Chapter 6

INSTALL Project process: Formative experiences in three European countries

Giovanna Esposito*, Anna Cannata**, Dan Florin Stănescu***, José González-Monteagudo****

*SInAPSi Center, University of Naples Federico II, Italy

**Research Institution 'Anima', Italy

*** National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, College of Communication and Public Relations, Bucharest, Romania

**** Department of Theory and History of Education, and Social Pedagogy, University of Seville, Spain

Keywords: INSTALL process; narrative modes; group dynamics; narrative group trainers; reflection/reflexivity

Word count: 5466

Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the formative experiences of the underachieving students enrolled in the INSTALL Project. We focus the discussion on meaningful passages from the reflexive processes that emerged from the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) methodology.

We present these reflexive processes from the unique perspective of the Narrative Group Trainers (NGT), as we believe the NGT perspective is important when analyzing

the learning experiences to elucidate the context indicators that are essential to understanding the group reflexive competence changes.

In the INSTALL training, the final goal of the trainer was to give the group experience with the narrative method, in which university issues and emotional experiences were the objects of reflection, the results from which gave rise to opportunities for change.

In particular, the training process is discussed using the specific narrative vertex of the NGT accounts completed at the end of each INSTALL meeting. Carli and Panniccia (2005) noted that such accounts of an author's description-interpretation of events should be based on specified interpretative criteria. The account is a type of narration that can offer valid support for the comprehension of the emotional dynamics enacted in the "here and now" of the formative relationship. Through an account, a subject can share and verbalize emotional experiences; moreover, the account, in its dual role as a methodological tool and narrative device, creates order within the narrative and activates thought and reflexive processes (Freda, Esposito, and Quaranta, 2015). During and at the end of the training sessions, trainers observed the group feedback. They focused their attention on some key elements, such as the group climate, the narrative discourse, the nonverbal language, or the introduction of innovative elements, which then became the reflexive competence development indicators. The accounts were the vehicle for an explanation of and elaboration on the observations, allowing for a reorientation of the training process towards the achievement of the reflexive goals. In these accounts, the NGT reflected on the group experiences mediated by the relational observations experienced in and with the group (Freda, 2014). Therefore, the Narrative Group Trainers provided "a relational point of view" in their accounts of the groups' reflexive competence changes.

The special relationship between the trainers and the groups gave the trainers a privileged, complex and articulated position. By assuming this position, they were able to highlight the significant steps taken to develop reflection and reflexivity in the underachieving students, identify the critical elements that emerged, and document the resources and strategies employed.

A tool to analyze the formative process

At the commencement of the INSTALL Project, we developed a shared criteria grid, named the *Formative Process Account* (FPA) , to be used by the NGTs to interpret and analyze the INSTALL educational training.

The grid was established as an "account-led" process, which was completed by Narrative Group Trainers at the end of each session to report on what happened, the basic steps covered, the critical elements that arose, the reflexive change indicators, and the strategies adopted to overcome any problems. The FPA was developed to allow for analysis and reflection on the educational process and as a methodological tool to re-orient the training experience to achieve the reflexive objectives. Specifically, the grid was designed to analyze the training process in each of the four narrative modes using a pre-determined set of qualitative analysis criteria, which focused on the following aspects:

- The strengths and weaknesses of the Narrative Mode
- The role and functions of the NGT
- The dynamics and functions of the group
- Passages of reflection and reflexivity

The grid also allowed the NGT to document verbatim the significant phrases, discussions or narratives from the group members' narrative discourses.

To develop this chapter, each partner country identified a training group who had completed the INSTALL training, for which detailed "account-led" reports were available, to describe the analytical and formative process. The authors of this chapter conducted several training programs over the three years of the INSTALL Project and shared their "account-led" reports to their selected groups, which allowed for the identification of the cross-cutting aspects across the three groups in relation to the four analytical criteria. There were significant differences in the university concerning the three groups because of the specific socio-cultural contexts in which the training had taken place. However, when comparing the three grids, the dimensions detected were transversal across the four narrative modes. For example, within the same mode, the Spanish, Romanian, and Italian trainers' roles and responsibilities were the same even though the intersubjective group discourses focused on different themes. In addition, it was very clear that the dimensions investigated through the grid had different articulations across the four narrative modes. For example, as we discuss in the next paragraph, in line with the structured Narrative Mediation Path methodology, the trainers' functions depended on the process and specificity of the mode, and in the last few modes, more reflexivity rather than reflection, were present.

