



Contemporary Educational Researches Journal



Volume 05, Issue 1, (2015) 01-07

www.awer-center/cerj/

Researching oneself through the collage

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Suggested Citation:

Biffi, E., & Zuccoli, F. (2015). Researching oneself through the collage. *Contemporary Educational Researches Journal*. 5(1), 01-07.

Received 09 January, 2015; revised 17 February, 2015; accepted 24 March, 2015.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Gulsun Atanur Baskan, Hacettepe University, Turkey
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Abstract

This paper will present a methodological reflection on how some artistic techniques can become for the individuals the opportunity to think of themselves in an auto-biographical way. In particular, this paper will focus on the collage. Collage is a technique based on a mixing of images, verbal text and other elements that starts with the analysis of an existing state of affairs, proceeds to deconstruct it, and finally to construct a new product juxtaposing different languages. In this sense, making a collage of the learning process engage the authors in a self-narrative process with the potential to enhance reflexivity. First, this paper will underline the role of collage in the artistic background of our contemporary era, in order to explain how the artistic work can be a way to create and tell the own life story. At another level, using selected examples of researching and training experiences conducted by the authors in some educational contexts (as university, primary and high schools), this paper will show how the collage can become a techniques for constructing and eliciting meanings held by the subjects that would not be accessible by other means and that are important to define themselves, especially for adolescents and young adults involved in the difficult construction process of their identities.

In light of the complexity of the topic, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to advancing understanding of the potential of arts as learning strategy in educational contexts.

Keywords: Collage, art education, qualitative research, autobiography

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1. Introduction

In analyzing the practice of collage in artistic or educational contexts, it is essential to take into account how this technique has evolved in modern and contemporary art, and how it has increasingly drawn the attention of both consumers and producers of images on the head of its subversive potential. Failure to consider these aspects may lead us to obscure the many peculiar features of this technique that have led artists to adopt it. However, collage did not wholly originate in the twentieth century but has roots stretching back thousands of years. This is not the place to provide an exhaustive description of these remote precursors of modern collage, but we would like to mention specific aspects of them that may be relevant to the case study presented here, in which collage was proposed as a medium for self-narration. Early instances of collage may be traced back to Ancient China and Japan, where calligraphers sometimes glued poetry onto surfaces of varying thicknesses and pieces of paper were used to patch up tears; the use of glued-on materials for repair purposes was also to be found in Europe, but during the Middle Ages this changed and the technique a form of transfigured materiality, as for example in the gold leaf decoration of religious panels¹ (Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Madonna and Child*, about 1320, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera; Gentile da Fabriano, *Valle Romita Polyptych*, about 1410, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera). The gold-beater was the craftsman with the skill required to handle such a precious material and to produce a leaf so thin that it could be glued onto wood using red bolus. From our own perspective, it is interesting to note that even at that early date gold was used metaphorically to express divinity: the divine light was not represented by an image but was materially present in the painting with a new brilliance that spoke for and about itself, evoking deep meanings. Precious stones were also used in the paintings of the day, either crushed to make colours, or glued directly onto panels and canvases, along with other three-dimensional objects to be found in some of the polyptychs, such as keys, jewels, blades and knife-handles - for example in the work of Carlo Crivelli (Carlo Crivelli, *Triptych of Camerino*, 1482, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera). Nonetheless the collages that we most readily identify as such are those of the last century. s observed by Marina Pugliese director of the "Museo Novecento" in Milan: "In 1912, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque made the first collages. This technique already existed in Oriental art and in decoration, but the cubists made their own of it with the aim of bringing reality into the work of art and overcoming the limits of oil painting on canvas. Thus at the intellectual level there was a shift from representation to presentation." (Pugliese, 2006). Picasso is attributed with the invention or innovative use of the technique, on the basis of his spring 1912 work, *Still Life with Chair Caning* (Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912, collage, oil, oil cloth, paper and rope on canvas, 27cm x 35cm, Paris, Musée Picasso): by including elements glued directly onto the canvas surface he broke with the bidimensional nature of painting, using materials that spoke for themselves, without the need for transformaton or transfiguration. While "[...] retain[ing] their former identity within the new pictorial context, [they] challenged some of the most fundamental assumptions about the nature of painting inherited by Western artists from the time of the Renaissance. The invention of collage put into question prevailing notions of how and what works of art represent, of what unifies a work of art, of what materials artists may use; it also opened to debate the more recent Romantic definition of what constitutes originality and authenticity in the work of art.»] (Poggi, 1992) (Poggi C., In *Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 1992) It is clear from this that the term "collage" derives from the verb *coller*. Indeed, as art has evolved through the constant search for new modes of expression and communication that is so characteristic of contemporary art in particular, collage has become a possible means of surprising, and speaking directly to art consumers, by using the voice of the materials themselves, even those who devote little time or attention to observing it. The collage is therefore "[...] the first technical innovation introduced by the avant-garde movements." (Gallo in Bordini, 2007). It is a voice that amazes and disorients, and this was particularly true of its earlier manifestations. Developments in contemporary art, viewed at a glance from a "bird's eye perspective", always display the tendency to remain rooted in everyday life, to use materials amongst the most

