Profession Reimagined: Tackling Adult Educators' Alienation through Multimodal Ways of Knowing

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Abstract

How can an auto/biographical approach be used in a group setting to bring about more holistic and complex ways of knowing for professionals in education?

Originating from a PhD study, the chapter presents my own journey of non/learning about professional knowing and becoming. Ideas of alienation from knowing are contrasted with feminist approaches and psychoanalysis that bring a more relational perspective and celebrate messiness in our learning lives, not least as professionals supporting others to learn.

A relational aesthetic auto/biographical imagination is proposed as the epistemological framework – emerging, recursively, from doing the research – as my personal take on Gregory Bateson's ecology of mind (1972) applied to biographical formative research with adults. I present the story of Federico, a teacher trainer and researcher, in a dialogue with my own, to illuminate the epistemological and affective learning, albeit as a struggle, I gained from the experience.

I invite others to draw on artful languages, and dialogue, to enrich research and education practice with professionals to develop different ways of knowing. I propose that crossing binaries, between conscious and unconscious, body and mind, cognitive and emotional knowledge, self and the world may help adult educators to draw on their whole personality, and flourish.

Keywords

adult educators – knowing – alienation – auto/biography – multimodality

Tangled Clump

We don't know when
We don't know why
We don't know where

Regular rivulets: 14066
 Infernal skein, non-direction
 The swallowing swamp that hides it from sight

It fakes, abstracting me
 Illusory, the white

Knowledge?
 Placate anxiety and then disperse it.
 (Del Negro, 2018)

1 A Research Project and a Quest

Bringing the researcher's own life and orientation into the research framework has become a key methodological focus for biographical approaches to social research, informed in the 1980s by feminist critiques of positivistic claims of objectivity (Merrill & West, 2009). Feminist scholars rejected assumptions of emotional detachment and political neutrality, to be attained by means of abstract theories and objective methods, in favour of a different set of pre-suppositions that include recognition of the researcher's interests and power (Maynard & Purvis, 2013). Self-disclosure is both ethically and politically motivated: the personal is political, in feminist terms. It is also a measure against alienation, as I argue in these pages. In biographical studies, it is now acknowledged that our choice of topic as researchers, and our ways of posing questions tend to be deeply rooted in the fabric of ourselves. This awareness forms what we might call an auto/biographical imagination (Miller, 2007).

My own auto/biographical imagination, initially quite stiff, developed throughout my PhD participatory research (Del Negro, 2018) about professional knowing and becoming. This chapter is a story about my own non/learning journey. My main finding is that connecting knowing to our lives through multimodal knowing and intersemiotic translation (Campbell & Vidal, 2019), may be an antidote to dis-attention, dis-embodiment, and anaesthetisation, the main symptoms of alienation in adult and professional lives, not least the researcher's. I want to show how a method of auto/biographically informed cooperative inquiry, can nurture the capacity to think in stories (Bateson, 1976), connecting cognition to feeling, emotion, sensation, and to bring all of our selves, and senses, reflexively, into the picture. I will outline how I learned this, together with my participants, and how this framework might be enhanced by multimodal knowing.

The prequel to this doctoral journey sees me as a performative student in organisational studies, and a successful young professional in adult training in Italy. There is a theme of distancing from knowing and idealising knowledge, linked with class issues and fragmentations in my family. I initially set out to conduct a more traditionally detached study, but as my research unfolded it also became a quest for meaning and for my own sense of self as a professional researcher, adult educator, and learner. Radical constructivism and operative epistemology (Fabbri & Munari, 1990; Maturana, 1990) posit knower and known as parts of the same circular ongoing process, suggesting that both are constructed and “revealed” by action and inter-action in one and the same hermeneutic circle of knowing and becoming. In this light, the “/” (slash) in the auto/biographical approach (Merrill & West, 2009) points in the direction of a constructivist posture of knowing as living, life as research. The chapter is also grounded in ecological assumptions (Bateson, 1972) locating “mind” in nature, in interdependencies, most of which are not accessed by consciousness. Artistic mediation can help illuminate “the systemic nature of mind” (Bateson, 1972, p. 145), skill and performance, offering professionals a wider view.

