INTENSIFYING OUR GAZE IN ORDER TO EXPAND OUR ACTION, REFLECTION, AND PARTICIPATION

Franca Zuccoli
University of Milano-Bicocca
Department of Human Sciences and Education
franca.zuccoli@unimib.it

HERITAGE
IMAGES
EDUCATION
DIDACTICS
RESEARCH

In this paper, I offer preliminary reflections on selected research pathways involving cultural heritage, the general public, and actions connecting the two. Exploring what directions this line of inquiry might take going forward, what its underlying epistemological implications might be, and what methodological choices it might entail – such as the need for contamination among disciplines – is pivotal to my discussion. Specifically, I focus on the main procedural steps in these research programmes, from design and launch through implementation and wind-up, in terms of both immediate outcomes and potential or actual spin-off projects.

INTRODUCTION

In this brief paper, I set out to analyse, albeit not as systematically as would be ideal, a series of recent projects and studies that I have conducted with different action and research teams. This work has been carried out in a field with fluid boundaries, which spans art, museum studies, heritage education, pedagogy, and didactics. A space of contamination in which multiple cultural and social forces have interacted, particularly collective actors such as schools, museums, and heritage sites that engaged with and learnt from one another in the context of our research programmes.

The individuals and groups that were invited to play an active part – and sometimes complementary roles – in the various projects included: children, adolescents, youth, adults, and older adults. To be clear, none of these parties were classified by the researchers as mere consumers of cultural experiences, but were viewed from a more complex perspective that embraced their total presence and not only their professional or social roles, and acknowledged them as the main actors in the project from the first moment of their involvement. Furthermore, the present brief account not only serves to communicate a body of research experience and findings to the broader scientific community, but also represents a means for me – as one of the researchers directly involved in these projects – to clarify my own pedagogical and metacognitive reflection (Albanese et al., 2002) about what actually took place during them or is still taking place. Writing the present paper has thus meant constructing a deeper and more complex perspective on our action programme and drawing connections between different research projects to identify a broad line of inquiry rather than a univocal set of outcomes (Demetrio, 2013; Mortari, 2015; Schön, 1983, 1987). Similarly, there is scope for this new journal, as it sets out in its first issue to create and define a new space, to accomplish a set of fundamental tasks: first, to disseminate and sustain completed and ongoing research in the domain of images

and the imaginary; second, to create and multiply unconventional and unthought-unthinkable networks that disciplinary divisions typically render improbable or impossible; and finally, to identify future prospects and directions, within a forward-looking perspective that is not linear but multi-faceted and contemporary.

REFLECTING ON THE STANCE OF THE RESEARCHER

As the title suggests, this paper is intended to "intensify our gaze", not only upon actions undertaken to engage audiences with heritage assets, but also on the figure of researcher him or herself. This may be attempted by engaging in a deeper level of reflection on the various steps in the individual projects – such as the research design processes brought to bear, the actions undertaken, the data analysis and debriefing stages – even some time after the project has ended, with a gaze that zooms out from specific details to seek a more detached perspective and identify connections that can be surprisingly different to those routinely experienced during project implementation. Indeed, our immediate reflection on what we have just implemented directly in the field often remains too close to the ground, with our gaze almost exclusively trained on research objectives and outcomes that are sometimes virtually preordained. In contrast, I advocate here for an alternative way of looking at our research work that is potentially more critical and penetrating, but certainly interdisciplinary, and capable of dialogue and exchange with other fields. The stance to be aimed for is one of detachment, a kind of epoché, that enables us to revisit, to more mindfully observe – with the input of others – the flow of actions that has taken shape in the course of the experimental projects implemented and to read the overall direction this flow is taking, which in part has been consciously planned, and in part has unfolded independently of what was originally imagined. Specifically in relation to educational action,

when reflecting on a proposed educational offering, it is crucial to take into account what Luigina Mortari has described as: "The highly problematic nature of educational practice [...] which is due to the fact that it often features unique cases, each different from the other, for which no predefined lines of action are available." (Mortari, 2015, p. 9). This demands reflecting attentively on and constantly monitoring what has been done to date.