In the following paragraphs, we present the crosscutting dimensions that emerged from the application of the grid on the three groups. Specifically, we present the experience accounts, accompanied by narrative examples from some of the underachieving students in the three INSTALL groups. To better illustrate the group changes, we compare the accounts across the four different modes: Metaphor, Iconography, Writing, and Body.

The INSTALL training experience: Accounts from three group experiences

Metaphorical mode

Strengths and weakness of the narrative mode

This mode allowed the students to share their representations of being a student by attributing different meanings to specific proverbs or mottos and comparing their own understanding with those of the others in the group. In all groups, the metaphoric mode was perceived as being non-intrusive, so the students were able to start thinking about themselves as students enrolled in an educational program and take an active role.

The mode, because of its simplicity, helped create a non-judgmental climate. The students felt comfortable with the methodology from the very first day and showed significant enthusiasm to search for solutions to their difficulties. The diversity of underachieving students (in terms of disciplines, faculties, ages, personal profiles, itineraries, educational experience, work, and family background) was positive in achieving the training goals, ensuring that the groups were coordinated and supportive. A Romanian student said: "*We are very different from each other; we study things diametrically opposed, but maybe this is a resource in order to help each other.*"

A common feature among the three groups was that almost all students initially had thought that the training was going to be study skills course. During this mode, students often discussed the initial ideas that they had had about the course as they had thought that the training was specifically about study techniques and skills.

A Spanish student said: "*I did not expect such a similar path. I thought that we would have learned techniques about how to memorize, about what to choose to study, and what to leave out.*"

Role and function of the trainer

At the beginning, the NGT trainers were active in inviting the students to share their thoughts and meanings from the metaphorical narrative input provided. The role of the trainers, in this phase, was to broaden the discussion to ensure the involvement of every student to "break the ice." The trainers introduced the "here and now" training objectives and defined the work context (university context), the themes (academic difficulties, the students' resources, etc.), the centrality of emotions in the narrative re-building of the experience, and the group setting. Communications were centralized, and the interactions principally involved the trainers as the main interlocutor to whom each student presented themselves through a story about their university experiences. In this phase, the trainer was perceived as "external" to the group, whose main function was to collect and articulate the themes narrated through the proverbs and mottos to create a shared context. Another function of the trainers in this phase was to define the groups' identities by encouraging the mutual disclosure of each student's academic problems and through the building of common goals.

Dynamic functions in the group

In all groups, there were some students who talked a lot, whereas some others needed more time to communicate their feelings and ideas about the mottoes. This situation gave rise to some difficulties when seeking to balance this unequal participation. After a while, all students began to speak more freely, especially when others had chosen the same proverb or motto. All groups experienced intense moments, particularly when group members gave extensive narratives on their academic problems, and the relationship of these problems to their educational itineraries, their family, and their personal and work lives. Support from some students toward those with serious problems also had a strong emotional charge. The students were very interested in

participating, recounting their experiences and reacting empathically to the narratives of the other group members. This support was particularly noticeable toward vulnerable students in that whether they had difficulties with or ambivalent feelings toward the convenience of continuing their university studies. Group members found it meaningful to understand how different the plans and experiences of others were from their own narratives. This factor promoted a significant interest in learning more about the other students and in trying to understand their own and others motives and reasons.

Passages of reflection and reflexivity

The output of this first session focused on "become familiar with each other" was an increase in student participation and a creative use of the narrative inputs. In this phase, the narratives were primarily reflective and were interpreted as a "sign" that the group was growing, and the reflexive path had begun, as expressed by an Italian law student: "*I chose the motto 'Yes, I can' because I believe that if I am in this group, if I choose to follow these meetings, I think I can do it, so hope still exists. Therefore, it seems to me essential to recognize that I do not know how, but without any doubts, I can do it!*" Students began to understand the connections between their experiences and their emotions and began sharing the commonsense representations provided by the metaphors and the mottoes. Students introduced themselves and started to get to know each other through a discussion on the first "problem": why they had chosen to participate in the training. There was little reflexivity in this early stage, as demonstrated by a second year Romanian Pharmacy student: "*This seems a very suitable metaphor for my experience. I never thought that things could be described in this way: 'mors tua, vita mea.' The comparison with the nerds, those in the front row,*

makes me always feel up in arms. Sometimes I feel that my goal is to sit in the front row rather than to study and to give exams"

