

STORYTELLING AND OTHER SKILLS: BUILDING EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Humans have no nature, but history.
(José Ortega y Gasset)

ABSTRACT: The storytelling device introduces the search for our roots, as persons and human beings. To write an autobiography is to seek our roots not only through *retrospection*, *interpretation*, and *creation* but through an act of profound freedom towards ourselves. To tell our story is to put back together the pieces of our existence and, in doing so, to re-build it. Recounting our work, at a certain point in our professional life, is like putting it back at the centre of our lives, it is like giving meaning to our actions, and starting to understand and interpret them again. This is why it is so important to recount our work, both for the narrator and the listener. From this point, we are trying to put in front of the educational perspectives the narration of the self as a central point of reflection on the knowledge, competences, and capabilities for entering into the world of work with responsibility, awareness, and a deep sense of citizenship. Following these indications, we thought that it could be a useful exercise to reflect on professionals' stories in order to look inside the self. At the same time, we trust it is very important for young adults transitioning into the world of work.

1. *Storytelling for professional development*

Stories constitute an important aspect of a person's identity [...]; they are ways with which we speak of our identity as people until, to a certain extent, we become a mirror of these identities [...]. The wealth of stories that a person possesses in adulthood do not only form the source of his or her stability, or transformations, at the same time they become a work tool, a compass and means to find the way (Smorti, 1996:71, own translation).

Following the studies by Jerome Bruner (1992; 2002) on one hand, philosophers of language on the other, and hermeneutists and systemic therapists on another still, the category of *storytelling* is central to understanding self-development. And it is all the more interesting and fruitful to look at these studies when dealing with the topic of young adults'

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training and education. Storytelling is a way of introducing ourselves to the world. All we do our whole lives long is tell our story, talk about ourselves and, by narrating *ourselves*, we enclose one story within the other.

We can assert that the storytelling movement, with the pivotal importance it places on self-narration to understand our lives, made its appearance a long time ago, dating back to the dawn of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, even now, recognizing why storytelling is so central to understanding ourselves, to building our personal and professional paths, helps us to grow. Storytelling commits us towards the world, so that we may analyse the sustainability of individual choices which then have fundamental effects on the community's decisions. Indeed, it could be said that it is not just a matter of understanding contemporary categories, but an act of educational responsibility. We have to get to the heart of professional stories if we want to understand how to prepare the new generations to enter the world of work. The challenge of these few pages is to place three lines of educational reflection on the experience of adulthood – self-narration, education, and, last but not least, employability – in a virtuous circle, using stories to self-educate to build work and hence build the self for the sustainability of human and environmental development.

Studies on language and its centrality in human experience, as well as in the subject's formation, began in the field of philosophy, on one hand with Wittgenstein's reflections, and on the other with the developments of Carnap's logical neoempiricism. These studies then went their own ways, for example, arriving at the results of Rorty, whose philosophy consists of seeking a contingent vocabulary, shared by a social community (Rorty, 1989). For Rorty, philosophy is conversation. There exists no external reality, there is no world of which we have to be able to speak or investigate, because the world is what people are able to speak of and decide to live in. Words are bridges of communication between people and words only have sense if they are part of a vocabulary. Vocabularies change, they are flexible and alter in the contingency of the narratives. But the pluralism of vocabularies does not prevent people from communicating with each other or disable the capacity to open themselves "in solidarity" with the other (Rorty, 1989:217–228). On another hand we have the reflection of Morin, only in appearance distant from the topic of communication, which places knowing how to understand as the means and at the same time end of human communication among the seven forms of knowledge necessary for education of the future (Morin, 1999:110). There can be no progress in relations among individuals, nations or cultures without reciprocal understanding, without communication that achieves human comprehension through a process of empathy, positive identification and virtuous projection (Morin, 1999:99).

Dewey writes in *Democracy and Education*:

to be a recipient of communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected.' Indeed, 'not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative (Dewey, 2000:214).

Borghi reminds us that education and communication are not agents of adaptation, but transformation (Borghi, 1992:29). Hence, communication is a primary activity through which we relate to each other in a continual game of references to ourselves and others. Communication is activated using words, we are what we say, and we are the stories that we tell, hence the interest in investigating the textuality represented by our lives. Nevertheless, human existence can be read not only as one text, one story, but as many texts and many stories. While educational activity forms and transforms us, the many, multiple voices of everyday stories constantly change us too. We are transformed by the eloquent and deconstructing words and silences that surround us. What is told in the stories is

the need to make oneself heard, accepted and understood. Storytelling can have many reasons and purposes. But one of its essential aspects has to do with the dynamic of recognition between the person telling the story and the person to whom it is addressed. It is a dynamic that relates back to the social relationship which is established through storytelling (Jedlowski, 2000:24-25, own translation).

