Sébastien Pesce
University of Tours

Definition of the situation through collective inquiry within a learning organization: Triadic mediation as a way to escape the trap of relationship in teamwork

This article describes and analyses an intervention and training program created by a group of French researchers, the "violence analysis diagrams" (Fr. ***courbes de deconstruction de la violence***). This analysis is based on an experiment implemented during a course held in the Master's program in Social Work at the Faculty of Pedagogy (University of Lower Silesia). Drawing on the theorization of this approach relying on institutional analysis, semiotics and pragmatist philosophy, the article describes how a team of professionals can avoid the pitfalls of relationship to favour cooperative and deliberative modalities inspired by Dewey's theory of inquiry. By becoming a "community of inquiry", such a team can put aside common interpretations in order to build, through semiosis, a new perspective on critical situations, allowing a better understanding of these situations and, eventually, a more peaceful action.

Keywords: Socio-clinical intervention, mediation, cooperation, institution, learning organization.

Introduction

In January 2018, I was given the opportunity to visit the Faculty of Education at the University of Lower Silesia, within the framework of the European Erasmus mobility scheme, on the invitation of Aneta Słowik, PhD. The visit was part of the partnership between the universities of Lower Silesia and Tours, and was organized in a broader context of the preparation of two congresses celebrating the legacy of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, the first of which was to be organized in May 2018 in Wrocław, the other one in November 2018 in Tours.

As part of this visit, I had the pleasure of meeting with the students of the Master's program in Social Work. Together with Aneta Słowik, instead of offering a lecture, we decided to hold a simulation training situation. This choice had a twofold objective: to illustrate the central concept from *The Polish Peasant*, and more

generally, from the Chicago School of sociology, i.e. "definition of the situation" (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920, vol. 1, pp. 68sq); and pooling our pedagogical practices, in this case around a specific training tool (violence analysis diagrams) that can be applied in the training of teachers, educators, social workers, and trainers, but also in the daily work of teams working in social and educational sectors.

My aim is to discuss this training technique and its implementation in the context of the course mentioned above, but also to problematize this approach using concepts that I consider essential for thinking about the work of teams of professionals, when they decide, within a learning organization, to escape the traps of relationship in order to mobilize mediation – one of the most powerful resources available in the tradition of educational sciences, i.e. in education, training and counselling.

An account of our experience: the Franco-Polish investigations

I will begin by recounting the morning of January the 26th, which I spent with some thirty students of the Master's program in Social Work, and used as an opportunity to present the methodology of the "violence analysis diagrams". It is a method created by Casanova, Cellier & Robbes (2005), which I partially reviewed, based on the theoretical framework that organizes my research work, inspired by Peirce's pragmaticism and semiotics.