This constructivist/systemic epistemological framework and the encounter with auto/biography as practiced in Canterbury, UK, pushed me to increasingly put myself into the picture, and take a more relational stance, while struggling to be changed in the process (Maturana, 1990). I will start by offering some theoretical concepts around alienation, relational aesthetics, and how the relationship to knowing shapes adult learning. I then argue that alienation can be healed by artful and multiple languages in a participatory setting, as underpinned by my study. I will provide some insights from Federico’s journey within the research, to show how artful languages worked for him. In the conclusion, I sum up what I learned, with my participants, about using a multi-modal auto/biographical imagination to connect our knowing to our lives.

2 Are Professionals in Education Alienated Knowers?

I claim that professionals in education are too often alienated from their emotions, intuition, and imagination; to ensure professional status they learn to disconnect from authentic participation to their context and relationships. This also means that they find it difficult to own their knowing, or even to recognise their position in the process of learning. Participatory research can be a learning space where they can integrate multiple aspects of themselves via holistic knowing.

Sociologist Bernard Charlot (1997) proposed that knowledge makes sense to the subject if it is significantly related to their individual stories, imbued with desire linked to the possibilities or inhibitions for their self-construction. Since

1987, his team has researched students' relationships with school subjects, with a particular focus on clarifying how high school students from different social classes, in the suburbs of Paris, acquired or failed knowledge. Charlot's (1997) psychic-relational model is expressed in the idea that

The relationship with knowledge (*rapport au savoir*) is the relationship with the world, the other and the self of a subject who is faced with the need to learn. (p. 93, author's translation)

This can be usefully applied beyond school settings, to professional knowing and self-making processes. In the learning process, conative and imaginative dimensions need to be considered; knowing is subjectively wired into a biographical trajectory, as we already "occupy a place" (Charlot, 1997, p. 60) from which we engage in cultural, material, and social interaction with others. To learn is to be engaged in individuation, a subjective process, as well as socialisation, which is deeply relational. Knowledge places us in the world. So, professional becoming can be understood as a non-linear, and stratified process, influenced by our webs of affiliation (families, workplaces, personal relations) (Bainbridge, 2015) and by the wider context: from the local to the global interacting eco-, socio-, cultural, political, economic, technological systems and discourses. When this complexity – in simple words, the interplay between multiple dimensions of life and interactive cycle between thinking and experience, self and world, knower and known – is lost, there is a risk of alienation.

A glowing example is to be found in the teaching professions. Gewirtz et al. (2009), among others, signal the issues raised by increasing performativity and decreasing autonomy due to teachers' professionalism. In higher education, Ronald Barnett (2011) wrote about a loss of "mystery" in how learning and knowing are understood, since neoliberal discourses rule out all that is not explicit or "evidence based". Feelings of inadequacy arise among professionals under multiple competing pressures to be accountable to a variety of stakeholders (Barnett, 2008). This tendency within education mirrors a wider culture of competition among perfectible individuals which is increasing across all sectors of our market-based societies: "from science and education to health care and the media" (Verhaeghe, 2012/2014, p. 113).

We could have seen it coming: psychiatrist R. D. Laing (1967/1977) pointed out from a humanistic perspective the condition of alienation affecting contemporary Western societies, which splits experience into "inner" and "outer" worlds,

[...] but perception, imagination, phantasy, reverie, dreams, memory, are simply different modalities of experience, no more "inner" or "outer" than any others. (Laing, 1967/1977, p. 18)

When we separate the knower from the known and think that our grasp of reality is independent from who we are, we start to lose our humanity. Both subjectivity and objectivity need to be challenged, when we search for the whole.