TWO RESEARCH PROJECTS: IN A MUSEUM AND AT A HERITAGE SITE

In light of the aims we have just briefly outlined, let us now focus on salient research projects, selected from among those presented and published at the 2017 conference and accepted for presentation at the 2019 conference. I have chosen to examine research projects in this field because they are in keeping with a perspective from which images, imagination and interdisciplinarity are all viewed as essential. Two projects in particular – given their themes, mode of implementation, and outcomes in terms of reflection – lend themselves to a perspective based on: gaze, action, reflection and participation, all key words that are cited in the title of this paper and that serve to delineate the perspective informing it. The first, "Images of a Museum. Participatory and Educational Pathways branching out from a Heritage Asset. The Ettore Guatelli Museum as a Case Study" (Mancino et al., 2017) concerns heritage assets in a museum setting, the Museo Ettore Guatelli, which has abandoned an exclusively consumption-based perspective in favour of the dynamics of interpretation, by actively seeking to foster contamination between present and past, among different disciplines, and among diverse audiences (children, educators, teachers, artists, visitors) who are invited to adopt an authorial stance (Zuccoli, 2017). The second "Rethinking local heritage through graphics in Mantua and Sabbioneta. Images, maps,

fanzines for narrating a Unesco site with students during school-work internship" (Zuccoli et al., 2019) is a project that focused on landscapes and cultural heritage more broadly, seeking ways to stimulate interpretation and participation, with a view to establishing new, or rekindling old, ties with the cities of Mantua and Sabbioneta, a single Unesco World Heritage site. In both of these research projects, the key concept was to foster direct participation, leading audiences to rediscover or form a bond with the heritage asset, stimulating the acquisition of multiple forms of knowledge no longer solely by means of logically reasoned communications with a high level of information content, selected a priori by "experts", but by promoting awareness, discovery and innovative ideas. For each of the two projects, let us home in on key phases that proved critical to ensuring the satisfactory functioning of both the research and action dimensions. The first crucial point is that the project should be designed in collaboration with representatives of the participating institutions, such as museums, local authorities, etc.: this implies first getting to know these parties, exchanging information with them, and discussing the project aims with them, with a view to formulating a tentative project plan based on the needs of the heritage site. A second requirement that arises as the project unfolds is spending time at the sites themselves, so as to develop a more in-depth and meaningful knowledge of them from an individual perspective and based on dialogue between specific professional perspectives. For example, the second project on Mantua and Sabbioneta, thanks to funding from the Lombardy Region, drew on the expertise of six different professional figures: a geographer, an education specialist with a specific interest in collecting stories, an artist, two art historians, and a film director. This investment was designed to ensure that the project would produce plural and interrelated outcomes. A third phase, which is not necessarily consecutive to the others because it is often initiated at the outset of the project, involves remaining in contact with the local community, by participating in targeted cultural or ev-

eryday life events. A variety of instruments (questionnaires, video interviews, maps, photographs, three-dimensional objects,...) may be used to collect opinions and information. The result is that the researcher becomes a member of the local community for the duration of the research. In our own projects, presenting images and inviting audiences to create images was an indispensable element of the research strategy, serving to revive memories and stimulate ideas of greater depth and richness than when only the verbal channel of communication is used (Bruner, 1988; Gardner, 1983)

LET US REFLECT ON OUR ... GAZE

Why do we need to intensify our gaze as suggested in the title of the paper? First, our own gaze as researchers: as we deeply engage with heritage and its consumers and custodians, we should cultivate an alternative approach to looking and looking at ourselves, so as to interact with others and move beyond disciplinary boundaries that restrict us to a single perspective. But, most importantly, the gaze of the local community, audiences, tourists, and those with responsibility for the heritage assets: The research projects discussed here were designed to orient all these parties' gaze away from serial accumulation and an overwhelming emphasis on quantity, inducing them to seek enhanced quality via a process of rarefaction. This implies an alternative way of seeing, which can be facilitated by translating what we see into signs: Jacques Derrida suggested that the act of drawing makes us blind to what we are seeing, yet enables greater depth of vision: "The drawing is blind, if not the draftsman or the draftswoman. As such, and in the moment proper to it, the operation of drawing would have something to do with blindness [...] He [the draftsman] invents drawing. [...] Blindness pierces through, right at that point, and thereby gains in potential, in potency: the angle of a sight that is threatened or promised, lost or restored. (Derrida, 2003, pp. 12-13)

