
Multiple Visions, Multiple Voices: A Dialogic Methodology for Teaching in Higher Education

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Laura Formenti¹ and Federica Jorio²

Abstract

This article aims at contributing to the development of teaching methodologies which can foster transformative learning in higher education. It presents a workshop experience, embedded in an undergraduate course, whereby active and dialogic methodology was designed to support the students in maturing self-awareness about their epistemologies and perspectives. The workshop used video narrative as language that allows exploration of the students' assumptions and the cross-media portfolio to support the learning process in its unfolding. In the first part of the article, we introduce the theoretical frame and contextual premises of the workshop and our different contributions to this study. Then we describe our methodology, through its multiple—visual, narrative, reflective, and reflexive—layers. Finally, we use dialogue to analyze a student's cross-media portfolio, as an in-depth example of the methodology employed. Our analysis illustrates the complexity and learning potential of this experience of transformative learning practices beyond self-report.

Keywords

critical reflection, transformative learning, adult learning

¹ Università di Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

² School of Humanities, Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author:

Federica Jorio, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, United Kingdom.

Email: ac3455@coventry.ac.uk

Introduction: A Complex Theory of Dialogic Learning

This article offers a methodological reflection on how to foster transformative processes in higher education, based on a workshop for undergraduate students where multiple media, voices, and levels of meaning were combined to enhance critical thinking, self-reflexivity, and transformative learning. A dialogic, qualitative, and interpretative epistemological framework is proposed, illustrating the power of aesthetic and narrative methods in teaching and researching. We define knowing as an ongoing representation and interpretation of experience, built through constructive and transformative action and discourse; hence, teaching, learning, and researching can be conceived as complex entangled processes (Alhadeff-Jones, 2010, 2012; Davis & Sumara, 2006; Fenwick & Edwards, 2013; Formenti, 2016, 2018; Morin, 1999; Osberg & Biesta, 2010) whose contents and perspectives of meaning are continuously performed/revealed, challenged, and reconceptualized. The multiplication of stories and perspectives, we maintain, flourishes on dialogue, a specific kind of interaction in human relationships and groups, weaving meaning and action in and through transforming conversations. Learning is seen here as a collective enterprise, where learners are engaged with one another in constructing a coordinated reality (Maturana, 1990).

In the theory of transformative learning, dialogue is valued but conceived as a good enough relational space for trustful communication (Taylor, 2009), a context that promotes personal and social transformation, and “a unique container in which transformation can occur” (Schapiro, Wasserman, & Gallegos, 2012, p. 356). We try to go beyond this metaphor, as confirming the dominant discourse based on individual learning. A dialogic group (Schapiro et al., 2012) is more than a “container” for individual learning. We think of dialogue as the fabric itself of learning, an ongoing “form that transforms” together with its participants. In a complexity framework, learning is “the characteristic of embedded, dynamic systems” (Haggis, 2009, p. 57), emerging from the interactions between (and beyond) people. It is individual, interindividual, and transindividual. Dialogue is the transformation and celebration of differences. “A difference which makes a difference *is* an idea” (Bateson, 1972, p. 272).

Dialogue is also between us, the authors: we engaged in this study with our different voices, questions, and theoretical perspectives, which will be visible in the text. Our dialogic writing process can be considered as a metaphoric duet: Some stanzas are individually played, while others are sung along. Dialogic research is not meant to reduce differences, by building a master story, objective truth, or encompassing explanation, but to open space for ongoing learning, where researchers recognize their own position in relation to one another and to the context (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012). Our method performs and connects different levels of interaction and learning: the individual (embodied and storied learning), the interpersonal (relational and coordinated learning), the surrounding academic community (role-based and regulated learning), and the larger society (cultural and

distributed learning). Our object is the “pattern which connects” (Bateson, 1979, p. 8; Formenti, 2018) these multiple layers in recursive and complex ways, to open space for the creative and generative building of knowledge, where learners, with their actions and thoughts, interact with one another, and with the teachers-researchers, as well as with objects, spaces, tasks, and artefacts. Such layering of interaction shapes and is shaped by the physical and symbolic space of the university and the larger context, comprising the students’ families, friends, and living worlds; the media; and the wide world web—all of this, we argue, is involved in the workshop, directly and/or indirectly.

Briefly, our idea of learning goes beyond what happens in the students’ heads or bodies, or words uttered by isolated individuals in decontextualized ways. Each “learner” is at every moment a living mind–body–spirit unit connected and interdependent with the context (Edwards, Biesta, & Thorpe, 2009), coordinating with others through *linguaging* (Maturana, 1990) and shaped by the historical, physical, and social space (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013). Adult education is about performing as well as challenging those actions, words, and stories that were built in previous relationships and contexts and triggering new ones, so as to increase alternative possibilities (Foerster, 1981) and to sustain learning, be it transformative, ecological, or emancipatory, or whatsoever variation of it. To celebrate this complexity, we need new concepts, languages, and methods.

