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

Pensa MultiMedia

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Famiglie, comunità, legami sociali

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# 19. Dancing mythical stories to *dance* more actively one's own history

**Alba G.A. Naccari**
*University Foro Italico, Rome, Italy*

In this chapter, I introduce some aspects of an original approach in education, integrating bodily mediation and narration as privileged dimensions for learning and increasing awareness and decision-making capacity, in different moments of the life cycle, especially in adulthood. This model and methodology can be defined as 'symbolic-anthropological' bodily mediation® (Naccari, 2004; 2012; 2015b); it places moving symbols and narrative-mythical archetypes at the heart of educative activities, reworking and integrating from a pedagogical point of view the theories and methodologies created by the contemporary dance-movement-therapy and the art of dance (see among others: Chodorow, 1991; Schott-Billman, 1994; Laban, 1950).

The choice of symbols and narrative themes focuses a specific moment of the participants' lives. All the activities, proposed through a narrative plot, are conceived as a privileged dimension to awaken different components of a person, considering the complexity of relational, cultural and political interactions in which they are immersed. Through the dancing comparison to a mythical plot, workshops' participants can rework the autobiographical fragments corresponding to their experience, become more self-aware and enhance a sense of personal identity, develop personal power and find the courage to change their lives and social situations.

The main context of application and study of the method is the work in education, research, training and supervision carried out by *Eurinome,* the *School of bodily and expressive mediation pedagogy* in Perugia-Palmi (www.danzasimbolica.altervista.org), operative since 2006. The school brought about some action-research activities to investigate and evaluate

the educational outcomes of the proposed approach (Naccari, 2012; 2015). Data were gathered through narrative and art-based tools, partly coincident with the participants' choreographic and narrative production during workshops. Further refinement of data was obtained by implementing an hermeneutic circular method, confronting narrative-art-based data with narrative-observational data, written and shared by educators in a special logbook (Naccari 2012). Until now, reports support transferability and corroboration of this educational method in adulthood.

## Stories for social awareness

The educational reworking of the method is centred on different kinds of *growth* (corporeal, affective, social, intellectual, ethical) and the participants' capacity to take care of themselves and others, to develop their own personal and social life. The philosophical background that contributed to the theoretical model comes from theories on dialogue, as an important opportunity for social and political awareness (Buber, 1984), and from personalist theories. The psychological background is based on the value of symbolic imagination with its educational and emancipatory power (Hillman, 1983; Jung, 1976). In pedagogy we used and reworked studies about narrative and autobiographical training (see among others: Demetrio, 1996; Mc Adams 1988, 1993).

The philosophy of dialogue addresses human interaction as a reality which involves the person as a whole being; it requires a kind of presence where the spoken word plays only a small part, and becomes more significant if it is a narrative one (Buber, 1984). Imagination, thanks to an archetypal plot, coloured by intercultural and transcultural values, suggests behaviours and insights that are fundamental for personal and social development. In narrative pedagogy, the different autobiographic modes are educational in themselves, since the choice of events and words to weave our memories reveals a point of view and by naming such events we understand them better and give a new meaning to what has happened.

In the symbolic-anthropological approach, movement and dance are *a total word*, since they involve the whole person and enhance imagination by archetypes and narrative symbols (Naccari, 2012). Narrative, borrowed from great mythical traditions, is a kind of playful integrating background for the proposed movement. It determines a specific activation of the participants, by selecting their possible experiences. The personal positioning,

through dance and movement, within a narrative plot allows a person to rework his/her own way to confront that theme, the way it was experienced in the past or could be lived in the future. This reworking opportunity shows an important mode of self-training in adult education.

> During adult life, [in truth] we represent and we constantly tell our personal history by using the same categories that control fairy tales and myths, [...] and the archetypal themes make possible the series of successive 'narratives', and then the continuous reinterpretation and understanding of our personal history (Moscato, 2002: 85).

## The virtuous circle between mythical and personal narrative: Workshop elements

In the circularity between mythical narrative and personal reworking, bodily mediation allows to get into the archetype through intuition and imagination as human resources. These resources are implemented as abilities, attitudes, styles, new ways of being, especially ways of social and political living. When the educator proposes a symbol to the participants, inviting them to improvise on it and teaching some traditional dances based on it, the symbol itself is actualized and personalized by everyone who is dancing it. For example, by dancing the archetype of the tree (typical of a lot of mythical narratives as *Axis Mundi*), everyone is able to perceive what it is to be *rooted*, welcoming one's natural human reality, to experience the opening of one's own *branches* towards the sky as an ideal inspiration, and the harmony of being one with the forest. The *tree*, however, could also be the olive tree under which one played as a child, or

> the great scented lime tree I see in front of my window when I work at my computer, or even the strong and friendly great oak tree that I would like to be for my pupils, students and clients. The symbol proposed *from outside* (*circularly*) connects with the *inner* one, activating personal resonances and meanings, whose degree of awareness greatly varies. Participants however, and some more than others, will dance the power of the tree to rebalance the high and the low, heaven and earth. (Naccari 2012: 75)

Therefore, by creatively comparing us to the characters and subjects of a specific mythical narrative symbol, everyone can learn to turn those at-

titudes one feels deficient in, or can better understand the less explored aspects.