¹A limited number of art works are cited to illustrate and provide specific – if not exhaustive – iconographic references for the points being made, with a view to prompting and guiding further research.

familiar (Zuccoli, 2010) and in current use: in this sense, although it is not always explicitly intended or declared to be such, art is a reflection of our incessantly changing times. Nicolas Bourriaud emphasizes how artistic practices constantly seek change and undergo transformation. «Artistic activity is a game whose forms, modalities and functions evolve in line with the period and the social context; it is not an immutable essence” (Bourriaud, 2010). Likewise Jackson Pollock, in relation to the work of the artist in the modern period, remarks: “It is my view that new needs imply new techniques. And modern artists have found new ways and new methods of attaining their objectives. [...] Every period finds its own technique” (Pollock, 1999).

Coming back to collage as an operative practice, whether or not it was invented by Picasso as is commonly held, it was certainly shared, developed and used with great passion and skill by Braque. At the very least, it is difficult to view Picasso as the sole inventor of collage, because numerous paintings by Braque from the same 1911-1912 period feature a variety of materials glued onto surfaces; for example the canvas entitled *The Portuguese* (1911) with printed letters and numbers, or the drawing dated September 1912, *Fruit dish and Glass* onto which the artist stuck three pieces of wall-paper on a wooden decoration theme. We mention this only to draw attention to the fact that this experimentation with new materials was often the result of shared reflection on the part of the artists. According to some scholars (Riout, 2002) a further development may be identified in the shift from the *papier collé* type of collage – for which only paper, card and wallpaper were used, often “in place of” something else – to the true collage in which the element itself with all its force featured directly in the work of art, culminating in the creation of truly polymaterial pictures. Other artistic movements apart from cubism developed new forms of collage in line with the particular type of expressive voice that they wished to obtain from this technique. Of particular note are the experiments of futurist artists such as Gino Severini who glued sequins onto his 1912 painting *The Blue Dancer* to make the ballerina’s skirt more precious in appearance, or Carlo Carrà who created an aggressive spiral rhythm with newspaper, advertising and words in his 1914 work *Interventionist Demonstration* (oil paint, pen, mineral powder and pieces of paper glued onto a card measuring 38.5 cm x 30 cm.). In contrast the procedure devised by Max Ernst was more related to mental elaboration. His famous phrase: “fine feathers may make fine birds but it’s not the glue that makes the collage” (Ernst, 1971) refers to the complex work involved in composing images, drawings, photos and text into the manifest expression of a thought. Further key figures are Hans Arp, with his *papiers déchirés*, pieces of paper that were torn and glued, Tristan Tzara and his *papiers découpés* and André Breton who developed procedures for the construction of texts. Finally the photomontage technique (used by Hannah Höch among others) was a key element of the strong political protest mounted by the Dadaist movement.

In summary, many developments took place in the treatment of two-dimensional surfaces thanks to Pablo Picasso² and Braque’s³ *papiers collés* and collages, the *papiers gouachés découpés* of Henri Matisse⁴, the Dadaist photomontages⁵, and Hans Arp’s *papiers déchirés*, to mention but a few of the early experiments. Since then, the history of art has seen further novel experimentation such as the magnificent works of Mimmo Rotella.

At this stage in our brief review of the history of collage – which is not directly relevant to our focus on the use of collage as an instrument for the narration of self, but which allows us to

²See the earlier cited work: Picasso P., *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912, collage, oil, oil cloth, paper and rope on canvas, 27cm x 35cm, Paris, Musée Picasso. The term *papiers collés* refers to the earlier experiments in which, differently to the subsequent collage technique, the cut out pieces did not coincide with the edges of the image.

³Braque G., *Still Life (Guitar)*, 1913, collage, charcoal and gouache on canvas cm.100 x 73, Philadelphia, Museum of Art.