Thinking Like an Adult: Laura Discusses the Context From a Teacher’s Perspective

The family pedagogy course is attended by 80–90 students of educational sciences, mostly young women with an average age 22, 6 hr a week for 3 months. The objectives for the course are:

- knowledge about systemic epistemology, family pedagogy, and social work;
- skills in observing, assessing, interacting with families as complex systems, and organizing one’s own work as a family educator; and
- developing responsible, critical, open, respectful self-positioning in relation to families and their members, colleagues, and superiors.

My aim is to foster sensitivity in relation to the context and complexity of family life. Family education is too often focused on distressed, poor, and stigmatized families; if students are to develop their capacity for multiple descriptions, responsiveness, and curiosity, their perspectives on the family and its context need to transform and open up. Previous learning, namely, family learning, shapes their perspectives of meaning, perceptions, and ideas:

We appropriate symbolic models, composed of images and conditioned affective reactions acquired earlier through the culture or the idiosyncrasies of parents or

caretakers—a highly individualistic “frame of reference”—and make analogies to interpret the meaning of our new sensory experience. (Mezirow, 2012, pp. 74–75)

Ideas related to family life are learnt day by day through repetitive patterns, scripts, stories; to develop richer ways of doing and thinking, students have to mature in their perspectives and learn to “think like an adult” (Mezirow, 2012). This phrase was used by Mezirow to synthesize many dimensions, such as contextual understanding, taking responsibilities, talking back to power, critically reflecting, assessing one’s assumptions, and so on. These are individual acts based on cognition and will. Thinking like an adult also entails some awareness and agency, that are not based (only) on cognition and will, and cannot be programmed or controlled by the individual alone. In our “organized effort to assist learners who are old enough to be held responsible for their acts” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 89), we know that higher education may, at best, offer “an *invitation* to think, to be, and to act in new and enhanced ways” (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012, p. 389, italics are original); so, as a teacher, I try to design spaces for the “spontaneous” emergence of adult thinking. That means, for me, dialogic spaces. “Discourse is the forum in which ‘finding one’s voice’ becomes a prerequisite for free full participation” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 78).

As I said, these students bring into the course their undisputed perspectives based on unchallenged experiences. This has social as well as biographical reasons. Most students in this course are the first generation of their family in higher education, living at home, in little cities and villages in suburban and rural areas; family is the main social, cultural, and relational reference for them, even in adulthood. Generally speaking, family microcultures are very strong, closed to new information and typically pessimistic: the values and practices of the traditional and the consumeristic family mingle, to produce hidden worldviews and paradigms, closed to critique and change, where difference is dangerous and conformity prized. School did not provide space to extend, challenge, nor develop a critical attitude either: It does not enforce the capacity to challenge ideological arguments or to cope with uncertainty, conflict, and the expression of emotions (especially the negative ones). Then, as stated by Bourdieu (1984), and more recently by research on nontraditional students in academia (Finnegan, Merrill, & Thunborg, 2014), students can feel like “a fish out of water,” if they did not build the economic, social, and cultural—and maybe imaginative—capital that would enable them to think and act like adults. As a first-generation student myself, coming from the same geographic area, I can understand some of the challenges they are facing, and the internalized passive attitude that hinders self-expression, authenticity, and the capacity to talk back to power. When their comfort zone is challenged, they tend to retreat and resist transformation (Mälkki, 2010).

To foster transformation, I take a transparent and dialogic attitude, openly asking students to take a responsibility for their own learning; I inform them of my objectives and the consequences and implications of my method; I encourage them to feel able to share their thoughts and stories, to meta-communicate, to oppose, and even to

leave the space, when they feel too challenged (Formenti, 2014). My body language and behavior are open and dialogical, but the achievement of true dialogue is always a challenge and any attempt to solve the problem simply by saying—“be active, make proposals, voice your thoughts and feelings!”—is likely to create double binds (Sluzki & Ransom, 1976) and even more blocked attitudes.

My pedagogy is research-based, aesthetic, and cooperative (Formenti, 2011, 2018), cyclically based on the four ways of knowing identified by Heron (1996):

1. living or remembering authentic experiences (experiential knowing);
2. performing, presenting, or narrating those experiences and/or their effects on the learner, via symbolic and aesthetic languages (presentational knowing);
3. authentically participating in conversations in the effort to understand and build propositional meaning (propositional knowing); and
4. imagining and designing new actions in the world, also comprising new similar cycles of understanding (practical knowing).

Topics are explored during the course by such a cyclic process.

When I met Federica, and her research on video narration, I saw it as a form of aesthetic language that could sustain students in exploring and maybe challenging their perspectives on families, and more generally their relationship to knowing. Presentational knowing is an epistemological bridge (Kasl & Yorks, 2012) between the students' tacit knowledge, emotional experience, and development of a satisfying theory and practice. This is why my courses always implement art-based projects and aesthetic languages (Formenti, 2014).