Iconographic mode

Strengths and weakness

The iconographic mode entailed the presentation of vignettes focused on common daily situations (enrollment, classes, exams, work at home, etc.). In all groups, this mode was by far the funniest, with a high level of energy and involvement. The vignettes not only strengthened the climate of familiarity developed in the previous mode but also lay the foundations for the gradual subjectivization of the students' university experiences. The use of the vignettes propelled the transition from a narrative about generic university themes to a narrative focused on the students' own university experiences. Students found the task easy and fun as an original activity. However, as the typical scenarios proposed by the vignettes were anchored to critical aspects of academic life, each student was able to easily participate in the group discussions.

At the same time, the mode was very intense in terms of the emotional dynamics, as the request to take the role of another gradually turned into an examination of self-worth within the episodes proposed by the vignettes and the "force" of the students' subjectification. However, the increased personal involvement prompted by the vignettes seemed to generate in all groups a "critical wind" that resulted in an abandonment of the INSTALL path by some students. The transition from a generic narrative on what was happening in a hypothetical college student to a narrative of their own university experiences activated a self-recognition process focused on their own lives and experiences at university, which proved to be overwhelming to many students, and, unfortunately, led to some students discontinuing the training.

Role and function of the trainer

In this phase, students were keen to speak and compare answers with their colleagues. They also began appreciating the role of the trainers as a coordinator and mediator of the intersubjective group discourses. The trainers were heavily invested as the group relied on them to develop a positive attitude toward change. The trainers adopted an "interpretative collaborative" role (Freda, 2008) by highlighting the connections between the different narrative texts presented in the vignettes. The trainers' participation was high and was characterized by interventions designed to support the students through a gradual elaboration of the interpretations. The trainers also promoted connections between the general and the particular, the objective and the subjective, and the public and private sphere and identified the lines of continuity between what was proposed by the students in the various vignettes and what was narrated by several students about the same vignette. The trainers highlighted the redundancies, associations, similarities, and differences among the student narratives and clarified the relationships that each student had with the university context they had chosen. Echoing Chapter 4, the trainers elaborated on the little *stories* that emerged in the process of the *telling* to make explicit new and unexplored links. The ultimate goal of this mode was to activate in the students a gradual recognition of the constructive role of the self in guiding their relationship with the university.

Dynamic functions in the group

The groups used the vignettes as representations of an experience, a feature that allowed them to identify critical elements in their university experiences. For some students, the atmosphere in the group (respect, empathy toward the stories told by others, quiet

ambiance) appeared to represent a university completely different from the conventional representations they had developed during their everyday university life. During the group discussions, the students' thoughts, beliefs, and emotions related to the different situations depicted in the vignettes were identified, which facilitated a process of meaning construction or reattribution from the group members' feedback. Some students began to develop a more supportive role toward those members who recounted painful experiences (serious traffic accidents, complete failure in the first academic year, and harassment at work). Therefore, there was a moderate decrease in the trainers' support function, as they began to focus on encouraging peer support by illuminating the relational method based on sharing and mutual support that the students had by this time begun to internalize. For example, in the Spanish group, when one of the students said she was unsure whether to discontinue her studies at university, two other students offered support and encouragement and influenced her to change her mind and complete her degree.

Passages of reflection and reflexivity

The students' reflexive processes were effectively mediated using the "biographical" plots stimulated by the vignettes focused on typical moments in university life, which facilitated student self-identification with the characters and fostered narratives on events and situations from their own university experiences. In particular, the students reflected on the redundancy of some of their often dysfunctional behaviors at university. The students reported that they were reminded of these details because of the "typical scenes" offered in the vignettes. Often this process was accompanied by astonishment, as the students had, maybe for the first time, found the opportunity to

"observe themselves from the outside" from within the projective mechanism elicited by the mode stimulus, thereby discovering something new about themselves.

