COSTRUIRE LA DIDATTICA.
TRA ANTICHE E NUOVE EMERGENZE PEDAGOGICHE

BUILDING DIDATICS.
BETWEEN OLD AND NEW PEDAGOGICAL EMERGENCIES

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Abstract

A key word of recent times is undoubtedly that of "interactions". The pandemic event has made it impossible for us to think in a fragmented way about single issues that are part of larger and more systemic ensembles. The points of arrival of technology, through the lens of training, should, rather than giving rise to sterile oppositions, lead to planning and consequent operations that contemplate, in the context of teaching, both physical presence and distance. The didactic direction is such if it engages the possible languages and related environments of teaching in presence and distance learning in order to learn, making the ability to study and the motivation to do so grow. If distance learning, or rather learning in the digital age, offers many opportunities to be explored and exploited to the fullest, an equal number must be demanded of that component of learning that takes place in presence. The latter plays its most significant cards on the field of empathic relationships, of being there with bodies and belonging to places, spaces and contexts as multiple and diverse as possible to learn to be in multiple forms and possibly authentic.

Una parola chiave degli ultimi tempi è senz'altro quella di "interazioni". L'evenienza pandemica ci ha restituito l'impossibilità di pensare in maniera frammentata a singole questioni che fanno parte di insiemi più ampi e sistemici. I punti di arrivo della tecnologia, attraverso la lente della formazione, dovranno, più che dar luogo a sterili contrapposizioni, spingere a progettualità e conseguenti operatività che contemplino, nell'ambito della didattica, la presenza come la distanza. La regia didattica è tale se impegna i possibili linguaggi e relativi ambienti della presenza e della distanza in vista di apprendimenti che facciano crescere la capacità di imparare e la motivazione a farlo. Se la didattica a distanza, o meglio la didattica nell'era del digitale, presenta chance da esplorare e sfruttare al massimo, altrettante dovrà rivendicarne quella componente della didattica che si compie in presenza. Quest'ultima gioca le sue carte più significative sul terreno della relazione empatica, dell'esserci con i corpi e dell'appartenere a luoghi, spazi e contesti quanto più possibile multipli e diversificati per imparare ad essere in forme molteplici e possibilmente autentiche.

Keywords

Digital Teaching, School Experience, Interactions, Presence and Distance
Didattica digitale, Esperienza scolastica, Interazioni, Presenza e distanza

Introduction

A key word of recent times is undoubtedly that of "interactions". The pandemic event has made it impossible for us to think in a fragmented way about single issues that are part of larger and more systemic sets, as well as to separate analytically closely connected aspects that can only be temporarily distinguished to bring new spaces of reflection to the analysis, but then they must be combined to allow a fuller understanding. We are all mutually connected, and this idea has also had effective channels of amplification for example through the famous phrase uttered by Pope Francis "No one is saved alone." The ties that interrelate our lives are part of ensembles in which the entanglements make it difficult for a mind that is accustomed to proceeding by separation to see clearly; a mind that poorly tolerates the need to adopt approaches of progressive approach, of fluctuating understanding, of reflective suspensions. Yet these are precisely the postures that we would and will increasingly need, in an era in which the pandemic has undoubtedly marked the transition to a "post", i.e. to a "everything will no longer be as it was before", which, besides representing an easy way to point out the differences and novelties that we are facing and that require unprecedented solutions, also and especially has the meaning of pushing thought to overcome fences, oppositions and antinomies that would have little reason to exist if we let ourselves be permeated and crossed not only by doubt and uncertainty, which as Dewey taught us represent the conditions of the growth of knowledge, but also by indefiniteness and *con-fusion* that characterize human events.

1. The school system in the post-pandemic era. Between presence and distance

A theme that has aroused wide interest and that especially stimulates pedagogical reflection is that of presence and distance in formative processes, therefore educational and instructional, as they are always the formal contexts in which cultural formation is carried out, which has fundamental declinations in the social and work/professional spheres. Another key term that should be juxtaposed to the previous ones is that of "methodology" which is at the heart of teaching, that is, of that action which, together with learning, characterises training systems. Methodology is based on technique, or rather it makes use of those tools offered by technology. Method-o-*logy* as *logos* reflects on the "how" and develops itineraries, in this case educational paths. The question, then, is not what we can do with the techniques at our disposal, but rather which techniques can be appropriate and coherent with respect to certain method options, notwithstanding that the former are not neutral and, at the same time, they exchange meanings with the contexts in which they are found. With regard to the school system, this defines the quality of its intervention through the game that is proper to any system between opening and closing components. If the former characterizes the influences between systems, or even better, the continuous interaction with other systems, the latter, as we know, involve the organization, and therefore a sort of back and forth between inside and outside aimed at better defining the structure and the sense of being a system between systems. It is starting, then, from their planning that systems should systematically redefine themselves, and openings are, above all, functional not to accept what is new as such, but rather to characterize systems better and better, and to push them in the direction of innovation and integration, both between internal components and towards the outside.