Cinema, or the Metaphor I Research by—Federica Introduces the Method

Cinematographic art is the metaphoric language by which I create room for seeing my own perspective on diverse topics, my windows on personal worldviews. When I realized that cinema is an aesthetic experience (Rose, 1993) of complexity, where reality is built by a dialogue between the movie and the audience, I started thinking about films as interlocutors I can dialogue with to build my own narrative and to explore my own interpretations on reality.

In my PhD research (Jorio, 2015), video narratives were used with students in education to foster (self-)awareness of personal perspectives and to reveal implicit epistemologies embodied in professional actions and practices, following the idea of making visible unseen structures and processes of knowledge production. To support students in accessing their patterns of thoughts and feelings, beliefs and attitudes toward education, I used video narratives to “make a difference in the way stories can be told, understood and shared. [...] [considering that in video-narratives] ‘form is the substance’ [which] [...] brings new insights, reflexivity and transformation” (Formenti & West, 2016, p. 16). Movies are a powerful aesthetic

language, an extremely significant part of our contemporary culture and informal learning. Besides, each movie contains multiple, infinite stories, since each spectator is called to dialogue with it to make her story visible, a story that may change as time goes by. Hence, it is a powerful means for transformative learning and education, in different ways (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2000; Jarvis, 2012; Tisdell, 2008). Watching a movie, we resonate and make our own story, reediting the director's vision through our own interpretative lenses and screens.

In my exploration of cinema as a transformative language and method, I realized that screenwriting and editing enhance and transform the dialogical experience of *simply watching* movies in a reflexive experience, by engaging the spectator as an author. So, I proposed that students edited a personal video narrative starting from something they *already knew*, that is, fragments of existing movies. This collage leads to a new story, with a new plot. In the video-narrative composition, no blurring effects, fade-outs, fade-ins, cross-fades, or wipes are allowed; cut-and-paste is an aesthetical choice that brings about a disorientating effect, for both the author and audience, due to the absence of clues about the running narrative or upcoming changes. The collage unfolds through juxtaposition of new elements at every junction; the plot appears constantly enriched, drifted, unsettled, and reorganized.

In my previous research, the movie-collage was not only taken as a montage technique but as a language of its own and a text-editing procedure that enhanced self-authorship. Actually, the cut-and-paste technique magnifies the hermeneutic potential of this medium, and the author's communicative action, shaping narration. The student-author is engaged in transgressing the given boundaries of the chosen fragments to make a jump onward and outward in meaning-making, which represents the (unforeseen) emergence of a *personal theory* about the topic. A new narrative, then, comes from the possibilities and constraints given by the syntax of montage, in a compositional process of multiple views (Formenti, 2011, 2014, 2016), entailing progressive structuring and reorganization of contents and context. The core of this methodology is repeated displacement and disorientation of one's own narrative that triggers new and enhanced interpretation of known contents.

Emotional and sensorial engagement, due to the aesthetic power of the visual medium, is then translated into text, hence reorganizing contents and producing a critical and reflexive positioning. This translation entails a process of transcoding due to the change in medium: a shape-shifting process requiring a trans-textual adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006). In fact, the differences between media create gaps, exceeding meaning, creative reframings, and recontextualization.

In designing a workshop for the family pedagogy course, we aimed to challenge students to explore hidden theories, perspectives of meanings, and implicit epistemologies on the family; we wanted them to take a position and make choices as authors, to expose themselves *on* screen (and not *behind* it), and to be invited and challenged on a new path of their education experience. The movie-screen, which most would have some appreciation of as something they grew-up with, yet similarly could be distanced/removed—*screened*—by it (Jorio, 2016), became a malleable

medium in which to creatively question perspectives, ideas, understandings. This is no easy task; going beyond the safe and known is a disorientating experience which brings learners to feel edge emotions (Mälkki & Green, 2014) that can hinder learning. A safe relational space is needed to sustain learning that is challenging for the person. A way for me to take care of the process is to commit, to expose my vision and my voice, to explore the medium myself with an open attitude, and screening my own video narratives, that somehow show my own vulnerability, if in a disguised way. Ethically, I could never ask students to take voice without also be willing to expose my own voice. Hence, the screen—in its double meaning of *shield* and *window*—is a context to (safely) challenge students on implicit visions about the family and, more generally, their epistemology, that is, their ways to connect and relate to the world and to themselves. With this frame of mind, I approached this collaboration with Laura as a workshop embedded in the course, where each student would be invited to build her or his own video narrative about “the family” as the trigger for a reflexive thinking experience.