We split students into six groups. Within each group, each participant recounted in a few sentences a critical situation they had experienced. The group was to select one of the situations and then proceed through the following stages: (1a) the narrative, as factual as possible, of the event constituting a "situation" (indeed it is a *situation*, rather than a *practice*, that is being examined); (1b) the members of the group ask the author of the narrative questions in order to establish the facts more precisely; (1c) the group identifies 3 to 8 key moments in the narrative, then reports them on a diagram, indicating the time and the degree of violence recognized at that moment, producing a 'curve'; (2a) the group selects one or more of these moments, known as "tipping points" (*"moments de bascule"*), and tries to identify "what is at stake", what parameters may explain why the degree of violence increases or decreases, but also what each of the actors involved in the situation "is trying to achieve" (*"cherche à jouer"*); (2b) the group, on the basis of the "tipping points" identified, and their interpretations, tries to project itself into a similar situation that may arise in the future, and to determine the kinds of goals an individual, or a team, would then try to attain, what they would seek to do; (3) finally, these still general approaches (what we are seeking to play) are translated into specific courses of actioWe therefore conducted six parallel "investigations" into six situations proposed by members of our groups, which resulted in the production of the following six diagrams.
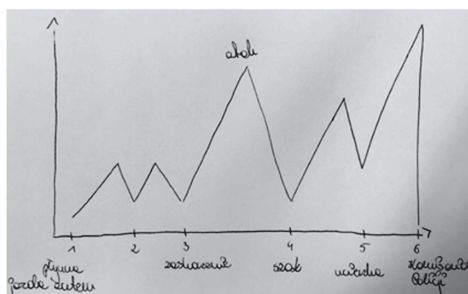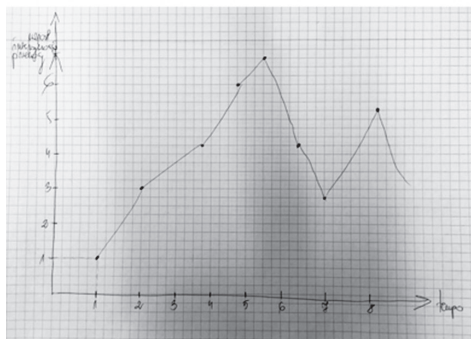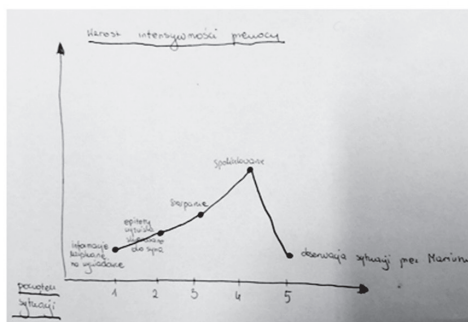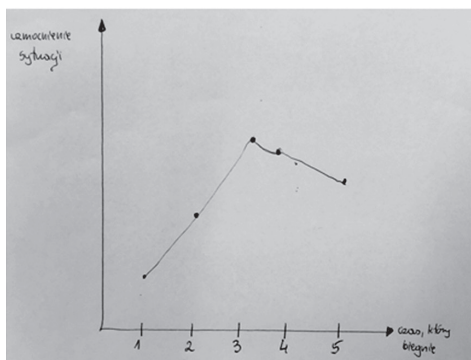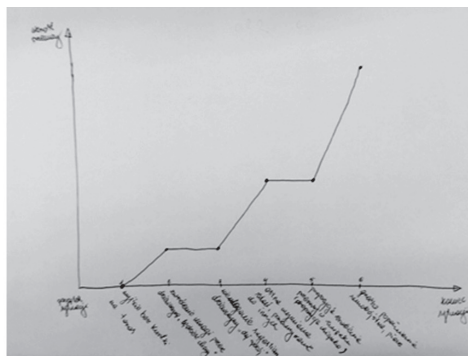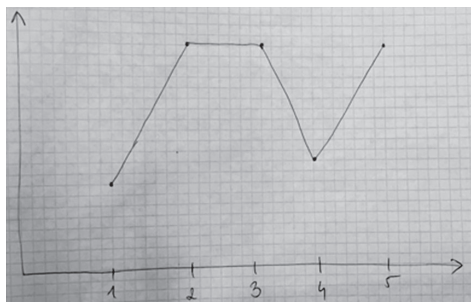
Figures 1 to 6 – Diagrams made by students during session on the 26th of January 2018

Three main stages of any situation or practice analysis method can be distinguished here: narration (1a to 1c); analysis/interpretation (2a & 2b); plan of action (3), although this last stage is not always present in the analytical diagrams from the session. However, even though the approach is similar to the classic format of professional practice analysis, it differs from it in a number of essential features:

- what is implemented here is not an analysis of *practices*, but of *situations*, based on the principle that any professional gesture is situated in a broader context, that it is part of an organizational and institutional system of which it is just *one* component;

- in contrast to some forms of practice analysis, the interpretations produced by the facilitator are extremely limited or even absent: his/her role is not to interpret the facts on behalf of the actors, but to empower them by giving them conceptual tools to carry out the interpretative work themselves;
- these conceptual tools are mostly borrowed from Peircean pragmaticism and semiotics, Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, and make little or no use of theories from psychology, social psychology or psychoanalysis.

