

**PART 7**  
**RESEARCH ON EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND  
MOVEMENT**

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## 16. RESEARCH THROUGH, AND ON, EMBODIED MOVEMENT IN ORIENTING ONE'S SELF TOWARDS THE FUTURE

### EMBODIMENT IN ADULT EDUCATION: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In Western thought, there is a long tradition of a Cartesian disjunction between mind and body (Damasio, 1994): where the mind is viewed as the site of reason and the location of speech and is entrusted with the future design of our life, the body is a tool at the disposal of the intellect. But what if we considered the body not only as an instrument of the intellect but as a way to knowledge in its own right? This chapter will take up this question and make the case that embodied experience, which is understood here as profoundly relational and situated, is central to learning processes and a crucial topic for adult education research. This throws up major theoretical and methodological challenges that I will discuss drawing on the methods used in an innovative project that explored the reflexive, transformative, orienting effects of body perception and movement in guidance and career workshops. We will argue, “the body has many stories” and we “know in and through our bodies” (Clark, 2012, p. 426). Our first orientation in life happens through the body: senses and movement give us our centre of gravity in this (troubled) world (Feldenkrais, 1991). Embodied knowing is our first and most primitive way of experiencing the world: our bodies allow us to be active and animate within the world, to see, hear, touch, explore; we can only become persons and selves because we are located bodily in a particular place in space and time, in relation to other people, animals, plants and things around us.

Recent decades have seen growing interest in embodiment in the social sciences and theories which challenge the mind/body division and understand the body as a source of knowledge and agency (Shapiro, 2011). Yet a good deal of the discussion in adult education and career counselling remains anchored in linear and de-contextualized ideas of the mind and rationality which is also highly individualistic (Reid, 2016). Only recently has this topic been taken up in adult education in a series of studies (Ollis, 2012) in which embodied learning is examined in a variety of contexts, including higher education, community education, health care and the workplace, and through multiple methods, such as dance, theatre and outdoor experiential education (Lawrence, 2012). This research challenges the dominant paradigm of how knowledge is constructed and suggest the importance of bodily movement in how we create our sense of self. Rich learning (Hunt, 2013), depends

on holistic reflexivity, in the double meaning of *reflection* and *reflexivity* the first is intended as cognitive, intellectual and critical ability and the latter as the capability of “abandoning” one’s self to the experience of learning, by giving up control – which is specific to *reflection* – in order to let something new happen in the present and the future. I am concerned about the pedagogical role of adult educators and counsellors in giving creative resources to future generations, because everyone has the right to a career guidance that is hopeful, creative and personally meaningful (Reid, 2016).

In educational research, and especially when it is conducted through participative methods, it is essential to recognize the personal, emotional and relational aspects that are involved in every step of the research process. This type of adult education practice has led us to develop a ‘compositional’ methodology which is attentive to embodied learning and narratives. Compositional methodology, which will be discussed in detail below, creates an educational encounter in which the participants generate stories through movement, relationship building, expressive drawing and imaginative exercises. In formal education (school, university), these aspects are generally neglected. This compositional methodology illustrates, instead, how thinking and feeling are not in antithesis, but come together in an enhanced, coherent, critical and collective practice of knowledge construction.

#### RETHINKING METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

In vocational and career guidance, practices rely almost exclusively on the use of written and oral language (for example in one to one sessions, in information booklets etc.). Conversely, the body rarely represents the focal point in constructing future life projects through guidance. Body perception and movement in guidance workshops aims at raising awareness on the important role of the body in our self-narration. Our story is not solely cognitive recollection of a series of events. It involves emotions, imagination, and indeed our bodies (Kroth & Cranton, 2014).

