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edited by Vanna Boffo and Laura Formenti

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Reflecting on reception: seeking beauty when working with young adult migrants

Silvia Luraschi¹, Gaia Del Negro²

Keywords

Aesthetic Representation, Reflectivity, Feminist Methodology

Abstract

This article ponders the reflective potential of using a participatory, embedded and aesthetic methodology of a feminist angle in the professional research of educators and coordinators of educational services for refugees and asylum seekers, in order to rethink educational/reception practices for adult migrants at micro/meso/macro levels.

1. Unexpected Subjects: educational research in migrant reception

For some years, we have been seeing the spread of theoretical studies and field research in the adult lifelong learning sector on the reception of adult migrants with a concomitant updating of professionals and volunteers, both internationally (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017; Morrice, Shan & Sprung, 2017; Guo & Lange, 2015; Shan & Fejes, 2015;) and in Italy (Di Rienzo, 2018; Shepherd, Scardigno & Manuti, 2018). The aim has been to enhance migrants' human and cultural capital and to foster justice and social wellbeing by means of their studies and practices (GEM, 2018). Here we would like to share certain reflections on participatory and aesthetic research/educational practices with operators that can highlight subjective needs (micro level), context variables (meso level) and collective dimensions (macro level).

"Unexpected Subjects" is a pedagogical research programme of the University of Milan-Bicocca financed by the Alsos Foundation, conducted by Silvia in a participatory and systemic approach under the scientific direction of Laura Formenti, and focusing on the transformative dimension of asylum seeker reception procedures (www.fondazionealsos.org). Partnering the research is the Consolida consortium which pools cooperatives committed for years to carrying out educational activities at reception facilities in the provinces of Lecco and Monza Brianza, within what was formerly known as the SPRAR system. The title of the research, "Unexpected Subjects", takes its cue from the thinking of Carla Lonzi, a leading representative of feminist thought in the 1980s, to carry out an epistemological subversion: migrants – but also operators – are indeed all unexpected subjects who can speak about their own condition and desires. The leap of faith to be taken presupposes that the subjects in question, whether migrants or operators, are authorities on their own lives and needs. This then requires proactivity in searching for needs and solutions (Scardicchio, 2014). The aim of the research/intervention is to rethink education not so much by systematizing 'good practices' but the operators' stance towards others as well as their professional knowledge, which needs to become more aware on practical, theoretical, cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, personal, and social levels (Munari, 1993). The 18-month research project included reflective workshops with asylum-seekers and refugees, meetings between refugees and young natives, and dissemination activities throughout the territory involving those considered insiders in the research field.

2. The workshop: theoretical premises for an active attitude

At the start of the research project, we (Silvia and Gaia) conducted a compositional workshop with an embedded reflective goal (Formenti, 2018), the former as researcher and the latter in support of the methodological part. By *active* or *embedded* attitude what we mean is a reflective attitude in the present, tied also to bodily and emotional attention (Contini, Fabbri, Manuzzi, 2006), which actively tends towards observation of anything strange or irrelevant (Dallari, 2005), to be precise: anything that causes discomfort, flinching, vacillation, or anger, to activate a fresh look at the experience. We therefore identify with the feminist notion that the sense body is a place of knowledge and that ‘what is personal is political’: it is neither conceivable nor desirable to separate the body and mind, nor the search for oneself from the development of others – and vice versa. From these premises derive two methodological implications: art, and ‘starting from ourselves’.

Aesthetic knowhow (Heron, 1996) such as the collage technique, supports associative thinking (Butler-Kisber, 2008) which ventures beyond the ‘already thought’ towards intuition, perception, and emotion. Collage does not require particular artistic skills and yet lends itself to abandoning its own frames of reference and being *guided by instinct*, accompanied by the writing of short reflective texts to explain the meanings of the work produced (Biffi & Zuccoli, 2015). In a highly operational professional context (such as that of cooperatives), it is particularly useful to try to steer organized thinking towards project action.

The second methodological point is ‘starting from ourselves’. To challenge the asymmetry of power between researcher/educator and the subjects (too often ‘objects’) of research/education, pursuing a feminist angle (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002), we have chosen to position ourselves as researchers within the analysis of the material we collect (Formenti, Luraschi & del Negro, 2019). This positioning is ethical: we ourselves are “Unexpected Subjects”, that is, galvanized by connecting with our own experience to discover the inequalities (of gender, class and race) present in our society (Fraser & Honneth, 2007).

3. An interpretive account of the workshop

The goal of the meeting, which took place in February, was to reflect on the meaning of the word ‘reception’. In fact, the beginning of 2019 was marked by the entry into force of Italy’s so-called ‘Security Decree’, with a new invitation to tender for reception services and the introduction of heavy cuts in all personal services, starting from education and integration. The question about the sense of reception services was therefore a particularly burning issue.