Thinking backwards: from institutional analysis...

Rémi Casanova and Bruno Robbes, who together with Hervé Cellier invernted this method, follow the tradition of "Institutional Practices" (*Pratiques de l'Institutionnel*) (Pain, 1993): like me, they were teachers, and mobilized the contributions of techniquest by Freinet[1] and of the Institutional Pedagogy (Oury & Vasquez, 1967). All three of us studied at the University of Nanterre, within a Department bearing the name 'Crisis, School, Sensitive Areas' (*"Crise, École, Terrains Sensibles"*), which had made a major contribution to the design and implementation of intervention methods in the tradition of "psycho-sociological intervention" or "psycho-social intervention" in the broad sense (Ardoino *et al.*, 1980; Dubost, 1987; Enriquez, 1997) and Institutional Analysis (Lourau, 1970, 1997)[2].

Institutional Analysis was born in France in the 1960s, and regards intervention with teams or within organizations related to, as its name implies, the central concept of *Institution*. Revisited from the mid-1940s onwards, first by Cornélius Castoriadis[3], the concept of an Institution has become linked with the central, fundamental notion of modern thought on education – that of *mediation*, which we owe to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762)[4]. Where many kinds of intervention, counselling or team work approaches promote the theoretical models that overvalue psychological factors (a level of analysis centred on the *individual*) and the role of the dual relationship (centred on the *interindividual*), the "Institutional Practices" propose to add three levels of analysis (Ardoino, 1972, p. xiii): *group* dynamics; *organizational* dimensions; *institutional* phenomena, conceived as a system of principles and values, as a set of underlying symbolic meanings (Ardoino, 1972, p. xv; 1977, p. 164). It is then a question of thinking about the way in which: on the one hand, the organization (methods, rules, procedures, spatial organization, schedules, etc.) offers mediation between individuals; on the other hand, how meanings, both

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[1] See Freinet (1994). On the links between Freinet and semiotic approaches to education, see Pesce (2016,2018).

[2] More broadly of Socio-Clinical Interventions see Monceau (2017).

[3] In particular with the pseudonym Paul Cardan – see Cardan (1965).

[4] On the links between institution and mediation, from Rousseau to institutional pedagogy, see Imbert (1992, p. 95).

conveyed, produced, and transformed by organizational factors, mediate between subjects and the group, between any subject and his/her own experience. In this logic of mediation, triadic models replace binary models.

…to semiotics and pramatist philosophy

Above, when I refer above to the idea of "thinking backwards", I speak of my own reflexive journey, from models of intervention born in the second half of the twentieth century to the philosophy and logic of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, in order to theoretically elaborate my experience I turned away from the practice of institutional pedagogy towards the pragmatist philosophy (first that of Peirce, later of Dewey) and semiotics.

In fact, if we try to account for symbolic phenomena and linguistic events that occur in the forming or the daily activities of teams, by mobilizing the most directly available linguistic models (for example the Saussurian model), we will encounter a great difficulty. Because these models are fundamentally dyadic, they can hardly account for phenomena that mobilize the triadic dynamics of mediation. Yet, one of the characteristics of Peirce and Dewey's thinking is precisely to break with binary conceptions of thought, meaning, or human action. This is the case with Peirce (1931–1955), due to both his triadic conception of the sign and his description of dialogical thought mediated by semiotic processes. This is again the case with Dewey (1938), who founded his *Theory of Inquiry* on a radical critique of binary models.

