

GEORGE A. KOULAOUZIDES (ED.)

TRANSFORMING WORK-LIFE BALANCES

**Proceedings of the 2025 Research Retreat
Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education Network
European Society for Research on the Education of Adults
(18–20 June 2025, University of Malta)**

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Contents

Reading Across the Research Retreat Proceedings <i>George A. Koulaouzides</i>	19
Papers Informed by Peer Group Discussions	23
Authenticity and Educational Dialogue in Remote Work: An Epistemological Inquiry in Adult Learning <i>Gennaro Balzano</i>	25
Teacher Identities through Autobiographical Narratives: A Pathway to Emancipatory Learning and the dynamics of transforming work-life balances <i>Athina Charissi</i>	33
Edutopia (Not) Created: Swedish Folkbildning as Ideal and Practice <i>Gustav Fridolin</i>	41
Promoting Future Work-Life Balance: Performing Arts-Based Training to Combat Burnout in High School Students <i>Irene Gianceselli, Andrea Bosco</i>	53
Transformative Learning and Self-Understanding: Processes, I mitations, actions <i>Alexis Kokkos</i>	63
Self-knowledge as a term of identity: aspects of Platonic philosophy in the constitution of professional and personal identity <i>Konstantinos Mantzanas</i>	71
Observation of works of art: A process of raising the question: Am I my job? <i>Georgia Mega</i>	79
Holistic Empowerment through Transformative and Emancipatory Learning for Life Balance: Elderly Adults in Second Chance Education <i>Theodorakopoulou Thomaitsa, Kagiavi Maria</i>	97

The Burnout of Becoming: Naming the Exhaustion of Endless Self-Transformation <i>José M. Tirado</i>	109
Papers Informed by Experiential Sessions	117
Life between home and work: embodied explorations of meanings and experiences <i>Giovanni Gottardo, Janet Ferguson, Sara Rossi</i>	119
When work is not working. Practicing radical vulnerability to open up spaces for transformative listening and collective kinship <i>Deborah J. Kramlich, Alessandra Romano</i>	129
Who am I? Living in awareness through drama and mindfulness <i>Charru Sharma</i>	141
Body & Age: Embodied Reflections on Functioning and Dysfunctioning in Communities <i>Dagmar Spain</i>	147
Reflections and Takeaways from the 2025 TEAE Research Retreat in Malta	157
The Contributors of the Proceedings	163

Life between home and work: embodied explorations of meanings and experiences

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ABSTRACT

The diffusion of digital technologies and constant availability bring out the urgency of striking a balance between work and home. Through the use of listening protocols and theatrical performance methodologies, the contribution proposes an experiential activity that integrates the use of the body with dialogue and reflection. The aim is to promote a reconsideration of one's own work-life balance, reflecting on one's own positioning and seeking to offer the basis for transformative learning with a view to individual well-being.

Keywords: Embodied Transformative Learning, Performative Methodologies, Listening Protocol, Work-life balance

Introduction

In a world where the boundary between work and home is less and less demarcated, and technology allows us to be in the office by connecting from anywhere, the impossibility of separating the professional and personal spheres emerges. In this scenario, the concept of balancing work and home becomes central and urgent. The contribution opens by considering the inseparability of these two “worlds” with blurred, fuzzy boundaries; boundaries that become the object of reflection in view of individual well-being. The theatrical performance methodologies and the listening protocol are configured as the tools through which to (re)read, through words and bodies, one’s own positioning, stories, and balances. A rational and embodied reflection promoted by an experiential activity that seeks to offer opportunities for transformative learning through work first in pairs and then in groups, using the possibilities offered by artistic languages. The aim is to construct a safe space in which each person can identify and trace their own limits, their own balance between work and home, employment and free time.

Between home and work, one long “corridor”

What if before entering work our “home” consciousness was completely switched off and our work consciousness switched on? And vice versa, what if on leaving work all memories, thoughts, activities were switched off and made unavailable until we entered work again? How would our life change?

Such an experience of life is narrated in the TV series *Severance*, but if at first everything is performant and perfect, then pieces of memories begin to creep in between the two “worlds.” Surely such a clear division is not possible today; it is pure fiction, but questioning and reasoning about work-life balance is not a secondary issue, to be relegated to the background, but an urgent and relevant dimension (Eu, 2019). If initially, for some, the doors of the home opened, allowing work to enter the domestic space (Dal Re, 2021), today, after the pandemic emergency, this has become a “new normal” (Vyas, 2022).

Physical boundaries have disappeared: the home, a space of rest, affection, and slowness, is hybridized, mixed with work, a place of performance, results, and speed. The home thus loses its sacredness and becomes corrupted by the problems, stress, and pressures of work activities. Time limits are also lost: “Firmly demarcated work hours (which begin and end with arriving at and departing from a physical workplace) have disappeared, making it easy to carry on working out of hours and disrupt the home life” (Vyas, 2022, p. 158). Technological development and hyper-connectivity, moreover, make work ubiquitous, to the extent that it is possible to access the office to answer emails and urgent requests from anywhere and from any device.

Home and work are such mixed “worlds,” with blurred, fuzzy edges, that ISPEL’s report (2002) speaks of a corridor syndrome: “In the context of contemporary life, the filters that manage the singularities of the everyday working and private spheres have been annulled. A seamless corridor has been created between the stimuli of the work environment and those of private life.” Questioning oneself on the meaning, the value, the materiality of this “corridor,” of this non-boundary, becomes a starting point to reflect on one’s own positioning, balance, and well-being in these two life “worlds.”

