

Stories from Bicocca University

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This contribution presents some theoretical and methodological issues regarding the pilot project “Stories from Bicocca” developed within Grundtvig project “European Biographies. Biographical approaches in Adult Education”¹

The general aim of the project is to enrich and improve methods of biographical work with adults, and to make biographical approaches in European adult education institutions better known as a powerful integrative and experience-based pedagogical tool for reaching and integrating socially marginalized persons into society.

As partner of this project² Bicocca University chose to address its project to non traditional students considered as people at risk of marginalization in the academic context.

By ‘non-traditional’ the project means students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This would include, for example, students whose family has not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, mature age students and students with disabilities³.

The first project action created a group of students coming from the following magistral courses: Educational Sciences and Human Resources.

Participants were first invited to think about their perception of non-traditional learners. It was found that the expression can be associated to a large amount of possible meanings (for example, a student classified as non-traditional the learners who complete their studies in the given time). This exercise was useful to shift the focus from the student characteristic of non-traditionalism to the relationship between learner and institution, where the recognition and definition in the terms of (non)traditional takes places.

The discussion focused on “accessibility”. Accessibility has to do both with the preparation of students when entering the academy (where some categories are disadvantaged), and with the possibility to vary the didactic offer, the contents and/or the way to transmit the knowledge. This concerns a cultural change in the academic orientation, not an easy one.

Therefore words as “marginality” or “a-typicality” were used as problem-words which might continuously intervene and question our project.

The idea is to gather learning stories from students that have some a-typicality in relation with the usual institutional expectations, for example adult students that decided to re-enter in higher

¹ In an interdisciplinary exchange between partner institutions from Austria, Germany, Italy, Poland and Turkey, participants will discover different methods and approaches. Based on these experiences, all partners will develop and the realize pilot projects in their respective partner country, introducing new biographical approaches into their work. The results will be published in a common brochure in English. Further material and practical examples will be published electronically in the partner organizations’ websites, to be used by any people interested in working with biographical approaches in adult education.

The institutional partners of the project are:

- Università degli studi di Milano Bicocca
- Ile- Berlin Institute for Lifelong Learning in Europe
- Ibika Institute for Biographical and Cultural Research (Goettingen, Germany)
- University of Innsbruck
- eFKa Women’s Foundation (Poland)
- Kusadasi Public Education Center (Turkey)

² The Bicocca project referent is Prof. Laura Formenti

³ <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/documents.html>

education after (or during) a work period, or students that shifted their faculty course. In the institutional thought these kinds of students are often considered as a social cost or an uneasy category to deal with: faculty changes are viewed as "error" and worker students are viewed as non-attending students. On the other side, these students could have more risk of non-completion due to different difficulties in facing their "atypicality". Difficulties are related to a wide area of experiences: the necessity to integrate different identities, often considered as opposites (students/worker/adult/parent...); the social feedbacks to their learning choice; the dealing with other previous higher education experiences...

The Bicocca project also addressed to students that are starting their university experience (enrolled at their first year of degree) in order to collect "fresh views" on the institution as well as difficulties in dealing with a new learning world.

Autobiographical workshops have been projected, experienced, valued by the members of the working group in order to define a common methodology to collect stories, to share them within little groups and to trigger a reflexive level about them

The project is linked to previous experience of guidance sessions for university students. The common sense equivalence [good info = good choice] brings many students to consider guidance as a mere collection of information. How is it possible, in this frame, to open a space for a pedagogical context, i.e. to promote self-reflection and development of personal meaning? There is a clash of frames: informative vs. narrative. Which kind of *relationship with knowledge* do they suppose?

Methodology

Since the 'turn' to biographical methods⁴ life history and biographical approaches are being used in diverse ways and in a plurality of settings in European adult education research.⁵

It is important to clear the epistemological approach and the method used to collect student stories.