Technology offers tools that can be made available to a methodology. And it is the methodology that decides, since it is an operational way of interpreting phenomena and following up on these interpretations through a coherent choice of action; it can be imagined as a bridge, a gangway, to be built and to be walked, where, we could say, acting goes hand in hand with walking, and therefore is not completely predefined. In educational contexts, methodology is aimed at bringing about an encounter between goals and students, which also constitutes a connection of meaning on behalf of those who learn.

In the last few months, the public debate on distance learning yes or distance learning no (sometimes we even talked about IDD, Integrated Digital Didactics), as often happens when it comes to purely educational and pedagogical issues of social and political relevance, has been overall poorly documented and supported on an empirical and research level; also this time, it

seems that professionals and researchers, educational experts are not recognized as such, unlike, for example, those in the medical field; it is enough to think of the omnipresence in the last year of virologists and immunologists in television debates and on social networks. Unfortunately, it does not constitute a novelty the economic drift and at best common sense that runs through the issues relating to the school every time they rise to the theme of political decision-making; it is equally obvious that precluding the proximity of schoolchildren was a choice dictated by the health emergency, therefore we could say, indeed, that we have performed an emergency teaching. The problem is, in some ways, even trivial: the modalities of distance learning represent an opportunity in normal times, and therefore its goodness depends on how it is used and applied. If the technical aspects are aimed, as Heidegger indicated, at the "unveiling of the relationship between man and the world and between man and man" (Heidegger, 1976, p.52), those involved in didactics reveal the way in which learning and teaching processes are conceived and acted upon, as well as the relational space and the way to inhabit it. We know that, in general, the technical dimension in various professional fields works as an identity anchor. This kind of approach, which is quite widespread, refers to a way of considering procedural and technical components as de-contextualized and such that they possess a value in themselves that is independent of where, when, how and by whom, according to certain intentions and relational qualities, it defines or even endorses educational and didactic settings. Precisely in those contexts in which the human variable appears less controllable and susceptible to unpredictable alterations, the reference to data and technique is definitely reassuring and strongly contributes to the definition of identity; the contents of the disciplines and the pedagogical-didactical knowledge offer a plethora of expertise and a technical-instrumental set that greatly exceed in importance the relational components, the knowledge of oneself and others, and those of an organizational and cultural nature. Teachers, therefore, still tend to perceive their professional role primarily in terms of the transmission of a corpus of knowledge on the basis of pedagogical-didactic experiences, in the sense of the use of operational modalities already acquired and liable to enrichment, rather than in those of establishing supportive relationships in favour of students, even at the level of organization and systemic planning. (Geerink et al., 2010; Gonçalves et al., 2013).

Reflecting again on distance learning, as the modality used in the last year has been commonly and erroneously indicated, it appears incompatible with improvisation and does not simply consist of transferring from a public to a private space; moreover, unlike what could have been observed, it is primarily characterized by the fact that it is designed to be carried out at a distance, together with a specific teacher training including an operativity able to translate the quality of relationship into forms of action and, last but not least, the establishment of an alliance or educational agreement, which is always a condition co-essential to the occurrence of a path managed together by several actors (Rivoltella, 2011; Ghislandi & Raffaghelli, 2014). The most appropriate expression of "digital didactics", which is far from coinciding with distance schooling, can represent an evolutionary chance of the didactic arrangements, starting from a reconsideration of the existing ones. The challenge, therefore, lies in how schools and universities will be able to relaunch their own peculiar social space of training guided towards culture, towards disciplinary and professional knowledge; in other words, "the question is what will become of the capacity for study and learning (therefore of schooling) in the world to come" (Bonafede, 2020, pp.173-174).

1. Critical issues in today's didactics and peculiarities/resources of guided education

In the upcoming years we will certainly have to ask ourselves how we can evolve towards a school, we could say, analogical and digital, plural and interactive, not only sensitive and involved in the figures of contemporaneity, but also a true promoter of transformative processes in the direction of well-being. A school that, since decades, has been showing a growing impatience, a distance if not a foreignness with the languages and syntaxes of today's world (Oliverio, 2020), almost a structural inability to rethink the educational environment that can only be made up of a plurality of contextual opportunities.