Our Emerging Method: A Cross-Media Composition for Reflection and Reflexivity

The dialogic design of the workshop was rooted in our common interests for auto/biographic, narrative, and arts-based research (Formenti & West, 2016; Formenti, West, & Horsdal, 2014; Leavy, 2015). Transformative practices in education often entail embodied narratives (Clark, 2012), storytelling (Tyler & Swartz, 2012), and aesthetical/presentational means (Jarvis, 2012; Kasl & Yorks, 2012; Lawrence, 2012); here, they are combined and enhanced by the multiplication of languages, voices, and levels of discourse. Our aim is to enhance reflexivity, that is “not just reflection on reflection” (Hunt, 2013, p. 66), but the creation of a space for unexpected things to happen and the experience of self “as other.” The workshop took advantage of the constraints and possibilities of different media—video montage, narrative and reflexive writing, conversations and collective writing—to multiply perspectives and to sustain the development of new meaning, a richer relationship to knowing and a critical attitude in relation to the topic. Starting from our experience with different narrative media, we designed a 12-hr workshop nested in the course, which equated to six meetings, 2 hr each, over a 3-month period.

Phases of the Workshop

The workshop’s steps are as following:

1. Introduction (four meetings): Visual storytelling and the practice and theory of montage. Free access editing software is presented and explored, to launch the individual task: create a video-montage (maximum length 8 min), on “the family” topic, using selected fragments from existing visual material

- (movies, TV series, commercials, video clips, etc.); no limits are given for the number of fragments. Special effects in junctures (i.e., fade-outs, face-ins, wipes and similar editing techniques) are not allowed (cut-and-paste technique).
2. Movie-collage creation: Each student makes her or his own creation in the following month; this action is iterative and circular, since the cut-and-paste technique feeds back on the selection and meaning of fragments; their juxtaposition, in fact, reveals unexpected differences and connections, pushing the author to revise choices, until the final product is personally satisfying.
 3. Video sharing and writing: Students are invited to watch their videos together, in small groups of four to six; they write a short personal text at the end of each screening, then they engage in a conversation, with the support of their writing.
 4. Collective and individual sense-making: During the group conversation, two lists of questions are provided; the first is a sheet to be filled individually, for each movie-collage (title, original films, images/topics, ideas/emerging theory, or perspective); the second is a questionnaire for the group, asking for a new title by each participant and a negotiated critical synopsis of each movie collage.
 5. Reflective and reflexive writing: At the end of the course, each student writes a text on the workshop experience, telling about each step and product, focusing his or her own learning, and taking an explicit theoretical stance that includes references from literature. This complex reflexive text will be discussed during oral exam.

Writing is extensively used in the different steps of the workshop to foster reflective and reflexive processes. By the former, we mean the power of words, and namely writing, in performing distance, objectivity, analysis, rationalization, and conscious reorganization of meaning. Reflexivity, instead, goes beyond the merely cognitive process, to encompass the impossibility of total awareness, the messiness and difficulty of knowing and transforming, and the role of soul work and mythopoetic processes in learning (Dirkx, 2012). Creative, narrative, and metaphorical writing, then—as forms of presentational knowing—are used to communicate beyond consciousness and to sustain the transformation of self (Hunt, 2013; Hunt & Sampson, 2006).

Cross-Media Portfolios

Sixty-three students attended the whole workshop, creating their own video collages and assembling a portfolio containing:

- the original video collage (assigned theme: “the family”) created by cut-and-paste editing of fragments from existing motion pictures, composed in a new handwork with its own title;

- the analysis of the video, written by the small group of classmates who watched their videos together (reciprocal audience), then negotiated it using a list of questions as a guideline;
- the final essay where each student reconstructed and critically analyzed her experience and learning process, reflectively and reflexively, in connection with the topic and learning objectives of the course.

The portfolio, a multiple cross-media composition of videos, questionnaires, personal notes, and final essay, materializes the complexity of learning that could have happened and represents the product of the workshop for each student. It displays how students worked across the workshop, revealing the unfolding of personal theories, meanings, and assumptions about the family, offering hints of the students' epistemology and testimonies of transformation.

Our Dialogic Analysis of Sofia's Portfolio

How do we know whether transformative learning has occurred? Could cross-media portfolios highlight the students' experience of learning and offer criteria for us to assess outcome and process? As Cranton and Hoggan stated, "the kind of knowledge we are interested in evaluating determines, at least to some extent, the evaluation strategy we use" (2012, pp. 520–521). They also claim the need for integrated and inclusive evaluation, encompassing critical reflection, imagination, intuition, and emotion. Together, these dimensions create *reflexivity*:

a mechanism of consciousness that enables knowledge of the world and of oneself to be acquired through a relaxed kind of intentionality and at a low level of consciousness rather than through more conscious and directed thinking. (Hunt, 2013, p. xvi)

