

Situated Vocabularies

A SITUATED AND AGONISTIC CONVERSATIONAL PLATFORM

Edited by

Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, and Francesco Vergani

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PART 3

San Vittore Situating Vocabulary

6. Leveraging Storytelling for Meaning-making

Mariana Ciancia

Politecnico di Milano - Department of Design

6.1 Introduction

For several years, the *Imagis Lab* research group at the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, has investigated the role of narrative in design processes (Bertolotti *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Piredda *et al.*, 2015; Tassinari *et al.*, 2017; Venditti, 2017; Venditti *et al.*, 2017), working in collaboration with academic institutions, professionals from various disciplines, citizens, public administrations, private companies, researchers, and independent organizations. In light of our primary research and didactic activities, we continue to address the power of stories (Roche & Sadowsky, 2003) to challenge public opinion (Winskell & Enger, 2014) and inform the creation of new narratives through design. Applying this to the prison context, specifically our work within Off Campus San Vittore, allows us to exploit the role of narrative and its societal connections within marginal contexts. We explore how the tensions and contradictions at the core of the human experience – our simultaneous need for individuality and belonging – can become fertile ground for generating new kinds of stories. Narrative,

in this context, is not simply a way to reflect reality but a way to actively shape it. Through an inclusive and participatory narrative-based design approach, we begin to see how the personal conflicts are not obstacles to be resolved, but raw materials to be worked with. In our practice, the narrative becomes both method and outcome – a framework through which people can recognize themselves, challenge assumptions, and imagine possibilities beyond current constraints. To achieve this, the San Vittore *Situated Vocabulary* was born as an adaptation of the Nolo Situated Vocabulary experience (Tassinari *et al.*, 2023; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023) conducted at Off Campus Nolo. Its specific goal is to build a shared vocabulary among the main actors of the San Vittore population: correctional officers, inmates, operators, and volunteers.

6.1.1 Narrative-based Design within the Wall

This chapter aims to identify the problematic nodes that emerge in adapting the Situated Vocabulary to the specifics of the San Vittore context and to explore the role of storytelling and transformative narratives in *meaning-making* processes.

In particular, the work explores how narrative can serve as a tool for valuing diversity, fostering social inclusion in marginalized contexts (Piredda, 2021; Piredda *et al.*, 2023), and supporting dialogue among diverse stakeholders (Anzoin *et al.*, 2014; Ciancia *et al.*, 2014; Ciancia & Piredda, 2022). The chapter's scientific contribution lies in the experimentation of collaborative storytelling practices to support transformation processes, where the construction and reconstruction of individual and collective identities address contemporary social and societal challenges. This study applies such an approach to individuals at the margins (hooks, 1984, 1989, 1994), not to alter their behaviour, but to create space for them to imagine and reimagine themselves through narrative construction. Rather than imposing external hegemonic narratives, the method invites participants to draw on the stories already embedded in their lived experiences. As Jerome S. Bruner observed, «Narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression» (1990, p. 77). In this sense, the act of narrative-making starts with the ways individuals relate to themselves and others. Building on this idea,

the narrative approach offers opportunities to surface alternative perspectives, possibilities, and identities often obscured by dominant social or institutional frames of reference.

Within Off Campus San Vittore (hereafter OC San Vittore), we adopted a strategic use of narrative and storytelling as complementary tools: on the one hand, as instruments within co-design processes, they support the identification of needs, resources, and possibilities within the prison context; on the other, they function as meaning-making devices that help generate new knowledge about spaces of detention and foster reciprocal connections between the prison and the city. Through an action-research approach, OC San Vittore leverages design as a driver of systemic change, challenging a historically reactive and emergency-driven framework while catalyzing *impossible dialogues* that foster engagement, self-expression, and collaboration among the diverse communities within the prison.

This perspective became particularly meaningful to me when I began to interpret our activities inside the prison ward through the lens of Erving Goffman (1956), who describes social life as a series of performances. In this framework, I see our role as occupying the space between otherwise impossible interactions – not due to physical separation but because of the underlying power dynamics that produce asymmetrical relationships between people (see Chapter 7).

Given such premises, we can consider the different internal communities – detainees, volunteers, social and health operators, and correctional officers – as performers, the outside society as the audience, and ourselves as *service specialists*, borrowing Goffman's term. As Goffman explains, a service specialist gains access to the backstage of the performance, becoming privy to its secrets without participating in its delivery or sharing the risks and rewards of being on stage. This role requires a strong ethical responsibility, as the knowledge we gain is often deeply personal or structurally sensitive.

During the vocabulary sessions, participants engaged with us in ways that allowed their perspectives to emerge. Acting as mediators, we gathered these different voices to produce narrative artefacts, carrying reflections and lived experiences beyond the prison walls and into the public sphere.

