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**Pandemic and Post-Pandemic
Space and Time**

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REINVENTING EDUCATION**

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Pandemic Space and Time**

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University and Active Citizenship. Didactic Practices and Methodological Trajectories for the Development of Creative and Critical Thinking

Promoting Creativity and Narrative Identity's Expression Through Digital Storytelling. An Exploratory Study

Laura Occhini, Nicolina Bosco and Alessandra Romano

University of Siena, laura.occhini@unisi.it

University of Siena, nicolina.bosco@unisi.it,

University of Siena, alessandra.romano2@unisi.it

ABSTRACT: *How to support the development of creative skills through the use of iconic artifacts? How to apply image-based methodologies in university teaching practice? Starting from those questions, the article presents an exploratory study conducted in the academic year 2019-2020 with 138 students enrolled in the first and second year of the Educational Science Bachelor's Degree. The aim is to explore the potential outcomes of the adoption of digital storytelling for the development of professional identity of future educators. The analysis of the digital storytelling produced by students involved in the study showed that those image-based methods, aligning narrative and imagination, are particularly useful to work on personal emotions and build reflective individual and collective processes.*

KEYWORDS: *image-based methodologies, digital storytelling, narrative identity, learning, creativity*

Introduction

Academic contexts face the challenge of promoting the development of knowledge and skills centered on the critical and creative thinking of college students (Livingston, 2010). How to support the development of creative skills through the use of iconic artifacts? How to apply image-based methodologies in university teaching practice? These are just some of the questions that guide the drafting of this contribution, aimed at describing a study on the use of visual methodologies applied within a university course at the University of Siena.

The scientific interest in this methodological approach can be linked to both teaching and research: in the first case it leads to thinking about practices that can be creative for teachers for developing critical thinking for university students; in the second case because it enhances the points of view of the participants through the use of narratives storytelling combined with images.

The perspective that characterizes them places the people at the center of a learning and inquiry process, emphasizing their stories and their

perspectives of meaning negotiated and validated in a process that constantly integrates the individual (as in the case of our work), the group and social level.

The analysis and description of the use of this methodology are interdisciplinary, collaborative, and situated (Tisdell *et al.*, 2012) and it is contextualized in the multi-method and multi-paradigmatic scientific reflection on the adoption of pictures in university.

1. Promote creativity in Higher Education through image-based methodologies

Images are widely used in everyday life, just think of the use made of them in virtual environments and the ways in which their use makes accessible the description of aspects related to social interaction (Banks, 2018). Their great use is due to specific characteristics, which makes images potentially useful in an interdisciplinary manner since they suggest communicating different aspects of disciplines through visual approaches (Clark, Morriss, 2017).

What is the relationship between images and learning? Inserted within the active development methodologies (Fabbri, Romeno, 2017), the image-based methodologies aim to promote critical reflection on problems of everyday life, enhancing the active participation of learners starting from the use of artifacts such as images, videos, photos, films, drawings (Wall *et al.*, 2012).

The flexibility and interdisciplinarity that characterizes them, make this methodology adaptable to different training contexts with purposes that can be didactic-educational or empirical and potentially usable in didactic and/or research work with different population groups since it does not require specific characteristics (Bosco, 2020). On the methodological level, it is possible to distinguish two key aspects, central to the teaching-learning processes that contemplate the use of this family of methodologies, namely reflection and reflexivity.

If reflection has to do with a retrospective process that recalls previous experiences and also involves the memories and emotions of the people involved, reflexivity contemplates a process that is also introspective with respect to the interpretations of one's own experiences (Watt, Wakefield, 2014). It is therefore clear that the involvement of learners is one of the key elements of this methodology. The revision and questioning of the ways in which meanings are constructed takes place by exploring the visual material, which makes the study material more concrete and more identifiable (Schell, 2009; Triacca, 2020). The analysis and discussion of the images that are presented in the classroom by students makes it possible to have a greater understanding of the objects to be learned and facilitates the acquisition of skills that can be used in future work environments (Walkington *et al.*, 2011).

The participant-centered approach places students at the center of their own learning process and makes them a fundamental part of the inquiry process, through which they can explore, together with others, the meanings conveyed by the images. In teaching practice, this can be translated into the choice of involving students in a learning process that requires them to produce images, which will then be analyzed in the classroom in order to create connections with specific elements of the teaching in which it is implemented (Wakefield, Watt, 2018).

