

Towards a Democratic Laboratory School

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Abstract

Nowadays, a new model of democratic school must contemplate educational dimensions capable of realizing those ethical relationships that can face the now unpredictable learning challenges of contemporary global society. Those involved in education have the task of organizing education by taking into account both the differences of each student to enhance the full development of the single individual's potential, as well as the opportunity to enhance talent to ensure a merit system based not on competitiveness but on recognition of the different skills of each pupil in the class. Perrenoud affirms the importance for the teacher to question himself about his activities and the educational relationship with young people, also with a view to an observation process that the school itself can undertake in the context of an overall self-assessment process. Against this background, the reflection proposed here focuses, in particular, on flipped methodologies, those cognitive and formative processes that, developed within the school of competencies, can be declined in real answers related to the existential, professional and social needs of young people. The transition to this type of school has meant the enhancement of a teaching approach in which pupils take the lead of their own learning pathway, learning to manage those key competences, including digital skills, social and civic competences, which are necessary for personal growth. In the context of these educational issues, it becomes useful to reflect on technology in a broader perspective, not only as a means to learn something but as an "object" able to promote the exploitation of those dimensions of existence, such as cooperation, sense of judgement, and the principle of responsibility, necessary to overcome society's challenges. Taking a chance on a democratic school means possessing digital wisdom, borrowing an expression from Mark Prensky, namely, that quality that can come out thanks to the enhancement of human capabilities through a balanced use of technologies. The digital wisdom, today's teacher, will reflexively identify the circumstances in which technology can be a valuable aid to stimulate students' understanding and creativity. Therefore, a proposal for those involved in education, may be to consider technology in a different perspective which, as Calvani suggests, embraces a different level of technology, the "contour", the potential, that which can be moved in terms of communication and cooperation. In this sense, flipped technologies (or an inverted way of teaching/learning: a task is given to the class that can be a video to watch, a book to read, or an experience to be carried out, usually to be done at home) such as the Flipped Classroom and the method of the EAS (method, transforming the school into a laboratory school, can represent an important learning opportunity for the adults of tomorrow. In fact, these technologies, due to their implementation methods, put into effect those values, such as collaboration, reflexivity, sharing, in a learning pathway suitable for living in today's complex society.

Keywords: democratic laboratory school

Introduction

One of the main issues of the relationship between school, education and democracy concerns the possibility of finding an agreement between formal and informal practices thanks to the use of digital media. The distance between the two types of practices, in fact, does not concern so much the difficulties faced by adults in handling new technologies as the fact that, despite having a certain familiarity with digital, adults, specifically teachers, cannot translate this familiarity in teaching practice.

Nowadays society and the world of education in general are experiencing the so-called "third age of the media" characterized by the fact that the media show themselves as a sort of *connective tissue* (Rivoltella, 2018) that innervates the person's body. This pedagogical need also arises from the observation that one of the central characteristics of contemporary global society is the idea that the individual is going through what Colin Crouch (2018) has defined as "post-

democracy" or a phase in which the opportunities for participation in political life, for people, they are canceled due to other decision-making structures such as bureaucracies, lobbies, economic enterprises and the media system.

Today a school that can be defined as democratic, will have to develop between teaching, media culture and governance since, by acting as a coagulant factor between these three aspects, this school can also better define the role and function of the teacher. In this sense, such a school will also be able to propose a bottom-up democracy with the aim of defining a school model in which it will be possible both to develop the talent and merit of each student in the educational relationship, and to welcome those educational stimuli, read in the terms of "integrated educational environments" (Galliani, 2012) able, that is, to concretize those ethical dimensions to allow young people to go through the now unexpected formative experiences of society.

Whoever deals with education will have to create a didactics of inter-actions between formal, non-formal and informal contexts, taking inspiration from everyday communicative-social actions in order to organize a school context that is able to enhance the full development of the unexpressed potential of every student. This is why it becomes necessary to approach pedagogically the use of technologies in the classroom since the urgency of today is to consider not the quantity of media used but which critical ideas to employ in linking the various media in relation to principles of sharing, collaboration, creativity; all this will lead the teacher to reflect on technologies in a different perspective, that is on what they can move, thanks to their use, in terms of emotions.

