

**Collective Mind and Togetherness in the Educational Team.
Eco-Training in Adult Education**

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Educational professionals are often engaged in team work and work together for the implementation of educational projects. Their practice is constantly questioned by the praxis - where the unpublished and unexpected (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2010, pp. 33-37; Wittorski, 1993; Teiger & Montreuil, 1995) are the figure of the professional competence and the ability to learn in a situation (Lave & Wenger, 2006) and in the work context.

In the educational team, professionals must be able to operate effectively and efficiently, both regarding the goal and their ability to be a team, encouraging team building: a group, in fact, is not yet a team, rather it must learn to become a team (Quaglino GP & Casagrande S. & Castellano A., 1992; Quaglino GP & Cortese CG, 2003). The process is not easy and it involves a multiple commitment: the ability to work in a team, to cultivate a sense of belonging and of Collective Identity, to learn from experience and to capitalize the knowledge and the skills learnt.

The learning ability of an educational team is directly proportional to its capacity to be a *Collective Mind* (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Tollefsen, 2006; Milani, 2013; 2014) as the highest expression of an *Educational We* (Milani, 2013) which does not erase differences and originalities, rather it harmonizes them according to the educational / pedagogical task.

The *Collective Mind* is a construct that expresses the ability of a team to act carefully, in a conscious and effective way. Reliability and ability to act carefully must characterize the educational teams as subjects with high responsibility. Reliability requires a group to operate as a *Collective Mind*. K.E. Weick and K.H. Roberts give this definition of *Collective Mind*: “The concept of collective mind is developed to explain organizational performance in situations requiring nearly continuous operational reliability. Collective mind is conceptualized as a pattern of heedful interrelations of actions in a social system. Actors in the system construct their actions (contributions), understanding that the system consists of connected actions by themselves and others (representation), and interrelate their actions within the system (subordination). On-going variation in the heed with which individual contributions, representations, and subordinations are interrelated influences comprehension of unfolding events and the incidence of errors. As heedful interrelating and mindful comprehension increase, organizational errors decrease” (1993, p.335).

In the educational field - accepting the contributions of K.E. Weick and K.H. Roberts - we defined the *Collective Mind* (Milani, 2013) as a metaphorical concept that helps indicating an indecipherable - but evident – reality, that manifests itself when an educational team coordinates and synchronizes its way of acting professionally in a concrete situation, managing the unprecedented and the unexpected. It is an emerging ability of the group, that is to be found in situations where it is necessary to act synergistically and quickly, to heed and instantly to enhance the skills and specificities of each professional. The *Collective Mind* is inter-subjective rather than over-individual.

The chance of generating a *Collective Mind* lies in the ability of the team to learn in the context, to be resilient (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2010), to create harmony, solidarity, reciprocity, sense of belonging and Collective Identity: it is important to foster mutual trust and the "We". In addition to the cognitive

and meaningful dimension, in fact, the *Collective Mind*, as an expression of acting with care and reliability, is nourished by affective aspects such as a *prosocial* attention directed towards others and *the ability to behold* - simultaneously - *ambivalent feelings*, like hope and doubt, certainty and uncertainty (Vogus & Rothman & Sutcliffe & Weick, 2014).

Developing a *Collective Mind* is a complex formative process. According to G. Pineau (2000), training is built within a triangulation of Hetero-Training (Hétéroformation), Self-Training (Autoformation) and Eco- Training (Écoformation). At the centre of this triangulation is the subject, who learns and thinks.

Self-training and autobiographical narrative approach constitute an indissoluble duo in adult learning - both in the transformative form of J. Mezirow (2003) and in the revision of life paths and learning in the workplace, especially in the re-reading of personal and professional trajectories. By analogy, we can correspond the *individual biography* to the *collective biography*. How is it possible to generate and support the *construction of collective biographies* in order to create a *Collective Memory*, shared learning and *heedful and mindful performances* (Weick & Suttcliffe, 2010), able to support the *Collective Mind*?