A relevant contribution came from feminist studies: the seminal research study on *Women's Ways of Knowing* conducted in 1986 by Mary Field Belenky and colleagues explored women's knowing, which had previously gone "unheard and unimagined" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 11), because leading studies on intellectual development usually generalised from findings obtained with male subjects, thus "using male experience to define the human experience" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 7). Belenky and co-researchers analysed interviews to 135 women about their ways of knowing, and found that – in women's lives and narratives – "the development of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 18). They identified five epistemological strategies, ideally locating women learners on a developmental continuum from silenced, to objectivist, to subjectivist, towards more constructivist positions.

Constructivist knowers can draw on both subjective (personal) and objective (sociocultural) sources of knowledge: they learn to "move beyond systems" and "make connections that help tie together pockets of knowledge. There is a new excitement about learning and the power of the mind" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 140). This is not a strict categorisation: epistemological development is not linear or cumulative, but different positions can be taken at specific times and places by the knower. Becoming is contingent, relational, and contextual. Belenky and colleagues shed light on complementarity of subjective and objective ways of knowing, and on how "the words of male authority [and abstract reason]" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 146) can silence other ways of knowing.

Feminism joined anticolonialism in a struggle to make "other" voices audible, not least by exploring indigenous epistemologies or mental "illness" as demonstrations of a panoply of possibilities. This throws up issues of inclusivity in education and the need to invent new settings and languages to support the subject's quest for self, voice and mind beyond any reductionism (Belenky & Stanton, 2000).

3 Artful Knowledge

Since the 70s, feminist movements in Italy and elsewhere have drawn on the arts to illuminate and subvert social norms restricting knowledge, creativity, sexuality, and identity by way of developing embodied, performative and relational practices (Scotini & Perna, 2019). Women artists uncovered spoken,

propositional language as biased by patriarchal categories, so they claimed a space to speak in their own voices as “unexpected subjects” (Lonzi, 1970/2010) via the exploration of multiple, expressive and creative languages. Literature, poetry, photography, abstract painting, sculpture, dance and installations were used to tell stories about women’s oppression and struggle for identity, a new way of becoming in the world. A mass of cultural objects was created, to testify this research.

Similarly, the auto/biographical approach has drawn on 1980s feminist scholars to research relational subjects, creatively devising new methodologies and composing a panoply of paradigms to reflect the complexities of doing research (Merrill & West, 2009). Linden West’s biographical research with GPs (family physicians) in southern England, for example, drew on psychoanalysis to interpret the gap between the myth of the doctor as an omnipotent and omniscient hero (clearly, a remnant of patriarchy), and the concrete struggles of these professionals in the everyday context of a multicultural, socially fragmented landscape. They may assume an alienated position “partly as defence against fears of inadequacy and [their] own emotional difficulties” (West, 2004, p. 301). This can be true of many professionals, i.e. teachers, social workers, counsellors, doctors and nurses, and so on – who work with/within relationships, and need to meet otherness, first in themselves, but are asked to keep a distance and enact a role, not a whole person. Pierre Dominicé spoke of such workers as adult educators, applying the term beyond formal adult learning settings to cover “a diversity of professional activities including, beside teaching and group work, guidance and counselling as well as human resource” (Dominicé, 2007, p. 241). Recognising the educational work of a variety of professionals “helping other adults to acquire the tools which will help them to build their biographies” (Dominicé, 2007, p. 247) implies that more attention needs to be brought to how knowing and learning are understood and inform daily practice.

Professional socialisation into an overly intellectual model – not least by very rational and functionalist forms of training and continuous education – hinders the possibility to explore richer and more inter-subjective ways of knowing. Auto/biographical research can open possibilities and “illuminate more of what doctors, in reality, may need to know, including the place of self and emotional understanding” (Dominicé, 2007). However, speech-based professional reflection might remain tied up with abstract thinking and disembodied forms of reasoning (Fook et al., 2016). As feminists taught to us, propositional language is tacitly colonised by patriarchal themes. Besides, it takes time, good enough relationships, and courage to leave our comfort zone, to develop freedom and openness. This plays in favour of a workshop setting,

as a reflexive training sustaining adult educators – professionals supporting other adults to learn from their own lives, as I am by training – to understand and take a position within “the social context in which learning takes place” (Dominicé, 2007, p. 248).