1. School and young generations. Are we moving towards new educational paths?

There have been two phenomena that have crossed society over time: on the one hand the cultural aspects of late modernity have participated, isolating individuals, from the weakening of the social capital of society itself (Putnam, 2000) on the other hand social networks, in the age of connectivity, pushed people to socialize and belong (Maffesoli, 1988).

«That is why, the private sphere instead of withdrawing from the public one, explodes in it making our society an outward one, a society in which what is "personal" is increasingly becoming "public"» (Rivoltella, 2010, p. 513). What appears to be a staple of the complex society is the presence of a strong educational need which today is fed by a series of factors including the pervasiveness of digital media, the increase of the social and economic crisis, an ever-increasing generalized cultural multiplicity.

These transformations have fostered the emergence of the crisis of traditional educational agencies, schools and families which, by becoming increasingly fragile in educating and training the younger generations, also fuel the loss of planning "made inevitable by the fact that our society offers to young people less and less opportunities to carry out their projects, professional and familiar ones, and in general projects of reasonable life "(Donati, 2010, p. 586). This is because in today's society the individual is still in search of those cognitive tools needed to tackle a series of open anthropological issues, including the loss of certain reference points, the effect that new technologies can have on emotional and cognitive processes, being able to manage the articulated forms of communication that come out thanks to social media, the emerging of polytheism of values.

We are approaching that threshold beyond which the educational problems could become dramatic in the sense that the young generations would be left to themselves - they should increasingly make do by themselves - in their own human, professional and moral formation, because the training agencies fail to be up to the challenges for the simple fact that they are conceived as not qualified (not legitimate) for this task (Donati, 2010, pp. 584-585).

This complex situation has, therefore, crossed the models of family, society, authority, relationship between adults and the youthful universe since the traditional schemes of an authoritarian type, according to some authors (Pietropolli Charmet, 2000; Lancini, 2015), have given way to more dialogical and emotional models. Just think, for example, of the figure of the father (Recalcati, 2011; Zoja, 2003; Perfetti, 2018) who has moved from an authoritarian dimension to a dimension of mothering and care, or to changes in the family system itself since we live, today, several types of families (Contini, Gigli, 2011).

Knowledge has fragmented and specialized, running the risk of being circumscribed in contexts separated from larger social environments, thus placing the educational problem of a possible and ever more urgent unitary recomposition (Morin, 2014; Giroux, 1989).

These transformations have influenced the world of school in the social, communicative, didactic, affective field and also the educational relationship itself; education and teaching, in fact, are going through a moment of strong crisis marked by the disappearance of some of those responsibilities that should, instead, define the education system, that is, increase knowledge, foster pupils' skills, offer real benefits in the world of work.

As Riva observes, "we find ourselves in the midst of a stormy and very complex historical-social phase in which both families and schools coexist, to varying degrees according to contexts, old models, values, and new glances, practices, behaviors" (Riva, 2015, pp. 24-25). The crisis of the educational issue concerns, in this way, the teachers who find themselves in the situation of no longer having the collaboration neither of the institutions, nor of the families that it is as if they are willing to yield, to the teachers, only a sort of "trial period" (Enguita, 2001). Therefore, those involved in education must face a delicate and complex educational work both to prepare a sort of value platform that facilitates this transition between the old and the new, and to critically elaborate the educational problems internal to the change of people, to the relationship among the groups, between the institutions, between those who plays fundamental roles in the school.

Suffice it to think of the same reforms that the educational institution has gone through, since these same reforms have blamed the weight of this transition, advancing changes that, however, attempt to propose innovations on old principles, clashing with mentalities that are not ready for change, with entrenched educational models in previous systems, in the context of a continuous alternation of apparently innovative proposals but, in reality, set on past ideological dimensions.