We are only beginning to get to grips with how to ensure guidance practice and research on adult education and guidance uses methodologies appropriate to the facts of embodied knowing and learning. A compositional methodology (Formenti, 2018) represents a challenge to how we think about guidance because it transforms the idea of the learner as distinct and separated from others, into an understanding of guidance as a critical exchange that is relational, reflective and responsive (Cecchin, Lane, & Ray, 1992). Compositional methodology operates on the assumption of an embodied and enacted mind (Varela, Thompson, & Rosh, 1993) to create moments of learning and research in which the participants’ narrations are linked to their body, to the plasticity of neural connections and the relationship with nature. The method consists of a co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) with a group of adults where all participants are co-researchers. Among the key principles that guide me as a researcher is the idea that dealing with adult education means considering ourselves more as collaborative research subjects rather than observers of other people’s lives,

and that the participants are, in fact, co-responsible for that learning that is generated together. Doing research involves raising difficult questions and finding answers through uncertain paths, which always exposes us to risk if they are not shared and deconstructed with others. This compositional methodology invites participants to examine their experience through multi-sensory exploration, embodied narrative, aesthetic representation such as drawing and dialogue. According to Formenti et al. (2014), embodied narratives do not merely tell stories about ourselves, but actively make sense of how we are connected to each other. By telling stories about ourselves, we expose the complex connections between what we think and who we are, our personal values, ideas, emotions and feelings. In order to do that, Formenti (2016b) suggests using a methodology that can move beyond familiar dichotomies: words and body, self-image and environment, narrative and reflexivity.

For this we need to create participatory environments where the participants' bodies can be 'summoned' – a space of "movement" as any action that allows us to see beyond reality "as it is" and to project what is beyond our own "perceptions". Our body moves as our mind moves. Learning is the process by which we vary our responses to information based on the context of each situation. I will also try to show how these actions are related to the creation of a space for the recognition and the valorization of differences and creative resources (Fraser, 2017), and how the body, for vocational and career guidance, potentially provides leverage for new opportunities in the relationship between education and progressive social change. Compositional methodology, we argue, can generate a deep, relevant change in our thinking habits, one that could activate critical, imaginative and transformative dimensions of learning.

#### DOING RESEARCH ON EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE: THE DESIGN OF THE WORKSHOP

According to the systemic and radical constructivist theoretical framework (Bateson, 1972; Maturana & Varela, 1992), and experimenting with a compositional methodology, this work presents a pilot case study related to vocational guidance and body-learning and aimed at a group of adults, attending a *Festival of knowledge*<sup>1</sup> organized by the University of Udine, in Italy in the squares and streets of the city. The festival's goal was to promote an innovative approach to knowledge, intended to connect with sections of the population that are not typically invited to debate about the role of knowledge in their life. I was prompted by a national call that invited young researchers to propose ideas for workshops which dedicated to "desire, methods and new knowledge". The workshop was set outdoors and the activities, conceived and led by myself, were inspired by the recent works on educational guidance through art (Formenti, 2016a) and ethnography of multi-sensory exploration of settings (Pink, 2009). This approach uses a version of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) which goes through four phases, each exploring a form of knowing – *experience-based, presentational, propositional, practical*.

The participants were 12 adults interested in creative educational methodology as mature students – teachers, educators, social worker – they were asked to co-construct the workshop by way of their actions and social interactions, by sharing language and gestures.

### *Experience-Based Knowing*

The activities were set in a square situated in the historic centre of the city as a starting point. The adults were invited to explore the space of the square; in different phases of the experience, our attention was focused on different parts of the body (e.g. feet, head) and its functions (breathing). Here are the directions I gave them:

- Choose a place to go to and observe the surrounding environment and your perceptions.
- Spend 20 minutes on the spot, either sitting, standing or walking alone.

The participants were invited to use the following questions to help focus their attention:

What do you hear? What do you smell? What can you touch or what kind of tactile sensations do you recognize around you? What about taste? What do you see? Do the sensory perceptions come from somewhere near you or have they travelled from afar? How does your body respond to your sensorium as a whole? What about your mind? Feelings, memories, associations? Are they personal/individual, or can they be understood as part of the broader cultural context? Are they related to your field of ways of making sense of the world?

### *Presentational Knowing*

After this first phase, the participants were asked to write down and draw what they had experienced on a sheet of paper. Art-based methods (Leavy, 2017) produce presentational knowing that opens up new possibilities of reflection and reflexivity. Stories and drawings show the complexities of our perceptions, emotions and cognition. The participants are invited to develop their own aesthetic sensitivity through the method of composition, i.e. they are asked to choose how they want to put words, signs, gestures and images together. This form of knowledge operates on multiple levels – corporeal, linguistic, semantic and symbolic – and by adjusting on the white page the elements and relationships that give meaning to the experience of the previous phase.

