

## EDITORIAL

by Salvatore Colazzo and Ada Manfreda

### Focus on: Performing Arts, Media and Training

The adoption of a real active sense of citizenship requires creativity as a social and technological tool. Nowadays, creativity cannot ignore the knowledge and the use of digital media, which are part of our social life. The media promotes relationships, boosts economic opportunities, drawing the scenario of *smart communities*.

Training, therefore, should be aimed at the development of digital skills, the cultivation of divergent thinking, the improvement of problem solving abilities, mental abductive and circumstantial processes as well as the acquisition of *meta-skills* (which are necessary to the right orientation of the skills themselves). These meta-skills include the ability to understand properly the context, to place and define ourselves in the context, to take opportunities to develop our potentials and to reduce the negative effect of our limits.

Modernity, which has modified the relationships within the community, together with the progress of individualism have been perceived as productive forces. However, today this process has highlighted the need to preserve the sense of community and fellowship, where it still exists, or “to create a new community”. It is not a coincidence that some issues have now emerged (or re-emerged), such as the “common goods”, the “common goodness” as well as the relational and sustainable tourism. Obviously, the crisis of the modern production system has led to the possibility of re-launching the concept of an inclusive “us”.

It is fundamental to clarify exactly what the real meaning of “social innovation” is, since it is quite clear that it doesn’t refer to technology itself, which represents a cultural innovation in the lives of people, a way to make them richer, autonomous and self-satisfied. In addition to this, it is necessary to face the problem of defining the professionals, who have to be capable of supporting the social innovation processes. It seems clear that these individuals are rather complex, as they need to have: a) psycho-socio-educational skills;

b) methodological skills for the social development of communities; c) digital competences; d) project management skills; e) specific expertise in performing arts. In the places where there is just an aggregate of individuals, these leading and essential figures can animate, re-animate and create communities. A strategy focused on job-related training and research-training-actions is necessary in order to reach a collective awareness of the problems and to provide joint actions to solve them.

During our research on the field, we have been asking ourselves what model could be considered epistemologically oriented and methodologically relevant to conduct research-interventions which could promote the community and its capability to produce social innovation.

We have decided to explore a generative and liberated pedagogy that empowers any person (Colazzo 2006; 2009; 2011a; 2011b), adopting an individual-oriented and socio-semiotic-systemic approach.

We have investigated one of the basic construct: *identity*. We have realized that identity is an interactive and dynamic adaptation and combination of subjective features and environmental resources, resulting in mutual modifications. The environment actually refers to a system of semiotic constraints. In other words: any person belongs to a group, a community that is characterized by context-constraints, the *brainframes*, by which individuals produce semiotic mechanisms. The context, in fact, determines what is or is not relevant from time to time in the process of signification. Through semiotic acts, the individuals determine their social space/position in the context.

The second key construct is the *need*, by which it is possible to promote an educational and pedagogical action and the improvement of individuals' *capacity building*. The meaning of "need" has been reviewed in order to avoid its obvious connotations of lack, shortage and deficiency. From our point of view, the need has positive values, i.e. it has been assessed as a resource, subjectively meaningful and pedagogically relevant. Indeed, it is from a need that an individual carries out a project. The *need*, as a "semiotic space", is defined by the Ego in terms of memory and project, because we have the reconstruction of "here and now" and "there and then" (memory) and also the position of the subject (project) in the reference scenario (Manfreda, 2014a). The third construct we investigated is the *community*. Its meanings are completely different from those of the late nineteenth century, because of the widespread diffusion of the media, the international migration and the globalization of economy and finance.

All these reflections, therefore, brought us to elaborate the model ACL, *Action Community Learning*, that turns into *Community Action Lab* when it

becomes well established and operative in an environment.

ACL represents a specific way to make research, training and intervention with an integrated method approach. It differs from other models of research-intervention or research-action, because it combines the elements of community *empowerment* and social innovation: narration, performing arts and media. This includes the *transmedia*, the support of computer network technologies, audio-visual and multimedia tools which, nowadays, impact every part of our lives. It points out the close connection between social and technological innovation processes, as we are aware of living in an *information society*, which strives to become a *knowledge society*.