A second year Italian engineering student said about the vignette that described an enrolment scene: "*It seems very strange, but now I realize that at university I felt confused and full of doubt, was half-hearted and confused. I think, at that time, I did not have time to think about the choices I was making, and I felt anxiety and agitation because of my doubts, and I was afraid of the university. I felt it was like a new and unknown world. I wondered if I would be able to live up to the expectations of my parents ... This fear comes over me even when I study for an exam. Again, I try to defeat it by studying hard, day and night. This makes study very stressful and does not produce good results.*"

Writing Mode

Strengths and weakness

After writing the three narrative assignments (a low point, a high point, and a decisional turning point), the students began to share their written stories by reading them out loud and commenting on the content.

This mode was considered by the students to be the most powerful in terms of finding a group meaning for the narrated experiences through the activation of different perspectives. In some cases, after the feedback was received from other group members, the low point was transformed into a high point as students were able to recognize the resources and competencies they had used during the low point.

The major weakness of the mode was time management, as it was difficult to balance and distribute the time between the students. Everything went very fast, so there was

no time to listen carefully to all the students, which resulted in the students asking for an increase in the total course hours to make this possible.

Role and function of the trainer

The trainers' role was to intervene to ensure free discussion, a good atmosphere, and respectful listening. During this mode, the role of the NGT was centered on promoting counterfactual thoughts that allowed for an analysis of the area of potential. During this phase, the trainers used their role as interlocutor to promote a meta-reflexive perspective by assisting the group examining the narrative as a process of knowledge regarding their own university experiences and not just a collection of facts. A common link between the stories was elaborated by the trainers, and they worked with the group to illuminate the resources and weaknesses within their own university experiences.

Dynamic functions in the group

The written mode was perceived as being the most difficult, both in terms of writing about the positive/negative experiences and sharing the stories. The participants were deeply involved in the stories and spent a long time writing them. The disposing of experiences and the associated feelings through the written form was important to encourage debate and discussion within the group.

This mode was also the most demanding because of the need to regulate emotions, as some participants became strongly associated with states, such as anger, fury, and crying, related in the stories and expressed these within this safe environment. During the discussions, students read their stories out loud, at which time there was a low level of participation by the others. However, toward the end of each story, the atmosphere became more energetic with the students expressing their own feelings about the

experience, finding the learning points and reframing the experience based on a common/shared understanding. The groups by this time had become more structured and mature compared with the start of the training, and there was significant mutual empathy. It was evident that there was confidence within the group and that a safe and inclusive atmosphere had developed.

Passages of reflection and reflexivity

The students' written contributions demonstrated reflection, reflexivity, agency, autonomy, and critical insights through both the narrative writing and the oral discussions, which resulted in the appearance of a meta-narrative critical dimension. For example, a Spanish student spoke about a negative moment in the first year of his degree when he had difficulties with his small group and had begun missing classes to devote time to his group contribution and to prepare for exams. His academic results had been very poor, so he had made a decision that during the training he realized had been incorrect: "*My academic results were bad, so I decided I would do the race alone, without companions. Now I realize that it was the worst decision that I could have made and that I have erred seriously in my early years of study because since then I have failed to change my course.*" This reflected a new capability to understand negative behavioral issues and assess them critically, which was necessary to modify and improve his university experience. Having "erred seriously" and "failed to change course" indicated that this student was developing a greater capacity to take responsibility for his academic behavior, thereby improving his academic attainment. In some cases, students referred to their management and use of time and to the problems arising from this. Another Spanish student wrote about a turning point in his university life. Faced with the demands and requirements of his friends and family, the

student stressed the importance of managing his time according to his criteria and needs, and therefore realized that he needed to put limits on outside demands: "*I decided to reduce my social life by not going to all activities, but I had to assert my authority sometimes with friends and family when choosing not to participate in an event because I needed time to work or study. My life has really changed because I have had to establish limits to manage my own time.*"

Bodily Mode

Strengths and weaknesses

The aim of the bodily mode was to encourage a shared representation of the students' university future and of their future goals in improving their university performance. This mode was seen to be an outcome of the previous reflexive processes and involved placing the body within an action and behavior dimension. Through the development of the human sculptures, there was a transition from the students' representations of their own being-in-education to an awareness of themselves as strategic operators who acted in a way that best suited the context.