In this specific setting, each proposal is seamlessly connected to the next on the same narrative archetype, to allow the identification of the specific theme. At the beginning of each workshop, the educator can tell something on the chosen plot, then the warming up is physical but also relational and emotional, while it introduces the chosen symbolic-narrative theme with the correspondent gestures. After warming up, we often propose an ethnic dance, that condenses the same symbolic image, because the dance enhances a sense of belonging to the group and suggests some gestures related to the theme. The next phase, called exploration, is the central part in which one fully immerses in the experience of movement in the proposed plot, through open improvisation. This can be emotionally intense and personal identification with proposed activities can be total.

At the end of the movement experience, we facilitate the possibility to remember what has been perceived thanks to its artistic reworking, which is often a narrative-biographical text, written as a personal resonance or a new story on the theme. After that, at the very end of the workshop, we have *verbalization*: everyone can chose an experience to be shared with the others, to understand it and integrate it within one's inner world and daily-social life. In this phase, the educator can give philosophical, cultural and social references about the symbols and narratives that have been explored (something similar to Jung's '*cultural amplification method*', 1977). Listeners are free to choose and select, among the stories, what they feel resonance with, according to their lives and histories.

## For an holistic approach: stories that can make a difference

The holistic approach of the method refers not only to the person as a whole being, but also to the relational, social, political, cultural and natural contexts in which everyone is involved by a system of actions, reactions and responses (Morin, 1973). Last but not least, it refers to the cycle of life, that involves each one with different evolutionary crises and tasks (Erikson, 1997; Levinson, 1978; 1996; Sheehy, 1996; Naccari 2010). In education, it is always crucial to consider the system of relationships in which people are inserted, and to develop the relationships established in a group of client-student for the learning process. This is particularly true in bodily mediation where the corporeal, relational, expressive and emo-

tional dimensions are central. There is a peculiar aim to promote awareness of the specific geographical, social and political context in which one lives, with personal, natural and collective spaces, times and rhythms, with which one must try to be in harmony or try to change. According to a pedagogy of the life cycle (Naccari, 2010), the adult person should/could be capable of caring and being responsible towards other people, especially the younger generations, and towards social and political life. In our times, however, the adult generation has been defined as the '*ego generation*' (Sheehy, 1996: 57), or a *narcissistic generation* living on the fulfilment of selfish needs, people in a position of power, concerned to protect themselves instead of the others. The development of individuality has become individualism. Dorian Gray is the sad and realistic archetype of this generation... This represents a true pedagogical emergency which we have to cope with. Bodily and narrative mediation workshops can help to assert creatively the individual's uniqueness, beyond the prevailing individualistic and competitive attitude, hence building more responsible social presence. These workshops propose and develop narratives in which everyone can find oneself, rediscovering a more authentic personal identity, feeling interdependence with all beings, resizing the need for recognition to become truly helpful for the *Other* (Buber, 1993). As I suggested in another essay (Naccari, 2014), several myths can be proposed to support the educational circularity between mythical and biographic narration in adulthood, allowing the development of an ethical, social and politically conscious attitude: *Puer and Senex, Chiron, Demeter, Euriclea, the Tree of Life, The Shaman, the Founding Hero…*

As an example, a workshop centred on the archetype of the Shaman can awaken the aptitude to understand the invisible connections among all things and responsibility towards all things. As a minister of religion and medicine man, in fact, the Shaman takes care of the well-being of the individuals and communities in their essential interdependencies. The Shaman is also substantially a guardian, a witness of the myths founding cultural identity. A dancing and writing workshop on this subject can allow personal reworking of these attitudes, consequently it can be educative, since it awakens the ability to take care of civilization, hidden in the maze of many contemporary adults. Everything proposed can be truly educative if it is made with the intent, the planning and the specific methodologies that foster a virtuous circularity between collective and personal history; this requires a recursive method in which time, space and actors are as heterogeneous and multiple as the people who narrate and dance.

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