



Pedagogia della cura
Famiglie, comunità, legami sociali

Stories that make a difference

Exploring the collective, social
and political potential of narratives
in adult education research

Edited by
Laura Formenti & Linden West

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16. 'It is not the glue that makes
the collage' (Max Ernst):
training in educational research
as an artistic process

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This paper is underpinned by the assumption – made explicit by Graeme Sullivan – that the contemporary world demands an alternative mode of research, one that conserves the complexity of reality, thereby following the logic of a transformative practice: '[I realize] that in an uncertain world there is a need to develop more widespread means of exploring human comprehension and that visual arts can play a key role' (Sullivan, 2010). At the same time, if we examine the specific practice of a range of artists from different historical eras we find that artistic action has always been research-driven, never remaining static but always striving towards new and different solutions, in terms of materials, styles and artists' relationships with their audiences. Thus, in the current paper we emphasize the connection between research and artistic practice, not viewing the latter as an optional accessory but as a mode of research in its own right: one that advances our understanding of the object under enquiry by providing a novel and metaphoric language with which to give shape to thoughts and ideas.

Therefore, within the context of a broader on-going research programme that combines art-based methods (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Butler-Kisber, 2010) with biographical methods (Demetrio, 1997; Merrill & West, 2009) with the aim of studying the formative process of educational researchers as an artistic process, we here present the artistic process as a form of biographical research that uses an artistic technique – specifically collage – as a gateway to accessing and exploring the world both inside and outside of oneself. We develop our argument in two stages.

First, we reflect on the biographical history of a selection of artists

whom we view as particularly significant because of their writings and artistic training histories, paying particular attention to how they worked with materials in implementing the collage technique. Second, with a view to comparing artistic training with training in research, we present a training workshop on the use of collage in qualitative research (Joensuu, Finland, 2014¹) conducted with PhD students as part of a Summer School on research methodologies in the human sciences. Via these two steps we hope to show that collage is an artistic training technique with the potential to enhance the enquiry into educational and training experience in multiple ways.

Research in collage

With regard to the biographical history of collage artists, it should be pointed out that since its re-emergence in contemporary art, progressive physical contact with materials has been a key determinant of personal development, just as the choice of what to use and how, necessarily determines a series of interpretative and realizational moves. Indeed, examination of art history reveals that collage itself has evolved over time, taking different forms in different periods, initially consisting of a simple connection among parts, only attaining the status of an established technique at a much later date (Bordini, 2007; Poggi, 1992; Pugliese, 2006). The roots of the collage technique go back much further than the 20th century, with some of the forerunners of modern collage already appearing in ancient times. We here most briefly summarize the most significant of these given their potential relevance to our enquiry. Early instances of collage came from Ancient China and Japan, where calligraphers sometimes glued poetry onto surfaces of varying thicknesses and pieces of paper were used to patch up tears. Glued-on materials were also used for re-

1 Part of the Erasmus Intensive Programme *Doctoral Studies in Research Methodologies*, Joensuu, Finland, a summer school involving 5 European universities (Canterbury Christ Church, UK; Siauliai, LT; Anadolu, TR; Eastern Finland, FI; Milano Bicocca, IT), funded by LLP-Erasmus and British Council. Coordination: Canterbury Christ Church University. Project Leader for Milano-Bicocca: Prof. Laura Formenti. The authors participated as members of the teaching staff.

pair purposes in Europe, where during the Middle Ages sticking on evolved into a means of transfiguring materiality, as for example in the gold leaf decoration of religious panels. However, only with the advent of cubism and the *papiers collés* of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, did collage become an established and recognised practice.

Since then, the collage technique has displayed great versatility, taking on different characteristics in the hands of the various artists who have used it. We now briefly outline just four of these different types of collage. In the work of Max Ernst (1891–1976) (Ernst, 1929; 1989; 2009), collage became the meticulous cutting out of details from wood engravings, natural science magazines and sale catalogues in order to evoke a world that is unreal and yet perfectly true to life. The painter cut out, with great care and precision, images that particularly struck him, before assembling them into a united whole, carrying the technique of collage to a level of perfection without compare. The outcome is the creation of a universe that is extremely precise but illusory, a surreal environment that challenges our usual perceptions of reality (Ernst, 2009).

In the compositions of John Heartfield (1891–1968) and George Grosz (1893–1959), produced from 1916 onwards and identified by the signature *Grosz-Heartfield mont*, collage – now transformed into photomontage given these artists' use of prevalently photographic materials – became a powerful satirical weapon, which was used some years later to critique Hitler and Nazism. The subversive valence of this technique, and its capacity to expose the harsh reality behind conventional appearances, makes it a mechanism for bringing to light many underlying aspects of the existing.

In Henri Matisse (1869–1954), collage is used differently again: a block of colour, at times based on a preparatory sketch, materializes thanks to the work of the scissors – a scissors-turned-paintbrush that creates new figures out of nothing. 'These paper cut outs have a very pure existence when they escape from your hands, your scissors' (Buchberg, Cullinan, Hauptman, Serota, 2014: 268).

Finally, in the artistic production of Mimmo Rotella (1918–2006), the scissors was set aside in favour of tearing strips off the surface of advertising posters. The subsequent application onto canvas of these lacerated images gave rise to a new technique labelled *décollage*, which points up unknown or unexpected details of the existing everyday world (Rotella, 2002).