The bodily mode was seen as being the most innovative intervention, and the students were surprised that in university contexts of such type (public relations, advertising, psychology), the trainer was also concerned about their physiology as well as their psychology.

The bodily mode fostered important reflexive competence skills. The acts of sharing, recognizing, cooperating, and closely facing each other were some of the aspects the students experienced within the group. In this mode, the students were encouraged to use a new non-verbal relational code, which was more involving, direct, and effective although simultaneously more implicit and somewhat vague. The "not said" and the

"not written" now was given the chance to be narrated by a relational bodily experience in which each student had to rely on the others as resources for their own reflexive narrative processes.

Dealing with painful feelings and narratives depicted by the students was not easy and reinforced the need for extensive preparation and training by the trainer to manage the emotions and communicate within the group context. An emotional situation also arose when the students realized that the end of the training was near, at which point many feelings and thoughts about the inevitable separation started to emerge, which became a critical moment for the groups.

General feedback from the students about the training sessions related to the reduced number of sessions. All requested additional sessions or longer periods of direct interaction. They also highlighted the importance of the safe, secure environment provided by the NGT and of the group's progress in sharing their experiences and explicating the meanings. In many cases, they referred to a process of building new understanding about their own and others' mental states and behaviors related to academic life during the sessions.

Role and functions of the trainer

In the bodily mode, the NGT's role was to observe the self-organization of the group in action. Therefore, the NGT's interventions were less frequent compared to those of the other modes, with the main purpose being to encourage a reiteration and expansion of the sense of the work the group had done together and to support the students as the training session reached its end. The trainers' discourse encompassed more complex narrative and meta-narrative levels and, when needed, used interpretation to assist in the ongoing meaning-making processes within the setting. In this final phase, the trainer

also played a key role in connecting the training experience with the students' university experiences, by clarifying and expanding on how the many dynamics that had come into play during the training process were similar to those the students had with their own relationships within the university environment.

Dynamic functions in the group

Interaction between the students was more frequent as the conversation was circular, thus allowing all members to take part. The group had become highly cooperative and students saw these dynamics as a resource they could cultivate outside after the training. A variety of interactions occurred in the group. Each student participated in the narrative of the others in a fluid, coherent way, which demonstrated the stable and familiar relationships that had been established during the training.

At this stage, there was an intimate and confidential climate. The students felt free to cry, joke, and use "emotional language" to express themselves in a direct way without the risk of being accused of being opinionated or brutal. Group discussions were productive as all students contributed active ideas and enthusiastically participated in the final sculpture.

Passages of reflection and reflexivity

Students participated and expressed their emotions easily. Narrations that require reflexivity are complex when articulated as they tend to bring forth links between emotions, thoughts, and behavior. From this reflexivity, the students within their groups hypothesized future strategies to fulfill their desires for success. An Italian student stated: "*I have great difficulties focusing on something. While I am studying, suddenly the stress arises, and I distract myself. It is not that Facebook distracts me; it is just me*

attempting to distract myself and looking for reasons to stop me from continuing to study. To be honest, I feel a prisoner of myself, but I find it easier to say that it is another's fault. This leads me on one hand to a lack of responsibility, and on the other it helps me to be more sincere. In the end, I had always known that I was fooling myself. This made me feel guilty, and the guilt made me depressed, so that studying seemed to become increasingly difficult. I am so good at making up reasons even to the point that feeling guilty was also a good reason not to study!"

Conclusions

From this account of the INSTALL experience, it can be seen that a complex formative process took place in each of the groups that articulated critical moments and gave the students the opportunity to share their experiences and receive empathic understanding from the members of their group. At the same time, in each of the sessions, the role of the trainers and the group dynamics moved from building a reflexive processing base to building on that base by developing more complex reflective competences. Each mode coherently triggered more complex meaning-making processes and led to a continual reorganization of the students' understanding of their academic experiences (Esposito and Freda, 2015). The role of the trainers was fundamental in amplifying these reflexivity processes, through their roles as highlighters of the students' experiences and providers of continuity from one session to another by reiterating previous events as part of the salient shifts in the training. The trainers, therefore, were instrumental in defining the setting, establishing the goals, elaborating the objectives, and elucidating the purposes for the specific training activities. While the students were unaware of these issues, they had high expectations of the training, which to some degree were not always realistic. These slightly unrealistic expectations were exposed

during the first stages of the training, at which point they needed to reaffirm their adherence to the objectives or to abandon them. In this stage, the training was focused on being open while presenting and explaining by giving the students a voice and not limiting or cajoling them into participation.

