

SCHOOLS IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY: PROPOSALS FOR MOTOR SCIENCES DIDACTICS

LA SCUOLA IN EMERGENZA: SUGGERIMENTI PER UNA DIDATTICA DELLE SCIENZE MOTORIE

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Abstract

The COVID-19 health emergency has presented us with a complex scenario leading to a sudden reorganization of the model and goals of the national education system. Teachers and students have had to rediscover a new meaning in their daily meetings, carried out no longer in the classrooms but in virtual environments. The challenge has been even more difficult for Motor Sciences teachers, who have had to give continuity to their educational action by sacrificing sports and motor skills, a key component of this discipline. The need to rethink didactics, by adapting it to the current situation, can however provide an opportunity to make an active contribution and turn the difficulties into opportunities, allowing this discipline to emerge from the marginal position in which it has been relegated, and rediscover a new centrality in the educational project.

L'emergenza sanitaria da Covid 19 ci ha messo di fronte a uno scenario complesso che ha spinto a una repentina riorganizzazione del modello e della finalità del sistema educativo nazionale. Insegnanti ed allievi hanno dovuto trovare un nuovo senso al loro incontrarsi quotidiano, non più nelle aule scolastiche ma all'interno di ambienti virtuali. La sfida è stata ancora più ardua per i docenti delle Scienze Motorie che hanno dovuto dare continuità alla loro azione educativa rinunciando alla parte sportiva e motoria, componente essenziale della disciplina. La necessità di ripensare alla pratica didattica, adattandola al momento, può fornire però l'occasione per dare un contributo fattivo affinché le difficoltà si trasformino in opportunità cosicché la disciplina esca dalla posizione marginale in cui è stata relegata e trovi nuova centralità nel progetto educativo.

Keywords

Motor Science; Innovative Didactics; COVID-19; School
Scienze Motorie; Didattica Innovativa; COVID-19; Scuola

Introduction

The terrible Covid-19 pandemic that has affected more than 130 countries around the world, forcing them to take emergency measures to safeguard the health of their citizens, has kept about 80% of the world's student population away from schools and universities. From the very onset of this pandemic, the Italian Ministry of Education has urged the entire educational community to give continuity to the didactic activity via telematic means, already familiar to teachers and learners, but only partially and not as an alternative to classroom support. In terms of speed and efficiency, the answer has been different from case to case because, while some schools operating in virtuous social and economic realities have been able to offer remote courses immediately, others have registered a total shutdown. The extraordinary moment has also brought to light critical issues; these have been related to the lack of access to the Internet for some students living in socio-economically disadvantaged situations, to an unsuspected lack of familiarity of the learners with the use of word processing or calculation programs, and to the initial opposition of the teaching staff (even if only in part) to remote work.

Specifically, for physical education, the challenge has been (as is still) even more difficult. It is a discipline which, by its very nature, promotes motor activity and healthy lifestyles, and has required students to replace movement with sedentariness. How to deal with the transition from the “real” to the “virtual” gym? Or better, how to compensate for the lack of exercise by continuing to pursue disciplinary goals? How to turn a condition that, at the moment, appears to be strongly limiting into an opportunity?

1. Distance learning and motor education

The Italian Law Decree no. 18 dated March 7, 2020, also known as “Cura Italia”, impeded any form of sports practice carried out outside of one's own home; as a consequence, any proposal to continue gymnastic activities to be carried out individually had to be excluded. Still today, practical sports activities under the direction of the teacher who operates in videoconference mode, due to problems related to insurance aspects, are to be excluded. In the case of an accident suffered by the student during home exercise, he or she could not be safeguarded by insurance coverage. Teachers therefore need to focus their didactics on theory by adapting the contents, means and didactic tools; all this with the awareness that, in the absence of practice, an essential element in the process of turning theoretical knowledge into a “knowledge-in-action” is missing. This didactic proposal, which can be applied even in normal situations, involves the use of comics as a didactic tool. When students are forced to spend many hours at the computer, sometimes suffering a heavy workload, comics are perceived as an element with a strong playful connotation and are associated with a recreational dimension. In this way it is possible to lower the stress of school performance and, within the disciplinary epistemological framework, to propose contents related to physical education on which to graft a subsequent in-depth study.¹

2. Teaching sports through comics

Although reading (even that for recreational purposes) is generally associated with the idea of relaxation, thus being a world away from sports performance which involves movement, training and sacrifice, the two worlds are less distant than they may appear. In fact, it is possible to use comics as a starting point to explore the real meaning of sport, competition and even the

