

# Dancing the Crisis Beyond the Usual Choreographies in Social Work

Antonella Cuppari

University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, a.cuppari@campus.unimib.it

Abstract - "Arianna" is a video-performance performed six months after the conclusion of a cooperative inquiry with social workers, volunteers and family members of people with intellectual disabilities in northern Italy. The choice of an aesthetic and performative way of analyzing and interpreting the research material arose from the need to move away from the colonizing power of discourse in order to open up new interpretative possibilities around the relationship between the experience of crisis and transformative learning processes. It contributed to the creation of an idea of transformation that tries to look beyond "the form that transforms".

**KEYWORDS:** Transformative learning, performative research, dance, social work.

## INTRODUCTION

I am a social worker and I am a second level coordinator of a system of services for people with disabilities in a non-profit organization in Northern Italy. I am also a third-year PhD student in "Education in Contemporary Society". I am doing a workplace doctorate that is based on an agreement between my company and the university starting from the need to innovate social practices of services for adults with intellectual disabilities, beyond "usual choreographies".

When I refer to "usual choreographies" in the sphere of social work, I intend to propose an interpretative metaphor that critically investigates the organization and evolution of services for adults with disabilities and that highlights the functionality/ dysfunctionality of the relationships that are activated at the *micro* level (between individuals: professional-user, coordinator-family, professional-family, ...), at the *meso* level (between systems: service-family, service-institutions, service-territory) and at the *macro* level (between service networks, between periphery and center).

My doctoral research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and explored the relationship between crisis experience and transformative learning processes in the professional context in which I work. In this contribution, I will narrate the salient passages of the performative part of my doctoral research and I try to illustrate how it contributed to generating some awarenesses useful for the composition of my own interpretative model of transformative learning.

## 1. BEYOND "THE FORM THAT TRANSFORMS"

Questioning the frameworks within which discourses on transformative learning are embedded is not trivial, especially in a historical time when learning and education in adulthood are experiencing a difficult situation that risks following the goals dictated by consumerism: "Change and transform!" (West, 2016). On the contrary, the idea of transformation challenges us to critical and problematizing thinking that is contextualized in a *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2000), where nothing seems able to maintain its own solidity for long "in society, in education and in our personal lives" (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 34).

The deeper premises of *transformative learning theory* (Mezirow, 1991) are Western and related to North American culture: individualism, rationalism, optimism and harmonic perspective (Boström et al., 2018). However, today we need concepts capable of integrating structural inertia, organizational change, conflict and power into the research and educational process. These can also help to better understand the deep ambivalences, contradictions and paradoxes that affect all people involved in the learning process. The relationships between the micro, meso and macro levels require new theorizations, in the direction of a complex theory of transformation.

I have thus tried to temporarily leave in the background the question "*What 'form' transforms?*" (Kegan, 2000) that has animated the international scientific debate over the years around the theory of transformative learning (West, 2014) in order to move thinking beyond "the form that transforms".

All this has been an invitation for me to think in movement, which has also been connected to my training as a contemporary dancer. Bringing this awareness rooted in the body into the framework of my doctoral research, putting it into dialogue with the dilemmas, tensions, inhibitions and insights of a research into crisis and its transformative possibilities brought out at a certain point the need to perform the research data.

## **2. A COOPERATIVE ENQUIRY IN THE CRISIS**

My research *with* the field began after the arrival of the pandemic in Italy. The variation in the usual choreography generated by the exceptional nature of the situation was grasped in its informative meaning and motivated the beginning of an initial exploratory investigation with a group of service coordinators (Cuppari, 2021a).

The prolongation of the pandemic emergency over the months made me and my colleagues aware of the need to find ways to inhabit uncertainty but also to reflect in systemic way (Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020) on the premises underlying the usual choreographies that had characterized the social educational work of the services.