What we find at the base is a defect of methodological and procedural-instrumental transposition of the didactic intentions that evidently recall the interpretations we give of learning and teaching. What kind of interpretations are we generally faced with? We can deduce these interpretations from the settings, so what is the setting we are faced with in the vast majority of cases? A frontal setting, based on transmission, repetition and verification. A setting that is in some way "natural", the one that teachers generally think of and to which, it should be emphasized, our students are accustomed. Even for us university teachers, when it comes to meeting our students, we use the word "lesson" and struggle to find other terms or expressions. It has been argued for decades now that this model could be coherent with socially restricted audiences, and that instead it turns out to be absolutely inadequate for socially, culturally and motivationally heterogeneous audiences (Vertecchi, 1994). Leaving aside, of course, the consideration that in the last few decades knowledge of how learning processes and cultural formation work have largely evolved. Therefore, knowledge cannot but be constructed, or rather co-constructed. And here we come to the painful notes: students are also sufficiently enveloped in a model and are resistant to participating in this co-construction. The obstacle that emerges is precisely this, and it is evident both when the so-called "lessons" are given in person and at a distance. It is obvious that frontal teaching that doesn't work in presence will not work at a distance. The reasons lie in its arousing boredom and demotivation, especially among those who would most need to take advantage of those opportunities to break free from family and territorial destinies that evidently convey messages of little acquiescence towards a school that transmits knowledge and know-how.

According to the report "Rewriting the Future. The impact of the Coronavirus on educational poverty" published by Save the Children, about 1 child out of 5 finds it more difficult to do his or her homework than in the past and, among children aged between 8 and 11, almost 1 out of 10 never attends lessons at a distance or does so less than once a week. Again, recent ISTAT data, relative to Italy, say that more than 4 minors out of 10 live in overcrowded homes, without adequate space for studying, and 12.3% do not have a computer or tablet at home to follow lessons from a distance, a percentage that reaches 20% in Southern Italy. Among children and adolescents who can use these tools, 57% must share it with other family members. Moreover, only 30% of children engaged in distance learning present digital skills such as to allow meaningful learning also through the use of online platforms. The severe lack of extracurricular opportunities, the difficulty in playing sports, engaging in other social activities, and going out with their peers has exacerbated a condition of social isolation: 51% of the adolescents surveyed prefer to spend their time surfing the Internet, 37% on social networks and 18% playing online games with people they do not know.

Focusing on didactics and teaching methods used throughout this pandemic period by means of platforms, a research conducted by Pietro Lucisano (Lucisano, 2020) shows that teachers, when facing a particularly critical situation, have preferred to use traditional didactic methods of a transmissive type rather than participatory and interactive ones. This tendency, mainly found at secondary school level, both of first and second degree, as it is rightly observed, can be traced back to the need to resort to familiar and better mastered forms of teaching that, compared to others, certainly more innovative and appealing but also in some ways more risky, can allow a better control over situations that are already unusual. These research data also reveal, however, that the panorama of teaching methods, apart from transmission, contains little else in terms of alternative possibilities for teaching, and that the field of student-centred teaching is, at least, impervious and little explored. Even in the field of evaluation there has been, if not a step backwards, certainly a moment of arrest in the process of growth of the culture and practice of evaluation, of which the pandemic situation has accentuated the components of measurement and control, further distancing the establishment of a new condition that sees students becoming able to carry out processes of self- and hetero-assessment, which, as it is well known, are fundamental acquisitions in the field of cultural and scientific training, with essential repercussions in the social and professional spheres (Broadfoot, 2007; Yilmaz, 2017, p.40 ; Wilson, 1996; Cunti,

2020). The results of the national research SIRD also show the same weaknesses, since they are in compliance with a frontal approach that, however, turns out to be insensitive to the presence, the evaluative choices are focused on written assignments and oral questions, relegating to marginal use alternative modes favouring the group and self-assessment (De Angelis, Santonicola, Montefusco, 2020, p.67).

It is well known that evaluation, in addition to its normative purpose, also has an instrumental purpose, insofar as the first is aimed at constructing a judgment of merit, having validity and value with respect to the object evaluated, and the second is aimed at supporting the actors in the choices that will be made as a result (Palomba, Banta, 1999); Moreover, the lack of student protagonism, especially in the field of evaluation, means that the students continue to depend on teachers for a judgment on the quality of their work and learning, and this prevents them from developing fundamental life skills, such as the ability to express evaluative points of view in complex environments such as those of real life, including professional contexts. Furthermore, and not of secondary importance, the evaluative and decision-making dimension is a constitutive part of successful learning, and this self-reflective and critical dimension should be an integral part of teaching (Boud & Soler, 2016; Grion & Serbati, 2019).