I shall now introduce my research workshop, but first I need to describe the auto/biographical imagination that helped me contextualise my own research epistemology in embodied relationality.

4 A Relational Aesthetic Auto/Biographical Imagination

Belenky and colleagues (1986) warned us that contextual, imaginative, sensuous, affective, and relational ways of knowing tend to be kept out (or mystified) in a patriarchal West. My research brought at the forefront that kind of knowing that “involves intimacy and equality between self and object” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 100), and is marginalised by professional epistemologies. Professionals and researchers in education are trained to prefer alienated knowledge “based upon impersonal procedures for establishing truth” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 102). Instead, an auto/biographical approach (Merrill & West, 2009), informed by feminism, relational theories and radical constructivism has the potential for self-reflexivity and self-subversion.

In order to better understand the complex interactions of knowledge construction, I use Donald Winnicott’s (1971) approach to object relations to bring attention to how knowers continually negotiate who they are in relation to others and the world. Self-integration is the ongoing, never fully achieved result of the expression of different aspects of the self, intended as “a never complete product of relationships with actual people and diverse objects, including the symbolic” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 70). The notion of transitional space illuminates learning settings where authenticity and playfulness can peak and sometimes flourish. As adults, thanks to biographical and educational work, we may have access to a space that is “good enough” – supportive and not exploitative:

This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect to its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality ... [is] retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 19)

The slash in auto/biography could be interpreted as such a relational space, a liminal space of difference, possibility, and transformation. Different ways

of knowing may be conceived as different transitional objects, or spaces, that work as mediators of the dynamic interaction between self and world. They also represent different modes of self-existence – some of which are more highly regarded than others in our society. There are ways of knowing that nurture alienation and oppression, while others sustain freedom and connection, hence self-integration.

My thesis is that the multiplication of our ways of knowing can better support knowers to become creative and “use the whole personality” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 73). In this sense, Gregory Bateson’s (1972) ecological understanding of art as the human “quest for grace” (Bateson, 1972, p. 129) points to the compositional and generative potential of our aesthetic engagement with the world, a way to overcome binaries between conscious and unconscious, body and mind, cognitive and emotional knowledge, self and the world.

By integrating artful languages in research (Formenti et al., 2019), and in relation to professional knowing, I want to challenge rationalistic universal claims to knowledge and common-sense ideas of educational good practices, hence I choose to look at the relational quality of learning and becoming. I feel the need to widen the stiff confines of knowledge, until it becomes meaningful to me, to our lives, countering the silencing of stories and ways of knowing that are marginalised by dominant discourses.

In sum, a relational aesthetic auto/biographical imagination includes:

- Spiralling – an ongoing recursive fluctuation between multiple modes of knowing (experiential, aesthetic, rational, practical, weaving imagination and intuition, consciousness and the unconscious);
- Self, voice and mind – celebrating the struggle for selfhood, recognition, and meaning imbued in our epistemological/ontological development (as professionals, researchers, etc.);
- Critical reflexivity – connecting knowing to the inter-subjective, material, and sociocultural contexts of its emergence (as feminists claimed: bring yourself with others);
- Art – engaging the senses (all of them!) in nurturing openness to experience, pleasure and pain; both in experiencing artful objects and in creating our own;
- Risk – by abandoning anaesthetised knowledge and drifting off into knowing as becoming, we encounter otherness and potential conflict within ourselves, with others and in the world.

Having somehow anticipated the end of the story, I shall now go back to present the research study that led me to widen my research imagination from more idealised to more processual and integrated knowing.