Voice and body at home and work, theatre methodology and listening protocol

The aim of this experiential activity is to create a space to reflect on and question the relationship between home and work in our lives. How do they affect one another? What effects do they have? These are important questions of meaning and value for our personal, family, economic, and work trajectories. Questions that we often fail to answer for the frenzy, the speed, the entering of one dimension into the other “in small steps” without problematizing it. Questions that must necessarily be answered in difficult moments, when faced with disorienting situations, when faced with important decisions to be taken.

The lack of a valid answer for everyone and the need to become aware of one's own position before it is "too late" prompts us to promote moments of individual reflection, capable of questioning our biographies, histories, values, and belief systems. To do so, this experiential activity exploits the opportunities provided by the arts as a "mélange" of reason, emotions, and imagination (Kokkos, 2010; 2021). Theatrical performance methodologies (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Fabbri & Romano, 2017) and active listening protocols (Anderson-Sathe et alii, 2022; Romano et al., 2024) thus become means to embrace transformation. If storytelling and listening in fact promote a more rational reflection (Anderson-Sathe et al., 2022), which also involves bodily dimensions (Romano et al., 2024), the use of theatrical techniques is aimed at giving voice to the experience inscribed in bodies (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023; Presencing Institute, n.d.; Gottardo & Ferguson, 2024), which is sometimes not expressible in words.

With the activity we want to create a space where each person has the opportunity to talk about him/herself to a companion, sharing experiences in a protected space without being judged. A story that manifests itself not only in words but also in bodies, repositories of embodied knowledge, and tacit wisdom. An encounter with the other, where telling and confronting each other through bodies and words, where reason, emotions, and bodies are all legitimized to express him/herself and communicate, an encounter that conveys a holistic vision of the human being as an inseparable and inseparable mind-heart-body unit (Schlattner, 2022; Spain, 2024).

The sharing of stories and experiences can enable the comparison of frames of reference, assumptions, or habits of mind and body that can sometimes be taken for granted and acted upon unconsciously. At the same time, the activity potentially supports the integration, modification, and/or change of assumptions, mindsets, and behaviors with a view to transformation (Mezirow, 1991). The body and concrete action offer the opportunity to explore, try new things, and question oneself. Embodiment and, in this case, performative methodologies thus become a protected place of practice and experimentation, where the subject can grow and begin to act on change with a view to transformation. A transformation that concerns not only the rational dimension but also involves and develops from the emotion-

al and bodily components, an embodied transformation (Finnegan, 2020; Schlattner, 2022; Spain, 2024).

Performing the reflection on home and work, the activity

The activity consists of three successive phases: the first two in pairs, the third in plenary (fig. 1). Each phase is presented by the facilitators, who will give a practical example, not with the intention of demonstrating what is correct to do, but to facilitate understanding of the instructions. In the first phase, the participants are divided into pairs, and each is given a role: the first person is blindfolded and can only listen; the second, on the other hand, has to guide the first into the space safely while at the same time telling the answer to a question formulated by the facilitator. Then the roles are reversed so that the other member of the pair can also tell his/her story. Before moving on to the next question, each participant, autonomously and independently, can note down words, expressions, and phrases that struck him/her in the partner's answer.

The activity is repeated several times so that both members of the couple can answer the following questions:

1. *What is the most important aspect of home? What is home?*
2. *What is the most important, meaningful, and inspiring aspect of your work?*
3. *What, how, and in what way does your home (private life) mix with your work? Has there been a significant event/problem?*
4. *What, how, and in what way does your work mix with your home? Has there been a significant event/problem?*

At the end of all the questions, in the second phase, the members of each pair can reflect on what has been said and make their work-life balance concrete and visible. Each person will “bring” their balance into their body and express it in a pose. Still in pairs, participants can discuss what they have heard (during the guides) and what they have seen (in the pose). Then, everyone will assume the pose again

and allow their body to move until they reach a new position. The new position, which will try to “resolve” the initial position, represents the possibility of a new equilibrium, a new balance.

The last phase consists of a plenary sharing moment in which each participant will demonstrate the first pose and the transition to the second. Together, the group will discuss the different poses assumed, the type of movement expressed, the sensations experienced, and any questions or insights gained during the activities.

Conclusions, in search of new balances



Figure 1 - The three phases of the activity - Authors' elaboration

Some research carried out during and after the pandemic emergency (Gibbs et al., 2021; Mustajab et al., 2020; Vyas, 2022) highlighted how the hybridisation of home space with work was considered positive for some workers while negative for others. Differences, which underline how the balance between work and home is not equal and univocal for everyone and which highlight the importance of promoting moments in which to question and reflect on one's involvement and the meanings attributed to it. Although the presence of European provisions on the “right to disconnect”, i.e., the possibility of not responding to requests, communications and work commitments during non-working hours (Eurofound, 2019), it remains fundamental for everyone to question his/her own positioning, placing him/herself in the “corridor” that separates home from work. The experiential proposal presented here moves in this direction: offering everyone the opportunity to investigate his/her own situation, recount his/her own experiences, and compare them with those of the other participants. The experience is not aimed at drawing a clear and universal line between work and non-work activities but is structured

so that everyone can draw that line, albeit a mobile and temporary one. Through storytelling and performative-theatre methodologies an attempt is therefore made to bring out situations, moments, everyday experiences, but also more or less implicit meanings and values as starting points to delineate a permeable dividing line, capable of transforming one's porosity, between work and home. A moving line, neither defined nor absolute, but one that can be shifted. A line, a limit that acts concretely, materially in our lives and that can represent a transformation of the daily dynamics with which we embrace home and work.

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