

A plurality of approaches for “non-traditional” stories

The Spandrels of San Marco and unexpected learning identities

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My contribution presents some conceptual reflections about auto/biographical work with non-traditional students in higher education. In the first part I present my Ph.D research design: the auto/biographical methods used and the different contexts in which the narrations were created. In the second part I enlighten the interdisciplinary aspects of the research in terms of field, method, object and conceptual frame. In particular I will expose the importance of abductive thinking in the auto/biographical proposals as well as in the analysis of learning processes embedded in students' writings, importing metaphors from sociology and evolutionary biology.

1. Non-traditional learners at the university: a Grundtvig LLP project

“Stories from Bicocca”, a pilot project funded by the EU Grundtvig Lifelong Learning Programme, was the starting point in building a framework for my own research.

The pilot project “Stories from Bicocca” started in 2009-2011 as part of the Grundtvig project “European Biographies Biographical approaches in Adult Education” whose general aim was “to enrich and improve methods of biographical work with adults, and to make biographical approaches better known in European adult education institutions, as a powerful integrative and experience-based pedagogical tools for reaching and integrating socially marginalized persons into society” (quoted from the brochure). Each partner institution (from Austria, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Turkey) realized pilot projects introducing new biographical approaches into their work. The results were gathered in a common handbook and cd in English.

As a partner of the project, under the direction of prof. Laura Formenti, the Bicocca University team chose to address non traditional students, who are defined in literature as under-represented, and whose participation in higher education (HE) is constrained by structural factors. This includes, for example, students whose family had not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from (specific) ethnic minority groups, older students and students with disabilities. These students are considered at risk in terms of access, retention, active participation, academic success, and social integration. (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/documents.html>).

The basic idea was to gather learning stories from students who appear not to fit the usual institutional expectations, for example adult students who decided to re-enter higher education after (or during) a work period, or students who had changed faculties. Within the Italian HE system, these students are considered in a negative light as a mere social cost and/or a difficult category to deal with; changes are viewed as "errors" and workers are simply “non-attending” students. In line with international literature, there is some evidence that these students have a higher risk of non-completion due to different kinds of difficulties related to their "a-typicality". The challenge is to integrate identities that are not only different, but opposites (student vs. worker, or adult, or parent...); the social feedback (generally negative) to their learning choice; the way they dealt with previous experiences in education and in higher education (Alheit, 1995). These students, more than others, may face a cultural clash coming to and learning in higher education: a situation of “floating” may occur. Floating is “a deep feeling of being paralyzed by events or experiences that a person cannot cope psychologically, emotionally and socially” (Bron, 2010); a difficult situation

that, nevertheless, when recognised through self-reflection, could trigger a process of learning. Literature also enlighten the difficulties in create a learning identity able to deal with the universities expectations and constraints (Merril & Monteagudo, 2010) “This interest in integration led us in turn to explore what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional adult students. Such an identity is itself part of the integration process which enables people to become effective learners and which promotes or inhibits completion of HE.” (Field, Merrill & West, 2011: 2)

Aware of danger to reduce people to the status of deficit in relation to the university, the attention was focused on resources, coping strategies, retention. Retention is not well defined and focused in current studies (Longden, 2002); recent work in the UK (Yorke & Longden, 2008) appears to favour a greater emphasis on student “success” which is all together a wider and more positive focus and avoids unduly pointing up student academic and cultural deficits.

Biographical methods revealed useful in my research to interrogate this aspect, in fact:

- biographies may cast a light on “resilience factors”, by focusing the experience of those students who are non-traditional, and nonetheless do not abandon; they could tell what they experienced and how they managed to take the challenge of being “invisible” for the university;
- biographic narration is a way to offer space for students to become more active; students at risk can better understand their experience by telling it, becoming reflexive and active in relation to it, finding new strategies for adaptation or for claiming space. And maybe they can avoid drop out, but we must also say that drop out is not necessary a “problem” in the biographic view.