Bauman (2011) in *The individualized society*, regarding the education of young people, stated that coordinating the commitment to "rationalize" the world with the effort to educate rational and adequate people to inhabit that world is no longer a credible educational project because, "Preparing for life", a sure goal of every education process, should be coordinated on one side with cultivating the will to cohabit with the uncertainty and complexity of today's society and, on the other hand, with the absence of reliable authorities. Again, this preparation for life would also have the obligation to carry forward the values of difference, of acceptance and reinforce those dimensions of criticism and self-criticism necessary to take responsibility for one's choices and their consequences. Now, the sociologist's criticisms of the dynamics of society in relation to the world of education focus attention also on another current problem that is that the school fails to meet the needs of a society in continuous transformation. Baldacci (2014), in relation to the complexity of the current educational situation, reflects in what idea of school, today, it is necessary to believe so that the educational apparatus can work. This is because the scholastic institution is crossed by two ways of seeing the binomial education-teaching, a way that has to do with the idea of "human capital" curved on production and efficiency, and a way of seeing in the school that institution capable of promoting "human development" aimed at enhancing the promotion of personal freedom. In other words, beyond the problems that the school experiences in adapting to the training needs of the younger generations, the underlying uncertainty is precisely the lack of an idea of school that is meaningful and suitable for today's cultural demands.

In today's society, the consolidation of digital media that has become an integral dimension of everyday practices, increasingly pushes the world of education to reinforce the thought that this idea of school must be implemented in capturing, in this educational place, that privileged educational model to direct young people towards social integration, sharing, confrontation because the school must act as a test bed for the construction of the self, of its own values, of its own ways of relating to the surrounding world, of its own strategies to face reality, of one's self-esteem, of the expectations of effectiveness (La Marca, 2016, p. 5). To complicate the cognitive frame of reference of young people there is also the fact that the latter, living a sort of structural union with the network, approach knowledge as a complex of liquid experiences, in the process of becoming, not only produced by experts of the various areas of culture but from anyone who wants to intervene to spread that given topic online. In this perspective, the world of schools in particular and the world of education in general are launching signs of great concern because free access to the network makes young producers active in personal paths of knowledge (Bolter, Grusin, 2000).

Furthermore, this free access to the web has meant that the young generations, living immersed in these new digital and educational dimensions together, are also able to experience a redefinition of the boundaries between public and private since intimacy today is called to show itself daily on the stage of digital media. The now widespread tendency to publicly exhibit feelings and emotions, has caused a sort of collapse between public and private as the public sphere presents itself as a narrative and emotional space. From this point of view, the neologism *publicity* (boyd, 2007) indicates this mixture of the public sphere and the private one which, generating a new culture of intimacy, pushes the younger generations to live meaningful relationships in a dimension of extimacy (Tisseron, 2001), or a dimension in which to express the need to publicly show intimate aspects of one's self.

This complex educational situation arises from the fact that this link between the media universe and the world of education risks exposing young people to a possible emotional impoverishment (Galimberti, 2008; Benasayag, M., Schmit G. 2005). The digital natives (Prensky, 2001), for example, have strong multitasking abilities because it is as if they had biotechnological qualities that allow them to use technologies as well as to have a cognitively broader form of reflection than previous generations. All this pushes the school world to deepen the issue of education and communication because, these two cornerstones of education, can no longer be read as problematic phenomena since, what comes forward, is a real epistemological problem, that is, a problem that concerns the ways in which the human mind produces knowledge and knowledge. To launch new challenges to the world of education there is also the fact that we are witnessing a change in the idea of "experience".

Simmel (1905), in an almost prophetic manner, used the expression *Erlebnis* to refer to a modality of occasional and affectively neutral experience, to which an equally fragmented and indifferent self referred to in *blasé* as the emblematic manifestation of modernity.

In the wake of the Simmelian thought, we can see the great dependence that young people experience above all from supra-individual apparatuses, a sort of atrophy of sensibility and the inability to perceive the qualitative differences between some form of experience. These are issues that move who deal with education, in the direction of a constant search for new educational paradigms capable of being able to speak the language of young people in order to orient them towards a value platform that is common to all.

Today kids experience forms of mediated experience, an experiential form in which three moments are missing: the space-time immediacy, the encounter and the interaction between people. The mediated experience is the child of the advent of the network and is characterized by the lack of physical co-presence of the people who enter into a relationship and by the use of mediated channels that allow a remarkable interactivity (Cesareo, Magatti 2000). Let's think about the relationship of young people with traditional media, such as the book. Kids, for the most part, read the books on the Tablet, buy them online, read the news headlines quickly on social network pages.