In our projects, the active use of photography, participants' musings and stories about maps, their choice of detail, and the drawings presented to and created by them, stimulated a curious, penetrating, innovative and sometimes irreverent, gaze. A gaze that regains depth (Berger, 1972, 2003), and that chooses where to linger, questioning the predefined choices of a hectic lifestyle, imposed forms of tourism, and a simplistic view of reality and cultural heritage. A concept of seeing that resonates with the "active exploration" advocated by Rudolf Arnheim (2005, p. 55).

LET US REFLECT ON… ACTION-EXPERIENCE

The projects that we conducted with local communities and audiences/visitors at the participating heritage sites, were informed by a strongly educational and didactic perspective. Indeed, education specialists, curators and artists in the museums and heritage sector have long emphasised the need for concrete steps to foster direct participation (Sennet, 2008) and to engage audiences in activities that require more than simply listening. However, there is always the risk – as John Dewey long since warned in relation to the school setting – that our good intentions will lead us to devise a set of pleasant activities that fill in time but are repetitive and detached from authentic content and its complexity. This would make us guilty of reductionism as opposed to simplification. Dewey defined the concept of experience, a crucial prerequisite to designing experience: "The meaning of "experience". […] the term experience may be interpreted either with reference to the empirical or the experimental attitude of mind. Experience is not a rigid and closed thing; it is vital and hence growing. […] But experience also includes the reflection that sets us free from the limiting influence of sense, appetite, and tradition" (Dewey, 1961, p.292). What kind of experience should we therefore seek according to Dewey: "It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience,

nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences. […] The effect of an experience is not borne on its face. […] Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences…" (Dewey, 1953, pp.15-16)

On this point, Yves Chevallard's theory of didactic transposition, albeit specific to the field of teaching, may be salient to us, especially the notion that learning content is adaptively transformed from an object of knowledge to be taught into an object of knowledge that has been taught (Chevallard, 1991, p.39); hence the need for epistemological vigilance over the value and accuracy of the learning contents we propose to audiences (Nigris et al., 2016).

LET US OPEN UP TO … PARTICIPATION AND SHARED REFLECTION

The arguments presented to date have set the stage for exploring the crucial theme of participation, defined as sharing a meaningful experience with others while being open to the potential changes that this may bring about. Here, it is of interest to cite Liliana Moro, whose works of art are currently on display in the Italy Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, on the underlying significance of cultural heritage events: "Sharing an experience means sharing a space and a time, but also and most especially share one's everyday thinking and acting with others. Public space is constructed through dialogue and 'doing [things] together'. Public space/time is nothing other than thinking about what we do"(Flash Art, 9 May 2019). Moro juxtaposes this statement with the words of Hannah Arendt in "Between Past and Future": "Are we truly free? It is impossible to communicate the value of the

freedom to act in a world that does not see public action as meaningful". (Arendt, 1991, p. X). Hence, our action needs to become public; this means engaging with our real-life settings, while also fulfilling a political function, in the sense of rethinking and redesigning community spaces and actions. A final source of inspiration is offered by the MAXXI exhibition "La strada. Dove si crea il mondo": the road, taken in its metaphorical sense, may be viewed as the place-paradigm where we conduct our research. "If the city is a living body, its streets are the arteries along which blood and energy are regenerated and circulate. Displacements, encounters, and relationships among people are essential to keeping the city alive. Awareness of this is even more vital in our own time, the era of global digital communications in which the virtual world tends to replace a large portion of the real world". (Hanru, 2018, pp.14-15). In the domain of cultural heritage, the virtual world can actually be of great support to us, bearing a potential that we could only dream of until a few years ago (Zuccoli, & De Nicola, 2019), although it needs to be securely anchored to our material presence in places and collective spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have attempted, albeit not systematically enough, to explore selected aspects of a body of cultural heritage research and action projects. Attention to gaze, encounter, participation and reflection have undoubtedly been the cornerstones of many of these pathways. A reflective stance on the part of the researcher is crucially important if we are to identify and pursue multifaceted and interdisciplinary lines of debate and inquiry: where such reflection may take place and the forms that it may take are questions that have yet to be fully explored.