2. The research design: auto/biographical workshops and co-operative inquiry

“Stories from Bicocca” thus represented the starting point of my research that became then articulated on two different contexts which produced different kind of processes and results: the auto/biographical workshops and a co-operative inquiry.

a. auto/biographical workshops

Auto/biographical workshops were designed and managed by a team of “researcher/students”, who were invited to experiment with auto/biographical methods through personal exploration, to reflect on their implications, specifically in terms of ethics.

The workshops, articulated in three meetings, three hours each promoted writing and sharing, in small groups, personal narrations that could:

- give voice to individual learning stories within the university;
- highlight differences and connections between the participants' experiences;
- develop meaning and understanding through dialogue;
- foster reflexive processes, and possibly deliberate actions.

Each workshop was designed in a different way but each of them follow the same framework: the “spiral of knowledge”, where four phases are cyclically re-activated (Formenti, 2009):

- authentic lived experience (direct experience and/or memory of it);
- aesthetic representation (by objects, autobiographical writing, telling, reading aloud etc.);
- intelligent understanding (reflection, discussion, self positioning with others);
- deliberate action (consequences and new project, the start of a new cycle)

Overall 50 students participated in the workshops. Their texts were shared and, with the author's consent, published online in a website (<https://sites.google.com/site/storiedellabicocca>), specifically created to make them visible to other students and members of the institution.

b. co-operative inquiry

I proposed to the group of “researcher-students”, who designed and managed the auto/biographical workshops, a research based on the participatory inquiry paradigm (Heron & Reason, 1997, 2008). The co-operative inquiry is based on key features:

- research is conducted with people rather than on people: a group of researchers come together to explore an agreed area of activity. All the subjects are fully involved as co-researchers in all research decisions
- the co-researchers engage themselves in the actions they have agreed and observe and record the process and outcomes of their own and each other's action and experience.
- the full range of human capacities and sensibilities is available as an instrument of inquiry.

The group of co-researchers decided to explore learning identity and university environment (with its possibilities and constraints) drawing on personal life experience as well as on the experience developed on the project “Storie della Bicocca”.

In each meeting a topic was decided and interrogated through questions able to trigger self-reflexive writings.

The follows are some of the questions that drove the exploration.

- When had I the feeling that university was eager to meet me?
- When did I feel that university was a place useful for me (a place where il can play)?
- When did the university allow me to dream?
- When did you transform the university from an “unplace” to your own place (if happened)? Tell what did you feel/see (or you didn't see/feel) before and after this transformation.
- When did I feel recognized as an adult, with his/her own proper learning interest?

The co-operativity inquiry produced, as a result a new project based on participant's experiences and reflections. The project aims to create workshops where students may explore and reflect upon their learning project, developing connections between their life and university experience. The project could become part of retention strategies held by university: “pedagogic strategies that draw on relevant experiences, and relate them to academic knowledge, are likely to enhance integration and promote completion” (Field, Merrill & West 2011: 9)

3. Interdisciplinarity

“Abduction: is a lateral, relational way of thought that allows a double description, or multiple/complex descriptions of some aspect of the world” (Formenti, 2004)

This form of thinking is very different from paradigmatic thinking, that conversely is vertically organized, categorial, hierarchic, inclusive. Abduction is not de-duction, nor in-duction: is an horizontal, contextual relational form of thinking. This process is at the basis of metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), narration and so many forms of human experience (humor for example) that Gregory Bateson considered: “All thought would be totally impossible in a universe in which abduction was not expectable” (Bateson, 1979: 158)

I see this epistemological attitude as the background in order to think in terms of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity plays a fundamental role at three distinct but intertwined levels of my research:

- A) field: pedagogy and educational sciences
- B) method: biographical methods
- C) object: learning processes of non traditional students in the university context

A) Field: pedagogy and educational sciences

Educational sciences are a plurality of different disciplines rooted in heterogenous fields (psicology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history etc..). They become useful knowledge for pedagogy through a formative and educational intentionality (see Massa 1990, Avanzini, 1992). This intentionality select specific aspects of the different disciplines and direct them to construct and analyze “objects” from a pedagogical point of view.

According to this view, interdisciplinarity is at the core of actual pedagogy.

Maintaining this stance, I drew on different disciplines and approaches in order to explore the complexity of learning lives.