¹ I. Mattozzi, *Che cosa si può fare apprendere con la storia rappresentata artisticamente? Tre esempi*, in P. Lotti and E. Monari, *Incroci di linguaggi. Rappresentazioni artistiche del passato nella didattica della storia*, Milan, 2016, pp. 81-82

technique of the different disciplines. When submitted to the students' attention as an object of study, it enables greater dialogue with the other subjects of study and allows to build up, together with them, a modular path particularly suitable in the case of SEN students within the class group. Comics helps students improve their reading and writing skills, understand complex concepts more easily, and approach - or even become passionate about - reading. The length of the texts and stories, which are considerably reduced compared to classic literary works, prove to be much easier for children suffering from pathologies affecting the decoding of texts. Moreover, compared to books, their strength is the visual component, a language that children are accustomed to, given the increasing amount of time they spend in contact with visual media; just think of the most popular smartphone apps, such as *tik tok* and *instagram*, and the time spent on them. Finally, being a concentrate of different expressive models such as texts, images and sounds, comics are more capable of intercepting the different cognitive styles which can be found in heterogeneous classes. Thus, it is a valid, original and engaging tool that can be employed to facilitate learning, and is very close to the communicative models used by young people. To exploit its full potential, however, the first reading should be followed by a deeper phase of critical study, which serves as a springboard to complex experiences of criticism, analysis and work.

To be used for educational purposes, with motor and sports activities at its core, is the *mokumentary*² *Goat*, which belongs not to the type of comics known as comic strips (generally published in newspapers), but to *graphic novels*; it is a narrative genre in which the story does not proceed sequentially but, as in the structure of novels, is self-contained.³ It therefore includes all the typical elements of the reading texts proposed to middle and high school students, i.e. beginning, development of the story, epilogue, character development, and conflict. This is not a secondary aspect, as it enables to be used for educational purposes as an alternative to the usual readings. Subsequently, there is the graphic element that makes the comics more captivating than the typical "novel". It is precisely the image the supporting element for SEN students, who find difficulties with very long text paragraphs and sophisticated writing, because the dialogical form of the balloons and the graphic element make it easier to understand it all. In *GOAT*, which is the acronym of *Greatest Of All the Times*, the protagonist is not a super hero wearing tights and a cape, but an invented character belonging to the sports world, a talented young tennis player named Idris Arslanian. *GOAT* is a comic "fake documentary" that guides us through the backstage of the tennis world, through a mix of imaginary characters and real protagonists of the international circuit. A story of rises and falls, desires and obsessions, failures and successes, able to excite even those who are not familiar with this sport. In addition to celebrating great champions such as Federer, Nadal, Murray and Djokovic, who have no equal in the history of this sport, it also turns the spotlight on those players who compete in minor tournaments, far from the attention of newspapers and television. This is interesting also because the language used recalls that of tennis manuals. Then there is the inner and emotional dimension of the protagonist who lives a controversial relationship with tennis, lights a light on the complex values intrinsic to the sport and on the perverse drifts of victory as the only possible result.

In order to be effective, the didactic proposal needs to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, involving not only teachers of physical education teacher, but also their colleagues teaching other subjects. The following diagram shows a possible development of the didactic action to be implemented by the teaching staff; it is worth pointing out that it is a purely indicative scheme, which must be adapted to the reference school cycle and to the study path.

2 Neologism that comes from the fusion of the words "mock" and "documentary". It indicates a particular genre, which simulates the style of the documentary, by hiding instead the construction of a fiction. It is also known as fake documentary. See "Mocumentary" on www.treccani.it [accessed on April 23, 2020].

3 E. Rosso, *Goat. Greatest of all the times*, Rome 2019.

Table 1

Interdisciplinary didactic proposal: "Goat" - <i>Greatest Of All the Times</i> comic strip	
Italian language	Narrative style, type of story
Foreign language	Sports language and language influences
History	History, birth, and development of Tennis
History of Arts	Comics as art form and artistic style
Motor and Sport Sciences	Tennis technique, organization of tournaments, traumatology, pathologies linked to sports practice
Humanities	Sports and social inclusion, ethics of sport, the Olympic spirit
Law and Economy	Sports legislation; benefits and costs of sports events organization
Natural Sciences	Benefits of sports activities
Technologies and Techniques	Evolution of materials and equipment: rackets, clothing, training equipment

More specifically, as for the didactic action of the Motor Sciences teacher, comics can be the cue to deepen the theoretical aspects of Tennis, and to anticipate the technique and tactics of the discipline that will be played once back in the gym. To try to stimulate participation and knowledge, clips of the most important matches played by the real characters included in the graphic novel and easily available on the youtube platform can also be displayed. The story in pictures proposed also provides an opportunity for a deep reflection on the theme of emotion management, and on the motivational component considered essential in the athlete's training and preparation. The protagonist of Goat, Idris Arslanian, has a very controversial relationship with tennis; this is partly due to excessive pressure from his mother, a professional tennis player who would like to make her son a champion. It is not uncommon that pressure from the family or from outside can cause the athlete a condition of psychological discomfort. It is enough to mention tennis players such as André Agassi, Viktoryia Azarenka, or football players like André Gomes and Gianluigi Buffon...⁴. The teacher can introduce the topic by enriching it with athletes, former athletes and mental coaches talking about their experience and the way in which working on the athlete's mind can contribute to performance improvement⁵, to controlling states of activation and anxiety⁶, and to regaining self-confidence following serious injuries or poorly performing moments in one's own career⁷.