5 Practicing Multiplicity: Cultural Objects, Interpersonal Explorations, and Transcoding in My Research Design

How can an auto/biographical approach be used in a group setting to bring about more holistic and complex ways of knowing for professionals in education? To answer my question, I implemented an auto/biographically oriented co-operative inquiry (Formenti, 2018; Heron, 1996) with two groups of professionals, in Milan and Canterbury. A colleague and I facilitated them in telling stories of knowing and becoming a professional, building explicit and implicit theories of education, and discussing their relationship to knowing. I was interested in exploring how a specifically designed setting of participatory research might encourage participants to connect their thinking and acting, narrated and enacted identities, and maybe sustain transformative learning to contrast alienation.

Six monthly co-operative workshops were run simultaneously in Milan and Canterbury from January to June 2015, with a follow-up four months later. The participants in Milan were 4 professionals currently doing a PhD at the university, 3 social workers, 1 social-service coordinator, 1 teacher. The participants in Canterbury were 2 professionals enrolled in a PhD programme, 2 lecturers, 1 art psychotherapist, 1 career counsellor. Each session took a repetitive format based on Heron's (1996) 4 forms of knowledge, whereby the sensuous, imagination/intuition, and rational understanding are drawn together to develop new lines of action. These kinds of knowledge are intertwined in a spiralling process of inquiry that can be more or less chaotic, more or less ordered – Dionysian vs. Apollinean – as Heron recognised (Heron, 1996, pp. 45–47).

I proposed a setting for shared exploration, using evocative objects (texts, picture cards, and films) to stimulate the senses and memories, and asking the participants to use writing as well as visual and performative languages to shape them (what Heron calls “presentational knowledge”, Heron, 1996, pp. 33, 54–55, 88–90). They discussed their learning lives, and interrogated experiences through their cultural representations, and vice versa. By “translating” lived lives (Del Negro, 2019), or aspects of them, into different media (transcoding, intersemiotic translation), I hoped to foster different, complementary, maybe disrupting modes of knowing and sustain novel thinking in the direction of transformation as an antidote to alienation.

The sessions involved writing, reading and discussing about life events, in constant movement between individual and group, triggering reflection and reflexivity (Formenti, 2018). The process proved messier than intended: letting go of a controlling stance was a struggle with many dilemmas and a learning path for me, as researcher. Critical incidents caused moments of displacement,

exhilaration and conflict in the groups, requiring all of us to find new creative compositions.

I propose here my reading of Federico's path in the group, to show how it raised conversations on difficult issues concerning the professional and the personal as connected sources of knowledge.

6 Federico's Narrative (or Mine?)

I chose to tell the story of a male participant to the Italian group, Federico, since it speaks to me auto/biographically (Merrill & West, 2009) about unlearning the idealisation of knowing and developing a more embodied understanding. This process started for me with the research. As it unfolds, it brings academic knowledge closer to my own life.

At the time of the research Federico was 31 (I was 30) and doing a PhD on literature and didactics. Specifically, he was researching the link between fictional immersive experience and learning with schoolteachers. A teacher himself, he coordinated teacher training courses on teaching literature, so perhaps he found the aesthetic and autobiographical approaches in my project strangely different from his own experience. All along the co-operative inquiry sessions, Federico came in and out of the process. Sometimes he was absent or arrived late and he wrote in a convoluted language. He was often a critical voice in the group, which I found challenging.

During the second session, as a starting point (Heron, 1996) I asked the participants to represent their learning biographies in the shape of a river. Federico produced this *Tangled Clump* (*Grumo Aggrovigliato*, his original title) (see Figure 12.1).

Following the drawing, I asked the participants to write, in the course of the day, three individual texts, which they read and discussed in the group after each writing session – the interpersonal theorising phase of the spiralling method, (Heron, 1996). Federico's first text (immediately after the drawing) was a piece of creative writing on his river learning biography metaphor.

I am the Tangled Clump, clumped we don't know when, we don't know why, we don't know where, down there, there in the middle, burning persistent lit up, infected magnetic intermittent.