To put it simply, the approach proposed to participants in an activity such as the "violence analysis diagrams" is part of a pragmatic approach to collective action. First, it is because these diagrams function as a mediation between subjects when they deliberate to determine the meaning of a critical situation; and then because the approach relies on creative semiotic processes, implying a relationship to meaning that is no longer referential, but metaphorical, to use the words of Jean Fisette (1996, p. 96) (in other words, deliberation is considered to produce new meanings, and not simply to identify meanings already there). Last but not least, because this approach invites professionals to engage in a shared investigation that goes back to the principles of the "community" inaugurated by Peirce (see Habermas, 1968/1976, pp. 137sq) and to Dewey's *Theory of Inquiry* (1938).

Training and teamwork as instances of Dewey's inquiry

From my viewpoint, there is a perfect analogy between the experience lived by adults in training (as was the case in the experience mentioned above), and the one lived by professionals working together and sharing their individual and collective experiences: if I propose to professionals in training to experiment with the "diagrams", it is because they then live, in my opinion, the same type of approach

that professionals could implement on a daily basis, during their team meetings, to work and bring solutions to critical situations, and to design anew the work they are doing with beneficiaries, the forms of their intervention, coaching, training, etc. The same goes for teachers, trainers and social workers.

As soon as a small group is formed during a training session, and as soon as it begins to elaborate a diagram, a "community of inquirers" is created, i.e. a group engaged in the conduct of an investigation, taking as its object the experience of one of the group members, an experience considered as a "situation": a real, one-time event that took place on a *stage*, delimited at the same time by a *moment*, *space*, *actors*, and one or more *events*. This community of inquiry replicates the typical community of a team of professionals in a school or social work service.

The situation that has been chosen is a critical one: it implies a tension (see Pesce, 2011). The reason why we are interested in this tension is that it gives the situation in question the status of "undetermined situation", a condition, according to Dewey (1938, pp. 104–105) of the initiation of an investigation which is specifically aimed at determining this situation: "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole". But in order to guarantee the "effectiveness" of this feeling of indeterminacy, there must be genuine doubt (in the sense given by Peirce, and as opposed to Descartes' methodological doubt). For this to happen, one must get rid of one's prejudices, *a priori* explanations and usual frames of reference. It is necessary to accept that "ready-made interpretations" should be put aside, and that new perspectives on the situation should emerge.

In the spirit of Dewey's inquiry, professionals or students engaged in the analysis will begin by producing an observation that articulates *description* (description of the constituents of the situation) and *narration* (taking into account the temporal dynamic, looking at how the situation evolves over time) (*ibid*, pp. 220sq). Saying "what is at stake" in a specific moment of the situation, at a tipping point (step 2a), means describing the situation as precisely as possible, while trying to identify elements that have remained invisible until then. Connecting the points, drawing the diagram, trying to understand what might explain the variations in the intensity of violence, comes down to producing a "narration", and casting light on the temporal dynamic of the situation.

It is both in the articulation between the narrative and description, and in the way in which *observation* and *ideation* are combined (p. 117, p. 133), that the participants in the inquiry gradually define their experience from a new perspective. However, the diagram methodology deliberately betrays one aspect of Dewey's thinking: while, for Dewey, ideas and observations enrich each other in what could be described as a recursive loop, we introduce a more sequential approach, first overvaluing observation in order to delay conceptualization (the interpretation of observed facts). The purpose is to compel the participants to look at the situation

as open-mindedly as possible, to abandon themselves to a form of musing, before "inscribing" (*i.e.*, identifying and pointing out to the other members of the group) the facts that seem to convey meaning, and then interpreting them. I borrow the musing-inscription-interpretation model from Balat (2003), who himself was inspired by Peirce's writings.

In Dewey's inquiry, the creative process, the possibility of producing new interpretations is based on inferential mediations made possible by the interplay of narration and description, observation and ideation. Though professionals may feel that there are some forms of immediate knowledge (meanings would be already there and easily accessible), the inquiry reveals that inferences are made on the basis of observation... knowledge is not *immediate*, it is *mediated* by meanings that need to be identified, named and acknowledged. What is eventually "known" is the result of mediation that take the form of the group or subject's inferential activity (pp. 139–140). The diagrams function as a pedagogical tool, as a means of raising awareness of inquiry through the actual experience of inquiry, of making these instances of mediation more visible, of accompanying participants in the development of their "semiotic consciousness" (Tochon, 2002), or of their "symbolic wisdom" (Burke, 1955).