From a methodological point of view, ACL is inspired by *WebQuest* (and its updated version *New-webquest*), the PBL and the *Living Labs* teaching methodologies. From a theoretical point of view, it recalls also a plurality of reflections about social activation by performative acts, such as: the Italian social and theatrical acting tradition; the libertarian pedagogy of Raffaele Laporta, the advocate of the community self-education; the pedagogy theories of South American Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, José Antonio Abreu; the socio-analysis of Georges Lapassade; the suggestions of Ivan Illich; the capacity-building of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum; the theories of the *digital storytelling*.

We believe that informal communities can create forms of collective *agencies* to reach changes in social structures, and, as a consequence, the acquisition of more individual skills. Involving informal participating communities, institutions can become more open to dialogue too. If we enable the community to participate in a process of self-representation and reflection on its identity and potentials, the community itself evolves and becomes part of the social innovation.

ACL is meant to include and connect action and reflection, participation and social generativity, valuing the community's intangibles. Therefore, community is an inclusive playground where it is possible to activate a process of self-narration and reflection on own identity and potentials (Colazzo, 2012). It experiences sustainable, supportive, inclusive, generative participation. ACL focuses on storytelling, theater, music and other arts to promote the transformative processes towards new forms of consciousness, social planning and generativity of sense.

The ACL model is elaborate, as it includes a plurality of interconnected and interacting levels. Each level, in turn, has an intrinsic complexity, so ACL needs a *network*: the community of researchers-trainers, the group of trainees, the target-community with its own characteristics and the institutions. Each level has its development task: researchers issue a theory; trainees learn theories

and techniques of community intervention with laboratory activities and *learn to learn*, acquiring a mature expression of professionalism. The community reinforces its self-awareness, participation and autonomy. Institutions, on their hand, are sensitized to the community's issues, reducing the barrier between themselves and the needs of the locals.

ACL promotes researchers and trainees' practices as well as an interaction with a *proper* community, and this leads to collaborative-cooperative processes where individual-groups-community-institutions improve knowledge, action and decision making procedures.

It is able to provide awareness about the connection among knowledge-decision-action and their systemic interdependence within any different level. The purpose is to induce social change, in the context of a participatory governance, according to models that could be defined as new citizenship and deliberative democracy.

For four years we have applied the ACL method during the *Summer School of Performing Arts and community care*<sup>1</sup>. This school, which is a real laboratory of experimentation, has been the place where we have practiced and modified the actual model of ACL.

The Summer School lasts generally from 8 to 12 days. So, many activities are held in short time and the applicants' requirements are to be resident in the surrounding area and a good disposition to be involved in a great experience.

The initial phase (called *briefing*) has the purpose to meet the learners and organize the training activities and research. It consists of the following actions:

- Trainers' analysis of the curricula of learners;
- Group interview with learners to understand their communication styles, interpersonal and cooperative skills;
- Tests to clarify their divergent thinking, problem solving and cognitive flexibility.

Then, the trainers concisely explain the theoretical assumptions and operational methods of the Summer School that the trainees will adopt in the target-territories during their experience. In this phase the training agreement occurs. The figure of the tutors is essential to combine the expectations of trainees and the offers of trainers. Tutors have already been selected by senior participants and have practiced their role in the previous editions of the Summer School. They give a great contribution as mediators of training and performing actions. Tutors have been trainees themselves, so they narrate also the skills they

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<sup>1</sup> It is a project of Salvatore Colazzo and Ada Manfreda and the spinoff of the University of Salento (Lecce) "EspérO", an innovative start-up company, created in 2009 about the Experimental Education of Prof. Colazzo, who has carried out research in the field of experiential education and outdoor and social innovation.

have acquired, their personal educational experiences that have affected their studying and researching choices.

The team of researchers-trainers is made up of social scientists, educators, experts in the specific subjects of the school, expert performers in dance, music, theater and dramatic writing. In addition to these, there are also a cameraman and a photographer: they have the task of documenting all the phases of the school and catch the most significant moments.

Before the Summer School starts, tutors have another task to accomplish. As teachers and students of the Summer School will be in contact with local people, tutors have to prepare the community and institutions on what the School's team is going to do. Teachers and students could be considered a sort of "invaders", but the tutors give to the community a proper knowledge of their activities in advance.