To tell a story is to share it with those to whom it is addressed, and this means reaching out past the borders that mark our singularity (Jedlowski, 2000:37) to go beyond the finiteness of being. Through storytelling we can recount ourselves to the other person and, during this narration, transfigure ourselves into a new form. As Pennac asserts in a masterly interpretation of the topic of thanking (Pennac, 2004:64-67), the person who feels gratitude says thank you not as an acknowledgement or formality, but a promise of a meeting. The meeting is what happens between the self and the many *somebodies* who have given rise to that self, who fill the memory and the memories, who have listened to the everyday tales and guided the most varied feelings such as anger, affection and pain, from meagre sensations to sentiments rich and dense in lived experience. And, Pennac continues, in an astonishing play on words, the self is but the shadow puppet of the real subject, the self is the person who is lit by the reflectors of the other person's listening and the exchanged and rediscovered words.

The word that cures and communicates has become the storytelling that cures, but above all the storytelling that transforms different stories and remodels them according to new points of view. To build an alternative story, possibly shared and confirmed by other people who are important to us, so that it makes an image of ourselves acceptable and appreciable, can become an ability that leads to hope. Rewriting our story, narrating our existence, is a way of reflecting on and exercising the condition of being human, it is a way of finding new and necessary directions in life (Bettelheim, 1987:67). To narrate our lives, and rebuild them through an autobiographical journey, is to *re-echo* long-buried experiences and make them resurface in the memory by *bringing them to mind*. In other words, it is to recover fundamental experiences of emotions, affections and feelings.

To tell one's autobiography is to *recall* and to *remember*; the former rebuilding the sources of the memory, the other relating the memory as a subjective, emotionally experienced state to the memory as the moment of producing a thought that enabled an experience to be learnt (Farello, Bianchi, 2001:33). *Re-echoing*, *suggesting*, *recalling* and *remembering* can be said to be the four moments for a phenomenology of the memory. In addition to the memory, in order to gain that narratological perspective which can lead us to autobiographically rewrite our lives, we must be oriented towards *listening*. This means listening to ourselves, but essentially listening to the many selves that merge together or remain separate within us. Listening is the way to communicate with the most intimate and deep part of ourselves. By listening we welcome the self into ourselves. At the same time, it triggers a transformation that leads to self-formation.

Creating an autobiography can be approached as a methodology for personal re-construction or construction, a process of self-formation and self-planning. An autobiography is a conversation of the self with ourselves, it is what Demetrio calls *cognitive bilocation* (Demetrio, 1996), that is, the capacity to recount ourselves, delve into ourselves and seek ourselves, but at the same time to be where we think of ourselves, in a near or distant past experienced by one of our selves. *Cognitive bilocation* is the capacity to live the present and rediscover the past *in order to* imagine the future, to imagine the plans for ourselves, becoming teleological hope. Storytelling and autobiographies are tools for each other. To understand ourselves as a story is to begin to find the apparently hidden meaning which only autobiographical stories can bring to light, giving a sense to the many stories making up every person's life.

The relationship between reflection on personal stories and building professional pathways is central in the education of young adults in higher education contexts. When thinking of the care with which the new citizens have to be accompanied towards the wider and more critical expression of sustainability set out in the 17 points of Agenda 2030

for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, 2015), it is necessary to strive towards high-quality education and suitable employability for all. We know that without good-quality jobs, there cannot be the conditions to create well-being for the new citizens, new adults and new families. The well-being of the subject, not of the individual, but of the person, depends on the conditions in which he or she can live life. It is not enough to think of existence, the self, stories, narratives or autobiographies. The methods must transmit contents supported by concrete educational actions. That work is built by being educated towards work, and employability – one of the Europe 2030 Sustainable Development Goals – is not only outlined within contexts of economic development. What I am interested in emphasizing is the strength of self-narration, which, in the same way as self-formation, depends on the contexts in which it is implemented and the tools with which it is developed. In university courses, which is what I am interested in, it is becoming vital to form new competences through new tools for the professions of the future. There can be no environmental well-being if we leave our students, graduates and post-graduates to themselves. We must and can act to build educational actions for employability and prepare our young people to know, interpret and understand their future, so that they are not caught out.