### *Propositional Knowing*

In the following step, the participants were invited to share their experience, or part of it, in order to gain awareness of its relevance to their present and, perhaps, future

life. This phase is crucial to get the participants involved as co-researchers. The researcher explains to the participants the systemic premises that interpret education as research, i.e. a specific kind of co-operational and compositional practice with an open and uncertain result in terms of knowledge that depends on an open shared process and on the dialogue that is created together. First, I asked them to introduce themselves to the group by referring to a concrete situation in their lives that involved their bodies. Then we had a conversation/debate in which the participants freely asked each other questions. Propositional knowing is not immediate because a biographical exchange in a workshop requires time to become a form of dialogue (Freire, 1972).

### *Practical Knowing*

Finally, the participants explored new possibilities of orienting themselves toward the future through the increase of their body sensitivity, the ability to sense and name differences and share knowledge in groups. I asked them to connect what they had experienced in the previous phases with their questions, doubts or desires about the future and, in general, about their past and present life. The dialogue became an embodied, living space of inquiry where the participants were encouraged to reflect on the conversation and the resonance associated with this talk. The process evoked new insights into the original experience, connecting aspects of the self which they were previously unaware.

### LET THE BODY SPEAK: SOME DATA FROM THE WORKSHOP

The workshop is above all a process of co-construction of personal and shared knowing which is both an event and a form of research. It relies on the subjects' and the group's ability to make, to share, and to criticize experience, always starting from their own history and stories, i.e. from their own concrete life experiences and from their ways of narrating them – without separating their perceptions and emotions from their ideas and values. The workshop was audio-recorded and the data analysis focused on the conversations among three participants, rather than on their life histories. The nature of this research is that it is multi-layered and situated and therefore difficult to summarize but here I will highlight three moments in which the participants were talking to each other which I think communicate a flavour of what occurred during the research and which also illustrate the complex embodied nature of experience and knowledge.

I wish to briefly discuss Giuseppe, Paolo and Luisa because they are adult learners: this common experience helped the creation of a dialogic environment for the horizontal sharing of knowledge. The presence of three adults returning to education out of 12 participants cannot be considered a coincidence. This would require further reflections on the difficulties of accessing the services of vocational and career guidance encountered by all those people who are not usually recognized/

well-served inside dominant processes of educational and professional orientation (Finnegan, Merrill, & Thunborg, 2014). By giving voice to three participants who have re-entered education, I underline the need to encourage co-operative research with adults who are going through a phase of personal and professional (re)orientation. I also try to promote a relational approach because individuals co-emerge as interactors within the interaction (Gallagher, 2005).

During the third phase of *propositional knowing*, participants were encouraged to introduce themselves to the group and share fragments of their biography in relation to the theme of orientation. Giuseppe, teacher, PhD student and father of a six-year-old child, introduced himself by telling a story which connects him with his son and students:

Luckily, I found myself lost several times in my life. Today my son Francesco and my students, who are my teacher's pets, guide my footsteps. (Giuseppe, age 38)



Figure 16.1. Giuseppe's picture

Giuseppe's words show he is within a transitional phase of experience, where his multiple identities, as a father and as a teacher, means he is constantly negotiating his position in relation to other people (Merrill & West, 2009). During the conversation a dialogue started:

Q: How come you teach little ones [kids]? You are a man. (Marta, age 25)

A: I know men are uncommon in primary schools, but I am man, father and teacher and I'm learning a lot from the children. As a man who teaches, I am expected to show an aptitude for sports such as football, but I prefer to dance. Sometimes, at home, the sitting room turns into a dance floor when Francesco puts on some music. He is very enthusiastic. I think he feels fully recognized: he puts his heart and soul into dancing and, in that moment, I am totally present with him. (Giuseppe, age 38)

The exchange between Giuseppe and Marta conveys something of the vital nature of the mind/body connection in learning. As a father, he describes the happiness deriving from physical movement and physical contact through the story about his son. This demonstrates that the relation with the body is not only necessary for the development of the child, but also fundamental for the adult, in that it generates a deep sense of integration among his different roles and selves. He himself tells how the personal, familiar and gender-related aspects all intertwine in his professional experience. Giuseppe is performing an act of composition because he is expressing his own personal way of dealing with multiplicity and differences, by recognizing them and trying to balance them in his life.