The second phase regards the *research on the field*. Depending on the chosen theme, the tutors accompany trainees to interview the locals (small groups of three or four people). The interviewees answer questions and the students will study and edit the narration provided. This work will be offered back to the territory as a play. One member of the group makes the video-audio documentary, while the others keep a diary on which they report everything that affects them, taking quick notes that could be useful for future projects.

Other activities are the following:

- a) *reflective learning*: the groups of students come back to their meeting location, discuss with the trainers about the actual work they have done, and any methodological problem they had during the interview, the video-documentary, the work on the field, participant observation, as well as the epistemological problems of ethnography applied to research-intervention;
- b) trainees attend performative workshops that take place throughout the duration of the Summer School, in order to acquire the basic fundamentals of narrative performance: laboratories of social theater, music and *body percussion*, collective dance. During these laboratories specific actions, sounds and gestures are selected to co-build the final performance. However, the main laboratory remains the "narrative gym", that is the Theatre laboratory of the community, where thanks to the guidance of a trainer-playwriter the final performance is organized. In the narrative gym, intertextuality and cross-media study are preferred: narration is an elaborate concept and it also includes digital storytelling, such as the videos of the students, videos from the internet or from other media sources;

- c) learners attend more structured training programmes: seminars and round table discussions, which stimulate reflection on the contents of the school, the methodologies adopted and the related theories. The activities of the school are held through discussions, so they stimulate dialogue with students. This stage, as well as the following one, is open to members of the host community;
- d) at the end of the evening, a film (often a video-documentary) is screened in a courtyard, or square, atrium of a school, where the community is asked to share its thought about the contents of the videos. It is a moment of further reflections.

It is quite clear that, at each stage, we look for a contact with the host community, we want its opinions, we do everything we can to let people notice the presence of the Summer School. Almost every year, on the opening day of the Summer School, we walk along the streets of the villages, distribute leaflets, explaining to the curious villagers who we are and what we intend to do. One of the main reason of taking performative actions during the courses is the cultural exchange. There are two communities (the community of the students and trainers and that of the host territory) which work together and decide to offer something each other. Therefore, the Summer School turns into an intercultural education environment. When it interacts with the Summer School, the local community often offers its own resources: a group of folk singers performs a small concert, amateurs actors play on the stage, a group of musicians joins the fanfare, a filmmaker shows his/her audiovisual results, the poet of the village gives a poem as a gift and housewives prepare some typical dishes. Therefore, this cultural and social exchange creates a semiotic space and a reflective and action setting. Here participants present each other identity claims. In these social and cultural interactions, identities are crafted and transformed. Anyone is open to the otherness and gives something of him/herself (of his/her identity) to the other. This process is closely related with the socio-cultural exchanges (Manfreda, 2014b).

The final performance represents the most relevant cultural exchange of the *Summer School*: the locals offer their stories to the students who have gathered and dramatized them with the help of a director. The community has the chance to see itself reflected into the performance, experiencing the work that has been accomplished, the theatre procedures and their full involvement and participation in this event.

Once the Summer School is finished, the activities are not completed, because everything is re-elaborated in order to produce a movie, which summarizes in

fifteen / twenty minutes what has been created. The community again watches this audiovisual narration in a public event, and again the documentary becomes a moment of reflection, to gather ideas, thoughts, suggestions and possible elements for a common project.

Now, it's important to focus on two methodological considerations. The first one, analyzed in the programme of the *Summer School of Performing Arts and community care*, relates to the dynamic meanings and generativity of narration. Different narrative media can interact together and confront with each other. From a methodological point of view, it seems to recall the theory of transmedia proposed by Henry Jenkins (2010), developing stories across multiple forms of media in order to deliver unique pieces of content in narrative synchronization and with an involvement of the media users themselves (Manfreda, 2014a).

The second consideration on the methodology is connected to the performing arts as intervention method through which meanings and differences, as well as the language of the body and its senses, and the artistic codes are highlighted. To perform means being open to the idea of *pretending to be*; it's a relational and communicative game which activates processes of intersubjective meaning making, and thus, allows the community to develop (Colazzo, 2012).

The central theme of the 2015 Summer School edition was food. One of the outcome consists of a documentary "The right food" (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2015). Indeed, food narrates the identity of any place, as well as the social relationships and landscape, the society, the rituals, and finally the self-perception of the communities themselves.

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