2. Some notes on storytelling: questions of method

So, I have asserted that the idea of preparation for work, starting from professional stories, has innovative educational value in the sphere of adult education studies. According to the line of reflection I am advancing, it is important to look into the reasons that have brought me to think of professional/personal stories. Hence, the critical path that I am proposing on one hand concerns the topic of stories as an aspect of building subjectivity, and on the other recalls the topic of self-education in order to be and become, transform, as Mezirow would say, through experiential contexts (Mezirow, 1991; Kolb, 1984). To speak of employability, it is important to begin from the self, while referring to a broad spectrum of studies which go beyond educational sciences and adult education.

In a little round house with a round window and a little triangular garden in front there lived a man. Not far from the house there was a pond with a lot of fish in it. One night the man was woken by a terrible noise and set out in the dark to find the cause of it. He took the road to the pond. Here the story-teller began to draw, as upon a map of the movements of an army, a plan of the roads taken by the man. He first ran to the South. Here he stumbled over a big stone in the middle of the road, and a little farther he fell into a ditch, got up, fell into a ditch,

got up, fell into a third ditch and got out of that. Then he saw that he had been mistaken and ran back to the North. But here again the noise seemed to him to come from the South, and he again ran back there. He first stumbled over a big stone in the middle of the road, then a little later he fell into a ditch, got up, fell into another ditch, got up, fell into a third ditch, and got out of that. He now distinctly heard that the noise came from the end of the pond. He rushed to the place and saw that a big leakage had been made in the dam, and the water was running out with all the fish in it. He set to work and stopped the hole, and only when this had been done did he go back to bed. When now the next morning the man looked out of his little round window, – thus the take was finished, as dramatically as possible, – what did he see? – A stork! (Blixen, 1959:200).

Karen Blixen tells this story in her famous book *Out of Africa*. At the end of the story, she adds: «When the design of my life is complete, shall I, shall other people see a stork?» (Blixen, 1959:200). The design of a life, its path can at a certain point be looked at like a path of sense, claims Cavarero, upon commenting this passage by Blixen (Cavarero, 2001).

The path of the man in the story told above can metaphorically represent the path of every person in search of life, it can correspond to the story that every person leaves behind, whose design can only be glimpsed if we are able to observe the footprints left behind from above. In the end, to be able to read this design is to be able to recognize ourselves. In this case, narration and self-narration become the predisposition in order to understand our lives. It is a matter of recognizing ourselves, re-knowing what we knew when we experienced it, seeing the route of our existence *from above*, interpreting and understanding ourselves anew. And it is this desire for knowledge and recognition of ourselves but also others and our world, our being in the place of vital existence that leads all people to communicate.

Communication, which Dewey considers a primary social process, first of all responds precisely to a deep human desire which is to reread ourselves, to understand ourselves by speaking or listening to ourselves, and to understand what surrounds us by rereading the text of our world. Ultimately, it is by reading, looking at and narrating themselves that humans seek themselves, telling their story to a probable listener, recounting themselves to their interlocutors, speaking about themselves to the other person who is listening. The most immediate traces and primordial steps of human communication are found in everyday communication, which always consists of single “narrative acts” (Jedlowski, 2000:110)¹.

¹ The notion of narrative act was coined by Barbara Herrnstein Smith by paraphrasing Austin’s now famous phrase *speech act*.

Every verbal expression is linked to a more or less brief dose of narration, which can go from a fragmentary account or barely hinted anecdote to more defined discourses marked by linguistic conventions which tend to be called *stories* or *tales* (Herrnstein Smith in Jedlowski, 2000:65; see also Smorti, 1994)². We are all capable of recounting something. It can be done disjointedly in everyday life or in a more systematic manner, by introducing the statement “something happened” into everyday conversations, or by giving the conversation the sense of a more defined discourse, recognized as an actual story. The discourse can be made of simple or the most sophisticated words, it can occupy an outlined space in time, or take on the importance of a fundamental and decisive piece of communication in which ‘the joint presence of the interlocutors and reciprocity that is established appear as the guarantee of a denser relationship’ (Jedlowski, 2000:65). Recounting is an activity that is part of everyday conversation. Conversing and recounting are the parts of everyday communication activated during interaction and reciprocal exchanges. Narrating everyday life introduces to the social *fact*, it is a social transaction. Indeed, speakers direct their conversation towards a listener who is never passive. Furthermore, the addressee of the communicative action plays a function of interpreting its contents.

Narration is therefore the social practice in which two or more people share a story (Smorti, 1994:66). The narrated story is negotiated within the conversation, it is communicated within a vital interaction between two or more interlocutors; every interruption, every change in tone or subject, gestures such as attitude, every strategy of mutual confirmation or negation can change the story, alter its sense, hence opening it up to various interpretations.