6.2 The San Vittore Situated Vocabulary

The San Vittore Situated Vocabulary started in July 2023 as a pilot activity that took place over two days with inmates from the Young Adults (YA) ward. Participants were identified from those already involved in *StoryLab* activities – the permanent collaborative storytelling workshop at the YA ward – and others recommended by ward educators based on relational and language criteria. Special attention was given to forming small groups and pairs for in-depth discussions on the meanings of selected words.

Starting with four keywords identified by the participants and their various meanings, the Vocabulary aims to fuel conversations about the needs and potentialities of San Vittore prison and explore new transformative actions. This process involves six steps:

1. Identification of keywords: through meetings with different groups, keywords are identified.
2. Discussion and comparison: in a series of small group meetings, participants from different clusters explore the different meanings of the selected words.
3. Collection and synthesis of meanings: researchers collect, compare, and analyse the various points of view and meanings, which are then synthesized into communicative artefacts, one per keyword.
4. Comparison with experts: these communicative artefacts serve as the basis for meetings with experts from different fields (philosophy, art, science, etc.).
5. Confrontation with the outside world: the collected words and contributions are shared with the outside world. Neighbourhood residents are invited to express their views on the words and their meanings, which will be shared in public spaces.
6. Collecting, synthesizing, and sharing: the contributions collected from the outside world will be shared with a broader part of the prison population.

The development of reflections and philosophical discussions with the residents of the YA ward began with the identified four terms.

26 detained people, 14 correctional officers, 18 operators (including

educators and healthcare staff), and 7 volunteers participated in this project, enhancing Vocabulary and promoting future beneficial interactions with the outside world.

6.2.1 The Context: Reading San Vittore Prison as a Social Transition

To reflect on the role of storytelling within the Vocabulary activity, it was beneficial to re-examine the application context through the anthropological lens. Prisons are closed environments designed to confine individuals, physically and socially isolated from society. In the case of San Vittore prison, it functions as a *remand prison* (*Casa circondariale*) – a type of facility primarily designated for individuals awaiting trial or serving short-term sentences. Specifically, it houses those serving sentences of less than five years, including those with a remaining sentence of less than five years (Ministero Della Giustizia – Istituti Penitenziari, n.d.). This distinguishes it from a *penitentiary* (*Casa di reclusione*), which is intended for individuals serving long-term sentences following final conviction. As a remand prison, San Vittore focuses on temporary detention rather than long-term rehabilitation. This status has significant implications for any participatory or narrative-based work within the facility. The population is highly dynamic, with a rapid turnover that makes it difficult to plan long-term engagement processes. The transient nature of detention in a remand prison means that individuals may leave the facility unexpectedly – due to release, transfer to another prison, or a change in custodial status such as being granted house arrest. As a result, narrative practices within San Vittore must rely on flexible, modular approaches that can adapt to uncertainty and make space for meaningful expression even within short or interrupted periods of participation.

This raises the question: how do prisons and their populations relate to society? If we conceptualize the prison as a transition space, its structure and purpose align with Arnold van Gennep's notion of the *rite of passage* (1960). A rite of passage is a ceremony or ritual marking «a person moves from one place in society to another» (p. 13), often involving a significant change in social status. Gennep continued underlying how the very man's life appears to consist of a series of stages

with comparable beginnings and ends because transitions between groups and social situations are perceived as inherent to life itself (p. 3).

Today, the term is widely used in anthropology and has also found prominence in popular culture and literature across many contemporary languages, thanks to the revised version of the concept proposed by Victor Turner (1977). According to Arnold van Gennep (1960), rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality and incorporation. During the separation phase, people leave their current state and prepare to move from one place or social status to another. The second stage is called transitional (liminal) and is identified as the in-between betwixt the first and third phases: one has left one place or status but has not yet entered or entered the next. Turner described this phase as «[...] a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states» (Turner, 1974, p. 57). Finally, in the incorporation phase, the transition has taken place, and the individual assumes a new identity or status, reintegrating into society (Turner, 1977). Van Gennep further refined this framework by categorizing the associated ceremonies: *preliminal rites* for the separation phase, *liminal* (or *threshold*) rites for the transitional phase, and *postliminal* rites for incorporation into the new state (van Gennep, p. 21).

The process of entering and leaving prison can be studied within the framework of these stages, resulting in the following:

- Separation: entry into prison marks the separation phase and the detachment from society. As van Gennep points out, the passage from one social position to another is underscored by a territorial passage: «This identification explains why the passage from one group to another is so often ritually-expressed by passage under a portal; or by an *opening of the doors* [...]. In fact, the spatial separation of distinct groups is an aspect of social organization» (van Gennep, 1960, p. 192).
- Liminality: the second phase represents the in-between state between the initial separation and the third phase. In this context, the prison functions as a liminal space – a suspended period that forces its inhabitants to exist on the peripheral edges of the social structure (Turner, 1977, p. 145). If, accord-

ing to Turner, liminality is understood both as phase and state disengaged from normal social modes and actions, it can also serve as a time for examining and revisiting core values and axioms of the culture in which it takes place (p. 167). During this stage, we activated the San Vittore SV, a dialogic tool that uses narrative to investigate the *social drama* of prison life, including its inherent power dynamics (see Chapter 7).