In the following months, several research-training paths were designed and implemented (Cuppari, 2021b; Cuppari, 2021c; Cuppari, 2022a; Cuppari, 2022b). These pathways used *cooperative inquiry* methodology (Formenti, 2017; Heron, 1996), a type of Action Research that goes beyond data collection and analysis and that is used to sustain change in social action. This methodology enabled participants to become communities of research (Heron & Reason, 2001) and practice (Wenger, 1998).

The research *with* the field ended in June 2021. At some point, the prolonged duration of the pandemic emergency had exhausted its informational reach. On the contrary, a certain tiredness and discomfort was present in the field, due to the difficulty in giving new organizational form to the unprecedented practices generated in the crisis. All learning was in fact being called into question by the uncertainty of the situation and this had made the organization of services even more rigid and made it difficult to imagine the future. I realized that my own research questions were being transformed. In particular, I was asking myself: "What cultural idea of transformation am I becoming the holder of?".

## **3. "ARIANNA": DANCING THE PROCESS**

"Arianna" (<https://vimeo.com/701090070>) is a video-performance resulting from a work of re-analysis and re-interpretation of research data. My familiarity with the aesthetic language of dance oriented me towards a performative analysis and interpretation of the research data (Gergen & Gergen, 2018). The use of dance and choreographic composition has both organizing and liberating potential (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002).

Whereas the research with the field was characterized by an immersive process in the social context investigated and a creation of knowledge through continuous dialogue with the participants, in this performative part of the research I felt the need to connect with the inner echoes of the research process, with the tensions, anxieties and questions it aroused. The research has in this second part taken the form of an *embodied autoethnography* (Spry, 2001).

The shift from verbal data to dance required attention to the selection of the material to be translated into dance, the choice of movements, the scene and the meanings generated by these choices (Leavy, 2009). I reanalyzed the research material and selected those narrative excerpts in which there was explicit reference to sensations, movements, body and movement metaphors. Some of these excerpts were then incorporated into the musical track.

After this selection, I tried to place the narrative elements within certain critical passages that characterize the transformation in the crisis (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021; Morin, 2016):

- 1) organized routines, habitual patterns of action, status of normality;
- 2) perception of crisis signals by means of irregularities and antagonisms;
- 3) blocking of organizational devices;
- 4) unlocking of hitherto inhibited virtualities;
- 5) integration of antagonistic and complementary forces in an organizational and fluid way;
- 6) fluctuation in time and renewal of energy and organization;
- 7) organizational reconfiguration of the system.

For the realization of the video-performance, I collaborated with a choreographer and a musician. In the planning phase, we reflected on a number of questions: Where to place the dance? How many people to involve? The choice was to draw on research material to identify a symbolic place for the process. The house was an evocative image that naturally emerged in the choreographer's mind and mine. It was one of the most inhabited contexts during the pandemic crisis, a place normally little known and inhabited by the services. We therefore contextualized the dance in the space of a house that is no longer inhabited, suspended between what it was and what it could still be.

A second crucial step in designing the video-performance was the choice of subjects. In this case we opted for a *pas de deux* that could help the observer's gaze move from a *micro* level (the individual subjects), *meso* level (the relationship between the subjects) and *macro* level (the dance in the house and the house in the landscape).

The mode of video shooting has also long been the subject of reflection on the action of observing. Immediately, the choreographer and I agreed on the choice of a mobile and fluid quality of filming, a 'gaze' proposed by the camera that was part of the dance in being.

With respect to the music, we chose not to use a piece that had already been composed, but to make use of the expertise and artistic sensitivity of a musician to be brought into dialogue with the creative process that was accompanying the design of the choreography.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The video performance "Arianna" was disseminated within academic contexts (e.g. ESREA SpringSchool 2022) and in my professional context. The collective viewing of the video allowed themes to emerge on which to develop further reflections around my research questions.