Bruner answers the question of what narration is, or what sets it apart from other forms of discourse and other ways of organizing experiences and knowledge. In the text *Acts of Meaning* he gives a thorough yet not exhaustive definition, open to interpretations in relation to the setting in which the narrations are defined and the situations from which the narrations originate. Bruner notes that the cognitive revolution field takes a more interpretative approach to cognition, which deals with *attributing meaning* and has gradually asserted itself over the years in the field of anthropology and linguistics, philosophy, literary theory and psychology. Hence, it is not a single context that gave rise to studies on narration,

² As Smorti asserts, narration is situated halfway between oral forms, such as conversations or interpersonal communication, and written forms, such as scientific, philosophical or literary essays. These two aspects have been defined, according to the terminology used by the Russian formalists, as *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, equivalent to the terms *story* and *discourse* used by Barthes. *Fabula* essentially describes the events in the story. *Sjuzhet* denotes the techniques that the author uses to present the story.

but scattered ones whose very complexity denotes the cultural pattern of the research today. The studies were started in various disciplines. The contributions of Ricoeur (1983; 1984) are at the basis of all the others, and indeed it is Ricoeur who inspires Bruner in his research and origin of the construction of meaning.

Bruner claims that the first aspect in selecting a narrative is to consider it «composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors» (Bruner, 1990: 43). Every narrative lives in relation to the environment in which it was formed, in the same way as its components do not have a life or a meaning of their own. The meaning of a story is prompted by the place and the way in which all the single parts are set out, that is, it depends on the plot or *fabula*. A narrative can only be understood through the plot and, at the same time, the form of the plot must, in turn, be extracted from the sequence of events (Bruner, 1995:55).

The narrative can be *real* or *imaginary* without having a negative effect on its intrinsic narrative power, Bruner asserts. It will be the sequence of sentences that determines whether the story is true or false and this will enable the meaning of the tale to be deduced. Bruner continues by saying that the particular sequentiality is indispensable for a tale to be significant and for the mind to organize itself in such a way as to grasp its meaning (Bruner, 1995:55). This *rule of sequence*, distinct to any narrative, means that the account possesses a structure within the discourse. Thus, the historian's empirical report and the novelist's fantastical tale share the narrative form (Bruner, 1995:56), however surprising this may appear. It can also be added that the form of scientific discovery is also expressed in terms of a narration of events and circumstances. Holton, one of the most interesting and advanced science historians, used his work (Holton, 1984) to demonstrate how science is a territory cultivated by imagination and creativity, as well as by metaphors and visions about a *beyond* that narratives can describe and illustrate.

Storytelling is projected into the teaching environment as a form of transversal knowledge and a possible transdisciplinary methodology. In educational situations, in school or university classrooms, narrative topics can represent the conjunction of a formulaic, systematic and lifeless learning method with the opposite way of schooling, through stories, imagination, possibility and creativity.

Storytelling possesses a specific capacity to establish bonds between the exceptional and the ordinary. Indeed, its structuring capacity is based on an *impossible logic* (Holton, 1984:58) that upsets the principles of the classic canons of 'non-contradiction' and the 'excluded third party' fundamental to Western thought. Indeed, accounts acquire meaning on the basis of their very capacity to explain deviations from the norm (Smorti 1994; 1997). In reality, the function of the account is to find an inten-

tional state that mitigates, makes a deviation from a canonical cultural model or at least makes it understandable. By extending this last property of narration, narrative methods could be used that allow students to get inside the problems and make them their own, in joyful discovery.

A fourth property of narration concerns its theatrical aspect. Storytelling makes an action plausible and strengthens the intentionality hidden beneath that action; it expresses the world of beliefs, desires and hopes. «It renders the exceptional comprehensible and keeps the uncanny at bay. [...] It can even teach, conserve memory, or alter the past» (Bruner, 1990:52).

Nevertheless, storytelling is not just a structure of plots or dramatization, nor historicity or diachronicity alone, it is also a way of using a language (Bruner, 1995:68). Once again, supported by extensive sectors of psychological research, Bruner states that humans have an aptitude to set out or organize experience in a narrative form, in plot structures. The analysis of this aptitude derives from the Aristotelian notion of *mimesis*. Aristotle claimed (Smorti, 1997) that *mimesis* is not only the theatre's way of imitating life, so much so that it might seem as if the order of the narrative has to reflect the real-life events. *Mimesis* is grasping 'life in action', it is an elaboration or improvement on what happens. Ricoeur, who, as already mentioned, studied storytelling more than any other in the last century, states that «mimesis is a type of metaphor of reality, [...] [it] refers to reality not to copy it, but in order to give it a new reading» (Ricoeur quoted in Bruner 1990:46). Precisely owing to this metaphorical relationship, narrative cannot be obliged to match a world of extralinguistic reality. Stories, as previously asserted, are not interpreted on the basis of the classic rules of logic. «The very speech act implied in "telling a story" – whether from life or from the imagination – warns the beholder that [...] we interpret stories by their verisimilitude, their "truth likeness", or, more accurately, their «lifelikeness» (Bruner 1990: 61). Stories, narratives, are *mimesis* in the Aristotelian sense of the word, as has also been explained by Ricoeur.