The end points of technology, through the lens of education, rather than giving rise to sterile oppositions between "apocalyptic" and "integrated" should lead to planning and consequent hypothetical, and therefore dynamic, operations that contemplate presence and distance. This would also mean questioning ourselves about these latter categories, asking ourselves, for example, how much distance we achieve in didactics in presence, and, at the same time, how much presence can be included in didactic processes at a distance. In the background, of course, lies not the idea that all the virtues are to be found in the former, but rather that we should try to read and enhance their intertwining, where distance on the one hand does not mean the absence of something, and on the other hand, we strive to take the greatest possible advantage of being in presence, as a precious asset that is no longer taken for granted. The didactic direction is such, then, if it engages the possible languages and relative environments of presence and distance with a view to learning that increases the same capacity and motivation to learn and to accept training as its own identity component (Entwistle & McCune, 2004).

In our country, we have emergencies of material and, above all, educational poverty with which even schools should have to deal. This is a widespread condition that requires ways of approaching culture and disciplines that are extremely different from those used in frontal teaching. For these young people, school is, or should be, an elsewhere; and, therefore, school, but I would also say university, under certain conditions and for certain areas, can and should be an elsewhere, even if the blended mode is used, but on condition that certain conditions exist. These conditions are obviously structural (the possession and availability of technological tools and suitable spaces, something that should not be underestimated), as well as having to do with skills. A distance education that is not limited to listening and rhapsodic intervention by students requires, in fact, digital skills to be acquired. Boredom and demotivation can be generated, very trivially, by the fact of being alone in front of the screen, by the fact of not physically sharing another space, by the fact of always being there, at home, or maybe somewhere outdoors, with a smartphone in your hand or in your pocket. School, as we have already pointed out, is a different context from the family and the friendship system, and this otherness should be valued and finalized, we could say, to build an elsewhere. Boredom and demotivation, again, that in a context of physical proximity can be mitigated with the "distraction" offered by the presence of peers, who, in a frontal setting, far from being resources for learning, are there like everyone else to learn in the same way, which, of course, cannot be provided at the present time. Therefore, it is clear that a frontal approach through distance learning can be doubly boring and monotonous, as well as inappropriate, because one should learn in a virtual context, where the physical one does not offer discontinuity, compared, for example, as already mentioned, to the familiar one. In these times, a very interesting and innovative area of research concerns the possibility of reading the emotions of students through programs that examine their facial

expressions. Alongside the aspect of cognitive enrichment, one might wonder what would be the best way to use such information. One of the risks that is feared is that the approach will always be the same, that is, that of perceiving incongruity with respect to an emotionality that we might define as "suitable" to allow learning, or to intercept, in other words, emotions or their derivatives that " divert from the path", that is to say, that hinder the development of a linear trend, which is the one proper to frontal teaching. In conclusion, interactivity certainly does not mean social interaction in presence, and distance learning can offer even refined forms of interactivity and cooperation, which require skills on the part of both teachers and students. In-person sociality is essential for putting bodies into play in an "other" context, in which we can try out and experiment, a context that is somehow protected and guaranteed where we can field our identities *in fieri*, which, as it is evident, also include what we know and what we can do. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the emphasis placed on the construct of "studenting", to be understood more than simply studying as the exercise of a function that takes place in a context, in the framework of the "relationship with a teaching and that can have outcomes in terms of learning but does not acquire its meaning (...) from them but from the encounter with an otherness, thanks to which the subject emerges to its potential" (Oliverio, 2020, p.46). On the other hand, it could be said that any didactics is fulfilled at a distance, the one that separates the subject from knowledge and from generative and transformative processes, a space to be covered marked by openness to new opportunities; the school experience, therefore, requires a distance that represents "one of the peculiar characteristics of the school experience in itself: school is that experience that by opening a distance from everyday life allows to re-invent it" (Rovea, Gobbi, 2020, p.133). The experience of otherness constitutes the very *raison d'être* of the school, not only with reference to the encounter with knowledge, but also with the being of others and with "the being of others in knowledge" of both teachers and peers, if it is true that the peculiarity of the school is to be a community that learns and lives the experience of knowing together (Biesta, 2013, 2016; Rovea, Gobbi, 2020).

If distance learning, or better, digital learning or learning in the digital age, presents opportunities to be explored and exploited to the fullest, just as many must be claimed by the component of learning that is carried out in presence, which obviously plays its most significant cards on the ground of empathic relationships, of being present with the bodies and belonging to places, spaces and contexts that could appropriately be as multiple and diverse as possible, to learn to be in many and possibly authentic forms.

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