REFERENCES

Albanese, O., Doudin, P. A., & Martin, D. (2002). *Metacognizione ed educazione. Processi, apprendimenti, strumenti*. Milano, IT: Franco Angeli.

Arendt, H. (1991). *Tra passato e futuro. Sei esercizi sul pensiero politico*. Milano, IT: Garzanti.

Arnheim, R. (2015). *Arte e percezione visiva*. Milano, IT: Feltrinelli.

Berger, J. (2003). *Sul guardare*. Milano, IT: Paravia-Bruno Mondadori.

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London, UK: Penguin Books.

Bruner, J. (1988). *La mente a più dimensioni*. Roma-Bari, IT: Laterza.

Chevallard, Y. (1991). *La transposition didactique. Du savoir savant au savoir enseigné*. Grenoble, FR: La Pensée Sauvage.

Demetrio, D. (Ed.). (2013). *Educare e narrare. Le teorie, le pratiche, la cura*. Milano, IT: Mimesis.

Derrida, J. (2003). *Memorie di cieco. L'autoritratto e altre rovine*. Milano, IT: Abscondita.

Dewey, J. (1961). *Come pensiamo*. Firenze, IT: La Nuova Italia.

Dewey, J. (1953). *Esperienza ed educazione*. Firenze, IT: La Nuova Italia.

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind, the theory of multiple intelligences.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Hanru, H. (Eds.). (2018). *La strada dove si crea il mondo. The street where the world is name*. Macerata, IT: Quodlibet.

Mancino, E., Turci, M., & Zuccoli, F. (2017). The Images of a Museum. Participatory and Educational Pathways Branching out from a Heritage Asset. The Ettore Guatelli Museum as a Case Study. In A., Luigini, D. Basso, S. Brusaporci, E. Cicalò, M. Moretti, M. Turco,...D. Villa (Eds.). *Proceedings of international and interdisciplinary Conference IMMAGINI? Image and imagination between representation, communication, education and psychology*. Basel, CH: MDPI. Retrieved from https://www.mdpi.com/2504-3900/1/9/969

Mortari, L. (2015). *Apprendere dall'esperienza. Il pensare riflessivo nella formazione*. Roma, IT: Carocci.

Nigris, E., Teruggi, L., & Zuccoli, F. (Eds.). (2016). *Didattica Generale*. Milano, IT: Pearson.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Sennett, R. (2008). *L'uomo artigiano*. Milano, IT: Feltrinelli.

Zuccoli, F. (2017). Il senso del contemporaneo. In S. Cognata, G. Gerboni & M. Sclafani (Eds.). *Guatelli contemporaneo '16* (pp. 31-35). Corcagnano Parma, IT: Graphital S.r.l.,

Zuccoli, F., & De Nicola, A. (2019). The District as a Heritage Asset to be Explored. Pathways to Discovery an Appropriation in Bicocca. In A. Luigini (Ed.). *Proceedings of the 1st International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Digital Environments for Education, Arts and Heritage*. Cham, CH: Springer.

Zuccoli, F., De Nicola, A., Pecorelli, V., Carriera, L., & Costa, A. (2019). Re-thinking local heritage through graphics in Mantua and Sabbioneta. Images, maps, fanzines for narrating a UNESCO site with students during school-work internship. In A. Luigini (Ed.). *Proceedings of International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Image and Imagination*. Cham, CH: Springer.