

## Editorial introduction: Transitions in the process of education

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*This editorial introduction frames the special issue by highlighting its choices: examining transitions in the educational process, so as to highlight common features of many educational phenomena, often considered separately; and conceptualise transitions as time-embedded processes. Such theoretical choices raise methodological questions, among which, that of preserving the dynamics of education. Three main methodological options for doing so are considered: time reconstruction (verbal or graphic); real-time data gathering; and focus on the individual-social articulation. Each of the papers is thus presented through its specific methodological choices. Finally, two transversal characteristics of transitions are highlighted: the person-and-environment mutual responsiveness, and their inherent playfulness; some consequences for education are suggested.*

The process of education requires interactions between humans, in relation with bodies of culturally constructed knowledge and skills, mediated by semiotic means and artefacts, in specific social settings. It is expected that, through such interactions, a person (usually the learner, but sometime many persons) will expand her capacity to think and act within or outside the educational setting, in the present or later in life. The process of education can occur in settings which are institutionally designed as educational (e.g., the classroom) but also in other social settings (e.g., in one's garden).

Given its complexity, the process of education has been approached by many disciplines. Psychologists have made tools to estimate the child's preconditions or maturational readiness for education, educationalists have studied specific didactics that promotes or inhibits learning, anthropologists have investigated the climate and the special culture of the educational settings, sociologists have made analyses of educational institutions and settings in a larger societal scale, and so on and so forth.

We propose to examine the educational process within the developmental trajectory of a single person. We conceive this trajectory as punctuated by shifts, ruptures, and relocations. Such shifts, we propose to call transitions. These transitions are, we believe, partly created by, affected by, and responding to educational settings. So, studying transitions might reveal something about the process of education.

In what follows we present the notion of *transition* in its many acceptations. We then argue that, in the frame of an enquiry about learning and development, studies of transitions should account for the creation of authentic newness. An interest for transitions raises methodological challenges. We present how each of the papers gathered for this special issue proposes a methodological solution enabling to capture transition processes. We finally suggest possible contributions to a reflection about education.

### The notion of transition

The notion of transition is much used in educational literature, where it has acquired different meanings. Here, we limit the introduction of the notion only to transitions people make and not to transitions of institutions (schools), systems (political/educational) or societies. We propose two axes of analysis of the literature on transitions.

The first axis explores transitions of different types, varying according to the level of analysis considered. First, a wide range of literature studies people's transitions *between institutions* and formal settings. One can thus discuss middle-school to high school transitions (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000); school-to-work transitions (Beach, 1999, 2003; Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997; Heckhausen, 2002; Carugati, 2004), transitions to PHD programs (Mastekaasa, 2006) or higher education (Rastall, 2006), transitions from medical studies to medical practice (Lane, 2005; Stern & Papdakis, 2006), or school transitions associated to migration (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Second, a more psychological oriented literature is interested in transitions between two phases within *the life course* (Baltes, 1997), such as the transition to adulthood or parenthood, or the transition to a terminal illness (Telford, Kralik, & Koch, 2006). A third approach is examining *micro-transitions*, such as the transitions which are part of a process of learning or a change in the activity at stake (Michinov & Michinov, 2007). All these approaches share a focus on transitions between contexts, stages or phases.

A second axis for distinguishing studies of transition runs through diverse forms of theorising the notion. To simplify, let us imagine the transition from A to B. The first approach focuses on the two contexts, stages or phases A and B. The term transition designates the fact that B replaces A. A is then compared to B. The second approach considers that it is precisely the processes whereby A becomes B that are relevant. The focus is on A *becoming* B, on the mergence of A into B, or on the emergence of B out of A.

Methodologically, the approaches of the first group mostly compare a state of affair A and a state B. For example, the idea of transition is translated as "adjustment" to B. It is operationalised into measures such as "well-being", "social adjustment" or "mathematical performances", compared before and after the passage from A to B (Fenzel & Blyth, 1986; Rice, 2001). This can be completed by the examination of variables that might influence these outcomes, which are then interpreted as facilitators for these transitions. For example, parental support (Duchesne, Larose, Guay, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2005; Seidman, Lambert, Allen, & Aber, 2003), style of parental authority (Clémence, Biétry, Gex-Collet, Sénac, Zittoun, Kaiser, Modak, & Nicolet, 2006, friendship (Fenzel & Blyth, 1986), or tolerance to ambivalence (Shaffer & Simoneau, 2001) seem to positively influence the difference between the state of young people at points B and A. Although these studies might reveal important determinants of processes of change, they do not examine the processes of changes built into their conceptualisation of transitions.