The theoretical background is the systemic approach (Bateson, 1972; Varela, 1993; von Foerster, 1981), social constructionism (Gergen, 1999) and the theory of complexity (Morin, 1995). According to these perspectives, auto/biographical work follows some general premises:

- “self-construction” is a systemic, conversational, and compositional process;
- there are other levels beyond the individual level of construction (the “agent”): relationships and contexts, where individual actions and meanings can be seen as effects of interactions;
- stories and meanings are not only subjective. They are developed in a context with its own possibilities and constraints. Different contexts create different narrations.

The term auto/biography, with the slash, seems to fit these ideas. It was coined to draw attention to the complex interrelations of the construction of one's own life and that of another person (Merrill & West, 2009).

B) Research method: biographical methods

Biographical methods are used in my research for two main reasons:

- biographical research is interested in “how people actively 'learn' their world, and their place in it, as well as how this may be challenged ” (Merrill & West, 2009: 4)
- biographical research is highly compatible with other approaches to analysing the life course. Significant episodes of learning are often at turning points “Biographical approaches thus allow for researchers to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to particular changes in their lives, including those that have to do with transitions between life stages, which we probably expect to go through at some time as we grow older, and those

that involve significant and often unexpected challenges to someone's status and role. Both force us to ask who we are, and who we should relate and how, requiring us to reconsider more or less explicitly our capacity for learning from and for our lives" (Field, Gallagher & Ingram, 2009)

If we wish to understand learning as a fundamental and pervasive human activity, then we need to see it as integral to people's lives and the stories they tell about their lives. For example the drop out issue can be addressed in terms of: what the decision to quit university means in the lives of the students? "In some cases dropping-out may be the start of a new transition and stage in their biography, while in others it may indicate a difficult set-back in what they see as an evolving learning career." (Field, Merrill & Morgan-Klein, 2010: 2)

Stories are "patterns which connect" (Bateson, 1979): they connect different life spheres, contexts and times, but also the teller with his/her audience. So biographical research have to deal with these integration processes:

"If biographical research is found in challenging spaces and can question dominant ideologies, it also transgresses overly rigid academic boundaries. Biographies, in their nature, appear to evoke an interdisciplinarity spirit, partly because lives transcend academy" (Merrill & West 2009: 54)

C) Object: learning processes of non-traditional students at university

Learning experience, the connections between learning and identity, the transformative processes are at the heart of my research questions.

As Field points out "learning is a fearsomely broad concept, with famously blurred boundaries: it is the active process by which we engage with our changing environment" (Field 2005: 3)

Learning experience is embedded in life, it happens in informal as well as in formal processes, it involves emotions, values and practical aspects beyond cognitive ones; so it is intertwined with many factors (for example the social networks as we will see in the next paragraph). Learning identity too is specifically related to "how actors experience themselves as learners in different life spheres" (Edstrom & Thunborg, 2010) and the integration of these different life spheres in terms of subjective experience is relevant. So it becomes important to see integration of learning processes (for example belonging or construction of a learning identity) in the light of wider transitional processes (Alheit & Dausien, 2002).

4. Conceptual framework to analyze stories about students and university in relation

As a way of moving towards an interdisciplinary approach I chose to employ sensitising concepts in helping me to analyse data and inform my theoretical and conceptual framework.

"Some theoretical perspective underpin all research, as theory and method are intertwined and inter-related: we cannot make sense of the world without having ideas of how the world works or of what it is to be human. We cannot interpret the detail generated in our research without having some framework to piece together, however provisionally, the fragments of stories to enable them to find a place in the world." (Merrill & West 2009: 57)

I decided to structure the concepts in couples, considering them as two polarities of a continuum. The two terms are considered complementary, not opposites (Keeney, 1983): it becomes interesting to question the biographical process that connect them. The couples are: structure/agency; social capital/imagined social capital and adaptation/exaptation.

A. Structure/agency

Structure and agency are mutual influencing factors. Individual agency is shaped by the constraints of structural factors the individual experienced (family culture, class, gender etc), but, at the same time, the agent experience these constraints in a subjective way, developing meanings and ways to act them out in different ways.

