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## From dream to profession: building bridges of meaning to cross uncertainty in vocational learning

**Dal sogno alla professione: costruire ponti di senso per attraversare l'incertezza nella formazione professionale**

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### Riassunto

Il panorama delle professioni dedicate alla cura si dimostra oggi sempre più eterogeneo e diversificato. La molteplicità di figure si accompagna alla differenza di linguaggi e stili di comunicazione utilizzati, per i quali si avverte il bisogno di trovare un punto d'incontro verso la comprensione e la legittimazione delle reciproche differenze e capacità distintive. Solo una loro reale integrazione può infatti condurre i professionisti verso un autentico atto di cura. Ma come si può portare gli studenti ad acquisire la coscienza e le competenze trasversali essenziali per una sua pratica attiva? Come si può aiutarli ad identificare i propri bisogni, le proprie paure, le proprie insicurezze e costruzioni preconcepite – spesso inconsciamente assunte – contro l'esercizio di una professione che può configurarsi come una delle più delicate e costitutivamente carica di responsabilità?

Queste sono alcune delle questioni alle quali si è cercato di rispondere, descrivendo un caso di clinica della formazione applicato in un'aula universitaria. Vivere la dimensione gruppale nel contenitore protetto della formazione si è dimostrato un passo fondamentale per la comprensione autentica dei differenti livelli di ascolto da parte dei soggetti, che hanno iniziato a riconoscersi in una nuova dimensione di ruolo: da deboli e indefiniti a possibili portatori di creatività e progetti innovativi per le istituzioni di cura.

**Parole chiave:** *psicoanalisi; pedagogia; formazione; gruppo.*

### Abstract

The view of the professionalism dedicated to care proves nowadays to be increasingly heterogeneous and diversified. The multiplicity of figures is accompanied by different language and communication styles, which need to find a meeting point to better understand and legitimise each other's differences and distinctive capabilities. Only the real integration among such differences and capabilities can lead to true and authentic care. But how can you bring students to acquire such consciousness and the essential transversal skills that are required to actively practice it? How can you help them to identify their needs, their fears, their insecurities and preconceived constructions – often unconsciously taken – against the exercise of a profession that can be configured as one of the most delicate and constitutively drenched by responsibility?

These are some of the questions that we tried to answer, describing a case of clinical-training approach applied in a university classroom, where living the group dimension within the protected container of training has proved to be a critical step for the authentic understanding of different listening levels by subjects, which started to recognized themselves in a new dimension of role – from weak and indefinite to possible carriers of innovative projects.

**Key words:** *psychoanalysis; pedagogy; training; group.*

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*Le opere d'arte sono sempre il prodotto di un pericolo  
Che si è corso, di un'esperienza portata all'estremo,  
fino al punto in cui l'uomo non può più continuare.*

Lettera di Rilke a Clara

## Premise: Some pictures of the world we live in

How can we describe the world we live in? Nothing really helps us to find a way that can include all the aspects that characterize our society nowadays. Authors from any knowledge fields give us pictures of their visions of our times, and none of them is very comforting.

From a sociological point of view, Bauman (2002) describes a liquid society unable to sustain the challenge that its “liquidity” forces people to face every day. Augé (1992), from an anthropological point of view, supports the vision of a world where locations are not defined anymore: they are built to be part of global networks. He called them *non places*, places where things happen and people get in contact, without boundaries that can contain and help to define the meaning of the action that is taking place there. Places where people just run through, crossing repeatedly, meeting and doing their daily activities and their duties. Places built around a logic of utility, a “global thought” that aims to create a perfect *system*, efficient and flexible, but totally deprived of any space that can enhance dimensions of sense-making and thought. People cannot stop in such places; they are only meant to cross one another. Augé, like Bauman, describes *non places* as full of new and increasing fears, but also of an utopic form of never-ending hope towards an undefined “future”:

«Les «non-lieux empiriques» [...] composent les paysages dominants de notre nouveau monde. Les aéroports, les gares, les viaducs, certains hypermarchés sont imaginés par les plus grands architectes comme l'espace commun susceptible de faire pressentir à ceux qui les utilisent à titre d'usagers, de pas-

sants ou de clients que ni le temps ni la beauté ne sont absents de leur histoire. Fragment d'utopie, là encore, à l'image de notre époque partagée entre la passivité, l'angoisse et, malgré tout, l'espoir ou, à tout le moins, l'attente. » (Augé, 2010, p.176)

In those places also time seems to flow in a different way: sometimes it runs so fast that it seems suspended, in a never-ending and non-recordable run, in which history doesn't even have the time to settle the remains of its flux. Everything is always re-thought and rebuilt as long as it becomes less efficient than it could be and old buildings and art-works become something that must be conserved only in city centers, something that people can look at with a sort of nostalgic attitude. An attitude that as Lipovetsky (Lipovetsky & Charles, 2004) reminds us in his writings, has always belonged to human nature, a fact that can be easily recordable if we just think that also Plato repeatedly denounced the corruption and the moral decadence of his times in comparison to “older times”.