The trap of relationship: group illusion and the free speech fantasy

The concepts of mediation and institution, despite their long-standing history in the field of educational practices and theories (practices making part of the 'new education' as a whole, theories from Rousseau to institutional pedagogy), are hardly fully recognised in the world of education, teaching, training and social work.

Our "naive pedagogy" is first and foremost a psychology, which considers that it is individual factors that, above all, determine the meaning and characteristics of a situation. Moreover, when we contemplate the work we do with beneficiaries or the way we organize our teamwork, we think about the quality of practices, situations and environments in terms of the quality of relationships. Not only do our naive representations lead us to overemphasize the role of a relationship, to the detriment of what plays as mediation (in terms of procedures or organization) in this relationship, but above all, many contemporary studies reinforce this risk by falling into the trap of relationship. *Care* theories or omnipresent discourses about "benevolence" potentially reinforce, among professionals, this exclusively relational concept of social work.

Thus, a good working team would be a team in which relations are good, in which "things are said" ("free speech"), in which professionals "trust" each other. I do not criticize these positions in themselves: these elements can be seen as indispensable (at least a part of them), but they merely describe the *conditions* on the basis of which the work will be able to proceed, but nothing more than these

conditions... We then still have to think about the arrangements, the modes of deliberation and the forms of interaction that will mediate between the subjects in the group and between the group and the world. In a certain way, to confine oneself to "speech", to "free speech" is, at worst, to deny the role of the inquiry as the privileged mode of a form of collective thought and, at best, to ignore the necessarily controlled, structured nature of the inquiry, to use Dewey's words.

When a team of professionals deprives itself of such mediation, locks itself in the idolatry of relationship, or in group illusion (Anzieu, 1971), when nothing comes to organize their work and mediate their interactions, then such team can only situate itself in relation to a twofold alternative: the supposedly "good" relationship (which is rarely good because the framework of group illusion often leads this relationship towards fusion), or violence. Only the mediation of institutions safeguards against the infringement of founding prohibitions (incest, murder, cannibalism, seen on a symbolic level as fusion, denial of identity, and institutional interference, to use the words of Rémi Casanova), while the overvaluing of dual relationship not only does not guarantee the respect of these prohibitions, but leads to their transgression.

Conclusion: pragmatism, communities of practice and learning organizations

The concept of "learning organisation", inspired by Argyris and Schön's (1978) reflections in Senge (1990), and later transposed into educational thinking (see Stoll & Kools, 2017), is very widely used today in the field of education. One could, without betraying this notion, consider that the logic of inquiry, as a standard operating mode for a team of professionals, constitutes a particularly relevant way for such a team to transform its working and intervention environment into a learning organization. In particular, this would allow the group to question the fundamental hypotheses that structure action within a given organization (Argyris & Schön, 1978, pp. 20–24).

To escape the pitfalls of relationship, of the idea that the inter-individual level is the normal level of teamwork, the challenge for the group is to turn into a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) that will develop the capacity, when a critical situation arises, to regard it as "indeterminate" (rather than projecting its prejudices), and to engage in a collective inquiry aimed at determining this situation.

By making such a choice, a team becomes a "community of inquiry", following the perspective inaugurated by Peirce, and adopting a pragmatist outlook, i.e. recognizing that deliberation will open up new interpretative perspectives, it adopts a triadic conception of meaning; by relying on formal methods to organize this deliberation, by implementing a controlled inquiry, it will recognize mediation as the

basis of collective activity; by protecting itself from the overvaluing the dual relationship in order to encourage cooperation, it will increase its chances of preserving the observance of founding prohibitions; and finally, by doing all this, it will gradually transform its "organisation" into an "institution".

Translated from French by Sébastien Pesce

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