The numerically finite alternative branching, tributaries-emissaries, nurture it above the swallowing swamp that hides it from sight, from senses, sometime from reason. They disperse me in 14066 regular rivulets: meanders, forks, lost times, straight lines, non-aims, non-direction,

FIGURE 12.1 Federico's river of learning, Bicocca, 13/02/2015 (from Del Negro, 2018, p. 132)

clump indeed. Infernal skein that makes us suffocate, that eats my oesophagus.

I am not trapped from outside, no opportunity of otherness, rotten swamp that swallows and fakes, abstracting me.

The white, illusory, the white. (Federico, text "Let me introduce myself", Milan-Bicocca University, 13th February 2015, author's translation)

Federico's second text was an epistemological (Fabbri & Munari, 1990) yet poetic writing, a reflective text that pinned down a first personal theory of learning:

If a learning biography were a river
 It would not exist
 As it would not project itself into the ocean,
 Nor into an artificial lake-reservoir,
 Nor into a black sea,
 Nor into a red sea.
 It would flow ad-infinitum
 So it would be
 Non-definable

Non-croppable
 Non-learnable.
 So maybe the question is
 To water, then
 Placate the swallowing anxiety
 Without sea salt
 And then disperse it
 Through the hypostatic channels. (Federico, text "If a learning biography were a river", Milan-Bicocca University, 13th February 2015, author's translation)

The third text was a biographical account on a learning experience – "That time when ..." – a personal recollection in relation to what had emerged on the learning biography. Federico wrote a story about fishing(?), from which he only read aloud the final part:

It was a question of meticulous movement of the wrist and sight. An issue of a few micro-millimetres and hundred-mill-thousands. The "mojarda" had to fall in the deadly trap, he saw it, just above water. Quick and with frantic movements and those hungry eyes with a fire in the pupil. And then wham, a sudden movement to take it unguarded, the tail risen, and the line loosen, bringing up the plumb ... knowledge? (Federico, text "That time that", Milan-Bicocca University, 13th February 2015, author's translation)

What is my relationship with Federico's texts? In my PhD thesis, I practiced different forms of analysis, in order to multiply the possible interpretations of a complex, mysterious and messy process – a more ecological approach (Bateson, 1972). Among these forms of interpretative analysis, I used a poetic re-writing of the participants' texts. This creative writing from research material is a critical-relational form of writing as inquiry, in which the researcher owns her interpretation and engages creatively with the words of others in order to open possibilities (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). Poetic re-writing helped me to explore and open up the "/" between Federico's story and mine, how Federico's narrative could connect with my understanding of my own, and how my understanding of my own life could inform my interpretation of his.

The poem at the start of this chapter is my composition from Federico's texts. After circling out words from the texts, based on personal resonance, I placed the words on a white page and brought some order based on rhythm, spatiality, and meaning. The resulting poem prompted me to reflect on my understanding of his initial texts. This is a self-reflexive as well as critical process.

Federico's texts spoke about being confronted by countless alternatives that provided no direction. My poem presents themes of abstraction and embodiment, framing them within a dichotomy of knowing/not knowing, in which an ideal knowledge, regular and infinite, becomes nonsensical and threatening to the person.

Writing the poem, reading it, pushed me to consider the risk of abstracting the self from the professional. Do we take into account, as professional researchers, the anxieties related to making sense of things? In my academic work, I was socialised into thinking that intellectual knowing is the highest form of knowledge (Belenky et al., 1996; Charlot, 1997; Heron, 1996). This sums up with my biography as a first-generation student in HE, drenched in anxieties linked with questions of class, gender, and not feeling like you belong (Merrill & West, 2009). And yet the "clump" in the title of the poem (a word used by Federico himself) evokes nature and blood that nurtures our biological life. Was Federico, or better was I through Federico, telling a story about my desire of embodiment as an academic researcher?

During the last research workshop, Federico represented his learning from the inquiry process by drawing three concentric shapes of white, yellow and red on a black board. He then said in the group that

... The dynamics between power and transformation and care have been theorised throughout the 20th century. But I see the generative aspect represented as a very female figure ... a female genital organ ... which explores in me a female part that is present, and maybe this pedagogical and formative dimension emerges more clearly. (Del Negro, 2019, pp. 148–149)

The feminine element now stands out to me as particularly significant.