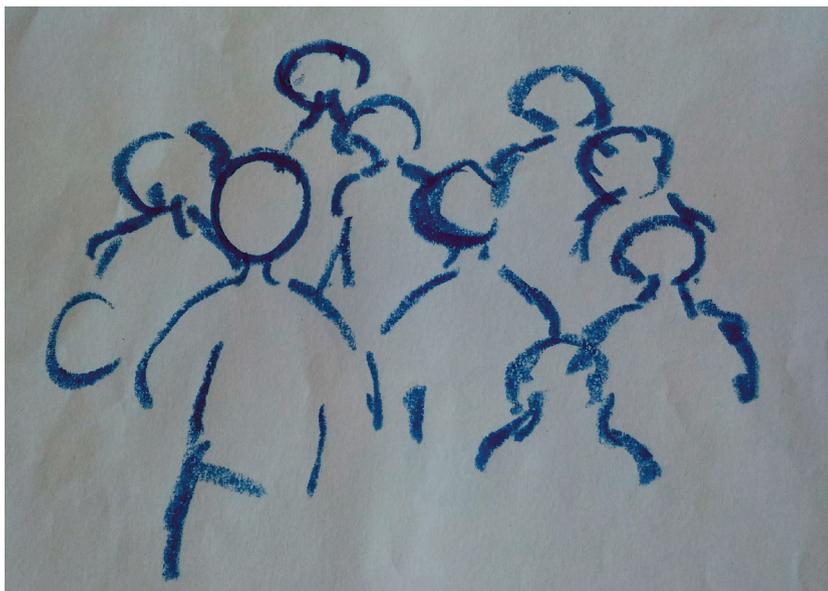
The conversation proceeds with the intervention of Paolo, another participant and founding partner in an insurance company. He introduced himself to the group by narrating his job experience:

I am not a robot, but I am certainly the product of huge random variants. I am all the people I meet in the city where I work. This fact recurs in every meeting I have with every living person, in every moment I spend working, in every sentence I say and every thought I have. (Paolo, age 45)

Paolo works in Milan, a busy, commercial city. His experience of working life, has helped to form a *habitus*, a set of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977). His working meetings and his business city are metaphors which refer to the multiple roles in his life. In addition to that, Paolo's words express how social cognition is generated and transformed in the interplay between the unfolding interaction process and the individual engaged in it (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007).

This fragment of Paolo's story appears as a very creative, almost poetical one. I need to go beyond it, to understand how his identity is composed of complex and multiple aspects. While talking, Paolo showed to the group the picture he had drawn in the previous phase of *presentational knowing*, which depicted a crowd of people in the subway.

This composition, involving both words and the body, represents the possibility of transformation in these workshop activities in the field of pedagogical guidance. Giuseppe's and Paolo's experiences show that each individual life contains a heterogeneous range of stories. Living a life "in-between" (in-between space of



*Figure 16.2. Paolo's picture*

practice and possibilities, in-between the socially constructed categories of “teacher”, “man”, “father”, “business man”) implies a space created and spatially defined by relationships. In-between space (Grosz, 2001) can be a space of exposure, a space that restricts and limits, spaces that are always altering and shifting and always in the process of becoming something else – tangible but un/known. If we reduce people to one story, we’re taking away their humanity.

Paolo’s story was followed by that of Luisa, another adult learner who, showing the picture of a tree, said:

I felt as if I was being called. By whom? By the leaves! Yes, they were so green: it is summer and I, up until that moment, had not noticed the green tree into the square. And I was actually seeing myself in the leaves. I was aware of the vitality of leaves and of my body, made of a soul, which is itself nature. (Luisa, age 36)

Luisa’s words transformed the topic of conversation, shifting the focus from an educational towards a philosophical goal. The aesthetic image of nature in Luisa’s words indicates how this sort of practice can also generate hope. The objective of orientation is not to give or find answers, but to bring participants to feel that they are “explorers”. This involves transformation in the perception of selves as those who are seeking something and, in seeking, lean towards things which have not yet taken form. In this they find a sense of hope. If our perceptions generate images and new



*Figure 16.3. Luisa's picture*

stories, these then enable us to create new worlds and contribute to the re-designing of the world in which we live and the ways in which we explore it, but also to bring the future into the present. This is a creative and reflexive process (Gardner, 2014) that enables changes in ideas and perspectives and, above all, innovative actions.