It is important to consider both the importance of students' background (cultural economic, social capital) as well as how they can dynamically exploit the human and symbolic capital of the university.

Bourdieu's idea of habitus is a way of exploring the social and cultural worlds of non-traditional students. Habitus is the “great deal of everyday life is conducted on the basis of shared values, norms and routines that are largely taken for granted”(Bourdieu, 1984: 169-73); it depends on people's social, cultural and economic background.

A perspective based on this idea is able to show how the institution and the student assumptions interact and generate a plurality of results. For example, if the student and institution assumptions are similar (that means similarity in expectations, language, visions of the world), probably they will not generate misunderstandings or clash of different frames; the student career will probably meet the institutions provisions (*fish in the water*). On the other hand, when the student habitus is “unorthodox”, it's possible to find obstacles in the learning career and risk of retention and dropping out (*fish out of water*).

“In the case of university students from non-traditional backgrounds, there is likely to be a mis-match between the student's cultural capital and the taken for granted cultural capital of the dominant group within the university. Our expectations was that this mis-match and the way is handled by the actors concerned, would be an important factor in explaining retention” (Field, Merrill & West, 2011: 5)

B. Social capital/Imagined social capital

Social capital is a multidisciplinary concept that represents all the benefits coming from social connections.

Social capital and lifelong learning are intertwined with one another: there is, in general, a mutual beneficial relationship between these two concepts, but it is not a simple one, depending, in fact, on a range of other elements (Field, 2008). For example, when the network producing social capital is based on very close and strong links (bonding social capital), the space for reflexive learning seems to decrease. In general, social connections help to generate trust between people, and thereby foster the exchange of information and ideas. However “the interplay between networks and learning is not simply part of the process by which skills and techniques are shared, and information is passed around. It is also an active part of the process of making sense of the world, by talking about feelings in complex and apparently contradictory ways” (Field, 2005: 128)

Quinn (2010) adds further reflections into the debate. She gives to the notion of social capital a new dimension: the networks that give benefits are not only “social”, but also symbolic and imagined.

“Symbolic networks may be the networks of those we know who are given a symbolic function, imagined networks may be with those we don't know personally, or who may not even exist, but with whom we can imagine desired connections. These networks provide resources of power and resistance and appear to be more useful for survival than formalized support networks are..” (Quinn 2010: 23)

The structural factors remains important, but there is another level of interest: how are these factors played in everyday negotiations? Which are the creative solutions found to face them?

“(...) universities facilitate the production of imagined social capital by opening up the strange and the unfamiliar to be reframed and reused by students in new symbolic networks. Is this ‘making strange’, then, the distinctive role of the university within lifelong learning?” (Quinn, 2005: 15)

The “imaginative side” of the relation between networks and learning should not be undervalued, as the possibility to imagine oneself into the learning community he/she is attending could become a retention factor.

“Our findings in respect of withdrawn students are still highly provisional, but they suggest the difficulties first of developing a compelling self identity as a member of the 'imagined community' of university students” (Field, Merrill & West, 2011: 12)

The following is an example of “imagined social capital” from the students' stories.

Anna’s narration about her motives to be a student starts from a sense of emptiness associated with inadequacy.

“I felt empty inside... like something left over... in the meantime the years passed, the children grew up, and this empty space got bigger and bigger; and it produced a sense of inadequacy. I wanted to escape from home and doing something different...”

She was inspired by a very special imagined social capital.

“I also needed money, so I accepted any occasion to work... saleswoman, clerk, attendant in a hospital: psychiatric department. The contact with craziness pushed me to begin a new vocational process, searching for “the human world”. I wanted to know why we move in a certain direction. Do we make our own decisions? I was 45!!! I didn't know, and actually I don't know by now, where the road is leading but I enjoy it. I left my job at the hospital, stopped cleaning bedpans and vomit, but I miss those foolish men and women. Because I found the courage to start over thanks to them. I took my life in my hands and I gave it a new direction, with new colours and a lot of poetry.”

Anna uses her imagined social capital when she is asked to find meaning for her choice of study at the university. The metaphors she uses express the way she embodies this meaning, in a very deep way.