In the tradition of formal logic, analysis of the contexts of truth in affirmations is totally independent from the fact that they can be recognized as true or false, and the truth is considered in objective form. Assertions that belong to the formal territories of scientific truths are disconnected from the reality of sentences that are uttered on a daily basis. Nevertheless, verbal utterances are undoubtedly richer, in terms of meaning, in logically implied references. In other words, they embody «many more intentions than merely to refer: to request, to promise, to warn» (Bruner, 1990:63). There are conditions of appropriacy according to which the various linguistic expressions are used. So, what determines the possibility of a verbal expression is the context in which said expressions are used. Grice went even further, highlighting how all linguistic conventions enabling the use of a particular verbal expression are also

restricted by a 'cooperative principle': «a set of maxims about the brevity, relevance, perspicuousness, and sincerity of conversational exchanges» (Bruner, 1990:3; Grice, 1989:71).

This gave rise to the consideration that meaning is not only generated within conventionally defined affirmations, sentences and scientific assertions. Grice's conditions of appropriacy and precepts (Grice, 1989) have enabled us to understand that formal textual analyses can give way to analysis where the function of situational language is fully recognized as bearing the strength of the meaning produced by the speakers' intentions. It is this passage, outlined in brief here, that has increased the urgency to consider meaning as what originates from human verbal/linguistic/communicative interactions. Meaning arises in the relationship between two or more speakers, its origin is cultural and conventional and no longer formal.

As Bruner asserts: «the concept of "meaning" understood in this principled way has reconnected linguistic conventions with the web of conventions that constitute a culture» (Bruner, 1990:64; Grice, 1989:71). Hence, we can extend this concept of meaning as the very *foundation* of narratives. Literary, oral, everyday and family narratives constantly give rise to the meanings of human existences. Narratives are inserted in a world made of events outlined in time and space. Life events are framed in great structures, schemes of memory or texts. These great structures provide an interpretative context for the single components contained in them. The meanings will be different depending on the context in which the speech data or actions are considered.

3. Stories model life and life models the stories

It is not possible to have a direct knowledge of the world. As human beings, it is not possible to have an objective description; no one has privileged access to the designation of reality. What is known about the world, what humankind knows, is due to experience had of and in the world. It is also impossible to know another person's experience of the world. It is only possible to interpret other people's experiences, that is «we can interpret the expressions of other people's experiences when they seek to interpret them for themselves» (White, 1992:272, own translation). To interpret these expressions, to get as close as possible to other people's experiences, to be able to communicate between similar and not distant people, we need to identify our own personal experience in the experience expressed by others. But some issues arise concerning this same world of experience which is nought but the life flow that surrounds us. White asks a series of questions, which he tries to answer from a psychotherapeutic point of view. Through which process do we

develop an understanding of human experience and give it a meaning? What processes are involved in interpreting our experience? How does our personal lived experience influence our lives and relationships? (White, 1992:273).

We have already seen that stories or narratives provide the dominant outline of lived experience, its organization and structure. «A story can be defined as a unit of sense that provides an outline for the lived experience» (White, 1992:274, own translation). Hence human beings enter their stories, they are introduced into other people's stories, they live their lives through these stories. Stories are mechanisms through which human beings capture the sense of lived time. It is through narration, storytelling, that we manage to perceive the flow of the past, the flow of the present and the future. Concerning the questions asked previously, some answers can be provided in terms of the concept of story set out earlier. It is the stories in which human experience is situated that determine the meaning given to this experience. It is these stories that lead to the selection of the aspects of experience that will then be expressed. It is again these stories that determine real effects and directions in people's lives and relationships. Hence, human life is structured by these stories, it is somehow forged, modelled. The stories shape our own human lives through the process of interpreting the experience in the context of the stories which we are part of or introduced to by those close to us (White, 1992:275). The proposal that White puts forward at this point is that life is a representation of texts (White, 1992:277). And it is the representation of these texts that transforms people's lives. Bruner asserts that stories only become transformative when they are represented. This representation implies a concept of authenticity. The individual arrives at a sense of authenticity through the representation of the texts of his or her life. There is a degree of indeterminacy in the texts and stories, a certain ambiguity and incongruity. The stories are full of gaps, which human beings fill through a continuous narrative and representation of sense. Narrating is a bit like rewriting the text. Every account sums up in a different way from the last. «The evolution of a person's life and relationships is similar to a process of rewriting, the process due to which people enter stories with their experience and imagination, go beyond them and create their own» (White, 1992:277, own translation).