The second group of studies attempts to identify dynamics of changes. This can be done at various level of analysis – the microprocesses of interpersonal adjustment, wider identity

transformation, or more complex configuration of interactions between people and their social and material environment. These approaches thus understand the notion of transition not only as spatial metaphor, but also as a temporal notion (Dupuy & Le Blanc, 2001). As such, transitions can be seen as admitting sub-phases (Bridges, 1980; Brammer, 1991; Bowlby, 1980; Van Gennep, 1909) or rather be seen as non linear (Hayes, Laurenceau, Feldman, Strauss, & Cardaciotto, 2007). Also, such approaches are more likely to attempt to preserve, or reconstitute the complexity of the phenomenon involved, for example through the identification of a “matrix” of change (Liddle, Carlson, & McKenna, 2004), “regimes” of transition involving the person’s involvement in various social settings (Stauber, 2007), or changing time allocation in different spheres of experience (Gauthier & Furtsenberg, 2002). We believe that this group of studies examining time-embedded dynamics of transitions are the most likely to enrich our reflection on the educational process. This special issue presents contributions that all have made this choice.

Our suggestion is that the study of *transitions* offers a powerful processual unit of analysis for examining relevant parcels of an educational trajectory. Our understanding of the notion of transition proposes to conceptually reunify a diversity of theoretically equivalent notions. The core idea is that transitions are processes of catalysed change due to a rupture, and aiming at a new sustainable fit between the person and her current environment. The notion of *rupture* designates the processes called *crisis* (Vygotsky, 1926, 1930; Erikson, 1950, 1968; James, 1890), *desequilibrium* (Piaget, 1966), *challenge* (Smelser, 1980) or *turning point* (Rutter, 1994) in psychology. The notion of *transition* designates the processes captured by these of *re-equilibration* subsequent to ruptures, of *restoration* of one’s sense of continuity and integrity (Carugati, 2004; Erikson, 1968; James, 1892; Palmonari, 1993; for a review see Elcherth, Forney, Gauthier, Ghisletta, le Goff, Spini, Tettamanti, & Widmer, 2003). In that respect, the notion of transition carries the intention of many of the founders of current psychology – that of defining the sorts of phenomenon whose analysis would contribute to our understanding of change, learning and development. We thus see the notion of transition as a theoretical tool enabling us to examine at once phenomena often studied by sub-disciplinary groups of social sciences, with little consideration for each other. And, as this special issue will show, this might be heuristically interesting.

### Transitions beyond transitivity

To fully understand the potential of change designated by the notion, we need to locate transitions in a wider developmental picture. Valsiner’s paper (this issue) offers the theoretical frame for doing so. He reflects upon transition, considered both as a general developmental process, and as process related to education. The main question concerns types of processes related to change: at what conditions is a change a mere transitive process, implying some form of predictability, and at what conditions can it lead to the creation of an authentic new event or entity? Consequently, how can we study, conceive and guide educational interventions which could lead to authentic development?

Drawing on recent scientific developments in other scientific fields, Valsiner invites psychology and educational science to reconsider the nature of causality in vital processes. Conceptualising an interdependent living system, Valsiner distinguishes functions that preserve the system, from functions that break up its conservatism and bring the system to novelty. Ruptures in the system can be understood as breaks of conservative cycles that force the system to re-establish itself in another hierarchical order. Such multileveled reestablishment can be called a transition. Here, a systemic, non linear causality is thus at work. Translated to educational and psychological language, the child (the person) can be seen as preserving her identity as person and therefore, both as changing and resisting to change in a changing socio-cultural environment. The educational intervention can be thought of as a “benevolent act of violence” aimed at breaking up the system of conservatism, bringing the child to learn. But is

the system “open”, “ready” to that particular interference? Is this act of violence well timed, or does it tickle the vulnerability (Valsiner, this volume) of the system? Is the system already in major transformation, in another direction?

### Methodological creativity

Defining transitions as processes of change located in time and in complex systems raises methodological challenges. “All theoretical innovations necessarily lead to new ways of doing empirical work” (Valsiner, this volume). The study of transitions offers a particular perspective for the study of change and development, and it inherits two methodological difficulties of developmental studies. A first main methodological challenge is to preserve the timeness and the processuality of the dynamics described. A second difficulty is to account both for the person’s perspective on continuity and change, as well as the sociocultural embeddedness of the educational process – always taking place in a specific setting, often in institutions with their very long traditions (Perret-Clermont, 2004). The sociocultural features of the situation always guide, enable, prevent or provoke such continuity or change. However, studying transitions demands a strict focus. No empirical study can capture the full interdependent complexity of human life, novelty and change on levels of micro- meso- onto-culture- and phylo genesis (Cole, 1992; Valsiner, this volume). Every methodological choice includes some aspects while leaving other out. The papers gathered here all develop methodologies that capture the educational fact and its possible radical newness, and thus propose solutions to these challenges. The variety of their choices is worth the end of our introduction.