“I had a reverent fear of university, like something beautiful but I was unfit for, and then I was infected by craziness!”

“Foolish idea... my idea”

C. Adaptation/Exaptation

In literature the relation between students and university often underlie an adaptationist discourse: is the student (cultural or social) capital fit for university? Which kind of fitness pressure the university exercises on students?

It could be interesting to explore in a deeper way this metaphor. In particular I present here some reflections that the scientist Stephen J. Gould developed upon this topic.

Gould made a critique towards the dominant idea of “the near omnipotence of natural selection in forging organic design and fashioning the best among possible worlds” (Gould & Lewontin, 1979:150). He proposed a plurality of ways through which change may occur, mediated by natural

selection, which “restrict possible paths and modes of change so strongly that *the constraints themselves become much the most interesting aspect of the evolution*”¹ (Gould & Lewontin, 1979:160).

Besides processes of adaptation Gould enlightened another kind of processes that he named “exaptation”. Through the “exaptation” functions and features that previously were not useful (or partly useful) are co-opted by the organisms in new directions.

“Features coopted as exaptations have two possible previous statuses. They may have been adaptations for another function, or they may have been non-aptive structures. The first has long been recognized as important, the second underplayed. Yet the enormous pool of nonaptations must be wellspring and reservoir of most evolutionary flexibility” (Gould & Vrba, 1982: 12)

The new functions arising from old ones (or from raw materials that wasn't useful) are often unpredictable. So current utility carries no automatic implication about historical origin.

“We fault the adaptationist programme for its failure to distinguish current utility from reasons for origin” (Gould & Lewontin, 1979:147).

In order to make this idea more visible, Gould used the great central dome of San Marco Cathedral in Venice as a metaphor. Admiring the beauty of the four mosaic decorated spandrels sustaining the dome, he made the following consideration:

“The design is so elaborate, harmonious and purposeful that we are tempted to view it as the starting point of any analysis, as the cause in some sense of the surrounding architecture. But this would invert the proper path of analysis. The system begins with an architectual *constraint*: the *necessary*² four spandrels and their tapering triangular form. They provide a space in which the mosaicists worked; they set the quadripartite symmetry of the dome above.” (Gould & Lewontin, 1979:148)

In Gould's view environmental constraints are necessary and fundamental and they always open spaces for new uses of the reservoir of evolutionary flexibility.

I found these ideas very useful in order to read a recurrent theme in students' narrations. The stories tell about constraints and difficulties, but from them an “unexpected” learner identity raises. This learning identity is connected to learning process that are described with the words “pleasure” and “beauty”.

The following is one example of “exaptation and unexpected identities” from the students' stories.

Carla is a mature student that left an employment in a bank to study educational sciences. The roots of this turning point are located in the maternity experience:

Becoming parent was the most fascinating and at the same time hard event in my life. I needed help and it was not easy to find someone really helpful, only experts with “receipts” that didn't fit with my needs.

I would like to transform grief in a creative act

¹Italics is mine

²Italics is mine

Carla tell us how unexpected was this life change in a dialogue with herself (the Actual Carla is “talking” with the Past Carla in one activity of the autobiographical workshops)

ActualCarla: I would like to say that you enrolled at university! You can't believe it right? But you asked and obtained a time off work, you took a first level degree and now you're studying for the second level degree!

PastCarla: Are you sure???

ActualCarla: Yes, and now you don't work anymore at the bank! You left that job for good two years ago

PastCarla: Beautiful! And all these things happened in eight years? I can't believe that!

5 Conclusions

In this paper I tracked some ideas of my actual Ph.D research. Interdisciplinarity and abductive processes lies at the heart of the research design. Metaphors and concepts coming from other disciplines revealed useful in order to analyze students stories in multiple directions. Interrogating stories is always an incomplete and provisional process so it is necessary to consider our own positioning as researchers. I chose a stance able to compose materials and symbolic world of learners, looking for theories that were coherent with materials but also with my own experience as non-traditional student. The topic I chose is rooted in my biography and my personal experience is interrogated explicitly during the research, aware that my interests and ways of making sense are not divorced from my experiences.

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