Indeterminacy, ambiguity and uncertainty, modified through an ongoing negotiation with human experience, engage people in an 'original' journey in search of themselves, to seek a unicum and an initial fact, an original and an origin. The search for empathy, authenticity and listening to ourselves in this structuring of stories is also a search for communication with the world, in the attempt to give a coherent interpretation of it, in accordance with our humanity.

What is narrating ourselves and then making an autobiographical revision if not the will to seek a clue, a gauge that enables people to say themselves, to signify themselves without deceit? But there is more: the dichotomy between the cultures of the humanities and science, opened in the seventeenth century by the mechanical science of Galileo and Newton, the wound in human thought, has somehow been stitched back together. As Gargani (1999:IX) says, the transition between different and alternative symbolic codes, between implicit or explicit transgressions of different languages happened with the narration of stories, with recounted thought.

The sedimentation of critical consciousness that over these years has passed through the exercise of language has come to rest on a recounted thought. As it was making the effort to tear off the covers from reality in order to grasp it, as it is in itself, instead of the objective, uncontaminated and neutral world, humankind met the world together with itself, together with the critical awareness of its languages and its tools of research. At that point, the game of interpretations and languages began. (Gargani, 1999:IX)

Humankind learnt disenchantment and exercising interpretation appeared as a life practice. So, starting from this disenchantment, which can be ascribed to the loss of securities sought and found in a theoretically given rationality (Gargani, 1999, own translation) discourse, dialogues and the practice of language erupted into contemporary culture. According to Gargani's original viewpoint, they did not presuppose things, or replace things, but started to speak of things, facts and reality through the filter that they themselves formed. Discourse, dialogues, languages and narratives became filters for the creation of communication that could 'tell' of humankind and more besides.

But the reflection on language that has spread in many fields of knowledge, causing humankind to make decisive leaps into uncomprehended and hidden territories, has also implied the necessary discipline of listening. As Gargani once again asserts, language has learnt that we speak and write only when we listen. It is in this act that the whole bond uniting one person to another, the essence of humanity itself, lies. And while we speak, we tell a story, and in order to tell a story we need a narrator, the person who tells his or her story, and the object of the story, whether it is an action or a person. The communication that is activated is the search for one's own humanity. It is in the sense in which language has been conceived of by philosophers, that is, as a well-defined logical mechanism mastered by its users, that Davidson observes «language does not exist» (Gargani, 1999:VIII). Therefore, there is no intrinsic relationship between language and reality, because the latter would instead seem to be an interpretative construct, a front of interpretations; but this front

gives rise to an ethics of communication: «the ethics of communication should not be interpreted as a duty which is external to linguistic phenomena, as an additional value, rather it should be conceived as being an essential condition inherent in any authentic communication» (Davidson, 1984:446), it is a discipline within the word that gives it meaning and expressivity. Humankind is only free before what it is aware of. In a letter to Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein writes:

I keep on hoping that things will come to an eruption once and for all, so that I can turn into a different person. [...] Perhaps you regard this thinking about myself as a waste of time – but how can I be a logician before I'm a human being! Far the most important thing is to settle accounts with myself! (Davidson, 1984:446).

The ethics of communication presupposes the effort to dive into the intimate crevices of our inner selves, to courageously deal with the pain of existence. In order to speak and in order to do so, not in a superficial but an in-depth manner, it is necessary to delve into human nature and accept to deal with pain and suffering. Wittgenstein asserts: «If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself, because this is too painful, he will remain superficial in his writing» (Gargani, 1999:9).

Through the act of speaking, during which human beings recognize themselves for what they are, or rather what they would like to be, on the basis of some projective idealization, a person can end up rewriting him or herself through the communicative relationship with an interlocutor. Gargani once again says: «the simple circumstance of being listened to by an interlocutor, even a silent one, arouses a process of self-narrative and identification in the speaker that is generated during a change» (Gargani, 1999:9, own translation).

A new description of the self is a new birth; a new description of the self fulfils the task of becoming what we are (Gargani, 1999:10). All of this absolutely requires the human being's discovery, invention and creative capacity to tell, recount and narrate him or herself, or at least attempt to do so.