The images thus become the pedagogical and transformative device (Mezirow, 2003) through which to enhance students' active learning experiences, learning that is thus centered on specific aspects of daily life.

1.1. Narrative identity and digital storytelling

The authors who deal with narrative identity assume that people tend to construct narrations of their existence by organizing them into a few substantial events (*Building Blocks of Life*) that are based on mnemonic emotionally vivid images, time frame of the familiar plot line and key person excerpt from cultural themes prevalent in the historical moment in which they are elaborated. This is true both for autobiographical narration (in the shape of written diary) and for verbal narrative traces or digital storytelling (Singer, 2004; Singer, Bluck 2001; McAdams, McLean, 2013; Kim, Li, 2021; Occhini, forthcoming).

Through narrative expression, individuals provide emotional intensity to difficult or complex life events, the source of substantial changes or the result of deep reflections, and incorporate them into their identity: the 'story told' becomes an identity reflection through the psychological path of internalization of the meanings. The development of identity, through narration, therefore includes the construction of a sense of personal continuity, coherence between the past, present and future self, as well as of stability between the self and social and cultural models (Tisdell, 2012; Andersen, Tisdell, 2016; Syed, McLean 2016; Morash *et al.*, 2020).

From these basic theoretical principles, the contribution articulates an exploratory study carried out with 138 students who participated at the mandatory laboratory of developmental psychology of the academic year 2019-2020. They addressed the topic of the development of autobiographical memory in childhood, the emotional correlates involved in construction of memory traces and, specifically, the role that the narration of autobiographical stories have in the organization of identity and identity awareness (McLean *et al.*, 2020). The request to generate digital storytelling as a practice exercise seemed the most stimulating solution as the different semiotic channels used give different types of information (cognitive, emotional, cultural, social) that are effectively integrated into the storytelling to build an organic narrative meaning but also – and above all – identity (Alonso *et al.*, 2013).

2. Research focus: sampling and method

The sample is made up of 138 students of the first and second year of Educational Science Bachelor's Degree at the University of Siena, attending the course of developmental psychology: 131 females and 7 males in a percentage that sees the female sample predominate with 95% of the presences. Referring to this composition, it is useful to remember that this degree course has a significant female presence which, in the different academic years, varies from 85% to 90% and the difference observed between the male and female component must be considered fully representative of university's students of the department (Occhini, 2018).

The average age of the sample is 20.7 years (min 18 – max 45) with a predominance of young people between 19-20 years (99 – about 72%), therefore of students who have enrolled in the university course immediately after the upper secondary school. A part of students (30 – 22%) is between 21-25 years old and the enrollment in the university course is the result of an existential replanning that is also evident from the individual storytelling. 5% of participants (7) fall into the age group ranging from 30-45 years in which the choice to undertake the university career is the result of an openly declared professional reconsideration with a hope to access improvement economical and career conditions.

64% of the participants to experiences are resident in the province of Arezzo and, also in this circumstance, the percentage corresponds – on average – to the students belonging to the degree course (Occhini, 2018); 21% come from other cities in Tuscany (with a predominance of Siena students (12% of the total), the remaining 15% live in areas other than Tuscany with a prevalence of the regions of the South of Italy.

The central argument of the laboratory of the course of developmental psychology concerned the analysis of the development of autobiographical memory, the emotional correlates involved in the construction of life memories and the use that can be made of such data to increase a reflection on one's own identity and on the central events that have determined it.

During the initial part of the laboratory, the students were offered the following 6-phase work outline, for the preparation and the delivery of the digital storytelling:

- a. showing, in the class, some storytelling as an example for theoretical and methodological explanations as per § 2;
- b. identifying, in the course of one's existence, an element deemed important to narrate because it is considered fundamental to describe one's identity or the path towards detection identity (episode, person, phase, existential theme);
- c. providing their personal details (at the beginning of the storytelling) and a single Italian word that was able to describe the student's personality;