After initially describing learning in dichotomic terms and associating it with feelings of anxiety ("Infernal skein that makes us suffocate, that eats my oesophagus"), Federico uses here a generative representation of knowledge, explicitly referring it to a "female part" and connecting power with transformation and care. At the same time, he maintains a strong connection with his disciplinary knowledge. His present and past selves seem connected within his theorising, maybe bringing him nearer to a constructivist position – able to connect pockets of knowledge, personal experience and sociocultural reference, acquiring a new voice (Belenky et al., 1986). This seemed to make him quite happy.

When Federico and I met for a one-to-one follow-up to discuss my findings a year after the events, and afterward produced a collaborative piece of writing,

FIGURE 12.2 Federico's object representing the changed self, Bicocca, 16/10/2015 (from Del Negro, 2018, p. 143)

Federico did not disagree with my interpretation. He expressed appreciation for my courage in writing myself openly into my text (which I had not done much during the co-operative sessions!). In his part of the collaborative text, still, he played his academic self, inviting me to go further in my investigation; I hear in his words some traces of positivism:

He recommended that I read a book about neuroaesthetics and embodied cognition he believed could help me to further develop these ideas. He suggested that if I had focused on a smaller number of aesthetic

objects, I could have provided a more in-depth analysis of how they had functioned as creative/formative dispositives. (Del Negro, 2019, p. 245)

Could I not provide a better – “more scientific” – theory to prove my argument? What I hear irritates me. When I listen for a while longer, I also hear my own subjectivist knower (Belenky et al., 1986), saying “praxis praxis praxis!” and closing her ears off to theory, out of exhaustion with the demands of academic standard, out of painful memories about learning and care in my family. There is richness here.

Keeping close to my ambivalent feelings, I have tentatively moved towards the uncertainties of auto/biographical imagination (Miller, 2007), and work neither to “demonstrate” nor to reject, but to explore and eventually nurture both theory and experience, knowing and living (Maturana, 1990), and their dynamic connection.

7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I began a discussion about the relationship between professional knowing and becoming, and professionals’ alienation of the self from knowing in the education sector and educationally sensitive professions (Barnett, 2008, 2011; Gewirtz, 2009; West, 2004). Starting from a more traditional study, I narrated of how I ended up facilitating a cooperative, auto/biographically oriented workshop with adult education professionals like me. Whilst I had anticipated that rich stories could originate from such a design, the full potential of a multimodal group setting emerged during the research. As Federico’s story shows, engaging in a relational aesthetic space of mutual learning can counter professionals’ alienation: the disconnect of emotions, perceptions, intuitions, from professional knowledge. My own interaction with Federico illuminates for me the anxieties, as well as joys, that can be associated with professional knowing and becoming, a stratified and non-linear process to which different needs, desires, and sensations contribute in a messy way.

The journey illuminates the irreducible uncertainty of professional knowledge, but also all the different dimensions and resources we can draw on. For me, auto/biography started to mean that we can celebrate complexity – stratification, interaction, co-implication – and wholeness, by bringing every dimension of our lives into our way of knowing: the personal and the professional, conscious and unconscious, mind and body, knower and known. The unfolding process of becoming escapes dichotomic views of professional knowing

and development (Fook et al., 2016). This can be messy, but messiness is, in the end, a feature of life itself.

Translating between media challenges our relationship to knowing, connects disciplines and parts of oneself playfully, and is aesthetically and ethically engaging because it creates a transitional space: it stands on the slash between self and other, where creative living happens. This is an ecologically sound approach to professional knowing, and it could support professionals to learn from their lives, bringing all of their artfulness into their professional journeys.

As I say this, I feel the risk to “*predicare bene e razzolare male*”, as the saying goes – not live as I teach. How many more spirals will I have to go through to come closer to that ecology? How often do I stick with what I know? I take Federico’s invitation and the irritation it causes me, and let it work.

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