Kafka asserts that

contemporary human beings have retained use of the word, but lost its internal sensation. Contemporary human beings have lost the dimension of construction through the word, they have lost the ethical dimension of speaking, buried by the mass media's excess of words. It is instead in the flow of becoming, in crossing through the unforeseeable randomness of existence that human beings acquire recognition of themselves (Gargani, 1999:14, own translation).

Through words, human beings open up to astonishment, not as a transitory condition, but as a condition creating existence. Because by

using words to tell ourselves, we make a movement towards the outside, it puts us in the position to open up, to feel astonishment; while we tell stories, we find new words to deliver ourselves to our narrative.

All of human communication between the subject/individual/person and other subjects/individuals/people lies in the experience of narration. «The passage from truth to the sense of truth coincides with the passage from ideas to relationships between people» (Gargani, 1999:14, own translation). This passage is communication of our own story as a person to the other as a human being.

To make an autobiography is to tell ourselves to ourselves, and by storytelling, we make a reconstruction that provides a new meaning, but also a new richer and truer knowledge of the lived experience. It is the same Bruner who asserts that constructing the self is a narrative art, bound to the memory as an internal fact and to the external facts of situations/experiences that transform the self as we encounter them every day (Bruner, 2002:72-73). Indeed, by «telling ourselves about ourselves» (Bruner, 2002:72) we invent a story about ourselves, about what we are and who we are. When transcribed, this recounting and narrating ourselves to ourselves ends up forming an autobiography, enabling us to take stock of and reread our lives. Autobiographies are the self's encounter with the Other that transformed it, motivated it to be educated, made it into the being presented outside itself. In autobiographical accounts, the author has to contend with his or her own uniqueness, but also with the reflection that others have of the person under observation and with whom they interact. The self also concerns the other and others shape the self, in a game of interpretations that gives the question of identity an undoubtedly public value (Bruner, 2002:77).

4. *Professional stories, education and employability*

The storytelling device introduces the search for our roots. To make an autobiography is to seek our roots not only through *retrospection*, *interpretation* and *creation*, but through an act of profound freedom towards ourselves. The search for freedom is one of the tasks that education has to set itself, through the many ways of learning to form ourselves. The autobiographical act is certainly an act that frees the life compressed and hidden in words over time. To write about ourselves is to free ourselves from the many ties that obstruct the paths through life and rediscover the true form that characterizes human matter. To tell our story is to put back together the pieces of our existence and, in doing so, to re-build it. Recounting our work, at a certain point of our professional life, is like replacing it in the centre of our lives, it is like giving sense to our actions, and starting to understand and interpret them again.

This is why it is so important to recount our work, both for the narrator and the listener.

Following these indications, we thought that it could be a useful exercise to reflect on professionals' stories in order to look inside the self. Hence, we started to propose the narratives of men and women setting out their choices, life paths and careers. As we have seen, storytelling is doubly important, both for the narrator and the listener. In the work with young university students at the University of Würzburg, during the Winter School which is part of the INTALL *International and Comparative Studies in Adult and Continuing Education* project (European Project, 2018), the goal that we wish to achieve concerns raising awareness of the professional career that attending Adult Education courses can lead to. The questions we would like to give rise to concern the professions of the future. In particular, we want to build a path of reflection for our international students, prompting them to ask themselves the question: «What training course am I doing and for what professional future?» It is a well-known fact that master's and PhD courses are often not directly linked to professional development. So, in a period when building employability is a pillar for the future sustainability of every country in Europe and the world, it is urgent to give our young people tools that can make them reflect on the contents of the subject on one hand, and on the sense of their personal and professional role on the other. Hence, the relationship between narration/story, education and employability.

Only recently has the category of employability been looked at in terms of teaching and education, leading to its inclusion in academic training courses. If we deal with school or university education, it is our duty to take the topic of employability into consideration in connection with the training processes provided in our educational institutions. Not only does employability feature in any training process in a formal context, but in non-formal and informal contexts too. Studies on this category were begun by two British scholars, Mantz Yorke and Peter Knight, who proposed it at the end of the 1990s as part of their studies on the role of teaching in higher education. There are ample and widespread studies above all in the economic field, but the greatest challenge is using the category at the pedagogical level. The definition of employability that is proffered and shared most by the academic community is this: «a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy» (Yorke, 2006:3). As can be seen, the definition does not refer to job placement or job seeking, but underlines the importance of acquiring skills, know-how and personal capacities.