A first theme that emerged during the academic discussions was the relationship between individual and social experience in research, made visible in the difference between the cooperative inquiry part and the predominantly autoethnographic part of performance analysis. Indeed, the interaction with the cultural field of which I was a part made me as much a research subject as the other participants, blurring the boundaries between personal and social, between myself and others (Conquergood, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 1996).

A second theme concerned the evolution of my identity, which during the research opened up to a *triple consciousness* (Du Bois, 1996; Welang, 2018): that of a social professional, that of a researcher and that of an artist.

Finally, a third theme allowed me to interrogate the relationship between art, research and the educational profession in my research, as explored by *a/r/tography* (Irwin, 2013). The *a/r/tography* is a fluid process of enquiry that moves in the liminal space between "a" (artist), "r" (researcher), and "t" (teacher) and is realized through a rigorous and continuous form of reflexivity and analysis (Springgay, et al., 2005). "Arianna", from this perspective, can be seen as a fluid and

becoming composition of three different parts that informed the whole process: scientific research, aesthetic sensibility and a pedagogical presence (Hills, 2006).

Another very useful moment of collective reflection was the viewing of "Arianna" with a group of service coordinators who had participated in the research. The decision to refer to the coordinators for a concluding reflection on the entire research process stemmed from the need to bring the reflection back into my own professional context. An initial theme brought up by the coordinators concerned the quality of certain professional 'gestures' and their effects on the relationship. The following are the words of one coordinator:

Watching the pushes in the video, I thought about how many times we pushed the families in these months. (...) and I wonder how much those on the other side moved because they were pushed by us or because of a change in the actual way of thinking about the relationship.

Another coordinator questions what it means to think about the transformation of services in relation "to the rest of the world":

When they started to pull the rope I wasn't sure if they would get out. (...) I imagined a rope pulling them back. This video clarified for me where I would like to go in a world that I don't feel is ready yet.

Another theme that emerged from the discussion was that of time in transformation. Two other coordinators say:

I was struck by the opening scene, her sliding her arms along the wall, which seemed to me like a crazy clock that wants to return a little to the past and a little to the present.

I was struck by the final sentence 'I'm looking at all this as if it were a painting': when you're too far in, things are in a loop and the movements convulse. When you walk out the door, things change. Now we are still inside. This anguish is current, it is not the anguish of the emergency.

The narratives of the coordinators do not seem to conceive of the possibility of redefining new frames in this uncertain moment. This reminds me of the same difficulty encountered in the act of taking a picture of a moving image such as, for example, a dance. What happens to the idea of transformation if the continuous movement makes it difficult to capture 'the form that transforms'?

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Having been the opportunity to carry out my doctoral research in a highly uncertain context such as the one generated by the pandemic allowed me to deal with my cognitive vulnerability from the outset and to rely on skills acquired in areas of knowledge apparently far removed from academic research such as, for example, artistic research.

The evolution of metaphors and professional postures in the course of research with the field had effects not only on practices and a certain way of conceiving the function of services but also on identities, primarily my own. The autoethnographic approach to research and performative work constituted ways of exploration and dialogue between different parts of me (social professional, researcher in training, dancer). This PhD course has enabled me to open myself up to the multiplicity that I am and to trust in a research process that can only in part be deliberate.

*The form that transforms* can be seen as one of the ways through which to view the complex dance of transformative learning. *Beyond form* - that constitutes the etymology of the word "transformation" (from lat. *trans*, beyond and *formare*, to give a form) - I see the possibility of a thinking in motion, sensitive to the *pattern which connects* (Bateson, 1979), a performative, ethical and aesthetic way through which to imagine adult learning, "for the world to come".