If knowing and learning are dialogic and complex processes, beyond individual will or awareness, we need a tool for dialogic and complex evaluation. The cross-media portfolio is such a tool, since it contains different kinds of texts and artifacts, apt to foster reflection and reflexivity: Self-report, narratives, and answers to questionnaires express, in fact, the students' conscious acts of mind and metaphors or concepts that are not fully aware; the video collage performs a visual theory beyond its author's awareness, opening space for further interpretation. The dialogic approach allows us to evaluate the process and outcomes of the workshop from different perspectives: the insider/student, her or his colleagues, and ourselves as insiders and researchers. We juxtapose these different voices (Norris et al., 2012), to avoid the development of a master story, and closed interpretation, while allowing the development of a provisional understanding of the learning process and criteria for analysis. The multiplication of perspectives is the basis of dialogical analysis, since "depending on the author/creator, virtually the same experience can produce different narrative accounts, and all stories are always partial and perspectival" (Bruner, 2002). Evaluation itself, then, is a partial and perspectival story.

Sofia's portfolio (a pseudonym) was chosen with the permission of the author for its coherence, insightfulness, and personal signature (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 173). Besides, she developed an explicit theory of her learning process, the struggles it provoked with her, and the resulting experience of (complex) beauty. We analyzed her work separately: Federica—the video-researcher—read the whole portfolio in its diachronic and progressive development and used her interpretative perspective to interrogate the process. She renarrated Sofia's visual work, exploring metaphors in the video's contents and plotline. Laura—the teacher-researcher—focused on signs of reflection and reflexivity in Sofia's essay and considered criteria to assess learning as a possible outcome of the process.

Hence, Sofia's journey of awareness and reflexivity, triggered by her experience of the workshop, is told here by a multiplicity of voices: hers, her classmates', and ours. We approached her portfolio as a complex, layered text sedimented through time, juxtaposing many images and words, referring to feelings and thoughts that emerged through and by her dialogue with colleagues and with herself. As we said, dialogic methods do not aim to state a single truth but celebrate the unfolding of understanding and opening of (new) perspectives.

The Portfolio as It Unfolds: Federica's Account of the Movie-Collage Experience

I, Federica, want to offer an interpretative analysis, as a "chronicled account" (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 69) followed the diachronic composition of the portfolio: She watched the movie collage, taking notes about contents and metaphors suggested to her by the narrative; then she compared her interpretations with Sofia's and her group-mates'. Sofia's synopsis of her movie-collage, titled "Getting lost,"¹ offers a first interpretation:

It's an evolution of a conflict; it's about distances inside the family, and their emotional consequences. I started with representing a blind fight, in absence of communication, and went on with scenes representing distance and departure, frustration and solitude. Is it possible to go back? How to solve a conflict? [. . .] The last two scenes try to give an answer to these questions. It's not easy or possible but sometimes it is necessary to take your own responsibilities [I] and turn back (on track), and admit your own faults, and spur others on to explain their own [respective] reasons. Sometimes it seems impossible to turn back to a more serene situation after negative changes but, even if nothing is ever going to be the same again, there's still hope to trigger a positive change within the family as 'we.'

What does the video tell me? When the video starts, the physical dimension and the absence of speech appear to dominate: a wordless fight between two men is followed by a second fragment where dialogue is hindered (by a wall separating two characters, a man and a woman). Following fragments are labelled in my interpretative

notes as: “getting lost” (third), “think it back,” “backtracking” (fourth and fifth), “no (re)turning back” (final). They tell stories of irreversible choices. The “aesthetic appeal” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 173) of Sofia’s work prompts a perspective of meaning where “people don’t give up,” neither backtrack but move on.

I identified movement as a leading feature and metaphor for change in the video narrative. In her synopsis, Sofia herself makes connections between movement (or its absence), communication (or its absence), and change. Her characters appear stuck in critical situations, speechless, but searching for a hint, or a space, to move on and make sense of life. The whole video can be interpreted as a visual theorization about transformation: “you have to be stuck, lost and disoriented, in order to ‘*start again*.’” It presents a transformative journey through emotions and actions. The fifth fragment is notably taken from “In the flesh”—a series based on a dystopic future where people turn into zombies but can be turned back into humans by an antidote treatment. This fragment represents the turning point in Sofia’s narrative, where transformation, choice, irreversibility are symbolically represented by a zombie teenager, turned human from his previous status. A transformational archetype, interestingly entailing physical metamorphosis, is a reorganization of embodiment. He has to cope with awareness of his past as a killer, with the painfulness of emotional detachment and the constant blurring of reality, memories, and present fear. Knowing that he will never be the same as *before*, he fights to keep memory of suffering and pain, as a necessary “scar of the past,” enabling him to move on. Sofia’s presentation states that memories are in the flesh, and stories open possibilities to move and act, transforming us from “walking dead” to “walking narratives.” I see this work as a visual theory of learning, performing an embodied, and enacted epistemology of education.