⁴Although the *papiers gouachés découpés* technique is principally associated with the works produced by Matisse in the 1930s, see for example *Dance* (1931, commissioned by the Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania) or *The Fall of Icarus* (1943), the artist used this operative method as early as 1912 as a *technique d’atelier* when working on *Acanthuses*, (1912, Moderna Museet, Stockholm).

⁵Here we recall in particular the photomontages of Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck and Hannah Höch, while citing as an emblematic work J. Heartfield’s *Adolf The Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk*, 1932, photomontage, cm. 70.5 x 59. Berlin, Akademie der Künste.

grasp the polyhedric nature of this technique and therefore the potential it bears for use in every kind of educational project or programme – it is perhaps worth including a further definition of collage, understood by Adriano Zecchina as «A mix of various materials glued onto a rigid frame, the collage is one of the most revolutionary innovations of the first half of the twentieth century.

With this technique, brush and pigments become less central and the picture changes look” (Zecchina, 2012). The shift highlighted in this definition leads us to reflect on the authorship of pictures, and on the iconographic ability and realistic reproduction capabilities of artists. It would seem that the latter skills have been demoted to secondary status since the advent of the collage technique. Certainly, not only collage but all modern and contemporary art, particularly thanks to the invention of photography, has tended to move towards new horizons in which the thinking, choices and actions of the artist in many cases has replaced the ability - almost on a par with a craft - to execute classic painting or sculpture. Collage is an artistic technique based on composing cuttings from different materials (such as paper, images, photographs, fabric and so on) on a frame. It is for this reason that collage raises the issue of “representation”: an image is not just a substitute for what it is representing: it is a thing in its own right. In this sense, collage-makers use images that they find around them, for their own purposes, thus creating something new and endowing the images a new identity and a new story, like Claude Lévi-Strauss’ “bricoleur” (1962) who uses “le moyens du bord” and – as described by Jacques Derrida (1967) – who uses the objects available to him or her even if they have not been designed for this type of use, adapting them as required.

Collage-making forces subjects to become researchers in seeking out the most appropriate and authentic images to narrate their story. In collage production, images become part of the narrative process, transforming the two-dimensional narrative into a three-dimensional experience, in which images and text are composed out of “figure” and “ground”. Moreover, the composition process entails “disciplining” the stories that the composers wish to tell into texts through an interdisciplinary research process, including the search for the right images, the choice of how to compose them within a single frame, and so on. For this reason, inviting subjects to make a collage on the basis of which to narrate their lives engages them in a self-narrative process that may enhance their reflexivity and transform their research into a learning experience.

In educational contexts, collage is often used in research with children and young people (Thomson, 2008) and is viewed as a specific method of inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2008); it can be a useful method in an integrated research strategy in which oral and written narratives are supplemented with collages, in order to access subjects’ stories at a deeper level (Biffi, 2010). In the latter case, collage is not only a research method, but also an educational experience for both researcher and participants, and this transforms the research into a collaborative process (Biffi, 2010). To illustrate this point, it is useful to describe here an example of the use of collage in a qualitative educational study that explored writing practices in young people's lives (Biffi, 2010). Specifically, we used the collage technique in a qualitative study that set out to investigate the use and role of writing practices in young people’s lived experience, both at school and outside of school: how and in what life contexts did young people engage in writing, and what they think about writing in general? The research was conducted at school with students in their final year at high school⁶ and with the collaboration of the Italian teacher.

We designed an ad hoc series of workshops to create different situations, from focus groups to individual interviews (oral and written), with the aim of collecting the participants’ stories of their relationship with writing practice. During the first phase of the research, through brainstorming techniques and interviews, we collected their stories about their literacy training, and their general ideas about the role of writing in our society. At the same time, we felt that we had not yet accessed their deeper meanings regarding writing practice.

⁶The research project was actually more complex and involved more than one class of students, but for the purposes of this paper it is not relevant to provide a full description of it. For further background, see Biffi, 2010.

One possible reason for this was that we had only offered a “literate” mode of telling the story. As is widely recognized, the technology through which we describe something is closely connected with the way in which that something is thought and “constructed” (Foucault, 1988). In this sense, collage offers us the opportunity to think about our experience in another language, that of images. Thus, the young people were asked to compose a collage on the theme: “writing in my life”. The focus was not on artistic technique, given that they did not have any specific background or training in art. The collage was chosen and proposed to them as an “intuitive” practice (“do whatever you want however you want”). We gave the students sources of images, such as magazines, postcards and art journals, as material for the collage, also allowing them to contribute images of their own that they considered to be connected to the research topic.