## References

- Alhadef-Jones, M. (2021). Learning from the whirlpools of existence: crises and transformative processes as complex and rhythmic phenomena. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 12:3, 311-326.
- Bagley, C., & Cancienne, B. (2002). *Dancing the data*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: a necessary unity*. E. P. Dutton.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Pr.
- Boström, M., Andersson, E., Berg, M., Gustafsson, K., Gustavsson, E., Hysing, E., Lidskog, R., Löfmarck, E., Ojala, M., Olsson, J., Singleton, B., Svenberg, S., Uggla, Y., & Öhman, J. (2018). Conditions for Transformative Learning for Sustainable Development: A Theoretical Review and Approach. *Sustainability*, 10(12), 4479.
- Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: towards a critical culture politics. *Communication Monographs*, 58, 179-194.
- Cuppari, A. (2021a). Interagire con i discorsi di sviluppo di un territorio: una ricerca sugli effetti della crisi da COVID-19 in un sistema di servizi socio-educativi in Lombardia. *Formazione & Insegnamento*, XIX, 2, 40-49.
- Cuppari, A. (2021b). Autobiographical memories as islands of certainty in an ocean of complexity: a cooperative enquiry on the effects of the COVID-19 emergency on some disability services in Northern Italy. *INSTED: Interdisciplinary Studies in Education & Society*, Vol. 23, 2(90), pp. 89-104.
- Cuppari, A. (2021c). Attraverso la crisi: progettare contesti di apprendimento e trasformazione a partire da pratiche professionali di resilienza. *Lifelong Lifewide Learning*, 17, 38, 206-219.
- Cuppari, A. (2022a). The transformative dance of the crisis to resignify social educational work: auto-ethnographical reflections on cooperative enquiry in Northern Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 13(2), 209-221.
- Cuppari, A. (2022a). From stories about living to living the stories: composing a collective idea of home in an independent living project. *INSTED: Interdisciplinary Studies in Education & Society*, 24, 1(91), 55-74.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1996). *The souls of black folk*. Penguin Classics.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A.P. (1996) (Eds.). *Composing ethnography: alternative form of qualitative writing*. Alta Mira Press.
- Formenti, L. (2017). *Formazione e trasformazione – Un modello complesso*. Raffaello Cortina.
- Formenti, L., & West, L. (2018). *Transforming perspectives in lifelong learning and adult education – A dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Formenti, L., & Rigamonti, A. (2020). Systemic reflexivity in residential child care: a pedagogical frame to empower professional competence. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 11(4.2), 115–139.
- Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative inquiry: research into the human condition*. SAGE.
- Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2001). The practice of cooperative inquiry: research with rather than on people. In Reason, P., Bradbury, H. (Eds.), *Handbook of action research*, pp. 179-188, SAGE.
- Hills, A. (2006). *Making sense of methods in the classroom: a pedagogical presence*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Irwin, R.L. (2013). Becoming a/r/tography. *Studies in Art Education*, 54:3, 198-215.

- Kegan, R. (2000). What “form” transforms? A constructive-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning. In Mezirow, J. et al. (Eds.). *Learning as transformation: critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 35-70). Jossey-Bass.
- Langallier, K. (1999). Personal narrative, performance, performativity: two or three things I know for sure. *Text and performance Quarterly*, 19, 125-144.
- Leavy, P. (2009). *Method meets art. Arts-based research practice*. The Guilford Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Morin, E. (2016). *Pour une crisologie*. Editions de L’Herne.
- Springgay, S., Irwin, R.L., & Wilson Kind, S. (2005). A/r/tography as living inquiry through art and text. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(6), 897-912.
- Spry, T. (2001). Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 706–732.
- Welang, N. (2018). Triple consciousness: the reimagination of black female identities in contemporary american culture. *Open Cultural Studies*, 2, 296-306.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice, learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- West, L. (2014). Transformative learning and the form that transforms: towards a psychosocial theory of recognition using auto/biographical narrative research. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12(2), 164-179.
- West, L. (2016). Apprendimento trasformativo in compagnia di amici. In Mezirow, J., *La teoria dell’apprendimento trasformativo. Imparare a pensare come un adulto* (pp. VII-XIV). Raffaello Cortina.