- d. production of a digital storytelling (with tools available, so at no cost) and with visual, vocal, musical, iconographic, interviews, preferred by the student – the maximum time of the final work should not exceed 3 minutes – time for the delivery to the teacher 1 month;
- e. upon consignment: signing of the waiver to authorize the use of the material for research purposes and a brief interview with the storytelling's author with the aim of detecting the dominant emotional experience, reflection on the usefulness of the identification process happened during the carrying out the task and reflection on the efficacy of the tool for the future profession of educator: how to use it with children, adults, caregivers, fragile persons (Chen, Chuang, 2021);
- f. collective restitution of experience and formalization of learning the method (see § 5)

The vision of each single paper was followed by the qualitative processing of the topics through a double entry table that has simplified the analysis of the most common rate occurrences and themes (Table 1) but also of those experiences, which, due to the emotional intensity with which they have been narrated, can be considered qualitatively interesting from an educational and psychological perspective.

TAB. 1. Rate occurrences

Grandparents		43
Tattooing		21
Family 20 (generic quote)	father 3	53
	mother 5	
	sibling 25	
Bereavement		19
Bullying 10	Body shaming 6	16
Parent's divorce	absent father 9	10
Uprooting		8
SLD		7

3. Research focus: emerging narrative subject

For the analysis of qualitative data it was decided to group the students' papers according to thematic macro-areas, even if some single themes appear to be transversal a few macro-areas as we will see below.

Some examples: it's not surprising that the family is mentioned in 38.4% of storytellings (see Table 1) and conflicts, disagreements or

hardships are rarely presented. Quite the opposite: the family is told as a fundamental support both in everyday life and during the painful and problematic phases of life; parents, for example, are always cited (and commonly thanked) as key people in overcoming the psychological and relational effects in the event of bullying or as references in the transmission of common, cultural and individual values. Siblings (the most cited in the family immediately after grandparents) are described like 'behavioral models' when older than the author of the storytelling or like the beneficiary of fraternal parenthood thanks to comforting behaviour that the firstborn practices in the relationship and that is narrated as an index of responsible growth (Borchet *et al.*, 2020; Cao *et al.*, 2020). A significant element, which deserves an in-depth study, is the theme of siblings 'rediscovered' after long separations due to their parents' divorce or due to custody/adoptions and that of the fraternal bond in acquired and recomposed families.

31% of the students include in their narratives the significant bond with grandparents (with a determinant predominance for grandmother). The grandparents, a parental figure who – according to the stories we have gathered – become real attachment figure because they substitute for the working or absent parent (backup parents – Dunifon *et al.*, 2018), compensate for the distance the divorced parent (Westphal *et al.*, 2015; Sorek, 2020) or simply because they become a source of shared affectivity, often less judgmental and requesting than parental (Saddudrin *et al.*, 2017). The stories of young people who witness the physical and cognitive decay of their grandparents with Alzheimer's dementia are significant and who, in line with recent literature, tell the sense of acute discomfort in not being recognized, in realizing that the sharing memory has disappeared, in perceiving an affective distance that no longer corresponds to the previous level of relational and emotional exchange with the grandparent (Ebert *et al.*, 2019).

The storytellings can be traced back to three main macro-areas which, in terms of content, include the majority of the artifacts presented. Let's see them.

3.1. Turning Point

Any participants, certainly the majority, narrate those phases of life that can be defined as 'turning points' and which from the mnemonic viewpoint take on the function of trigger events for intense emotional experiences, for reflections on the self or for motivational impulses.

The two most common turning points in narratives are parental divorce and bereavement (which concerns grandparents, parents and, in rare cases, peers, friends or members of the family entourage – Rolbiecki, 2021). Particularly interesting are the themes of travel/growth in foreign countries, in profoundly different cultures, in places where help-care is exercised as a form of volunteering or profession. The theme of the eradication of students from foreign countries – who moved to Italy after spending part of their childhood or adolescence in the nation of origin –

is significant to be explored: the memory of the culture to which they belong is encountered (but does not conflict in the stories of young people) with the different culture to which they approach with enthusiasm, curiosity and, often, with irony. There is nostalgia but no regret.

Enrollment at university is also experienced as a turning point in one's existence, especially with regard to mature female students, formerly mothers, who are projected towards professional fulfillment.

3.2. Redemption Theme

The redemption theme is much more common than the contamination theme (McAdams, 2013). The emotive narrative that is oriented from a negative to a positive mood – regarding young people with broad and open prospects on the future – is undoubtedly the prevailing one. Objectively, it can be said that only in one storytelling does one breathe the sense of resignation and failure.