This global, systemic concept of organizing urban architectural spaces highlighted by Augé deeply affects life stories as *life-long-learning* stories, because it is in those places that education happens today.

Morin (2011) helps us give a theoretical framework that allows us to consider our reality and its complexity. He explains that we have to take in consideration all the multi-facial aspects of the complex society we live in. A society where uncertainty seems to be the primary feature, bringing us to confront ourselves again with the category of “fear”. But liquidity and fear are not the only “problems” people have to face: they actually have become the source of a deep contagious discomfort which affects people in their intimacy, making them feel unprotected and frail.

This kind of discomfort is also affecting places that have always carried the role of building, protecting and containing identity: institutions (Jaques, 1964; Menzies Lyth, 1988; Pagliarani, 1985). As a matter of fact, educative institutions aren't unfortunately spared from this disruptive process (Bauman, 2012; Olivieri Stiozzi, 2013).

This sense of discomfort is well described with its poisonous effects by Evelyne Grossman (2012), who, referring to Sartre, reminds us of the feeling of "nausea". She links it to the concept of angst and, even more important to us, to the loss of a corporal and psychic casing which seems to become more and more permeable and perforable, a skin which can be passed through exactly like the temporal and spatial dimensions of our liquid society:

«A sense of Nausea as this continuing coming and going that characterize the collapsing of the corporal and psychic casing. In angst, the being become porous, unharmed – awful affliction of the unweaned baby.» (Grossman, 2012: p. 18, translated by the author.)

An unweaned baby always present in every person, who claims to be helped and can actually be helped.

That is why I left pedagogy and psychoanalysis at the end of our flow of pictures. In Pedagogy, Cambi (2006) narrates of a *disenchanted world*, where people have to deal with all the already cited challenges, but have also the chance to find a way to develop themselves.

As representatives of the psychoanalytical voice, I chose Benasayg and Schmit (2005). They describe us how the analyst's studio has become a place where all the sadness, uncertainties and doubts converge, as if there were a funnel directing people to that kind of places in search for a solution, a sort of recipe to recover fragments of identity and fight against what the two authors, quoting Spinoza, called "sad passions". But recipes and

prescriptions are nor the tools neither the purposes of psychoanalysis, and uncertainty, impotence and crumbling – the so-called sad passions – cannot be fought with a "to-do-list" right for everyone.

People need to build their worlds of meaning to face the extreme and paradoxical complexity in which we all live in. Learning spaces are the first places, after the family context, in which people have the chance – and the right – to collect some of the pieces that will become an integrated part of their identity and of their ability to read the features of the world they inhabit.

Professional identity, in particular, is strictly connected with *vocational learning spaces*. These spaces share some features with the Augenian "empirical non places": they are part of the "system", meant to be crossed and used by people of every age. They are also set in the same (un)useful way almost in every corner of our world and viciously deprived from their primary functions: the creation of meanings and the expression of self and creativity. They equally share that scent of hope and optimism that education and culture have always brought with them: the possibility of development (Alberici, 2008). In their being part of the apparatus (*dispositif*) of power (Deleuze, 1989) these spaces conserve the possibility to be re-built every day, sculpted by the trainer, following the needs of the people who inhabit them. Usually, they are set within institutions, which consciously define them with their rules, customs and history, but also with a huge amount of implicit and hidden dimensions that work in the unconscious life of people (Correale, 2007). Considering these elements, psychoanalysis becomes the key-knowledge that can help trainers to enlighten all this invisible forces that work underneath the surface of institutions, and find a way to create effective learning spaces where people can elaborate the feeling of distress.

**Vocational Learning in the contemporary world: a pedagogical reflexion**

Vocational learning is usually defined as a training that emphasizes the learning process and the necessary skills to do a certain job. Nowadays, university courses can be certainly included in this category, but doing vocational learning in the scenario we described means to have the resources to deal with a considerable amount of challenges. Even if invisible and mostly latent, un-said phantoms and fears – often connected to the uncertainty about the possibility that society gives for the future and the employability of learners – are one of the biggest problems trainers and educators have to face when put into action. It seems like people, young people above all, are losing the trust in a model of society which is perceived as something that doesn't give any kind of security or safeguard. Instead, it has become something that tries to constantly deprive them from the possibility to believe that a “place” for them even exists. Following again Bauman's words, we can see how [modern] society is being transformed by the passage from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ [...], in which all social forms melt faster than new ones can be cast. They are not given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as the frame of reference for human actions and long-term life-strategies, because their allegedly short life-expectation undermines efforts to develop a strategy that would require the consistent fulfilment of a ‘life-project’ (Bauman, 2005).