From Author to Audience: Group Voices

After sharing their movie-collages in small groups, students had conversations about each video. Sofia’s colleagues titled her work as follows:

*Hope, the conflict which creates new harmonies,
Searching for . . . hope,
Back to back (as in duel), and
Hope after the storm.*

Hope and conflict are repeated, as key words, along with *movement* and *time*, also in the new synopsis negotiated and written collectively by the group:

[. . .] We saw a pathway which starts from a conflict of strong emotions within a physical fight; all the scenes are characterized by a strong emotional charge generated by conflicts, solitude, and loss; until it gets to the rediscovery of a new possibility (hope).

The metaphor of a “*pathway*” entails a journey, a quest, or time passing by, and overcoming difficulties. The two synopses may be juxtaposed, as in a conversation, where Sofia presents the cognitive/emotional condition of feeling lost, while her colleagues see hopeful trajectories as chances. These chances, we can imagine, she then saw, more clearly through the group’s eyes, as a compass for her pathway. The “(new) composition of all the participants’ perceptions, actions, emotions and values” (Formenti, 2016, p. 639) could have enabled her to access a further step of inquiry and to focus her own position, as necessary to “restart” the journey (see below the title of her final essay). Sharing the video in a collegial environment (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2000) supported her in pursuing her pathway of awareness. As Tisdell contends, “it was the movie *and the discussion of it* that lead to greater understanding, and potentially to transformative learning” (2008, p. 60, *our italics*).

In her final essay, Sofia reports about a qualitative leap in her understanding: she learned from sharing her work and receiving different perspectives that enriched her own. She describes this experience as a composition of different visions of the family:

I learnt how our personalities can make a difference in representing a topic which is apparently the same for everyone. Assuming differences and different points of view among us isn’t the same as seeing it with your own eyes. Everyone spoke about “family,” but none of these videos is similar to the others, indeed! Each one showed an idea, a perspective, a personal emotion and triggered innovative questions and original discussions.

Her portfolio, then, from the initial video to the final text displayed an unfolding, a transition from speechless actions to words and meaning, by which her epistemology became more visible. She wrote that narrating had clarified her position as a member of a larger system. She became her own audience and was able to point out the transition from being “stuck” to “walking again,” “moved by hope.” The concept of hope became pivotal in her narrative, after being used by her colleagues. Hope is crucial for transformative learning: it is about seeing alternative narratives, or unveiling one’s mask (Tisdell, 2008), and keeping on moving, waiting for a chance and acting for a change. Hope cannot be separated, however, from hopelessness, struggles, and dilemmas. This tension opens questions, triggering Sofia’s reflections:

I felt uncomfortable. [...] The difficulty of opening up in a visual narrative [...] showed me that we [as educators] need to have delicacy and care when we ask the others to open up. Anyway, why such a difficulty? Does it happen to anyone? [...] Did I focus on the absence of movement in my narratives because I am stuck? [...] The only thing I can do is reflect about it: before working with families, before thinking about others’ movements, I will try to position myself. I will try to understand where I

am and where I am going to, if I am really suspended as the protagonist of my video-narrative. From there on, I will start to move again.

By reflecting on her learning as an author, she can recognize and celebrate her vulnerability and need to take a position. By accepting the challenge of being narrated by an audience, with whom she dialogued and questioned her own ideas, she takes the risk to face the unknown, driven by hope.

The Final Essay, or Laura's Dialogue With the Author

What does it mean to dialogue with an author through her text? A dialogic reading of Sofia's final essay entails respect and curiosity for her frames of meaning, as expressed by her choice of words, phrasing, and semantic punctuation. On the other side, it requires self-positioning by the reader, based on emotional awareness and critical exercise. This analysis does not claim objectivity, but seeks for intersubjective truth, if temporary. When I, Laura, started reading Sofia's final essay, entitled "Start again" or "Re-start,"² I felt compelled by the short, sharp title, standing out among the many longer and explicative ones. After reading, I wrote a note for the student: "A good work, very reflexive and original. One can see that you took the challenge (and a lot). You do not fear pain and conflict. This will be useful for you as an educator." Where was my judgement based? Was it legitimate? I consider these essays primarily as ways to foster self-evaluation (Cranton & Hoggan, 2012; Formenti, 2014). But then I have to mark them, as a teacher. How can I analyze them, in order to assess learning? Words and semantic punctuation become clues, news of differences (Bateson, 1979).