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

During the workshop information was collected through dialogue among the participants, in which individual body experiences constructed “space” for attention towards the biographies of others (West, 2016). My proposal for the workshop was based on group work in order to reflect upon the way to experience life “in-between” knowledge and identity in relation to vocational guidance. Then, the possibility of telling different stories from different perspectives about the same experience helped to realize that we, as embodied human beings situated in time and space, combine multiple models of the world (Horsdal, 2012). This pilot case highlights how, in career guidance, practices of exploration associated with movement and artistic experience (writing and drawing) and dialogue sustain the development of self-awareness and innovative patterns of action.

Arguably we are experiencing a shift in notions of the future – from a pattern of progress and repetition to openness and unpredictability (Morin, 1999). This demands a wider educational perspective of guidance, where choice is seen as a continuous, dynamic process (Formenti, 2016b). Reflection on experience in this sort of workshop is a type of ethical action, not only because it was participatory and democratic, but also because of connections and relationships, including with one's own self, that were activated. The workshop suggests that life is made of interdependence and movement between the inside/outside. Through embodied experience in an open space, myself and others have listened to the minute movements and senses of the body – “My body is a tree”, said Luisa, as though the body were an inward field of learning and knowing. The body wakes up. Our bodies will be more similar to a field of resonance, when we start to feel that we are connected with other people – “I am all the people I meet in the city where I work”, said Paolo – and the future generation – “[...] my son and my students, [...] guide my footsteps”, said Giuseppe.

Awareness encourages or allows an oscillation between inner and outer space. The space of the “in-between” is the locus for social, cultural and natural transformations: it is not simply a convenient space for movements and realignments but it is in fact the only space – the space around identities between identities – where becoming and openness to futurity outstrip the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity (Grosz, 2001, pp. 91–105). In what can feel like a philosophical or sacred space, intuition, movement, emotions, gestures, hopes and dreams have equal validity alongside the rational thinking and thoughtful words. They co-exist, so that differences can inspire a type of creativity that is life honouring, which is called human flourishing. The participants' engagement in activities aimed at increasing body awareness seemed to raise their ability to sense their perception and share experience where they were able to tap into embodied knowledge and then write and discuss from a more embodied perspective. The research suggests we have multiple selves; we all play many roles and are complex human beings. But how can we connect to and explore this multiplicity in research, guidance and education? We need to create occasions, to encourage a more holistic way of approaching vocational guidance and go beyond binary thinking. Exploring, with body and words, the multiplicity of experiences, role, beliefs and perspectives that make up this unique person. No perception exists outside of action, and as far as actions change, perception of the world changes too (Varela, Rosch & Thompson, 1993). Paying attention to one's own sensory perceptions and giving them form through written words is an exercise of hope which allows us to create a new image of our connection to nature, and in going beyond the separateness from it, we have ourselves created. Embodied movement practices are a way beyond dichotomies: parent/child; teacher/student; male/female; practitioner/service user; able/not able; and power/powerless.

Developing compositional methodologies in research and education allow the participants to engage in both verbal and non-verbal orientating activities that creates space to not only explore what is immediately possible, but desirable. Body awareness can help create richer narrations that challenge the way we conceive

ourselves and foster a more integrated self (Tisdell, 2003). In post-modern times, where uncertainty is ubiquitous, it may be relevant to involve wider segments of population in non-directive and non-linear activities to invite them to become active participants. Responsible co-construction and emotional participation, in activities which encourage listening, recognition and mutual appraisal enhance our subjective and personal resources to walk through an uncertain present and look to the future with confidence.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> [www.conoscenzainfesta.eu](http://www.conoscenzainfesta.eu)

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