That is the reason why the research for this “little spot”, which every human needs, seems almost impossible if the learner is a young adult, who still has all his/her future and life ahead. Pagliarani (1985) in his most famous work perfectly describes a young person's feeling of being lost, out of place, a person that after finishing school find themselves thrown in a chaotic and unintelligible world that seems to tell them that there is not a place for them anymore: a place for work, a place to live in and create their own family and future; a place (or a piece) of rest, to have the chance to think and reflect upon themselves, to choose the direction they

would like to take in this multi-directional, hyper-connected and un-intelligible world.

In this framework, the challenge for educators seems both clear and complicated, because it implies a high level of engagement and a continuous questioning and reflection about the works they are doing (Contini, Demozzi, Fabbri, & Tolomelli, 2014; Riva, 2004). What claims to be re-thought today is not only education's role and purpose, but the educative “gesture”<sup>1</sup> itself that requires a new grammar to be expressed and codified, to have the chance to meet the needs and face the increasing difficulties of young adults' experience in the contemporary world.

That is also why we need to add psychoanalytical language to pedagogy: watching the world across its lens, and intertwining it with the pedagogical knowledge, is the only way that allows us to disclose all that amount of feelings, emotions, thoughts, phantoms, stories and needs that inhabit the invisible and latent part of the formative space, and to transform it in a “gesture” which can support learning instead of obstructing it.

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<sup>1</sup> We deeply believe that today, the profession of teaching and training has join a point of rupture that cannot be ignored anymore. The era of omniscience has reached its end and the social status of these professional figures has changed. The role of “support” in the raising and professionalising of students has surpassed the role of the “savant” distributing knowledge to others from its pulpit and with this turn even their status and their desirable competences have changed. Education still encompasses a very pragmatic role, set on the plan of reality, that implies the need of continuously taking decisions and acting not only for the person who is practising it, but also and above all for others. Doing this, respecting the others and their will and needs is one of the most difficult part of the educative work, whatever declination it may take. In the educative gesture a still uncountable mixture of levels and latencies are condensed that pedagogy has only started to analyse and re-think. After dozens of years, being an education still seems an impossible profession. What is changing is the modality in which pedagogy professionals are starting to analyse and practise it, following the attempt of rebuilding new boundaries and containing anxiety and fragilities that the liquidity of our world has taken with itself.

As Kaës (Kaës, Anzieu, & Thomas, 1984) tells us, training as an activity is not a mere technique but it is, by excellence, the human technique that can assure the most favourable permeability between the psychological and the external reality. From these few words, we gain the image of the learning space as a middle earth in which personal conscious and unconscious needs and desires, aspirations and phantasies cross with the pressing requests of the external reality and its continuous demand for adaptation and development. That is also why, following Kaës' words, we can join him in saying that: training involves the use of techniques and instruments more elaborate than what is required simply to maintain life, since the purpose of training cannot be limited in advance to this goal; training must follow the very same movement, unpredictable, as it is the desire of man.

I would like to underline and prove these two ideas: first, the concept of the formative space as a middle earth, an intermediate space that lies between the external world and the interior one, where experiences are recreated using a "pretence register" (or *registro finzionale*, in Italian) to let people have the chance to experience them in a protected scenario. Second, the idea of "desire" as something that characterizes man as a subject dealing with a formative process (Recalcati, 1991, 2014).

### **The training of and the training as: some talks about "care", spaces and new professionalisms**

The case I am going to describe is connected to the experience gained in tutoring an art academy class, where young adults were studying and training to become art-therapist. The focus is purposely set on a dimension of auto-formation. The group dimension is fundamental in our work. Considering the class as a group (Bion, 1961; Hinshelwood, 2007), focused on a specific task and with its specific needs of learning, allowed the teacher to adapt every single lesson, making it more ef-

fective. As in Schein's model (2013) we used counselling in training to teach learners how they can learn from their own experience, planning for the future and learning from the past (Bion, 1970; Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2013).

We can see how today the view of professionalism dedicated to care proves to be increasingly heterogeneous and diversified, and the internal tension hidden in the same idea of "care" shows the difficulty people can have when entering in this kaleidoscopic scenario.