A classical way of approaching transitions in developmental trajectories is to question a person, at a certain point in time, about processes and changes that have occurred in her past. This method, which is reconstructive, has the advantage of offering access to the person’s present evaluation of past events which seem to have changed her trajectories. From point C, the person identifies events that she has personally experienced as ruptures and that are linked to A – B transition processes in her past. The weakness of this approach is that processes of change are reconstructed from the perspective of C. Different techniques are used to gather and generate such data which aim to redeploy temporality. A classical technique is that of inviting people to tell their life or to guide them through the exploration of past significant events in their life (see Hasse, this issue; Zittoun, this issue). One cannot be naïve about the process of constructing a narrative. As experience is verbalised, it is deployed in time and thus becomes historical (Ricoeur, 1985). One can thus construct a narrative based on events which might have appeared as disconnected as they occurred. Also, narration enables the emergence of a fact which was not necessarily pre-existing that narration. For example, Catherine Hasse (this volume) shows how adults narrate their becoming the physicists they are. They mention a series of events, randomly distributed in their childhood and their youth, which probably appeared as isolated as they occurred. From the perspective of the present, these appear as connected and part of one same transition to being a physicist. Narration is also submission to canonical genres, of which the most elementary structure is that of an accident, being then resolved (Bruner, 1991; McAdams, 1993; Propp, 1928) – narrative genres invite the narration of rupture and transitions (Gillespie, 2005). Finally, narratives in interviews are coconstructed, and the active role of the researcher should never be underestimated in the production of a narrative. One additional limitation to narrative as a reconstructive technique is that it privileges people who have an easy access to verbal language. In her work, Pernille Hviid (this issue) interviews children about changes they perceived in their life. Yet to give access to their memory, she first asks them to draw a map of the places in which they live and have lived. In other words, the first mediation of their experience is through graphic semiotic means. For a while, it escapes to the convention and limitation of verbal language. Verbal language then completes or nuances the graphic reconstruction of the past. Thus, the first

person perspective is preserved, and the complementarity of modes of externalisation might enable to reconstruct the processes at stake beyond the canonical guidance of narrative. Yet at the same time, asking children to draw provides them with a metaphor for their experience, which might have the inconvenience of fixating or reifying very fluid events. That might inhibit the normal reorganisation of experience within the flow of subjective inner time.

A classical contrasting approach to reconstructive techniques for studying transitions is given by real-time data gathering, which demands techniques for observing change as it occurs. Jette Kofoed (this issue) observes everyday life at school. She develops a floating attention which brings her to note relevant systemic incidents – a girl cries in a corner of the schoolyard and other girls react – and the interdependent situational evolution. Here, the parallel observations are made as they unfold. The identification of transitions is interpretative, yet based on signs of apparent disturbance perceived by the persons (the girl's cry, and the comfort of the group). In other words, events endlessly unfold, and the researcher has to identify moments that correspond to the A and B of a transition process. This might occur as the process happens, or later on, as the researcher can apply a distant gaze on the data. Of course, why the girl cries, what she thinks and perceives as she is brought to a new form of relation with her classmates, will escape to such approach. A parallel way of trying to capture processes in time while preserving a first-person perspective consists in analyzing diaries (Zittoun, this issue). Again, the researcher has no direct access to the social world experienced by the diarist, only through the reconstruction produced by the person and through other archival sources.

An alternative way of capturing real time processes is proposed by Laurent Fillietaz and Ingrid de St-Georges (this issue). The authors systematically record complex interactions in a vocational training setting, and then identify sequences taking place. Through a micro-processual analysis, they reconstruct the way in which a content of knowledge is announced by a teacher, enacted, imitated and probably internalised by students. Through the close analysis of the trajectory of some parcel of knowledge, the slow re-aging of personal and interpersonal positions and actions are revealed, and thus transitions emerge. If the subject's perspective is lost, the complex reconfiguration of a system in transitions appears beautifully. Of course a tickling question is about the place and importance of such micro processes of transition within the apprentice's educational trajectory.