Once the aims were clear and the group was stable and engaged, the trainers' adopted a "holding" position (Winnicott, 1971), which involved maintaining the groups' interest in the reciprocal acts of mirroring and the sharing of each other's experiences to allow each student the ability to "move" within the group, express themselves, share their history, listen to each other's stories, or even, if they wished, leave the group (Karterud, 2011). The trainers' role was to ensure that each student felt free to choose their own role within the group without threatening group cohesion or identity, even when challenged (Freda and Esposito, 2015).

The trainers, as mediators of the reflexive process, ensured that the groups worked productively using the suggested tools in each mode (Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey, 2006; Pink, 2011). As the autonomous group identity emerged, the trainers' role was increasingly peripheral as they intervened less in the discussions. At this point, the trainers' role was to encourage the participative process through the use of jokes, by providing challenges, and offering comfort, all of which assisted the students in using the other group members as resources to recognize their limits and to integrate and transform these to make sense of their own university experiences, and thereby be able to find a new method for dealing with these issues. The trainer mediation facilitated a subjectivation process in each student, each of whom was then capable of emerging from the group with an understanding of their own individuality, a plan for their academic goals, and the strategies needed to achieve them, which was certainly the aim of the reflexive process fostered by the training methodology (Caston, 2011). At the

completion of the training, the students faced a "critical phase" as the collaborative group experience had ended. Students were then required to individually make use of their acquired reflexive competences to successfully pursue their own specific academic goals.

This transition from a group based on mutual empathy to one based on individual action was examined at the end of the final part of the final session of training, in which the trainers encouraged each participant to summarize their own reflexive experiences (Rizq and Target, 2010). The trainers' role in this final session was not only to ensure a smooth transition from the group to the individual but also to make sure that the link between the training experience and each student's academic goals was clarified by inviting each student to be involved in the final reflexive task of this path, in which containment, self-expression, sharing, meaning-making, and reorganization took place. In this last stage, inspired by the bodily experience, the underachieving students were able to achieve a re-signification of their academic experience, perceiving themselves as more competent in facing the obstacles to their academic success so as to achieve personal fulfillment.

References

Carli, R. and Paniccia, R.M. (2005) *Casi clinici. Il resoconto in psicologia clinica [Clinical case. The account in Clinical Psychology].* Rome: Il Mulino.

Caston, J. (2011) 'Agency as a Psychoanalytic Idea', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 59*(5), 907-938. doi: 10.1177/0003065111422541

Dicks, B., Soyinka, B. and Coffey, A. (2006) 'Multimodality ethnography', *Qualitative Research,* 6(1), pp. 77-96.

Esposito, G. and Freda, M.F. (2015) 'Reflective and agentive functions of narrative writing: a qualitative study on the narratives of university students', *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, 49 (4), in press. doi: 10.1007/s12124-015-9323-5.

Freda, M.F. (2014) *Reflexivity in Higher Education.* Rome: Aracne.

Freda, M.F., Esposito, G. and Quaranta, T. (2015) 'Promoting Mentalization in Clinical Psychology at Universities: A Linguistic Analysis of Student Accounts', *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 11(1), pp. 34-49. doi:10.5964/ejop.v11i1.812

Karterud, S. (2011) 'Constructing and Mentalizing the Matrix', *Group Analysis*, 44(4), pp. 35-373. doi: 10.1177/0533316411417941

Pink, S. (2011) 'Multimodality, multisensoriality and ethnographic knowing: social semiotics and the phenomenology of perception' *Qualitative Research,* 11(3), pp. 261-276. doi: 10.1177/1468794111399835

Rizq, R., & Target, M. (2010) '"If that's what I need, it could be what someone else needs": Exploring the role of attachment and reflective function in counselling psychologists' accounts of how they use personal therapy in clinical practice: A mixed methods study', *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling,* 38(4), pp. 459-481. doi:10.1080/03069885.2010.503699

Winnicott, D.W (1971) *Playing and Reality.* London: Tavistock.