Traditional and strictly codified professions walk side by side with new emerging ones, often characterized by a hybrid nature.

The need of taking care of patients, in all their aspects and dimensions, is landing institutions of care and services to the creation of interdisciplinary teams, in which these new professional figures are introduced with a sort of "supporting functions" to the healing process. All these different professionals are then pushed to work together, apparently encouraged in doing so, but implicitly obliged to find a way to match their knowledge and skills, in order to pursue their job in the interest of "the other".

They are asked to carry out the uneasy task to find a meeting point and a combination between professions that are historically considered "strong", with a high level of legitimation and recognition, and these new, frailer and often underestimated, emerging ones.

A meeting point where terms like "interdisciplinary" should end up being only a desirable concept but instead they become an actual way to work together as a group, understanding and legitimating each other's differences and distinctive capabilities, enhancing them for the fulfilment of the group's task.

The primary question, in training young adults to be educators and art-therapists, has always been connected to what could be the better way to meet their complex needs of learning.

The main objective then becomes bringing aspiring art-therapists and educators to a greater understanding and a better legitimacy of their role, providing skills that strengthen

the capacity of self and hetero-listening, necessary for a conscious, careful and creative exercise of their profession inside institutions.

### **The planning of clinical training-research: a circle model to let emotions circulate**

The course has been planned according to a clinical-training approach (Massa, 1987; Riva, 2000; Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2013) with a special attention towards the group dynamics and needs. That is why spaces for group observation and listening were strategically provided at the beginning and at the end of every lesson, in order to cyclically investigate the students' learning needs<sup>2</sup>.

The central hypothesis is that the creation and care of these formative intermediate spaces inside the class are fundamental to elaborating and trying to overcome at least a part of the difficulties and challenges that the scenario we previously described obliges us to deal with as training professionals.

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<sup>2</sup> In the training model we propose, when we speak about "learning needs", we don't think them only in a didactic way. In the more and more complex and disconnected world we live in, new generations need something more. Learning needs can't be connected only to the acquisition of pre-determined contents and knowledge. Students can easily access them on the Internet, and they are often even better than their teachers at finding information and knowledge. They are able to specialise in new techniques and models of work with very little external help. What they need today is new directions of possibilities for being adults and dealing with their future professions in a responsible way. They also need to be aware that the techniques they are learning have a deeper meaning connected to the educative and caring process they put in action in their work. For these reasons, learning needs today are above all emotional and reflective needs that can help young professionals in the hard process of shaping themselves, to the hard capacity to contain and to sustain their negative capability, to build new boundaries for their self-containment, to relieve themselves from an idea of idealised self easily connected to the world of care and become aware of their limits and of their potential, legitimating themselves to go beyond constrictive instructions and feeling free to live their profession with a deep and incarnated dimension of meaning.

The practice of counselling in training shows its formative potentiality when it allows us to let the raw experiential data emerge from the experiences of the individual, and to purify it from its rawness to let it become a sharable object, which is then re-invested of new meanings by the group during the whole training process.

Today experiences are all connoted by a high level of unpredictability and ambiguity that gives them an enigmatic status, that introduces the emotional tone of "amazement" (Cepollaro & Varchetta, 2014). Desire and amazement are designed as "the emotions" able to move people. They work like a positive engine towards discovery, because their feeling is what helps the subject and the group to predispose themselves to a deep and dense comprehension. For this reason, the work of the group is essential in this phase. If well conducted, it helps subjects in the development of what Bion (1970) called "negative capability": the ability to tolerate frustration and anxiety. This capability – so rare and so underestimated, almost atrophied in our times – can help students to retain the capacity to think in the present moment, even in the face of uncertainty (Cornish, 2011; French, 2001; Simpson, 2006).

In each lesson moments dedicated to listening and discussion were followed by a work session conducted by a body therapist, followed by a second one dedicated to the manipulation of art materials which were used as a medium to have such experience, and for the reworking of emotions.

Artefacts served also as a deposit and historical memory of the knowledge accumulated during the bodily experiences, a form of primitive knowledge born from a contiguous-autistic way to perceive the world that remained hitherto inexpressible with words, but that impressed its mark and started to sediment, leaving its traces in the students' minds, changing their way to perceive not only the external world but their own inner and physical space (Ogden, 1989).

Each meeting ended with a time dedicated to reflection, in which the teacher linked the mutual feedback on the work done to the ex-

posture of parts of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge.

From the first meeting we had to deal with the students' unspoken but clear request of being guided and protected in their way to reach professional independence.

