

Dancing the crisis beyond the usual choreographies in social educational work

Antonella Cuppari,

PhD Student in "Education in Contemporary Society"

Department of Human Sciences "R. Massa" - University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy)

e-mail: a.cuppari@campus.unimib.it

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Abstract

"Arianna" (<https://vimeo.com/701090070>) is a video 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 analysing and interpreting the research material arose from the need to move away from the colonising 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".

Introduction

I am a social worker and I am in charge of design and innovation in social education for people with disabilities in a social cooperative in Lombardy, 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 organisation 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 centre).

At an international level, the bureaucratisation of discursive and operational practices has generated approaches aimed at validating the wisdom of practice (Fook, 1999; Parton, O'Byrne, 2000), but also highlighted potential risks of oppression (D'Cruz, Gillingham, Melendez, 2007). In Italy, the regional legislation defines services for adults with disabilities on the basis of standardised classification of social and socio-medical needs. This organisation has contributed to a hegemony of classificatory medical-specialist language that has led to an objectivisation of the person and a distancing of the observer's gaze.

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. The uncertainty of the situation made my research path more like a dance than a linear walk along an already traced road. At a certain point in the process, I felt the need to go beyond the colonising power of discourse (Langallier, 1999) to elicitate the *productive ambiguity* (Eisner, 1997) of art and its transformative possibilities.

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 problematising thinking that is contextualised in a *liquid modernity* (Bauaman, 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, organisational 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 theorisations, 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 (Tidell, 2012; West, 2014) in order to move thinking beyond “the form that transforms”. Crossing the crisis, fluid and becoming dimension of transformation (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021) is the challenge of complexity (Morin, 2016) against a simplifying thinking that is even more mutilating and dangerous today.

All this has been an invitation for me to think in movement, which has also been connected to my training as a contemporary dancer. In contemporary dance, one of the basic methods of training is the *Release Technique*. In the late 1990s, the *American Movement Research Performance Journal* devoted several articles to exploring what Release Techniques were. The complex movement system that underlies the Release Technique is rooted in the basic patterns of human motor skills and emphasises and highlights the release of muscle tension in the execution of movements, the use of body weight and gravity, and an integrated view of the body.

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 (Jude, 2018; Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020) on the premises underlying the usual choreographies that, until then, had characterised the social educational work of the services. What differences and choreographic variations were brought about by the crisis? Which variations could have become evolutionary and transformative ways of professional postures and choreographies linked to the social educational work of these 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 (Heron, 1996; Formenti, 2017), 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. The prolonged duration of the pandemic emergency had at some point exhausted its informational reach. On the contrary, a certain tiredness and discomfort was present in the camp due to the difficulty in giving new organisational 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 organisation of services even more rigid and made it difficult to imagine the future.

I realised 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?". I was particularly concerned about the risk of thinking about transformation being overly driven by *conscious purpose* (Bateson, 1972).

3. "Arianna": dancing the process

"Arianna" is a video-performance resulting from a work of re-analysis and re-interpretation of research "data". The "data", in performative research, are better said to be "created" by the link that is generated in the interaction between researcher and context (Østern et al., 2021), in a "sensitive participation in the research process (...), through multiple forms of analysis that multiply meaning and open up possible transformations" (Luraschi, 2021, pp. 88-89, translation mine).

My familiarity with the aesthetic language of dance oriented me towards a performative analysis and interpretation of the research data (Gergen, Gergen, 2018) It offers the possibility of opening up new possible interpretative readings of the research object and the data generated during the process, leading to new insights or causing new questions to emerge. In particular, the use of dance and choreographic composition has both organising and liberating potential. As Bagley and Cancienne (2002) state:

Dance in the performance moves beyond the actual interviews and takes creative licence. This is done for purposes of seeing old information in a new light and creating a new interpretation from the old. (p. 227)

Whereas the research with the field was characterised 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). Spry states:

I began writing and performing autoethnography, concentrating on the body as the site from which the story is generated, thus beginning the methodological praxis of reintegrating my body and mind into my scholarship. (Spry, 2001, p. 708)

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 reanalysed 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 characterise the transformation in the crisis (Morin, 2016; Alhadef-Jones, 2021): 1) organised routines, habitual patterns of action, status of normality; 2) perception of crisis signals by means of irregularities and antagonisms; 3) blocking of organisational devices; 4) unlocking of hitherto inhibited virtualities; 5) integration of antagonistic and complementary forces in an organisational and fluid way; 6) fluctuation in time and renewal of energy and organisation; 7) organisational reconfiguration of the system.

For the realisation 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 emerged in the choreographer's mind and mine quite naturally. It was one of the most inhabited contexts during the pandemic crisis, a place normally little known and inhabited by the services. We therefore contextualised 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 two-step 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 'look' 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. Finally, the use of the Release Technique constituted the grammar of the entire dance, particularly in the central part of the video and in the *pas de deux*.

3. 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 myself 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: that of a social professional, that of a researcher and that of an artist. The concept of *triple consciousness* (Welang, 2018) originates from the strand of black studies and black feminism (Davidson, 2010; Du Bois, 1996). In it, the focus "is the psychological process of confronting and unpacking the messy contradictions of conflicting identities in order to produce new liberated identities" (Welang, 2018, p. 298).

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 realised through a rigorous and continuous form of reflexivity and analysis (Springgay, et al., 2005). Particularly useful for me was the concept of *becoming-a/r/tography* (Irwin, 2013, p. 200), "a dynamic process of knowing that is performed across three moments of becoming, one un/folding into the other, blurring the boundaries of each" (ibid.). "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. We have had time for reflection in these months, but many other people with whom we relate every day have not. (...) Another aspect I thought about while watching the video is overwhelm. We overwhelm when we push, driven by an ideal. We get a bit attached to the ideal. But how much time do we dedicate to listening?

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. Three 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.

The rope alerted me. Where were they going? Towards another catastrophe?

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'?

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 was not the outcome of a predetermined project but was generated in the dance between complementary, antagonistic, cooperative and competing tensions that accompanied me during the months of research.

As a social worker, this constitutes an invitation to understand innovation as a tension that constantly animates the organisation of services and which interacts with antagonistic, complementary, competing forces. Sometimes it occurs between the threads of usual choreographies, in micro-movements that generate new insights; at other times it visibly modifies relational dances to the point of even changing the scene.

As a young researcher, 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".

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