BEYOND BOUNDARIES: THE HOLISTIC LEARNING APPROACH THROUGH DIVERSITY, AND CREATIVITY

OLTRE I CONFINI: L'APPROCCIO OLISTICO ALL'APPRENDIMENTO ATTRAVERSO DIVERSITÀ E CREATIVITÀ

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ABSTRACT

The paper develops the theme of creativity in the service of inclusive education by identifying the key to educational success in the dialogue between vertical thinking and lateral thinking. The theories of complexity, creativity, and emotional education constitute the cultural framework within which studies related to the decrease in creative capacity are analyzed. Simultaneously, possible strategies and educational interventions are suggested to overcome obstacles that hinder the full development of the individual

L'articolo sviluppa il tema della creatività al servizio della didattica inclusiva individuando la chiave del successo formativo nel dialogo tra pensiero verticale e pensiero laterale. Le teorie della complessità, della creatività e l'educazione emotiva costituiscono la cornice culturale entro la quale vengono analizzati studi relativi alla diminuzione della capacità creativa. Contestualmente, vengono suggeriti possibili strategie e interventi didattici volti a superare quegli ostacoli che impediscono il pieno sviluppo della persona.

KEYWORDS
Inclusion, creativity, lateral thinking, vertical thinking, learning, soft skill complexity, empathy, education, training, teaching & learning process e-learning, European Union, Competence-based didactic approach, lifelong learning, learning by doing

Inclusione, creatività, pensiero laterale pensiero verticale, apprendimento,soft skill, educazione, formazione, processo di Insegnamento/apprendimento, e-learning, approccio didattico basato sulle competenze, lifelong learning, learning by doing

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Introduction[1]

The year that is coming to an end has been characterized by significant changes ranging from geopolitical to sociocultural aspects. Today, education cannot ignore the use of new technologies that will increasingly be present in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, this process cannot follow obsolete methodologies but must also avoid flattening, succumbing to the fragmentation of knowledge that leads culture to be constituted by hyper-specializations closed within their own boundaries. Therefore, another path is necessary, one that can be considered a synthesis between extremes, in order to avoid sterile polarizations incapable of producing culture but only technical notions lacking depth.

In 1992, Gustavo Zagrebelsky published "Il diritto mite" (Mild Law), which, although it concerned a specific area of knowledge, namely legal science, suggested the possibility of taking a middle path also in the educational field. Following these indications, it should be highlighted that in recent years, this fundamental area for the structuring of knowledge and, therefore, individual growth has not considered the importance of time. Time is necessary for the sedimentation of knowledge and for the development of a balanced individual.

In a context where everything seems locked in opposing and dichotomous positions that leave no room for comparisons, evaluations, and re-evaluations, the possibility of error is no longer contemplated. On the contrary, the middle path indicated by Zagrebelsky, characterized by mildness, should constitute the necessary background for the realization of a harmonious culture. Harmony is a complex ensemble, formed by different threads creating a weave as elaborate as the effort and time invested in its realization. Contrary to what is asserted today with great vigor by training agencies – that specialization leads to competence – the writer argues with even greater force that competence, in the sense of a set of skills and knowledge indicated by the European Union (UE recommendation of May 22, 2018), is achieved only through culture. Therefore, culture cannot be specialist but holistic, capable of having a perspective not on the particular, but on the overall picture. This allows the educated individual to face the various challenges that life presents critically, autonomously, originally, and not standardized.

In the current context where the originality of influencers instructing the masses on what to do or, better, what to consume is appreciated, cultural professionals are called upon to develop teaching practices and strategies capable of implementing creativity and divergent thinking for the development of individuality. Individualities represent diversities that, in turn, constitute a richness that must be left free to express itself truly and not confined or domesticated with "soft" coercive systems. In this sense, reference is made to the development of seemingly inclusive languages that, in substance, only attempt to narrow down the lexicon,

[1] This paper is the result of the shared work of the authors; however, for the purposes of the attributions of its individual parts, it is divided as follows: Angelina Vivona: §§ 1 Introduzione; Marta Raffone: §§ 2 Creativity at the service of inclusion, ;Antinea Ambretti: § Conclusions.

to downsize the "logos." The Greek term "logos" can simultaneously indicate thought and word. If the lexicon is reduced, thought and word lose depth, leading to a dichotomous flattening of the cognitive process.