Learning is situated (Lave & Wenger, 2006), socialized (Vygotsky, 1990), organizational (Nonaka, 1991; Argyris & Schön, 1998) and collective (Milani, 2013). Professionals develop their competences and learn the practice in collective contexts and in *communities of practice* (Wenger, 2006), moreover increasing collective skills (Wittorski, 1997). Learning in teamwork develops among *reflection* (Schön, 1993), *Self-reflection* (Mezirow) and *eco-reflection* for a *co-reflection* (Milani, 2013): this *reflective cycle* generates a *learning cycle* that leads to the development of praxis and practice and the creation of individual and collective skills. This process requires, in addition to communication and dialogue, *personal and group narrative skills*. At an impasse, and/or in a cognitive conflict, free discussion can be useful, but a *collective narrative approach* (with a *collective narrative practice*) can be vital: this approach allows to rebuild the professional memory of the group and supports the sense of belonging, of solidarity, the common visions that give sense and body to the *Educational We*.

The dynamic *Hetero-Training, Self-Training and Eco-Training* invites us to place the narrative hypothesis on several dimensions: 1) the dimension of *hetero-training* can foresee proposals of stories/narrations already given to be analysed and reviewed, in order to activate the reflective cycle and the learning cycle; 2) the dimension of *self-training*, encouraging reflection in the form of autobiography, leads to the narration of personal learning stories related to the educational team and, by sharing them, activates a process that leads to shared reflection from self-reflection; 3) the dimension of the *eco-training*, the most important challenge, leads to the eco-reflexive dynamics towards the full expansion of the reflective cycle and of the learning cycle. In the *eco-training* the team rebuilds its own stories of shared professional experiences (the development of a project, the management of some complex cases, the generation of a partnership network in a territory...) assuming also the contextual elements, the processes, the crossroads, the choices, the *know why* and *know where* (Milani, 2013) that have oriented the choices and have given form to *sensemaking* (Weick, 1997), reconstructing the reflection on several levels.

The *collective narrative practice* is widespread in the therapeutic field (Donboroug, 2008) and is having extensive developments (Doboroug, 2012), but has not found full realization in other fields yet. The narrative approach is, however, widely used also in the analysis and interpretation of *Collective Identities* in organizations (Czarniawska, 2000, Brown, 2006) and more generally in

organizations (Weik, 1993; Czarniawska, 1998, 2004; Kaneklin & Scaratti, 1998). In a current sociological vision, educational teams can be considered organizations (Bonazzi, 2002).

In the hypothesis of the team as a *Collective Mind* (Milani, 2013), we believe that it is possible to imagine building a *collective narrative practice* for the reflection in vocational training, particularly in eco-training working contexts. The aims of this practice are: 1) to allow the reconstruction of experiences in order to support professionals and generate a collective resilience; 2) to capitalize collective and individual knowledge and skills; 3) to generate connections in the group and a clarity of cultural references; 4) to learn how to share experiences; 5) to build visions and collective, shared ways of working, generating a unitary and synchronous style of work; 6) to generate the ability to understand each other immediately.

In the framework of organizations, narrative practice is applied in various ways - especially to interpret *Collective Identity* or to analyse how people learn and build a *Collective Memory*. This practice uses: 1) an analysis of the documents, of the mails, of the reports of the organization (Brown, 2006); 2) an analysis of the informal and formal conversations and the exchanges between people, also in the form of stories and anecdotes of successes or failures (Orr, 1995); 3) an analysis of personal stories related to the organization. Moreover, 4) a fourth way is possible, in the wake of E. Wenger (2006) - that is to say the analysis of artefacts and reifications that a team produces, whose meanings are never determined once and for all, but they are the result of negotiations.

Storytelling promotes team *Collective Memory* (or common memory, according to Orr). In fact, "[...] the stories work as vehicles of the community memory and help share the information obtained during the action" (Fabbri, 2007). These are situated stories whose narrative favours understanding, because narrative thinking is, for J. Bruner (1996), the thought of comprehension, of interpretation, of reconstruction of the meaning. These stories well represent how much it is possible to learn from experience in contexts that promote eco-training. *Collective Memory* not only supports and reinforces *Collective Identity*, but also a *Collective Culture* for a *Collective Mind*: contributions, representations and subordinations (Weick & Roberts, 1993) can, in fact, be activated only if there are visions, ways of thinking, of acting and common perspectives, if there is a *sensemaking* that drives and supports collective performances.