Firstly, a clue of reflexivity was inscribed in Sofia's first lines:

In my video-narrative I chose to talk about conflict [...] I leave to the audience the task to imagine what happened before, or who and what provoked the fight [...] I also choose not to identify the protagonist: it is clear that a singular point of view is entailed [...] it doesn't matter. What I want to represent is movement created by conflict, the path followed by the protagonist to re-approach the other and try to communicate. (italics in the text)

Choice is clearly stated by Sofia's words: "I chose . . . I also choose . . . I want to represent." Sofia took the challenge to focus and represent a theme—conflict—and to position herself, which is not easy or automatic, as already stated. I see it as a claim of authorship. Sofia goes on:

After one month, I re-viewed it [the movie-collage], I realized that one aspect had escaped me previously: in most scenes, there is no movement. Or better: characters move, but only physically. The prevailing atmosphere is standby. The main character seems to me like suspended in nothingness, he walks without going anywhere. He is not able to move, since he does not know how it can be done. (italics in the text)

The effect of becoming one's own audience is expressed in the text as a *realization*: the perceived absence of movement (*standby*) and the emergence of conflict, not only referred to family experience but related to Sofia's assumptions. A new surprising meaning was brought to her by her own storytelling. She *realized* that an unforeseen challenge was to be taken and claimed that a "standby family" needs a restart. But "*What can be done to make a family re-start?*" This appears to me as an authentic question, rooted in Sofia's family experience, suggested to her by watching the video, and expressed in written form after reflection. Sofia's provisional theory is that standby comes from sudden and unforeseen adversity, "*out of our control, such as illness, for example.*" To build a satisfying theory (a requirement for the essay), she actively uses the literature of the course (books and papers on children's illness, family negligence, resilience, etc.) to identify situations that may provoke family crises, disorientation, and suspension. Further, she criticizes undisputed views about discomfort, conflict, and pain and begins to see the potential role of education in this: "The suffering we are used to watch is sensationalyzed, far from reality and consequently we never undertook paths of *education to pain*" (italics in the text).

She is building, word after word, in her text, a relational and contextual theory of education and learning: of how individuals need others, for example, parents, and the latter may be able or not to offer their attention and care. Parents also need others, especially when they "*find themselves in the dark, far from spotlights,*" and even more so when they *are* the apparent cause of suffering. Sofia is learning how to read parental negligence in a wider context: behind a negligent caregiver, she argues, there is a "*weak network,*" hindering change. A "standby family" is one, then, where positive change is prevented. The question transforms in a new one: "What can an educator do, in order for the family to cope with suffering?" This phrasing suggests a transformation in Sofia's view of the educational relationship.

Sofia is weaving her theory in her essay; she goes back to watch her video, once again, and she finds a possible answer: "*after breakaway, frustration and solitude, the protagonist decides to try another way, that requires the courage to abandon known paths*" (italics in the text).

There is *another way* to manage conflict: as her protagonist, Sofia chooses the acceptance and exploration of conflict, differently from the family paradigm. To allow a "*change of perspectives,*" the young man in the video pushes his father to "*tell his own position in the story.*" A change in perspectives entails the transformation of a relationship: there is no way to become adult without challenging family rules and roles; on the other side, emancipating from the family needs a cognitive reorganization, sometimes an epistemological leap, as her words suggest: "By changing your point of view you rediscover some aspects of your family that seem forgotten, buried under the stiffness provoked by pain, by the feeling of having no other choice. Hence, circularity, movement is generated."

This needs collaborative space for reciprocal listening and learning: Sofia quotes as an example a psychiatric service she read about, where families share their

experience of living with a mentally ill member; a space for people to “*collaborate in search of a new perspective.*” Her emerging theory for education is based on reciprocity, collaboration, and movement, which “*has the power to open possibilities.*” Hence, “*the end stays open*” and “*the family restarts to hope, to try to build sense of their world and to welcome possibilities*” (italics in the text). Further signs of learning appear at the end of Sofia’s essay, when she recognizes the inner struggles triggered by this work:

The request to bring outside some part of me, and fix it on paper, triggered many times a feeling of discomfort. [...] this difficulty can be useful for me to understand how much delicacy is needed when you ask to somebody to do the same, but I cannot do without wondering myself on the reasons of such a big struggle. Does it happen to everybody, or I am “blocked”? [...] What I can do is to start to reflect: even before working with families, before thinking about others’ pain and movement, I try to position myself. I try to understand where I am and where I am going to, if I am really suspended like the protagonist of my video-narrative. From there, I re-start to move.

I see here containment given by reflection: In Sofia’s text, emotions are connected to ongoing theorization and the use of such verbs as *understanding*, *wondering*, *reflecting*, *positioning*, and *restarting*. This expresses altogether a sense of authorship, openness to change, intersubjectivity, and a more integrated, responsible, informed and insightful relationship to knowing and learning. The features that Mezirow (2012) ascribes to transformative learning. I also see reflexivity in the *relaxed intentionality* and *fluctuating consciousness* (Hunt, 2013) that allows to accept suspension and a certain degree of discomfort (Brooks, 2011).

From this dialogue with Sofia’s text, I came to fix some criteria of evaluation for my course’s essays, and maybe, more generally, for transformative learning in higher education: an explicit claim for authorship, the discovery of (new) questions and dilemmas, the effort to position oneself within the text and context, and the building of a personal, articulated, explicit theory of the topic. These criteria can be used to evaluate learning, but they need to be checked, as we did here, against self-report and analysis of the whole cross-media portfolio. Besides, we can use these criteria to sustain research on transformative learning and its evaluation, which still lacks explicit attention (Cranton & Hoggan, 2012).