- Incorporation: represents the moment people are released from prison and reintegrate into society, reassuming their previous identity or embracing a new one.

6.2.2 Meaning-making in the Marge

These reflections allow us to conceptualize the time and space of prison through the concept of liminality:

- Liminality in time is understood as the period (weeks, months, or years) that people spend in prison (Thomassen, 2009).
- Liminality of beings refers to the various minority groups that inhabit the prison and can be considered liminal. This includes not only illegal immigrants but also the specific situation of detainees, charged but still awaiting trial. These people exist «betwixt and between home and host, part of society, but sometimes never fully integrated» (p. 19).
- Liminality in place understood the prison as a space of social transition.

The San Vittore SV activity was conducted within the prison, which is understood as a liminal space. Started in July 2023 as a pilot project, the activity spanned two days and involved inmates from the Young Adults (YA) ward.

The choice to begin with this group was deliberate, as these inmates, moving in the intermediate space of the prison, «are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial» (Turner, 1977, p. 95).

The prison, conceived as a liminal space, serves as a fertile ground for creating myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and values (Turner, 1974, p. 60). These cultural products can be produced through participatory processes that generate new meanings, simultaneously

affecting people on multiple psychobiological levels. Moreover, such outputs are not merely abstract classifications since they can inspire men to act and think (Turner, 1977, pp. 128–129).

The first phase – *Identification of Keywords* – was conducted in a plenary session held in the library of the Young Adults (YA) ward, with the participation of 15 inmates. After introducing the Vocabulary activity to the participants, the session moved into a discussion and translation phase, during which keywords were translated into Arabic and English, facilitated by the researchers and the same inmates.

After the collaborative discussion, participants voted to select the most relevant words. The resulting words included: *mother*, *father*, *god*, *fun/boredom*, *justice/injustice*, *life/death*, and *responsibility*.

It became evident that the initial three words – *mother*, *father*, and *god* – had profound meaning for each participant when it came time to refine the chosen words further. However, their unanimity in importance ran the risk of making conversations less lively. The inclusion of *god*, in particular, echoed Turner's emphasis on the importance of religion for human social and psychic structures.

This insight was shared with the group, and a young inmate serving as a *peer supporter* persuaded the others to set aside *mother*, *father*, and *god*. These words, however, were symbolically displayed on the library walls to acknowledge their importance. The group ultimately agreed to focus on the word *responsibility* for deeper discussion.

The morning session ended with identifying four words (or pairs of terms) to explore in the second phase: *fun/boredom*, *justice/injustice*, *life/death*, and *responsibility*.

After a discussion with the Department's educators about the results of the first phase, the afternoon session began with small group meetings, marking the start of the second phase – *Discussion and Comparison* – which continued into the following day. The relational dynamics among participants played a significant role in the discussions: some individuals openly acknowledged struggles with anger when in group settings, while others conducted the conversation almost entirely in Arabic, with the help of the Arabic-speaking researcher. One group consisted of four participants of Italian origin, three of whom were adults with prior prison experience. The most contentious issue turned out to be the idea of justice/injustice. The

adult inmates provided a unique viewpoint into the evolution of the prison system, offering a unique perspective on how societal diversity impacts both prison and broader society. One participant remarked, «It used to be that in prison there were criminals; now they put the starving in there» while another stated, «Today, the police don't make arrests – they trawl». Statements that resonate with Turner's observations on the role of novices in the liminal space of rituals, suggesting parallels between them undergoing a period of isolation and the detained people: «The novices are, in fact, temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no rights over others. [...] They are dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world» (p. 59).

The pilot activity, initially conducted with inmates from the YA ward in prototype form, resumed in September 2023 with additional user groups, including operators and correctional officers, to proceed with the next stages of the process (see Chapter 9).

6.3 Conclusion: Unveiling the Social Drama through the Power of Narrative

Thus, the prison is conceptualized as a liminal context, a border zone in which critical reflection on socio-cultural elements can be activated. It serves as both a space and a time where social dramas (Turner, 1986) unfold, engaging the various social groups inhabiting the prison: the detained individuals, correctional officers, educational and healthcare staff, and volunteers.

This environment forms the backdrop for the San Vittore SV activity, which functions as a dialogue device utilizing storytelling to reveal and understand social dramas (Figure 1).

