to their own autobiographical journeys, characterised by continuity and dis-continuity, including in the educational/training sphere itself.

A model of education that is essentially and excessively based on the transmission of knowledge is clearly in tune with overall political, economic and institutional needs, but, conversely, is at odds with the autobiographical paths of individual adults which, as a consequence of constant uncertainty, insecurity and feelings of inadequacy (Bauman, 1999; Beck, 1992, p.62), are increasingly on the brink of becoming what Beck defines as “*risk biographies*”, or even, “*danger biographies*” (1992, p.67). This suggests the potential value of a renewed emphasis on adult education offerings based on the “learning to think”, or even, “re-learning to think” first advocated by Donata Fabbri (1994, pp.127-134). Specifically, at this juncture in adult education, I make the case for adopting narrative-self-reflective-autobiographical educational dispositives.

Key-words: liquidity society, adapting, learning to think, re-learning to think, adult education.

Contemporary adult subjects are exposed to continual sudden changes, to the constant putting off of the attainment of most of their goals, personal and otherwise, and consequently – as we are reminded by authors such as Bauman (1999; 2003), Beck (1992), Sennett (2007), to mention but a few – to a situation of seemingly permanent incertitude concerning their personal and professional life plans. This means that adult life trajectories and learning/educational biographies have come to feature patterns, periods and phases, often of lengthy duration, characterized by the alternation between existential and career-related investments, as well as by discontinuous experience, such as the gap between school/university and work, going back to education, career changes (Alberici, 1999).

¹Cfr., Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*, Sage Publications, London, 1992.

In this general scenario, the dominant logic – which is dictated by the laws of the market and of post-capitalist work relations – has also come to permeate discourses about education and training for adults. In consequence, adult education initiatives – at least in the Italian context – are mainly focused on delivering programmes and practices enhancing adults’ professional profiles (Tramma, 2011) so that they can respond appropriately and competently to the continuous demand on the part of organizations and institutions for flexibility, adaptability and a suitable level of professional training (Alberici, 1999; Mariani & Santerini, 2002).

Thus, the contemporary cultural and educational agenda tends to emphasize the efficiency of individual adults, both *per se*, and in relation to their professional roles, and by extension the efficacy of the organization, of whatever nature, for which they work. With all that this implies in terms of the production of new types of adult marginalization, which particularly concerns social classes and “other” cultural affiliations that may be poorly equipped to meet the new challenges, although this is not the only factor coming into play. Also at risk of being pushed to the margins are women and men whose educational and professional careers have been “adequately successful” (Alberici, 1999).

“Managerial” and organizational cultures, of various kinds, do not set out to form adult subjects in light of their complex and problematic nature, their daily grappling with a profound need for meaning, and attempts to emotionally sustain their fragmentary and fragmented life experience. On the contrary, such cultures are concerned with obtaining, “[...] a work force that is functional to corporate needs [...], despite the fact that official statements place [the needs] of the person at the centre” (Tramma, 2011).

If in practice “the adult person were at the centre” this would imply, as Pavan has observed, “[...] demanding higher coefficients of subjectivity for individuals and society [...] going beyond the languages that we adopt to speak about the human factor in terms of human resources and human capital, which tend to represent the human person as a means and an instrument for attaining pre-determined types of performance and objectives” (2001, p.33).

Against this backdrop, I propose a form of adult education and adult educational practices that rediscover an educational way of thinking and acting that is not solely based on “taught learning” – to use the definition of Jarvis (1987) – which paradoxically risks becoming a permanent stockpile of knowledge, techniques and competences that need to be updated and replaced within a very short time span due to the unrelenting dynamism of our life contexts and experience in every sphere, professional and otherwise; but is also founded on “experiential learning” (*ibidem*), or (self) reflective learning, which is organized around a narrative, and in part also autobiographical, paradigm and thought.

I believe that today’s adults, caught up in the struggle with life, learning, educational and work-related trajectories that are un-certain, in-determinate, dis-continuous, and generally in a constant state of flux, need educational time during which to reflect narratively and autobiographically on their own learning, including at the existential level, and on their own personal ways of constructing knowledge and competences.

They need to re-elaborate that which they “already are, know and do”, and the trajectory that has led them, more or less intentionally, to reach – in a succession of movements and standstills, arrivals and new beginnings – that which they “are, or are not, or are not yet, but could become”; “that which they think, or do not yet allow themselves to think, or that which they think in too monotonous a fashion”; “that which they do, or do not do, but might allow themselves to do”.

In my view, this educational approach has the potential to complete, enrich and problematize learning: helping individuals to interiorize, manage, trans-form, and so on, their own learning in light of their personal and autobiographic experience and priorities of meaning.

This is where the narrative-autobiographical paradigm comes into play as an “alternative” and “innovative” gaze on education for adults with respect to traditional educational methods.

Why a narrative-autobiographical approach we might well ask? For at least three reasons, which – following L. Formenti (1998) – I briefly outline here. Specifically, this approach:

- ❖ recognizes individual adults, in their own right, as subjects that are competent and possess competences and, not only as individuals that must be continually made competent and therefore filled up, so to speak, with competences; thereby helping adults to recognize themselves as competent;

- ❖ accepts and values learning, including learning that is existential in nature, generated along the life trajectories of individual adults and generally connected with moments/phases of transition, dis-continuity, change, crisis, etc., helping the adult subjects to do the same and inviting them to explore how such learning might be transferred to new contexts;
- ❖ attributes a key role to the continuous exchange between lived experience and self-reflective processes of re-elaboration and construction of a meaning that is acceptable to the subjects themselves.

This prompts us to reflect on the current paradoxical situation, for example in Italy, which is far from addressing – as called for by EU policy – the crucial issue of validating prior learning and competences, both formal and otherwise.

On the one hand, it is almost impossible for contemporary adults to find spaces and times for re-elaborating what has happened to them in the recent past – let alone in the distant past – or what is happening to them in the present. On the other, neither does current adult education provide them with the opportunity to pursue this goal, which concerns the potential to re-gain meaning, by means of a generative process that is personal and autobiographical. Despite the stated intention to recognize and validate learning, from a narrative-self-reflective-autobiographical perspective there appears to be a lack of ad hoc places, contexts, offerings and practices characterized by an educational timescale that should be – particularly within a narrative framework – prolonged, or at least in keeping with the processes of individual adults engaged in recognizing, comprehending, naming, re-elaborating and validating the experiential learning they have acquired in the course of complex, shifting and problematic daily lives, and which demands to be integrated with new knowledge, by means of a deep, multifaceted and refined process of interiorization².

²Boutinet, J.P. “Vie adulte et formation permanent: de la notion au concept” in Carrè, P & Caspar, P (eds.), 2004, *Traité des sciences et des techniques de la formation*, Paris, Dunod.

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