Our theoretical references are represented by systemic epistemology⁶, social constructionism⁷ and complexity theories⁸

In this frame autobiographical work have to deal with some premises:

- the "self construction" is viewed in a processual way
- there are always different levels to consider: an individual one (where we find active agents), as well as systemic ones (where individual meanings can be seen as an "effect" of different contexts of living)
- stories and meanings are developed in a context with its own opportunities and constraints. Different contexts generate different narrations.
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The term auto/biography, developed by Merrill and West, seems to fit with these ideas.

⁴ Chamberlayne P., Bornat J., and Wengraf T., *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* Routledge, London 2000

⁵ <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/documents.html>

⁶ Among the different authors that contributed to systemic epistemology: Bateson G. *Steps to an ecology of Mind*, University of Chicago press 1972; Varela F. *The Embodied Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1991; Heinz von Foerster *Observing Systems* Intersystems Publications, Seaside, CA. 1981

⁷ Gergen K. *An invitation to social construction*, Sage, London 1999

⁸ Morin E., *Introduction à la pensée complexe*, Seuil, Paris 1995

*The term 'auto/biography' was coined to draw attention to the inter-relationship between the construction of one's own life through autobiography and the construction of the life of another through biography.*⁹

Following this “guideline” workshops proposed a group participation in order to:

- making visible inter-relationship and connections between stories
- honouring complexity of life through dialogues on experiences
- generating reflexivity on experience

This last point needs a clarification.

The projects' aim is collecting stories for a virtual archive, but in a social constructionist view when someone's telling about his story is not only reproducing something already “recorded”, but he's generating a contextual version.

So there is the ethical task of creating a context that could promote reflexivity and social recognition for students considered at (potential) risk of non completion or dropping out.

For what concerns reflexivity, workshop proposed tasks that could generate a “cognitive displacement”¹⁰ on the way learning experience is usual narrated. Students were also invited to participate, in an active way, the other's narrations in order to offer a different point of view.

Reflexivity, as possible effect of workshop, needs to be questioned. Someone could take a reflexivity stance on his experience only to confirm the same story on himself. That could mean closing possibilities instead of generating new ones. That's why workshops are projected to promote something new about narrations.

“Recognition” was the other ethical leading direction.

There is a paradox in the creation of a context of recognition without the other, who may become a mere *addressee* of recognition, instead of an actor. Self-recognition is a process, it is not something fix, perhaps it may be a long term aim. As it's impossible to avoid power relations, it becomes important to be sensible about them and self-recognition becomes an open question to be declined every time in a specific context. This kind of questions needs a reflexive stance by the researcher who is involved in a pedagogical context

Narrative workshop: an example

I would like to present, as an example of the activities organized in the project, the narrative workshop for learners in higher education that shifted their faculty course. For the students who lead the workshop this was an occasion to experiment the autobiographical methods in adult education and research. Even though the expected outcome should be to collect stories of educational experiences, it was made clear that the sense was also to listen to the stories and honor them, giving their narrators a recognition as learners and subjects. To the participants we offered to experiment the autobiographical methods as users, but also to get back reflectively on their experiences at the university and to share that exploration with mates. This last aspect of confrontation and sharing with other adult learners emerged as a source for motivation to participate to this kind of group based workshop during the promotion of our activities.

It was decided to construct a narrative tool composed by three meetings of three hours each every two weeks, and to open the subscriptions to a group of 5 participants. The three steps were entitled as follows:

1° day- different meanings of changing: exploring together different moments of changing and the meanings given

2° day- future ideas: imaging a professional future

⁹ Merrill B. and West L., *Using biographical methods in social research*, Sage, London 2009

¹⁰ Munari A., Fabbri D.(1984) , *Strategie del sapere. Verso una psicologia culturale*, Guerini, Milano 2005

3° day- connections in learning biographies developing a final narration that gathers the threads of each learner identity.