Conclusion: Raising Reflexivity Through Dialogic Didactics

Sofia’s case shows the possible effects of a “multiple visions, multiple voices” method, weaving visual and written narratives, metaphorical and prosaic text, individual and collective work. The unfolding of a single case, through a composition of different voices, was helpful in raising questions, focusing criteria for evaluation, and suggesting further research. Yet, one case is not a demonstration. Sofia’s story is exceptional, her work was striking for clarity and beauty; it brought evidence that creating one’s own narrative, or even reflecting on it, intellectually, is not enough:

we need others, and the different perspectives of meaning they bring into the conversation.

Our interest for narrative methods, and theory of dialogic learning, brought us to build the workshop as a pathway that unfolds its potential step by step, through multiplication of languages and perspectives, starting from multiple transcoding (achieved here by the movie-collage), then going through reflective writing and sharing, to build reflexivity. We see three epistemic leaps in the process of sustaining perspective transformation and adult thinking in higher education. They seem to be necessary but not granted.

The first epistemic leap is *personal reflection*; at this level, authorship (as in editing a video-collage) can be rewarding in itself, especially for those who still need to find their voice; it is risky and challenging, as voice can be silenced or compliant with power or express unconscious, unforeseen, and troubling ideas. Far from being transparent, the student's intention in composing the video is unintelligible prior to discursive interpretation. For many students, this first leap is already an achievement.

The second leap is *interpersonal learning*: Group screenings are moments of discovery, unease, unexpected reactions, and comments that push to explain and sometimes to question oneself ("Did I do it wrong? Why did I choose *those* pieces?"). Dialogue on differences and commonalities can be difficult, disconcerting, and problematic itself; some groups obliterate their differences or split into separate parties, each one following their own truth. Dialogic groups are forms which transform, and not only given containers for transformative learning. Many students report their struggles to dialogue, to accept critical views, and to overcome conflict. In these cases, transformative learning is threatened; as we said, perspective transformation happens in transforming contexts.

The third epistemic leap is about *self-reflexive transformative learning*. It entails a meta-theory of self-in-context. Over the years, Laura chose to trust and feed the students' capacity for self-reflexivity introducing the final essay as a method for (self)evaluation, where the student herself reinterprets her learning experience, illuminated by the course's contents, to develop a meta-perspective. This is the most difficult leap, for the many challenges it entails, well recognized in the literature on transformative learning. Self-reflexivity brings tensions and resistance, it is probably not suitable for everyone at every time, and needs support that cannot be granted in a university room with around 80 students.

One could argue that students' voices are necessary but maybe not sufficient to say if transformative learning has occurred. In fact, transformation is a rhizomatic story (Tyler & Swartz, 2012); a narrative reconstruction of experience made by multiple observers: the learner, the teacher, and others. In complex systems, stories bring unexpected changes and transform themselves, continuously, at different levels. The way we present our experience feeds back on it, iteratively, in a circular process. Reflexive writing and the cross-media portfolio combine different codes. Learning and living are based on "the coding and transmission of differences"

(Bateson, 1972, p. 452) and the basic epistemological act is to “draw a distinction” (von Foerster, 1981, p. 288). But then, to think like adults, we need to go beyond our own distinctions and ways to draw them. In the workshop, students become authors first, then audience to their own narratives. They take other points of view and switch from different codes (video, talking, writing). They share and shake their views in conversations that pushed them to look for new, provisional ways to make sense.

Similarly, we were also deeply involved in the process: by interacting with the students, anticipating the expected outcomes of this process, bringing our frames of mind into the picture, and using dialogue to gain a reflexive understanding of the process. This article is our provisional story (or theory) of it. It fuels our further analysis. And hopefully it will be generative for the reader too.

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Notes

1. Her choice of fragments from movies and TV shows (as edited) was: *True Detective* (season 01, episode 06); (2) *Doctor Who* (season 02 episode 13); 3. *Lilo & Stitch*; 4. *Peaky Blinders* (season 02 episode 06); 5. *In the Flesh* (season 01 episode 03); 6. *The Lord of the Rings*—The Two Towers.
2. The translation of Sofia’s text from the original Italian version poses many problems of interpretation. We did it separately, and the differences, not least in the title, were maintained to respect our dialogic view.

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Author Biographies

Laura Formenti, PhD, is Professor of General and Social Pedagogy at the University of Milano-Bicocca, Director of the PhD program “Education in Contemporary Society”, Chair of European Society for Reserch on the Education of Adults and joint convenor on the Life History and Biography Network.

Federica Jorio, PhD in Education and Communication Studies, is an independent research with a specific interest in visual narrative methodologies for education and training of professionals.