In this sense, the meeting and the relationship between people comes to change with respect to the past, since we go less and less into the bookstore and even if they buy paper books, most young people do that online. Scientific studies on this issue (La Marca 2016; Rivoltella, 2015) have shown that the effects of living an almost structural relationship with technology could lead to pushing this generation to be a strongly individualistic one, with little interest in socializing in life real because they would prefer to experiment more with forms of virtual socialization. The need therefore arises to reflect pedagogically on the criteria used by the educational institution to work with various media in relation to the principles of collaboration, creativity and reflexivity of young people. Prensky (2010; 2013) in his last reflections on the relationship between media and education, has taken into consideration the idea of the need for a "digital wisdom" perceived as the characteristic that can arise thanks to a balanced use of technologies in relation to the educational area. The teacher imbued with digital wisdom, in other words, will be able to distinguish the conditions in which technology can be a valid stimulus to facilitate communication and creativity, thus increasing the cognitive resources of young people. The realization of an innovative teaching, that is able to realize a model of democratic school, also means to bet on a school in which, thanks to those teachers who look at technologies not only as a tool but above all as a means to stimulate the emotional part of young people, value differences can be developed in a specific educational environment (Spadafora, 2018).

A school understood in this way, in order to place itself as that space in which to reflect on teaching as a path capable of carrying out a renewed laboratory of democracy, will have to focus on a teacher who will also have to follow the path of self-reflection in relation to his own way to relate to the pupil who will always have to be considered as "a difference towards which we can empathically decentralize to favor the development of his unexpressed potential" (Spadafora, 2018, p.101). According to Perrenoud (2017), indeed, the teacher who works with a critical sense and passion, will also be able to ask himself about the type of action to be carried out in the classroom because, by avoiding any form of power, he can stimulate those manifestations of empathy that can encourage the growth of young people's potential. This idea of self-reflection of the teacher, wise and training designer, if really considered by those involved in education, can also push each student to a critical use of technology by encouraging both the dimension of inclusion and the capacity to plan one's own life path. In fact, only such a teacher, aware and critical of the formation of the life project of each and everyone in the class, can re-establish a formative pact for the school for a conception of human capital as a possible generator of psychological, emotional and cultural development (Spadafora, 2018, p. 102).

2. The school as a laboratory of democracy. Emotional education and new technologies

The reflection on the importance of affectivity in a person's life certainly has an ancient history. Bloom (1976), for example, emphasized the presence of a strong link between affectivity, motivation and learning since the affects, in his thinking, have always held an important position in the processes of knowledge and socialization that are built in the classroom. Again, Vygotsky, reflecting on the relationship between emotion and learning, wrote that: "The same thought originates not from another thought, but from the sphere of the motivations of our conscience, which contains our passions and our needs, our interests and impulses, our acts and our emotions" (Vygotsky, p. 225). More recently Goleman (1995), starting from a concept already developed in 1990 by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990) in the article "Emotional Intelligence", spoke of emotional Intelligence to refer to the fundamental role that emotions play in relational sphere. According to the American psychologist, strengthening "emotional intelligence" is a fundamental process for the psychological well-being of the individual as emotions guide the path of life; the "emotional teachings" assimilated during childhood and adolescence, in fact, will guide the emotional responses of the adult person.

One of the most recent and most important studies of the link between emotions and experience, is certainly that of Martha Nussbaum (2000) who in the text *Hupheavals of thought: the intelligence of emotions* has highlighted, with reference to music, anthropology, art and literature, the importance of addressing a critical discourse on the education to emotions as, the latter, are presented as a sort of "lighthouse" that guides the individual in managing his relationships. In this direction the Nussbaum reflects on compassion as that emotion that is able to act as a prerequisite for policies that protect the rights of citizens and for the promotion of human dignity and freedom.

Now, in the light of these observations, a school understood as a laboratory of democracy will also be a school that, educationally betting on an education of emotions, is able to nourish in young people the desire to create opportunities for reflection on the importance of dialogue in the meeting, sharing, opportunities that can allow young people to live an idea of citizenship suited to the complex dynamics of society.