The 3-hour-long workshop involved 10 members of a consortium of three different cooperatives with different backgrounds and professional roles: 5 female educators and 1 male engaged in the services of the second reception phase, a social assistant, another female educator and a male educator who coordinated the service in addition to 1 project coordinator. This was the first time they had all worked together to try out a reflective aesthetic practice.

The meeting was audio-recorded and transcribed. We ourselves analysed the data collected in the form of a dialogue (each read the texts and transcriptions, then we swapped notes), following an inspiration of an auto/biographical type (data interpreted in the light of the researcher’s biography – see Merrill & West, 2014), within a research-action framework with a reflective goal (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

We prepared an informal setting with a table and the material to be used: A3 sheets of paper, magazines, scissors, and glue. The material chosen – old *Airone* magazines – in our intentions focused on the spatial dimension, which is explicit to the research into how migrants inhabit space and which spaces are available to them and which are not. The participants were invited to create a collage for each person who answered the question: what does reception mean for me in the roads followed by young adult migrants? Having assigned a title to their

work, each participant then wrote down what was in the collage and what it represented, and shared it with a companion, then with the whole group.

In analysing the autobiographical texts produced and the group discussion sparked by the collages, we were guided by the following questions:

- What are the operators telling us about their work with migrants?
- Has a dimension of discovery (a formative dimension) been enabled thanks to the embedded languages of the artwork?

Despite the atmosphere of organizational stress, the operators played along willingly, preparing the collages and sharing their reflections with the group. The project coordinator, Sandro, who is responsible for building and maintaining relations between the services of different cooperatives and territorial institutions, wrote a fairly perplexing environmental metaphor which arrested the group's attention and sparked a debate:

[...] in my collage, which I've called "The Amulet", I put a photo of this old man, who, although it can't be understood from the photo but can be read in the commentary, uses a seashell to call the deer that live in the forest. He avoided throwing the shell away, and saying it was no longer useful because they're in the mountains here. And yet he never uses it to listen to the sea and say: 'dammit, it was so great when I was at the sea,' but reuses it [...].

During the debate, the participants agreed that they could see the ambiguities and contradictions of their own daily work in the metaphor. We therefore found it interesting to reflect on Sandro's story to question at the micro/meso/macro levels a representation which seemed evocative – for this group – of the practices to welcome adult migrants. At the micro level, the metaphor of the shell recalled for us the unrecognized skills of the migrant, that is to say, his or her ability to access 'other' distant resources, from a totally different social context; to what extent is this knowledge of those who come from another place recognized by the individual migrant and by the operators? At the meso level, in other words, that of the relationship between the operators and the migrants, the shell that could call the deer for us evoked the capacity of the educator (and the migrant) to live in a dynamic situation where actions and reactions are multidimensional, and that something greater than our own thinking always eludes us (metaphorically "the deer"). In educational work, developing the ability to improvise together (Gamelli, 2016) requires a slackening of the need for control and programming to stay in the present moment, thanks to bodily listening (Luraschi & Formenti, 2016) to what the other is bringing us and evoking with his or her presence. What further aspects of themselves are barred from the operators in their work and lives?

At a macro level, the metaphor of the shell invites us to wonder who the deer might be in the contemporary social world. In the 2017 film *On Body and Soul* by the Hungarian director Ildikó Enyedi, two very lonely people have the same dream in which two deer follow one another into the woods. Escaping from the isolation of their lives marked by silent suffering bodies, they find in this image a language for love. To the common sense which sees migration as a problem and an emergency, the sensitivity to recognize that everything is interconnected may be elusive nowadays (Morin, 2001).

Broadening the discourse further, the metaphor of the shell prompted us to think about how encountering new people and frames of meaning, which initially seemed alien, had influenced us. Arguably, the same applies to the reception services which are changing and face the challenge of not discarding what their operators have learned in meeting others alone. Silvia continued to meet the group of operators throughout the research project to continue the debate on this subject, checking the assumptions expressed in this commentary with them.

4. Conclusions for a genuine collaboration

The conscious arrangement of aesthetic settings triggers divergent reflective thoughts and brand-new connections (Leavy, 2017), which may well be 'odd' in the beginning, but can stimulate us, like the shell narrative, to question the sense of our experiences and knowledge in the reception of migrants.

In Silvia's case, it will be interesting to observe whether and how the professional attitudes of the operators have changed towards colleagues, migrants, and even towards the term 'reception', after being involved in the research project. For both of us, this means moving away from a linear point of view of research and education to try out a participatory method inspired by feminist practices. This does not mean applying a predefined method, but understanding, together with the operators, in a more integrated and complex way (Formenti, 2017), how to ask oneself authentic questions which challenge the commonplaces on working with migrants and open the way to reassessing the evolutionary dimension of using spaces both inside and outside reception centres.

Notes

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