

Formation and metaphors

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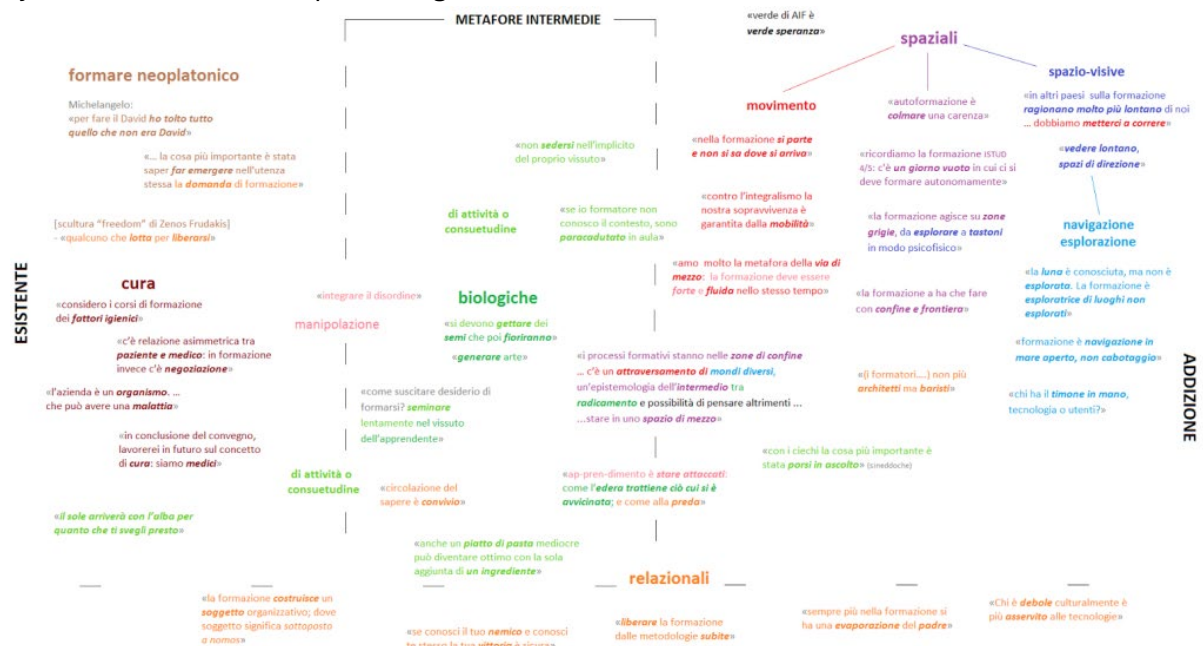
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Training makes continuous and explicit use of metaphors: it can be useful to think about them to reflect on its themes, such as the idea of trainer, the activity of training, users, the role and culture of technology, organizations. Metaphors are in fact a sign of deep thoughts, both in the sense of hidden and to be discovered, and in the sense of "background", that is, they provide the general organization of conceptual, emotional and action frameworks.

I have collected the metaphors spoken during the conference. Listing them is not enough: it is important to recognize the role that each one plays in the collective thought produced by the conference. To do so, I have organized the metaphors into areas: they have been grouped according to the conceptual homogeneity that can be found among them, given a title, and then reported in a map. A synthesis that is certainly not the only possible one, but that must serve as a provocation.

Below I will illustrate the criteria for building the map; then I will briefly describe the metaphors used, leaving aside further details. The map wants to be explored with the eye, because it is the use of the map - more than the explanations reported below - that allows one to become aware of the different roles played by each metaphor. This map is only one of the possible maps - or of the possible syntheses made with other means. Those who are more expert than me in training will know how to see, rework and integrate.

(you can click on the map to enlarge it)



How was the map constructed? It seemed to me possible to summarize the areas of metaphors under two poles, two main paradigms: training as addition/addition, that is, discovery of further knowledge and skills; and training as elaboration of the existing. Both pursue the new and the

creative, but in different ways. On the left is the paradigm of the elaboration of the existing: here we find the neoplatonic idea of the emergence of form from the formless; and we find the medical idea of care. On the opposite side, on the right, there is the paradigm of addition: dominated by spatial metaphors – and in particular of exploration – so important in our modern mentality marked by Columbus and Magellan. In the central band of the map, the biological metaphors hold together the link with the existing (roots and soil) and addition (the rising and growing of the plant): the intermediate placement signals an affinity with both.

The colors have the function of making the areas of metaphors immediately recognizable; but they also serve to indicate further metaphorical phenomena. Thus, the micro-interweavings between metaphors of bordering areas are made clear («training acts on gray areas, | to be explored gropingly in a psychophysical way»); the conceptual integration of an area with another very distant one is highlighted («... the most important thing was knowing how to bring out in the users themselves | the demand for training»). Finally, in some cases the close placement of expressions of different colors signals a conceptual kinship («not sitting in the implicit of one's own experience» means “not standing still”: it is therefore close to metaphors of movement).

Spatial metaphors are probably the engine of reasoning on education; the image chosen as an icon for this conference is undoubtedly a product of this. Indispensable, and therefore potentially dangerous: the more they coincide with the very concept of education, the more they risk constituting a cage from which one cannot escape, ceasing to generate meaning (I express here my reading).

“Training” is not the only concept these metaphors reason about: so is the idea of “trainer” – and with it the ideas of “user/learner” and the “user-trainer relationship” (“organization” and “technology” emerge – unfortunately – almost accidentally). While in the past it was common practice for a company to take care of the growth of its staff, today’s trend is to make learners increasingly responsible, almost left to a private learning path (“evaporation of the father”); at the same time, the trainer discovers himself as a learner in the training process itself; and training takes place in a cooperative way.

Relational metaphors are those that mainly elaborate the concepts of trainer, learner and their relationship. Precisely because they touch mainly on the concept of “trainer” and less on the concept of “training”, they can only be traced back in part, weakly, to the existing-addition dichotomy. For this reason they have been placed transversally at the bottom of the map, even if for some of them it is possible to seek a placement according to the two paradigmatic poles.

But the metaphors mentioned above also elaborate the idea of the trainer. The metaphor of care suggests an asymmetry between user and trainer (an asymmetry that one participant explicitly discussed); and it also thematizes the notion of “organization”. The spatial metaphors, on the other hand, leave the theme implicit; thus, although they are not an impediment, they also risk acting in a conservative way: by not discussing the theme they would endorse the status quo of the asymmetry.

I find neoplatonic metaphors very creative: in one of the collected cases, the sculpture *Freedom* by Zenos Frudakis, it is the learner himself who emerges in autonomy; furthermore they are often reworked with relational metaphors, the main ones in the construction of the idea of “trainer”.

Finally, activity and habit metaphors and activities (and manipulation metaphors) play an important role, as they integrate in a timely manner the collective conceptual work of the other metaphors.

Certainly some metaphorical expressions have escaped the notes. What is important, however, is to look and observe, to recognize the metaphorical areas, their interweavings and their conceptual productivity: and then discuss the metaphors to reflect on “training”, “trainer”, “users”, “organization”, “technology”.