The dichotomy of the computer language "0,1" is reflecting on the way individuals communicate, who can no longer conceive many alternative positions. The only conceivable options are indeed YES/NO, TRUE/FALSE, RIGHT/WRONG. In these extreme poles, there is only space for a term that can therefore be considered positive or negative depending on the preconceptions present in the subjects who choose this "logos" model. This determines the immobility of those who choose one position or the other. The educated person, on the other hand, must remain in the only space that allows change: the so-called gray area. In a dichotomous world where everything is either black or white, gray represents an infinite range of possibilities for action, a space so open as to ensure the meeting between poles to generate the mild path theorized by Zagrebelsky.

Today, there is a progressive loss of one's individuality, of one's cultural richness, in order to better conform to the masses (Freud, S., 1921/2012). This is what educators must combat. For this reason, the following pages represent an attempt to transform apparently distant theories, but actually full of points of contact, into an organic complex theory of creativity with reference to the complexity education of Edgar Morin and Umberto Galimberti, the divergent thinking of Edward de Bono, and the emotional intelligence of Daniel Goleman. A theory of creativity that seems more urgent than ever today due to the continuous technological facilitations that scientific progress gives us, exchanging creativity almost unwittingly for the flat silence of comfort, undermining the desire to read, write, draw, and, more generally, to create.

John Dewey, in the 1950s, had already understood that theoretical knowledge is too volatile and easily destined to be forgotten if not "attached" to practical-manual activity (Dewey, J., 1949/2014).

What has been stated so far cannot and must not ignore the concepts of empathy and inclusion that form the basis of civilization development. Civilization implies the acceptance and respect of human weaknesses and fragilities, from an inclusive and forward-looking perspective. For this reason, it was chosen to conclude this preamble with an anecdote attributed to the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead.

"*A student asked anthropologist Margaret Mead what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student would have expected Mead to speak of fishhooks, clay pots, or grinding stones. But that was not the case. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a healed femur. She explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break a leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, go to the river to drink water, or seek food. You are prey for predatory beasts that lurk around you. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal. A healed femur is evidence that someone has taken the time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety, and has helped the*

person to recover. Mead said that helping someone else in difficulty is the precise point where civilization begins. We are at our best when we serve others. Being civil is this."

Creativity *at the service* of inclusion.

Emotional intelligence, creativity, lateral thinking are all skills that contribute to the realization of an approach that one might want to define as inclusive. This approach would be capable of ensuring that all students achieve not only the competencies required by the European Union but also a critical culture, capable of generating complex thoughts and activities.

"Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and those of others." According to the theories of Reuven Bar-On, Daniel Goleman, Peter Salovey, and John Mayer, what characterizes emotional intelligence are self-awareness, emotional management, consideration of others, and relationship management. These skills represent the foundation for inclusion in education. Teachers and trainers, before being able to engage in teaching, must have developed an adequate level of emotional intelligence to respond effectively to the diverse needs of students and to create a positive and welcoming environment. In this regard, the continuous training of teachers should always be stimulated through forward-looking planning to master tools for managing not only technological but also methodological innovations in the educational field.

It is necessary to emphasize that today it is no longer possible to postpone the internalization of the proactive attitude typical of Lifelong Learning, first indicated by the European Union in 1995 and subsequently enriched and further integrated, becoming increasingly prominent. For this reason, the EU has strengthened its strategy for lifelong learning through the Europe 2020 strategy and the Erasmus+ program (2014-2020), with the aim of promoting education and training for all European citizens throughout their lives. The European Union itself, urging all its member states to build a strong sense of community and connection among peoples, suggests adopting an open-minded attitude capable of embracing new knowledge. This attitude is deeply connected to the ability to produce new and original ideas to achieve the goal of citizens aware of being part of an extremely rich multicultural community. The European Union, therefore, invites all its citizens to structure their creativity, understood both as the ability to produce original content, find new solutions to problems, and compose, decompose, and recompose their cognitive processes. Such an attitude is in a constant state of updating since its functioning is learned through use and, therefore, through experience. The process of training and growth is clearly linked to the creativity capable of identifying in the constant updating - therefore never the same as itself in the various evolutionary stages of the individual - the ability to change, which is, in Jean Piaget's view, the goal to be achieved for successful education. For Piaget, in fact, education is a change, a passage from one

evolutionary stage to another (Piaget, J., 1972/2001). This statement is so fundamental for Piaget that it makes change the central focus of the entire educational act. Therefore, education cannot be separated from the process that makes it possible, nor from the time required for the sedimentation of acquired knowledge. For this reason, today, we speak of the teaching/learning process.