According to E. Wenger, "practices evolve as shared learning stories" (2006, p.104): in order for an experience to become practical, it must be narrated, also in the form of documentation, to be feasible also by other people (Milani, 2013). Narrating a practice means, in fact, to reconstruct it, to re-signify it: the meaning of a praxis is rebuilt and it is also linked to theories and models, useful to make a practice communicable and transferable. This process is not always spontaneous in the educational teams: starting from fostering an eco-reflective process, asking the members of a team to narrate a professional experience in the form of a collective story, it could already be a methodological aspect of the collective narration. Trying to reconstruct the story of the birth of a team, could also let the sense of the educational action of professionals be reconstructed, on the axis past-present-future as well as the professionals' sense of belonging.

In the perspective of adult training, the use of narrative approach has multiple functions (Formenti, 1998; Demetrio, 1995, 2004; Scaratti, 2003; Stoppini, 2003; Gamelli, 2003): the reflection on oneself as a learning subject, the reflections on one's own identity change, the professional progression and the self-care. In this context, we believe that the collective narrative practice can in various ways understand these levels in the collective form. In the field of vocational training and in particular in team work and in the perspective of the *Collective Mind*, the collective narrative could promote the development of collective meta-competences. In fact, in order to become a competent team, an

expression of an *Educational We* able to act with care in the educational processes, the educational team must know how to implement some meta-competences: *Projectuality, Intentionality, Reflexivity, Deontologicity, Historicity and Representativity* (Milani, 2013). These meta-competences demand to be constantly acted and simultaneously learnt in situation, in praxis.

In particular, *Historicity* and *Representativity* support the Collective Identity of the team and are directly connected to the ability to manage and support the group's *Collective Memory* (Orr, 1995), a memory of the experiences, the activities, the projects, the decisions taken, the difficulties, the moments of impasse and resilience, but also of the team's successes in dealing with the unexpected. *Historicity*, as a meta-competence, is in fact the awareness of the history, of the roots and of the evolution path of the team and is based on its *Collective Memory*. An educational team needs to construct a *collective narrative of its history* that acts as a background to the identity and, indeed, generates the *Collective Memory*. The latter actually constitutes the support to the possibility of practice and team identity and the support for the sense of belonging, feeling and *Togetherness*. Exactly like a family, telling stories, narrating the past, keeping track and memory of identity and common history, so the *collective narration* in work teams becomes a tool for strengthening group identity and mutual bonds and interrelations of professional character and refers to a common heritage of practices. The shared learning histories, in fact, are the result of the combination of participation and reification of the subjects to a community of practice (Wenger, 2006). In this direction, "formation can be considered as a structure of intentional participation in narrative activities insofar as it is the practice that gives meaning to the stories" (Fabbri, p.107) in which "shared learning histories" are possible (ibidem).

The *collective narrative* becomes, therefore, a tool that works as a 'glue', generating interconnections between people, shared visions, a common philosophy of educational action, models of action and, above all, mutual knowledge: this practice, while supporting *Collective Mind* - able to act with care - develops an *Educational We* and nurtures *Togetherness* – a professional solidarity and a sense of belonging and, at the same time, an educational hope as a shared collective attitude.

The *collective narrative practice*, could, therefore take some sense directions:

- *to preserve*: in this case the collective narrative practice helps rediscover the strong reasons for the team's educational action, recovering the historical reasons that have started and supported the group and its perspectives and basic choices, to protect the possible loss of values, reasons, meanings both in the logic to "rejuvenate" the visions, rereading them according to new perspectives, experiences and reflections elaborated by the team;
- *to restore*: the collective narrative practice can bring to light, and to a renewed splendour, the meanings and motivations of collective action that could acquire a new meaning in a historical-critical reading, but also with reference to current needs; every restoration work intends to restore beauty and splendour: in the educational field one often risks, under the influence of educational fashions, of forgetting experiences, models, theories, practical solutions that, brought to new light, still show their value and their endurance;
- *to change*: the collective narrative practice favours the activation of the reflective cycle and allows, through the critical analysis of collective stories, to modify models, reference values, meaning perspectives, but also links with the territory, objectives and network: only by sharing and having in mind the story of a team it is possible to give it a new course, to change its way of acting;
- *to repair*: the memory of a team can be 'damaged'. Sometimes it can be incomplete, thus offering a fragile support to the Collective and individual Identity. The collective narrative practice could allow, through the biographical reconstruction of the team, the critical elements both on the professional