We can give some examples:

- a. self-affirmation – the student who left her abusive boyfriend by moving to a new city and starting to stud after the boy was banned for jealousy or imposition of sentiment power;
- b. awareness acquisition – the young woman with a specific learning disability who, despite obstacles, manages to pursue a brilliant university career «then I'm not a dumb like my math teacher screamed. Then I can do it») and at the end of the storytelling she publishes the photo of the university classroom together with a teacher. The university becomes a real moment of redemption and identity affirmation;
- c. Change of perspective – mostly linked to mourning as a turning point that forces us to rethink but also to a disease that forces us to change lifestyles and use of time. Many interesting – in this perspective – are the stories of the students who have overcome (or are overcoming) an eating disorder.

3.3. Adverse Childhood Experiences

In literature, adverse experiences are considered as life events that significantly affect the psychological and physical well-being of the child and the future adult, exposing him to a greater risk of vulnerability and fragility (Felitti, 2017). The storytellings tell us that some of the adverse environmental elements are thematized in the lives of young people in the form of motivation to redeem or, alternatively, in the form of the need for detachment. The divorce of the parents with the father who becomes an absent figure (in 9 cases of 10 divorces narrated) opens to feelings of hostility and closure that commonly translate into generalized distrust (Demir-Dagdaz, 2021).

Bullying is always narrated as an experience that determines impotence, as a repressed form of aggressivity towards indifferent teachers, especially when it refers to disablism against pupils or students

with SLD and as a form of relational aggression linked to the body shaming that leads (in few cases) to a clinical eating disorders full-blown. Not infrequently, these young people also endure a relational poverty that leads to real forms of generalized anxiety or panic attacks (Falla *et al.*, 2021).

Undoubtedly, it can be said that the educational laboratory has provided decisive ideas for future educational perspectives but has also offered interesting stimuli for research regarding the use of students' psychological and personal themes. These latter faced a disorienting dilemma from which learning processes arise.

4. Digital storytelling and transformative learning in the education of future professionals

As researchers, we were particularly interested in exploring the transformative elements of digital storytelling (Tisdell *et al.*, 2012). Adopting a double level of analysis, we did not focus only on collecting and analyzing digital storytelling, but also on how to support future educators to acquire an image-based methodology that they can use in their professional practices. It is widely recognized the role of the image-based methodology in sustaining processes of reflection and reflexivity upon professional identity through a narrative that is constitutively visual, multimodal, affective oriented. The majority of students (over 80% of them), during the interview following the delivery of the digital storytelling, confirmed that it has stimulated a profound reflection on their experiences and above all on the effectiveness of recovering episodes that they become 'consciously' important for the definition of their own identity. In many cases the experience has been defined as 'liberating' or, even, motivating. From the words of a student: «I realized that I am missing a piece, that I am not enough anymore. I would like to travel because I want to meet my authentic self».

The excerpts of the written reflections of the students proved that digital storytelling is a valuable tool for promoting personal transformation in students, possibly changing their representations about themselves, what they have experienced in the past and what they expect to do in the future. The personal growth that students described in their narratives represents much more than knowledge acquisition or skill development. Though most of them do not make any explicit references to transformation, their stories suggest that they experienced the learning described by Mezirow (2003) in that it was holistic, reflective, integrative, and had significant implications for their future practice. Working with a structure of facilitation in building their digital storytelling, recognizing emotions and affective dimensions and how they affected their narrative identity, were all catalysts for learning, particularly when digital narratives were about engaging and facing life challenges. Some reflections on the instrument lead students to imagine

that memory can also be facilitated and built in educational contexts through the choice of evocative images, dramatization techniques, narratives, storytelling protocol and the invention of fairy tales (Tisdell *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, the multiplicity of ideas that students have proposed as an alternative (but more often in association) to digital storytelling is surprising and stimulating as co-implementation of the applicability of the instrument to a variety of contexts.

What we do hope to highlight is the fact that future educators of the mandatory laboratory of the study not only passed through a potential transformative experiences, capable to elicit holistic transformations in their capacity to stay in the world and to know themselves, but also gained a creative and learning tool that they may adopt in educational contexts for childhood, in educational services and in training sector.

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