In Edward de Bono's theory (De Bono, E. 1970/2015), creativity and lateral thinking are closely connected. He argues that lateral thinking is one of the forms of thinking opposed to vertical thinking. The logical-sequential analysis typical of vertical thinking is based on a linear path for problem resolution. Vertical thinking breaks down a complex problem into smaller, more manageable parts, thus arriving at a rational solution based on logic. De Bono has proposed lateral thinking as a complementary, not alternative, approach to vertical thinking, where the goal is to find original and creative solutions using unconventional techniques and connecting seemingly distant elements. The ability to connect these elements is characteristic of creative action. De Bono, like Zagrebelsky, proposes a conception of thinking that is not exclusive but inclusive and dialogical, capable of generating an effective relationship between seemingly opposing modalities, such as lateral thinking and vertical thinking, able to achieve educational objectives.

Over the years, the school has structured a more standardized learning model, aimed at the valorization of only vertical thinking, neglecting the practice of developing lateral thinking.

De Bono (1970/2009) argues that lateral thinking, the ability to think divergently, can be developed through the use of specific techniques such as brainstorming[2]. The author identifies systematic lateral thinking and provocative lateral thinking as techniques for developing effective, as well as original, ideas and proposals. Systematic lateral thinking analyzes and understands the problem within the context in which it arises, thus evaluating possible solutions based on their impact on the system itself.

Both systematic and provocative lateral thinking are creative problem-solving approaches. The former focuses on the context, i.e., on the connection of seemingly distant elements available at that specific moment and space, while the latter involves using all possible, even imaginary, elements to generate original proposals. The importance of the latter deserves further reflection regarding those who, through their works, manage to leave a trace of humanity's passage in history. How would humanity have evolved, for example, without Leonardo's creative genius? The provocative approach is precisely what aims to overcome the limitations imposed by conventional thinking.

[2] Brainstorming: An idea generation technique in which a group of people work together to produce a large number of creative and original proposals on a given topic or problem. The brainstorming process involves encouraging the free expression of ideas, without criticism or judgment, in order to create a collaborative environment that is open to creativity. Ideas can then be evaluated and selected later for implementation or development.

The use of such techniques positively influences the development of creativity in education and training stakeholders, thus increasing the possibility of finding strategies and responses suitable for the diverse needs of individual students in order to personalize the educational and training experience as much as possible. It is crucial to reflect on how to cultivate the minds of all education users: today, there is a need for creativity in the service of this achievable goal through an observable and measurable process, a significantly different and divergent approach. It is no longer time to consider creativity a factor to be autonomously developed by individuals, leaving them alone and without guidance. It is time to consider creativity a true resource for the harmonious development of a new civilization. The predisposition to welcome new ideas and content cannot be separated from comprehensive training.

The forward-looking perspectives on complexity theorized by Edgar Morin and Umberto Galimberti go exactly in this direction: they focus on the importance of an open, flexible, and multidimensional approach to understanding the world.

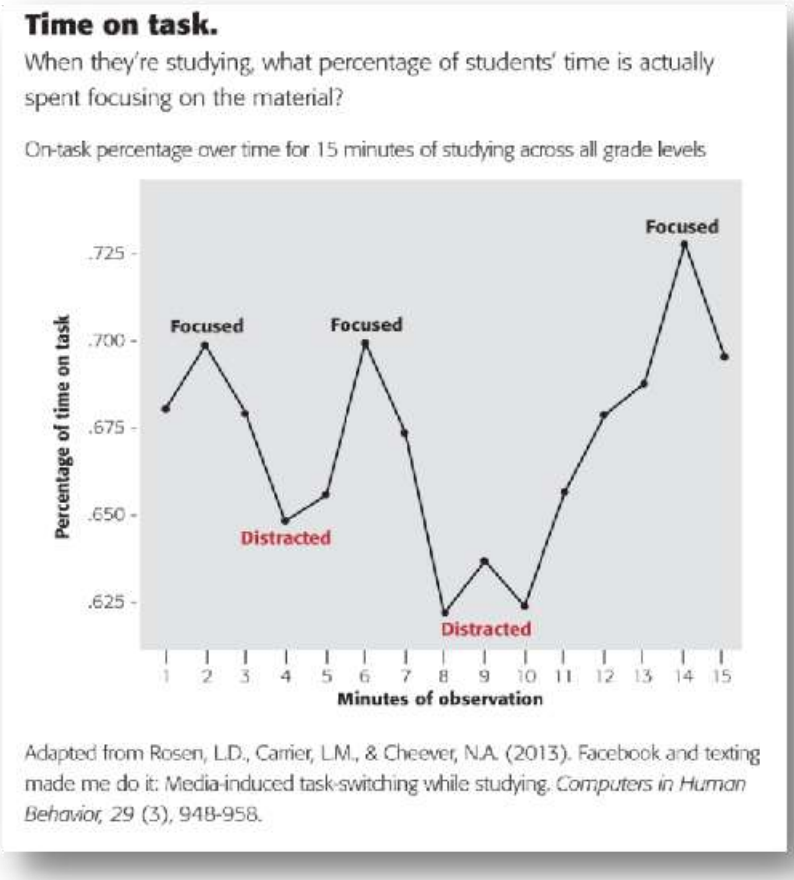
Today more than ever, culture must be conceived as an organic complex, characterized by a multiplicity of factors contributing to the development of phenomena and systems, avoiding simplifications and fragmentations of knowledge.