action level and on the "affective" (Vogus & Rothman Sutcliffe K.M. - Weick K.E. (2014) and relational level, allowing to explore the obscure sides, the hidden shadows of *Collective Identity*: the risk, in fact, may be that of an identity not taken freely and consciously, but undergone. Showing also means acting on the most fragile parts of a team, on its wounds, on its possible traumas: the educational team can not be *heedful* and *mindful* (Weick & Sutcliffe) if it does not cultivate a sense of belonging and inclusion and an organizational well-being (Avallone & Paplomatas, 2005);

- *to recompose*: the *Collective Mind* requires cooperation (Weick and Roberts, 1993) and this requires a sense of belonging; learning to be a team, working in a synergistic and cooperative way requires a solid and supportive group; the collective narrative allows, rereading the collective biography and the stories in a co-reflective way, to put together fragments of *Collective Identity*, but also the multiplicity of visions and experiences that accompany the flow of shared experiences. Starting from the interpretation of these shared experiences allows us to give voice to subjectivity in relation to the inter-subjectivity that characterizes the experience and the context of work itself. The invitation is aimed at learning to 'put the pieces together', 'make them match', without forcing interpretations, also accepting that the vision is not completely homogeneous, but that the 'junctions' between one fragment and the other 'are essential and important parts of the composition itself;

- *to harmonize*: the collective narrative can aim to favour a harmonious relationship of the team, a relationship in which the 'differences', the 'dissonances' are not catalogued as something to be eliminated, but as something that enriches and characterizes harmony of the group and the group's 'concerted work'. As in a musical composition, the dissonances or the fortes and the pianos create the harmony itself, they write the musical plot, so the multiple 'voices' of the collective, the different visions must be recomposed as much as possible in order to feel in a common professional social history. The *Collective Identity*, in fact, can also be a trap that homologates and flattens differences and resources, testing the group's Togetherness. The *Collective Identity* can, as a matter of facts, also be the theatre of more or less hidden games of power and iniquity (Brown, 2006). It should be remembered, with L. Fabbri, that "The narration fulfils the function of development and transformation of the communities [and of the teams]. Commitment, enterprise, repertoire are not so much the result of a priori sharing among like-minded people, rather the unpredictable and never completely predictable outcome of collective negotiations "(p.109).

Another use of the importance of a narrative approach is offered by E. Wenger: the reference is to the communities of practice, but some dynamics are also to be found in the educational teams - collective subjects constantly committed to redefining the practice in daily praxis to cope with the unedited and the unexpected. E. Wenger writes: "A community of practice is a history collapsed into a present that invites engagement. Newcomers can engage with their own future, as embodied by old-timers. As a community of practice, these old-timers deliver the past and offer the future, in the form of narratives and participation both."

Past, present and future are the times of *Historicity* and narration. These time frames can be the starting point for a methodology of collective narrative in contexts of professional training: for a team that needs help to consolidate its *Collective Memory* and its identity, the axis of the past is the reference with which to review the present, while for a team that needs to measure itself with new tasks and with a different identity, it is necessary to work on imagination, on the invention of stories that from the *present* go towards the *future*.

In terms of feasible tools, there are different possibilities:

- the use of generative metaphors;
- the use of stories to be completed;

- common maps to be transformed into a story;
- suggestions of schemes for plots;
- narrative games;
- tales of collective stories of projects, failures or successes or experiences that have accompanied the shared experiences.

In conclusion - recalling both the dynamic hetero-training, self-training and eco-training, and the transformative and constructive power of the narration - we can say that the collective narrative approach has in itself an enormous potential in the area of professional training of adults involved in team work. The latter is often tiring, stressful and risks de-motivating professionals. In general, this happens when a team does not manage to be competent: nurturing competence, eco-formative and eco-reflexive capacity means defending the group and the individual from *burnout* and encouraging *educational hope* as a shared attitude both within the group and towards the subjects which the team work addresses.

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