4 See the article worked out by M. Strada, *Lo sport e la depressione. Serena Williams, Phelps, Buffon e gli altri, parlarne fa bene*, Corriere della Sera, Sport, 8 agosto 2018, by clicking on the link <https://www.corriere.it/sport/cards/sport-depressione-serena-williams-phelps-buffon-altri-parlarne-fa-bene/pruzzo-ho-sofferto-depressione-il-calcio-piu-dolore-che-gioia.shtml> [access on april 23, 2020].

5 A. Cei, *Allenamento mentale degli atleti*, in F. Lucidi, *Sportivamente. Temi di psicologia dello Sport*, Rome, 2011, pp. 339-341.

6 S. Franzoni, *Attivazione e disattivazione nello sport* in F. Lucidi, *Sportivamente*, quot., pp. 365-368

7 On sports psychology see the pioneering but always valid work F. Antonelli e A. Salvini, *Psicologia dello Sport*, Roma, 1978. See also the essays contained in F. Nascimbene, F. (edited by), *Guida alla Psicologia dello Sport, verso un approccio relazionale – ipertestuale*, Milano 2011 e Id., *Le emozioni nella Psicologia dello Sport*, Psicologia contemporanea, Milan, 2017, pp. 47-49.

3. Concluding remarks

Whether for distance learning implemented to ensure continuity of training in emergency situations or for a normal modular path within regular school activities, the interdisciplinary approach proposed can make Motor Sciences gain a more central role within the school context, with the presence of experts from other disciplines during physical education lessons and vice versa, as a proof of the correlation between the different subjects. In fact, although physical education at school provides transferable skills, such as teamwork, fair behavior, respect and body awareness, skills that students can immediately apply to other school subjects and in life, it is too often considered as ancillary to the disciplines for which the curricula provide more lesson hours.⁸ This distorted perception and the idea that motor experience at school is merely “recreational” has denied the discipline the possibility of making the concept of movement become a general cultural heritage, although it is a mediator of cognitive and relational learning, of psychophysical well-being, and of motor and sports skills. This also marks the gap between the condition of this discipline in our country and what happens abroad; outside of Italy, physical education at school provides everyone with the opportunity for improving personality and social relationships⁹, creates the conditions for the consolidation of permanent sports habits essential to maintaining a dynamic health, and offers opportunities for aggregation in a social system in which the individual tends to seek refuge in the social and escape from collective experiences of growth and confrontation.

The unprecedented challenge that motor science professionals face, both in the school and university world, can become an opportunity to develop a strategy for improving the conditions in which a subject is taught. This discipline has now the opportunity to invest in itself, becoming ready to have a less and less marginal role in the school curriculum and to gain the social consideration it deserves, also in consideration of the positive effects it has on the persons, both as individuals and in the social contexts in which they express their personality. In the framework of the promotion of behaviors functional to civil life, Motor Sciences teach the ability to be in conflicts respecting the “rules of the game”, to recognize them as a challenge to be faced and overcome, and not as a condition to get rid of by looking for an easy way out.

Finally, the model of interdisciplinarity on which this proposal is based is likely to trigger a process of growth within school itself, because the dialogue among disciplines using different methodologies and languages can lead to a further innovation in didactics, and to create an ideal breeding ground for students who intend to undertake university studies, preparing them for very diversified curricula. In order for this to happen, the teaching staff should be ready to operate in a teaching/learning context and act as a “collaborative group” in which productive and constant exchange processes are undertaken, providing an opportunity for mutual training. In a society characterized by the speed and extent of the changes taking place within it, the work of the teacher can no longer be carried out within closed spaces, but must necessarily be carried out within the logic of an educating community, where the search for synergies is structural, aimed at proposing values of solidarity and producing identity processes. The teacher of Motor Sciences cannot miss the opportunity to promote these paths and to experiment them on the job, adapting each time the methods of organization, implementation and operational translation of the model.

⁸ C. Maulini, M. Migliorati, E. Isidori, *La valorizzazione dell'educazione fisica, motoria e sportiva nella scuola italiana: il caso degli “Stati Generali dello Sport di Cremona”* in *Formazione e Insegnamento*, 1, XVI, 2018, pp. 135-148.

⁹ C. Gozzoli e C. D'Angelo, *Lo SPORT strumento innovativo per l'inclusione sociale: quali condizioni?* In “Laboratorio metropolitano per la conoscenza pubblica su innovazione e inclusione”, Milan, 2017, passim; F. Coalter, *Sport and Social Inclusion: Evidence-Based Policy and Practice*, *Social Inclusion*, 5(2), 2017, pp. 141-149.

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