

Going back to school: an ecological gesture of women non-traditional students

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Introduction



I usually walk in the woods to reconnect myself to the Nature.

In this presentation I would like to share with you a reflection on the **transformative potential of going back to school for adult women** (Merrill, 2003).

My aim is to illuminate **how adult education can represent an experience of human flourishing** (West, 1996) and an **ecological gesture to reconnect oneself to the world**, in the hope to achieve a deeper and richer understanding of **the collective construction of stories we are immersed in**, and that are also built-in educational settings (Formenti & West, 2018).

Women's Learning during the Pandemic



Piazza del Duomo (Cathedral Square), Milano, October 2020

I was a non traditional student came back to education as an adult. It seems to me that the challenges of becoming a learner are so hard (and on different levels) especially for women.

Research on **non-traditional students** says that **for them are both important social networks** (Social capital, Finnegan et al. 2014) and the **Imagined Social Capital** or rather based on symbolic networks made of people not known personally to whom is attributed a power of inspiration for resistance in the study (Quinn, 2010).

But the pandemic has reduced social relations. What effect does it have on adult women who study?

Italian feminism in the Seventies

My Imagined Social Capital is represented by Italian feminism in the Seventies (Lonzi, 1970). In the last past years, with two colleagues, I searched about the place of the body, artistic imagination, and ecology in society and education (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro 2019, 2020).

We consider **feminist methods an important source of experience and knowledge, not least to contrast neoliberal values and discourses** (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro, 2021).

In particular, in my way of doing research photographs have become important. **I use photography to give body to embodied narratives** (Formenti et al. 2014) **especially with marginalized people**. I worked with migrants as “unexpected subjects” (Lonzi 1970; Formenti & Luraschi 2020; Luraschi 2021).



The rebel triangle, Feminists in Piazza del Duomo, 1970

Art, photography and Feminism in Milan

I visited an exhibition where a feminist groups of artists and activist (some of them are adult educator), that have been active in Milan, explore the condition of women in their past society. Pictures and video presenting the stories of adult women engaged in education, as teachers or students (for the working class in public school in Milan in the Seventies) create resonances with my experience (Formenti, Luraschi and Del Negro, 2021).

I connect the feminist tradition of adult education underlined by the exhibition with the present experience of a group of women (some of them with migratory background) who are attending courses a school for adult students (CPIA) in the metropolitan area of the city of Milan.



Gestures of revolt. Art, photography and feminism in Milan in 1975/1980, Milan, October 2020

School for adult students in Milan



Student photographed by Gaia Bonanomi, 2020

I did a participatory study with 11 adult learners and 9 teachers during the pandemic in Milan. The project was supported by the regional network of adult schools in Lombardy **to explore the social capital in learning for students going back to school, most of them with a migratory backgrounds.**

Biographical materials were generated using auto/biographical method (Merrill & West, 2009) in a way which encouraged a more **conversational and ecological relationship between researcher and participants.**

I engaged in this research with a **youth professional photographer** – Gaia Bonanomi – to dialogue informally with her on **the evocative power of images to give voice to the body.**

Women's conversation

Finding women willing to be interviewed individually was much more complex than finding male subjects. This difficulty refers to the dichotomy between public/private.

Women generally are not self-confident in public speech. So I set up a small group interview.

The participants are three students, a teacher and the school's director, all women. From the conversation with me and Gaia (the photographer) emerges a multiply perspectives (Luraschi, 2020) of what it can mean **having a sustainable live – in families, schools, communities, society – in this fragmented world characterized by deepest gender inequalities.**



The three students Amber, Yulya and Tara photographed by Gaia, Legnano (near Milano) 23th October 2020

Invisible discriminations

Amber introduces herself with this words:

“I am a housewife, I left Brazil when she was 27 years old. Today I am 41 years old and so I am almost 14 years old living in Europe.” (23th October 2020, my translation)

Amber tells us that **she is a lawyer, but her degree is not recognized in Italy**. She chose to live in Italy **to follow the wish of her Italian husband** to return to his country of origin. In Italy **she takes care of the two children** and one years ago she has decided to go back to study because:

“some Italian women made me uncomfortable saying that I spoke badly Italian and I could not be part of the board of an association that I care very much.” (23th October 2020, my translation)



Amber photographed by Gaia Bonanomi

The solidarity from below



Giulia photographed by Gaia Bonanomi

Yulya was born 34 years ago in Russia and graduated in engineering. How **Amber arrived in Italy to follow her husband, also an engineer, after living with him in Chile where they met.** She was on vacation and he is Russian too.

She also says **she had difficulty living in Chile because she did not speak Spanish and, once in Italy, she decided to attend public school immediately to learn Italian.**

She likes the Italian language and few times ago, **she has started to help a group of women** (Russian native speakers without papers) who work as caregivers in the homes of Italians because: "**they don't have the documents and cannot come here to study normally as I do**".

(23th October 2020, my translation)

Family relationships

Tara, a 47-year-old Italian secretary **returning to education for help her young son**, an unskilled workers without a secondary degree.

She tells that he abandoned school when he was 17 years old because of the persistent difficulties due to a diagnose of dyscalculia.

This experience of drop up creates a dialogue with her son: “I realized that I had been wrong many times with him. I **always worked hard because I was a single mon, but I never supported him to overcome his school difficulties.** So, a day, as a joke, I said: Listen, how about we go back to school together?” (23th October 2020, my translation)



Winter in Milan during the pandemic crisis, January 2021

The photographer's point of view



"We sit in the room and in the gray of the afternoon to my eyes stand out the colors of their clothes.

Amber, Yulya and Tara sit composed, formal, full of curiosity about the interview.

Hands in pockets and three shy faces hidden behind the masks.

As soon as they begin to tell each other their arms are folded little: they recognize themselves as travelling

companions. How magical the confrontation is? Listen and be heard, understood, shared and supported.

That afternoon, sincere and powerful tears descended, filled with renunciation and repentance but bright and full of life."

(Gaia's email, 9th January 2021, my translation)

An ecological gesture



Self-portrait during the pandemic crisis in Milan, 2020

The conversion was intense. **From the stories it emerges social prejudices and gender inequalities.** The pandemic has increased inequalities!

Following an eco-systemic thinking (Bateson, 1972), I reflect on **the transformative potential still actual of doing biographical interviews in small group with women non-traditional students.** In fact, in an individualistic and accelerated society, there is often very little space and time for people to **consider the complexities of their own life in a critical and open way through dialogue with others.**

I am convinced that women need to be together to speak openly as they did in the 1970s **for creating a space of one's own, thinking together, with body and mind, and imaging a future based on the recognition of the ecology of life and celebration of the diversity.**

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