Based on the work of these five artists alone, even though they are on-

ly five among the many who have experimented with collage since its invention by Braque and Picasso, we can observe the vast scope offered by collage for personal interpretation and for opening up new horizons that vary as a function of the materials chosen and of the artist's intentions. For this very reason, the artists' own writings are an invaluable source of insights that help us to explore link between artistic enquiry and research that is more strictly educational. Our own enquiry to date has been informed by illustrations of works of collage art, and by the written reflections of collage artists themselves, whether personal diary entries or formal and operational guidelines.

Making a collage on one's research

Given this background, we designed and implemented a workshop with the aim of providing of training in research that was modelled on twentieth century artistic training, in which working on materials played a key part. As above described, the workshop was on the use of collage in qualitative research and was conducted with PhD students as part of a Summer School on research methodologies in the human sciences. The workshop, as earlier mentioned, took place over two sessions. The first part was devoted to artistic experimentation with specific practices and to reflecting on the connection between art and research. The second part was based on practical experience of collage-making. Our hypothesis, informed by the perspective of Art-Based Research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Denzin, 2000; Knowles & Cole, 2008; McNiff, 1998), was that collage is a useful means of developing one's research, and a powerful instrument for reflecting on the researcher's own processes of change. At the first session, we pointed out the specific elements defining the collage technique, especially the presence of subtraction and/or addition: elements may be ripped (for an unpredictable outcome) or cropped (for a more controlled result). Collage may involve the juxtaposition of figurative/abstract fragments, as well as narrative/symbolic and compositional aspects: for example a collage may be harmonious or unharmonious. The artist is no longer someone who is only able to draw and paint.

These reflections helped us to introduce the second part of the workshop, in which, via a range of collage techniques, we invited the PhD students to think about their own doctoral research. As they went through the various exercises, the participants were invited to jot down their

thoughts in a small notebook, or *cahier de voyage*. This notebook served as participants' "research diary" during the workshop, and was designed to help them fully experience the artistic research process.

Specifically, participants created three different collages:

- 1) the first collage was made using advertising images, taken from magazines and newspapers. Participants were only supplied with a glue stick and square of cardboard each. The theme of the collage was "research" and it was to be based on a set of words associated with the idea of research that had previously been generated by the group. The aim of this exercise was to experience using a 'structured' approach, given that the materials and type of images were defined and 'closed'.
- 2) the second collage was based on colour rather than images. Participants were invited to take a sheet of paper of the colour of their choice, tear it as they chose, and stick the pieces onto a piece of card – again of their chosen colour. They were invited to only use their hands to do the tearing (no scissors) and glue for sticking. The title of this collage was 'My IP experience'
- 3) the third collage required the participants to break out of the two-dimensional framework, and to work more intensively on the aspect of assembly and composition. Students were invited to take a set of objects that they had collected during the summer school; they then had to lay out and stick the objects onto card, which they were instructed to cut to measure as they wished. They were supplied with different kinds of scissors and glue. Finally, they were asked to put all their works together to form a single socially-constructed composition.

Collage in research

The sequence of collages just described was designed to demonstrate that there is not just one collage technique and there is not only one way of using collage in research. Moreover, collage may be an individual or collective technique. Focusing on the specific characteristics of artistic techniques helps us to understand why they may be thought of as research processes in their own right.

For this reason, when researchers want to use collage in their studies, the technique chosen must be coherent with the research aims and objectives (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Moreover, it may be used at different

stages of the research process. It may be used by the research team (researchers and artists), but may also be used (or maybe *should* also be used) with the participants, within a cooperative framework. In this regard, Butler-Kisber has made valuable observations about Collage Inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2008; 2010). For this author, collage may be used in three ways:

- collage as a memoing/reflective process;
- collage as a conceptualizing approach;
- collage as a stimulus for writing, discussion or interview.

Moreover – and this is our own hypothesis in the current paper – it may be used as both a pedagogical and a research tool, and may be implemented by both participants and researchers with a view to raising their awareness of and gaining insight into their own personal histories (Biffi, 2010; Zuccoli, 2013).

The question spontaneously arises as to how to choose, from among the variety of techniques developed by the various artistic movements, the most appropriate collage technique to use in a given research project. Modern and contemporary art are characterized by a proliferation of new techniques, which are often freely combined, as may be observed in works that bear the description “mixed technique” and that reflect the complexity and variety of the experimentation being engaged in by numerous artists (Pugliese, 2006). The body, materials (ranging from the more prestigious to natural and industrial waste materials), installations, audiences themselves – currently all or any of these elements may be used by the artist to produce artistic performances that are characterized by highly fluid and permeable boundaries (Bordini, 2007). Therefore, it is critical to note that opting for collage as a mode of research requires choosing just one of the many available techniques, because this will make the research outcomes more observable, easier to document with the rigour demanded by the research paradigm, and easier to share and communicate.

In conclusion, although collage making is apparently simple to carry out, it is very rich in terms of the variety of ways that it may be done and the variety of outcomes that these different techniques will yield. This helps us to understand that it is the act of production in itself, which activates novel and sometimes unexpected reflective processes: working with our hands sets off different thought processes to engaging in oral narrative or writing practices, for example. That is to say the outcomes of collage are different to those of practices that are mediated by words. And

even when we revert to words after we have created our collage, the words we use to describe our work are different, that is to say, they are more 'experiential'.

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