After the collage production, the core element of the research experience was the discussion between students and researcher aimed at integrating their written and oral accounts with their collage on the same theme. What emerged from our analysis was that the collage practice had taken their reflection to another level, as if by using a different language they had started to think about the theme in a different way. The aspects they emphasized in their oral narratives (such as, for example, the key role of school) were absent from their collages, which in contrast featured more evocative images allowing them to express more fully the ambiguity of their relationship with writing. For instance, some collages featured images (such as broken bridges or straitjackets) that their creators, during the discussion, indicated as being related to the difficulty of writing and to their sense of incompetence in relation to it, but there were also images of high mountains, birds flying and so on, that suggested the sense of freedom that they had felt once writing had become a familiar practice.

As the participants emphasized during our discussion of the process, in telling their story with a different language, they learnt something new about their own resources and their limits in facing the writing challenge. The opportunity to express themselves in another language forced them to explore in a different way what they wanted to say and, consequently, what they thought about it.

In this sense, collage offers the opportunity to construct one’s own story through a sort of pre-literate medium. While words themselves are actions, a collage allows its creator to access the right word indirectly via an intuitive process as opposed to directly through a declarative process. And for the same reason, the audience too is engaged in a process of translation that transforms the collage into a dialogic context, as is the case with all art forms. Moreover, the all-pervasive presence of images makes them seem “usual” to us, as though they had a life of their own, independently of human intervention. And this is true in part: images remain even when their producer has passed away, and they may be used for purposes other than that for which they were originally created. In this sense, images exist at two different levels: the first level relates to their creation, the second to their application. This is well illustrated by René Magritte’s famous series of “pipe” paintings (starting with the first painting in 1926), in which the contradiction between image and reality is the theme of the work, or rather: it is part of the work itself, as expressed by the caption: “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”. As observed by Michael Foucault (1988), “to designate” and “to draw” are not the same thing, and the object, its image and its name are close to one another but unable to enter into contact one another. Similarly, the word itself and the meaning intended by the person speaking the word are not the same thing, therefore images may become the space of mediation between them.

This leads us to focus on how images may facilitate those who have difficulty in telling their stories. People may encounter obstacles in remembering and recounting their own lives, because of their cultural framework or their difficulty in thinking about themselves as “stories”. Moreover, while oral narratives are a means of exploring how subjects tell and construct their stories, the underlying meanings may be more difficult to bring to light. This is also because they may require some form of mediation: inner meanings and mental representations are often not-yet-thought in a conscious mode. In this case, through translation into other preliterate languages, subjects can compose their own life stories in an “evocative” way, on the one hand

imposing an initial structure on them but on the other still retaining an appropriate level of ambiguity.

For this reason, collage-making may be used as an educational tool for thinking about, or re-thinking, critical issues for their producers, in learning contexts. For example, when students seem unable to “find the words” to say something, or to describe what they are thinking or what they are feeling. In these situations, collage-making breaks the circle of the “unspeakable”, that becomes “inexpressible”. In such cases, in which words may have a constraining effect on the students’ deeper feelings, images may enhance their ability to think about the core issue and to find new ways of saying what they previously could not say.

In conclusion, at the end of this paper, the reader may wish to address a specific question to the authors: Why should we choose collage in preference to other artistic techniques for the narration of self? What characteristics of this technique make it particularly suitable for the narration of self in the context of educational programmes?

The first characteristic is the fact that anybody can make a collage, including those who do not – or who believe they do not – have any graphic-representational skills. “On the face of it the collage denies the specialized manual skills and training required for painting and the mystical touch; in contrast it exalts choice as the essence of artistic production, the opportunity of endowing poor, even waste, materials with meaning; the latter have a poetic dimension of their own, often closely related to a temporal dimension that is differentiated from the “eternity” of the work of art” (Gallo in Bordini, 2007). The second is the use of materials for what they are (Picasso’s rope is simply intended to be a rope). The third is that, in contrast with the previous point, the materials may be used to narrate something else (the gold of the medieval altar pieces, that represents light and divinity). The final, and perhaps the most important characteristic for our purposes here, is that collage allows its creator to use a narrative language that is not bound by the linearity of discourse, that is to say that does not follow a chronological procedure with tight logical constraints – such as before and after, cause and effect, or coming up with an explanation or answer at all costs – but allows unrelated hypotheses to emerge, leaving room for the development of meanings of a more metaphorical nature (Dallari in Giusti, 2012).

Collage therefore facilitates the process of self-definition that characterizes all autobiographical work, which is never complete but always ongoing (Demetrio, 1997).

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