Here are presented the activities proposed in each meeting through the indications given. At the end of each meeting presentation is added a brief extract of the story written by Carla a woman in her 50ies who was involved in the workshop and who expresses herself with interesting metaphors.

FIRST DAY

A special attention was used for the opening of the first meeting, where the conductors present themselves and the project and secondly asked people to tell about their expectations and reasons to come to that meeting. A document prepared ad-hoc and called the Ethical Code was proposed to the group for discussion: the code is an agreement about how to participate and about the use which should be done of the materials produced.

As introduction play, every participant is asked to write a post-it in which the university give a short message to them.

Activity one: an image of changing

Participants are invited to draw a picture that can represent a symbol of changing

Activity two: autobiographical writing

Participants are invited to describe an important moment of changing in the past. And then to write a dialogue between the past self that was in the middle of hopes and doubts and the actual self.

The writings are shared in a final reading.

Carla's first writing:

2002 – summer

I'm in Berlin with my family. It's lunch time and we are looking for a place to eat. (...) I don't care about that. My head is following a thought: "I will not come back to my work at the bank! No more!". I'm sure about that. I don't yet know how this fact will take place but I'm sure of that.

Carla's second writing: dialogue between past self (PS)and today self (TS)

(...)

TS: Carla, you had to come back to the bank after Berlin

PS: Oh No!

TS: Yes, but... no fear. After a work period you enrolled at the university! And then you got a part time at the bank and you started a new work with children!

PS: Really? But it's fantastic!

(...)

TS: Carla you have been very strong. But...How you could be so sure of this changing that day in Berlin?

PS: I don't know, in a moment I Knew it:

TS: Thank you

PS: Thank you. I'm so happy about this story!

SECOND DAY

The second meeting focused on future ideas.

Activity one: images of myself in the future

Using a cardboard support shaped as a man and different materials, people represented two ideas of themselves in a professional future (one idea is “realistic”, the other one is a “dream”).

Then everyone describe his work.

Activity two: The roots of my vocation

Participants are asked to remember and write some episodes that are meaningful in order to understand today's professional project.

Activity three: other's point of view on my future

Everyone is asked to write a future description (ten years from now) of one mate.

Final reading

Carla's description of her roots:

Becoming parent was the most important and the most difficult moment of my life... I needed help but I met only experts with their "recipes" good for everyone.(...) My child, my husband and me, with our unique experience didn't come out in front of the expert eyes...

I decided to study in order to become a family counsellor for this reason perhaps...

Martina imagine Carla's professional future:

I Imagine Carla's future. I see a woman that, after a long struggle is able to realize her project. Now she has her own office; it's big and warm... There are many books on the shelves: the library gather the books that Carla loved and collected in her long path... There are also empty shelves: her desire of learning is still alive...

THIRD DAY

The work was about the river as a metaphor for life. Participants were invited to position the educational experience at the university along their life path. The workshop closed with a final writing about the educational experience in its overall.

Activity one: imaginative drawing "Life as a river"

In this activity we propose to draw a river with different colors and materials which should represent the life course of the person. Along the river should be positioned the educational experience at the university. Then the river is given voice. Finally, drawings are positioned on the ground to compose a sort of geography, a landscape where each person can guide the others to visit his/her river and listen to its voice.

Activity two: autobiographical writing "I was, I am, I will be"

In the last autobiographical writing people are invited to go over everything that they experienced and reflected about in the narrative workshop and to construct a free narration which can give each person a sense of satisfaction regarding his/her educational story.

Exchange of views and impressions closed the whole workshop.

Participants are finally asked to write a short message to the university.

Carla's writing

The little girl is crying, the teacher is teasing her in front of the class. The river is polluted.

(...)

The university stops the river with some black rocks...but it goes underground and it comes in surfaces again in a new degree course. The actual moment... The river is clear, wide thanks to knowledge and wisdom and it's going wider, grass all around, flowers...(...)

I was a wet little chicken

I am a smart cat

I will be refreshing water

References

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