We thus hope to have shown possible methodological strategies respecting the basic dynamic qualities of the process of education. Our reading suggests that each of these choices, while failing to capture the totality of their dynamics, might contribute to our general understanding of transitions.

## **Back to education**

What do we learn about educational processes through such studies of transitions? We propose to indicate two important properties of transitions revealed by the papers gathered here. We discuss transitions as always both an individual as well as a social process. We then highlight playfulness as an important feature of transitions. We finally raise some of their educational implications.

The first aspect of transitions revealed by the series of papers proposed here is their constant individual and social nature. Not only do transition processes often take place between social settings or within them, also, every transition in which a person is engaged demands or provokes some responsiveness from the environment, which feeds further transitional processes. A person changing her way of talking to others will realise their welcoming or aggressive reactions; a new idea is always listened to or ignored; a new activity might be welcomed, refused or ignored. A transition is always a *transaction* between the person and her social and material changing environment. Responsiveness can be positive and supporting a person's development of new skills or self-definition, but it can also be negative

– depreciating or alienating. Taking the vulnerability of novelty (Valsiner, this volume) into account, we suggest the importance for educational professionals, to pay attention to the inherent responsiveness of any transition process in which a person is engaged, and to develop concepts and strategies to deal with the climate of responsiveness to novelty in the educational setting. It might precisely be the responsibility of the educators to fertilize and guide this social responsiveness, so as to enable the actors involved in the educational process to engage in generative transition processes.

The second feature of processes of transitions that appear recurrently through the papers in this special issue is their playfulness. A transition process always requires leaving some old conduct, ways of thinking or of defining oneself. That process of leaving behind things, relations or aspects of oneself, the dying out or loss of interest goes hand in hand or followed by a process of move towards a new form of acting, defining or sense-meaning. Yet this production of novelty rarely occurs at once. Rather it has been shown to develop through exploratory processes, sometime called *as-if* modes (Bateson, 1976; Josephs, 1998). Transitions of identity require experiencing *possible* new positions, not yet fully inhabited, and perform as-if one was already there. Defining a new professional action requires experiencing unfamiliar movements, expecting them to become functional and smooth. Giving sense to a new event mostly goes with thinking and speaking about it over and over again, while playing with it seems often preferred by young children. The playfulness bridges the actual present and anticipated new future. In other words, every transition requires a space or time for *play* – through as-if actions, try-and-fail, by trying actions and performances that does not yet have stability and density of the “for-good” and “real-life” consequences.

It seem to be of great importance for schools, educational setting or classroom to offer such spaces for try-and-fail, for experimenting as-if, or for enabling a ludic appropriation of knowledge, skills and identities. This is demanding, because it implies for educators to protect, tolerate or even promote uncertainty, fuzziness, and disorder, while at the same time keeping meta-constraints of the educational system intact, thereby hindering its potential breakdown. In other words we are advocating for establishment of a *transitional frame* in the educational system (Winnicott, 1971; Zittoun, 2004).

We make the hypothesis that supporting such playfulness within the educational process could have several positive consequences. Firstly, the possibility of emergence of new form of learning precisely requires such forms of fuzziness (Abbey & Valsiner, 2004; Josephs, 1998; Vygotsky, 1930; Winnicott, 1971). In other words, playfulness might be a condition for learning. Secondly, playfulness might offer schools and other educational systems a mean to develop themselves. Thirdly, the society itself is more and more open to or uncertain of the pathways it can offer to its youth; and for the next generation, it is of first importance to tolerate uncertainty, ambivalence, and the playfulness these can generate (Zittoun, 2006).

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*L'introduction proposée par les éditrices pose le cadre de ce numéro spécial et spécifie les choix théoriques qui le fondent. D'une part, il s'agit d'examiner des transitions dans le processus éducatif de manière à mettre en évidence certains aspects communs à des situations souvent étudiées isolément; d'autre part, il s'agit de conceptualiser les transitions*

*comme des processus situés dans le temps. Ces choix théoriques soulèvent des difficultés méthodologiques, comme celle de la préservation des dynamiques caractérisant les situations éducatives. Trois options méthodologiques sont présentées: les reconstructions temporelles (temporelles ou graphiques); des données collectées en temps réel; et un accent donné à l'articulation de l'individuel et du social. Chaque article est ainsi introduit selon les choix méthodologiques adoptés par les auteurs. Finalement, deux caractéristiques des processus de transition sont mises en évidence: l'importance des ajustements entre personne et son environnement qu'elles demandent; et les dynamiques ludiques qu'elles impliquent. De possibles implications pour la réflexion éducative sont suggérées.*