These «dramas of living», as Burke (1945) terms them, emerge in groups of people who share values and interests (Turner, 1980, p. 149), with complex dynamics that can have a transformative impact on society (Cottle, 2008).

In the first two phases of the activity – *Identification of Keywords* and *Discussion and Comparison* – storytelling facilitates the emergence of words significant to participants, imbuing them with meaning

derived from group discussions and the negotiation of meanings. According to Scholes (1980, p. 207), «A word in any language carries with it a semantic field of potential meanings which is partly governed by a social code and partly individualized by the unique features of whoever utters or interprets the word». This underscores the importance of the narrative dimension established through dialogue with participants: through storytelling and the act of narrating, participants shape these words (or pairs of words), offering them more precise definitions (p. 207).

Moreover, storytelling plays a key role as a reflective activity, capable of:

- Assisting in the construction of self-identity and understanding oneself in relation to others (Glover, 2004).
- Providing meaning to what is being narrated, even reinterpreting past events or situations.
- Rearticulating values and goals that may conflict but gain cultural meaning through the narrative structure (Turner, 1980, p. 168).

In this regard, storytelling can be understood as a social practice, both as a mode of telling and as a method of knowing (Richardson, 1990).

As we move to phase three – *Collection and Synthesis of Meanings* –, the creation of communicative artifacts leads to cultural performances. According to Barbara Myerhoff (1980, p. 7) «cultural

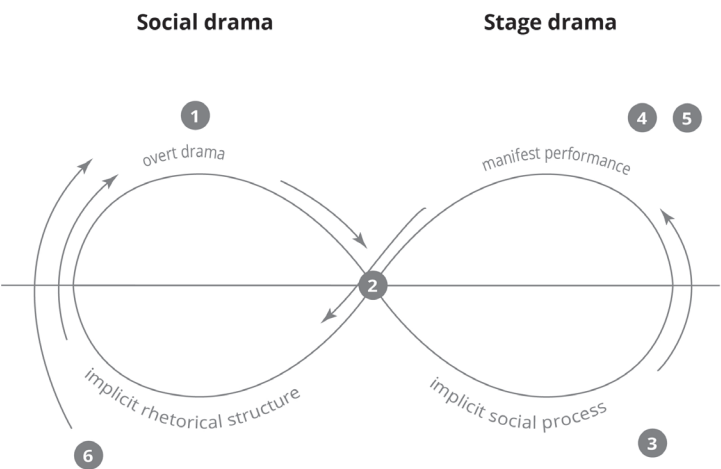


Figure 1.
Description of the
San Vittore Situated
Vocabulary stages,
aligned with Turner's
model of social drama.

performances are reflective in the sense of sharing ourselves to ourselves. They are also capable of being reflexive, arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves. As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware, conscious of our consciousness».

In steps four and five – *Comparison with Experts* and *Confrontation with the Outside World* – performance is manifest through storytelling, making the internal processes that remain invisible to the outside world explicit. As Glover (2004, p. 63) states, «narratives shared among a group of people help us come to understand the *communities* (however defined) to which individuals belong». By interpreting the terms within and beyond the different groups involved, we can gain insights into the collective meanings and identities of these groups (inmates, officers, staff). In this way, the vocabulary device and narrative act as tools to vicariously bridge social groups that share the same physical space but do not typically communicate with one another.

The final step – *Collecting, Synthesizing, and Sharing* – aims to facilitate internal discussions regarding what has been gathered from external stakeholders, enabling the circulation of new meanings. This process can thereby modify social dramas, positively influencing rhetorical structures.

In conclusion, the result is restoring voice to disempowered and marginalized individuals, challenging hegemonic narratives. The outcome is the ability to assign meaning to ongoing social dramas by activating processes of self-understanding (Turner, 1980) and dialogue that would otherwise be impossible through narrative processes, storytelling and cultural performances.

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The book explores the *Situated Vocabulary*, a participatory design research project aimed at co-designing vocabularies of shared meanings to feed conversations between situated communities and prompt transformative actions for their future.

Drawing inspiration from the vocabulary artifact and rooted in Hannah Arendt's definition of democracy, the project explores the transformative power of words to highlight both convergences and potential divergences, and the possible nuances of meanings in-between. Its objective is to disarticulate and potentially rearticulate different perspectives within a specific context, collaboratively gathering meanings from the diverse set of actors and stakeholders residing in it. The project presented in the book is framed in two different experimentations within the city of Milan and developed in the urban living labs of Off Campus. Off Campus, an initiative by Politecnico di Milano, aims to make the university's presence in the city more tangible, fostering researchers' responsibility, attentiveness to social challenges, and closeness to the community. By exploring case studies in the Nolo neighborhood and San Vittore prison (Milan, Italy), the book questions how designing for participation can embrace other worldviews, attempting to identify the radical interdependence deeply connecting them.