Anger, stress and angst were quite perceivable. Students described themselves as the few who "survived" the first year, unhappy and discouraged, full of doubts and, at the same time, deeply convinced that only those with a real engagement and motivation had survived until that point. They showed us an idea of care totally connected with an excessive state of aid: unable to concentrate themselves on the needs of "the other", or simply to look at them, they were absolutely worried about the possibility of doing something wrong. They wanted to be independent, and yet they were frightened by the idea of leaving that same place where they were continually served with already-made educative projects and readymade answers, adapted to any situation and problem.

This paradoxical coexistence of feelings appeared even in the position they assumed inside the circle: they weren't used to using chairs as students usually are, some of them simply wanted to sit on the floor, even without shoes on their feet.

It seemed like rules and boundaries did not exist inside the classroom. Limits were not set as a protection for the group: people, even strangers, entered and exited the class at their will as if it were normal to interrupt a lesson. Better, as if there even weren't a lesson. Common rules were not valid but restrictions and unwritten duties were everywhere, and they could be felt curbing the students in a sort of never-ending chaos.

In this situation the unweaned component immediately appeared, just like in Grossman's (2012) words. In the first body-work section, their acts and movements were so limited, and all conceived to show how much they were able to take care of each other, that every gesture had the nauseating smell of a too-sweet fragrance. The room felt instantly filled with "love", so many caresses, so many hugs, so few looks at each other, so few ways

to move in the spaces they had and to explore it.

They were moving, imitating each other and looking briefly at us, clearly in search for approval. It was as if they were saying at every step: "Am I doing it well, mom? Look at me!". Almost shouting for attention, to someone that could just look at them.

They were unconsciously asking to be seen, just as a baby does, to understand and create their own categories to enter in a good relationship with the external world. As Winnicott (1999) taught us, everyone needs the gaze of the other to become himself, to build his/her own identity, to feel and perceive themselves as a person: their unspoken request paved us the way to start to work with them.

As phantoms emerged, revealed and evoked time after time both from the corporal experiences we created for them and from the artefacts in which they deposited all their inexpressible sensations, even words came back where language had previously failed.

We reasoned with them on the topic of relation in the educative work, on their experiences of care, on their ideas of trauma, wounds and care and, above all, on their representations regarding the art-therapist profession.

At this point, theories started to emerge from the group itself, in a new form of incarnated knowledge: imitation and adherence to the others' desires were not the key words anymore, and neither was a stereotyped form of alternative freedom.

Lesson after lesson, the training room became the metaphorical casing in which they felt contained and protected by a new psychic skin (Anzieu, 1974), created by the group under the supervision of the conductor. As they began to open up giving names to emotions and fears, their self-awareness and personal professional identity became more and more defined.

During a particularly intense corporal-section in the middle of the course, the chaotic dimension of the "tribe" came out in all its power and violence: caresses and hugs were replaced by pushes and wrenches, smiles by

yells and the fake dense silence was substituted by voices and guttural sounds that lacerated the air, creating spaces of escape and manifestation for all the untold.

At the end of the lesson, students were looking at each other, and found themselves like monsters deprived from their physical skin. They had covered each other's faces and skins in red, despite having many other colours at their disposal. But after a first moment of horror, amazement arrived and they started smiling, simply relieved. They were reflecting their deeper parts reciprocally.

After that moment, the group started to elaborate its own concept of what an art-therapist should be. They abandoned the idea of the art-therapist as someone who uses artistic techniques to work with people in needs, choosing between a collection of samples' laboratory-models and having other people make little beautiful assignments. They replaced it with the image of a professional able to create his/her own psychic skin, available to others to draw his/her needs of care on it, using the creation of the artefact as a means to create a way for the other, to express them and then be able to wash everything away: white paint again. A professional able to sustain complexity, angst and uncertainty.

### **Conclusions: why a training-counselling model in pedagogy?**

What emerged as an undeniable necessity and results of this field-research is the strong need of students for a space to "rest", a space in which they can metabolize their experiences in the educational process, and in which they can rethink it – and themselves – with all the emotional complexity that the experience of care encompasses.

The group dimension also helps the formation of fictional experience and the birth of a new form of generative thinking, in which theories are not conveyed by a designed apical source to the students anymore, but derive directly from the thinking of the group: a form of knowledge that becomes in-

carinated and that can be continuously revised and renewed.

Using counselling-training and living the group dimension within the protected container of the formative space has proved to be a critical step for the real understanding of different listening levels. Moreover, it allowed students to experience the gaze and the presence of the "other" and to exert a clinical gaze on the other, where the "other" is not only a stranger but also a person himself. This is what allowed them to start to recognize themselves in a new dimension of role: from weak and indefinite people, to possible carriers of radical and innovative projects of care.



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