In this extremely problematic situation, the school suffers contradictory thrusts that ask it now to return to guaranteeing the seriousness and quality of the studies ... Furthermore, on the one hand it is claimed that the school restores a rigorous discipline, on the other it is asked to become an agency containment of youth distress. The company, in other words, puts at school conflicting needs that put it in a situation of "double constraint": whatever it does, for some reason it is wrong and is submerged by a shower of criticism ... (It is therefore necessary)¹ to set the affective education in ways complementary to school education and integrated with it (Baldacci, 2009, p. 8).

This is why the teacher, today, will have to work on a different level of technology, on what a wise use of technologies is able to move at the level of communication, collaboration, reflexivity and sharing. The educational and didactic role of the teacher, thus, will be based on the centrality of the student focusing on the motivational side of learning, on the role played by socialization, on aspects that have affective roots. It will therefore be necessary to reflect on the link between the affective needs of the young person and new teaching practices such as, the need to confront each other in order to deal with the deepening of some topics, the need to work on themselves and with oneself, thus seizing the need for regulating the cognitive circuit on one's inner "clock", the sense of belonging, that is to say, to be part of a learning community, the urgency to personalize, that is, to be able to reflect on what the prospect may be to increase one's own experience leaving a mark of one's own action in the educational place (Weyland, 2016). A school activity that, for example, can move in the direction of an educational synergy between the emotional dimension and the didactic practice is that of the Flipped Classroom, that is reversing (to flip) the traditional dimensions of the lesson, the frontal part and the individual study as if the frontal lesson will take place at home and study in the classroom.

To make pupils work at home, the teacher can either take advantage of online resources or create these resources on his own. This strategy makes it possible to create products that meet the specific needs of content, teaching methodology, educational communication of each teacher, but requires the development of technological and above all methodological skills completely different from those of the lesson face to face. For the technological aspect there are a multiplicity of services and free access tools to do *screencasting*, that is video recording of the PC screen while viewing the contents (Cecchinato, 2014, p. 15). Managing in the classroom the individual study will require, from the teacher, an organization of educational activities centered on learning, "that is, dedicating the time of the classroom to learn rather than to teach" (Ivi,

¹ The parenthesis is of the writer.

p. 16). This type of teaching will therefore be able to focus on the affective dimension of the student, on his reflection, on his motivation, on the ability to critically examine the contents. The teacher would thus have the role of assisting and advising young people in realizing their own circuit of knowledge, valuing their attitudes.

This way of teaching can be functional since the younger generations have a structural link with digital technologies which, by now, have changed their way of gaining experience, relating and learning. The *Flipped Classroom*, could thus present itself as a possibility to bet on a school model able to carry out an educational paradigm that focuses on a teacher "facilitator" of the learning processes and supporter of the expansion of cognitive abilities of young people. Whoever deals with education, then, can really put into practice that sense of education that can motivate young people to share and collaborate. Students would thus find themselves working together with the teacher on the ability to achieve both emotional attitudes such as the understanding of their own inner time and that of others, and emotional ones, that is the realization of certain personal characteristics as critical understanding towards the potentiality of one's own affective dimension (Baldacci, 2009). Today, A democratic school that looks forward to the future is a school that, focusing on the affective dimension implemented by a balanced use of technologies, can bet on the community and intersubjective dimension of the person, idea the latter, supported also by economic and sociological reflections that affirm that communication, collaboration and sharing represent salvation anchors for the human being. In this direction, Klein (2007) states that: «the best way to recover from impotence is to help: have the right to be part of a collective recovery». (p.533). A school laboratory of democracy, then, will be a school able to recognize, as generators of democracy, also understanding, compassion, empathy, respect for the other (Dato, 2015) since, such school, must be able to develop in young people both the rational and the emotional dimension so that they can travel the paths of human and cultural formation together and become:

supportive and responsible citizens; open to other cultures and ready to express feelings, emotions and expectations in respect of themselves and others; capable of managing conflicts and uncertainties and making choices and making autonomous decisions by acting responsibly (MIUR, 2009, consulted 05/05/2019).

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