A lot of literature has been produced on employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke & Knight 2006; 2007), but here I am interested in under-

lining how crucial it is to prepare young adults to take charge of their employability and how this is connected to achieving skills, especially transversal ones. It can be an interesting step to reread the stories of professionals to introduce the category of employability to the various sectors of adult education and understand how far life can be reconstructed as a text that narrates work. The proposed professional stories activity can be a starting point: in part story, in part autobiography, it connects education with the personal self.

On one hand, it will be important to include some autobiographical recognition practices such as observing and listening. The recollections brought to mind and produced using the memory will form the object and the text that we will listen to and observe. This memory exercise will be associated with reading the feelings and emotions connected to it. Observing, listening, bringing to mind, creating memory, building analogous situations, *feeling* a feeling and re-echoing an emotion form the corpus for an exercise in self-care that university education has always ignored, failing to recognize the human person's existence with relation to the self and confining the subject to the individual and pupil without passions, without memories, without emotions, an automaton set on learning *cognitive* contents. It takes extreme attention to learn to read ourselves, but it is necessary for the life plans which the culture provided by education/university can point towards. Hence, the employability-building workshop can be set up to create culture, the pivotal element of practical and theoretical learning.

The story of professional figures is a stimulus, a starting point, a vision, it connects students' emotional and affective sides and enables a connection between adults-workers and young people-students. Stories, as we have already broadly and amply seen, are what link the *lives* of professionals and young adults. Professional stories are the means for otherwise separate subjects to communicate, understand each other and converse. And in stories we can find bonds, processes, actions and indeed educational paths that otherwise would remain implicit, hidden. Stories, narrated lives are the basis, the presupposition to begin to reflect on knowledge, skills and capacities. It is a profoundly formative and educational process and it leads to the construction of citizens.

The main theme of the first project is *telling our stories* through aspects of other people's lives: it is a topic that leads to reflections on the family, studies, friendships, loved-ones, free time (we could add the categories of reflection we consider most opportune for the storytelling). This first exercise, after the professionals tell their stories, is an experiential survey into the emotions that the storytelling arouses in the subject, going through the reasons leading to the choice, the reasons for the cues they acted upon, and the reasons for the importance of the text. Indeed, even those texts that are unpleasant or not very appealing for the student taking them into consideration speak of his or her self.

The second line of work, emblematically called *narrative self-creation*, is suggested by Bruner's work *Making Stories*, whose research concentrates on the rise and fall of the narrative form in descriptions of ourselves. «We constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future» (Bruner, 2002: 72). The project can be split into three different types of exercises: 1. the *Wheel of Life*; 2. the *Life Roles*; 3. the *Life Phases*. All the proposed exercises could be thought of as building a mental map to read our professional careers. In the *Wheel of Life*, the students reflect on their satisfaction with their experiences at home, at university, with friends, at work and in love in the last six months, hence this exercise concerns the sense of ourselves. Then they map the future goals for the same fields. What is this activity for? It is to discover their emotions in everyday actions, to reflect on their actions from an emotional and affective but at the same time cognitive and critical point of view. It could be said that this phase of the work concerns telling our professional selves with reflexivity (Schön, 1987).

In the same way, the *Life Roles* exercise leads the students to think about their relationships, their condition as a person in the many life contexts: we are all children, brothers or sisters, students, graduates, parents or professionals. The choice of role implies the perspective we assume, the point of view from which we perceive ourselves in the professional and human community. It is another reflection on ourselves. Lastly, in the third exercise in this programme they are called upon to reflect on their *Life Phases*. What were the key moments in their decisions, choices, changes, successes or failures? Once again, it is central to reflect on our life course to begin to learn about our employability.

We have all followed our own paths, which we have traced more or less consciously. I believe that the first level of employability is to look at ourselves and understand where we are and where we want to go. *Employability* and *Adult Education* have a path to follow together. *Employability* can be considered a category of *Adult Education* in the sense of forming self-skills but also responsibility in young adults, and an ethical outlook towards themselves and others. Hence, tools such as drawing up a CV, formulating a correct covering letter for companies, understanding the labour market and the world of work, the capacity to become and be creative for our own lives and professions are elements connected to responsible growth towards maturity.

It is a duty of university education to build employability, both in countries with a blooming labour market, and in countries where this is not the case. We have seen how self-narration, the autobiographical dimension and self-awareness are unavoidable aspects in the growth of an adult and the construction of cognition, autonomy and responsibility. The latter are three aspects of the human person that express tech-

nical rationality, reflexivity on action and awareness of values. We have to create suitable spaces for educational actions that can strive to achieve professional awareness. As has been seen, it is not a matter of acquiring technical skills, but of creating a programme to acquire a critical capacity that can ease the adults' growth towards their professional futures.

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