It is important today to consider various factors that could negatively impact the development of lateral thinking and the structuring of a culture of complexity.

Numerous experiments, for example, suggest a relationship between the continuous use of electronic devices and the decrease in creativity and attention span.

The study conducted by Larry D. Rosen, Andrew F. Lim, and Jessica M. Felt in 2013 clearly shows the effect of mobile device use on the productivity and creativity of university students. The results indicated that students using smartphones and tablets during a lecture reported lower productivity and a lower ability to process complex information compared to students who did not use such devices. Moreover, students who used these tools continuously reported a lower ability to generate innovative ideas than others. It should be emphasized that the study identifies media multitasking[3] as one of the main causes of the progressive inability to maintain attention for an extended period on a single task.

[3] Media multitasking: simultaneous enjoyment of multiple digital media streams.



A second study conducted by Daniel Becker, Reem Alzahabi, and Christopher J. Hopwood in 2017 examined the relationship between smartphone usage and creativity in a group of university students. Again, the results indicate that frequent smartphone use is associated with lower creativity. Among the reasons for this decline in creativity and divergent thinking is the excessive simplification that gradually slips into standardized trivialization. If not controlled, this could lead to a flattening in the teaching and learning process with serious consequences for the healthy and balanced growth of individuals. It becomes evident, therefore, to start developing a series of activities aimed at implementing the structuring of complex reasoning.

The integration of Morin and Galimberti's complexity theory with De Bono's lateral thinking emphasizes the importance of a deep and holistic view of reality. This approach helps avoid fragmented views that often characterize contemporary culture. In inclusive education, a holistic approach allows understanding the complexity of students' needs to find personalized solutions suitable for each individual.

It is undeniable that in such a knowledge architecture, one cannot do without an educational and training model that prioritizes activities such as simulations and real-world tasks to extract rules and general theories from specific problems. Problem-based learning is an approach structured precisely for this purpose.

Regarding innovative teaching practices aimed at stimulating inclusion and creativity, other techniques come to the forefront in addition to problem-based learning. Approaches such as peer tutoring, where cooperative learning between peers is verified, cooperative learning, where cooperative learning develops in heterogeneous groups, and service learning, which postulates learning through engagement in social projects. All these practices share the encounter with others. The principle governing these approaches is that there can be no inclusion without community. Therefore, educational agencies must aim at implementing empathy and competence in awareness and cultural expressions to allow individuals to embrace others. What is intended to be emphasized is clear: the need to share consistent attitudes in the perspective of forward-looking planning that aims at the restructuring of the sense of community.

To develop inclusive models capable of responding innovatively and, therefore, creatively to the new demands of society, users of education must be made capable of understanding their cognitive processes. These processes are unique and unrepeatable but can be implemented and improved through observation and evaluation. To do this, education and training professionals are called upon to develop the metacognitive mechanisms of users. Metacognition must be studied and learned because modulating one's cognitive abilities necessarily involves knowledge of the mechanisms that regulate it and represents the condition without which the development of inclusive learning cannot take place.

Metacognition refers to an individual's ability to understand and regulate their own process of thinking and learning. It consists of reflection on one's condition, i.e., the ability to observe, understand, and learn about oneself. This is a capacity that develops through experience and allows understanding how one learns, reflecting on one's cognitive functioning, identifying any obstacles, and developing effective strategies to achieve different educational goals. Metacognition enables the construction of greater and more structured self-awareness and capabilities, fostering the regulation of these during the teaching-learning process.

The development of metacognition is, therefore, a fundamental aspect for the promotion of successful inclusive learning and real inclusion. Teachers and trainers, through the use of teaching strategies that promote reflection and self-regulation of learning, will be able to enhance the potential of each student, adapting educational interventions to their specific needs and promoting active participation in school life and the learning community. However, for these activities to truly contribute to increasing the sense of belonging to the community, it is important that they are inclusive and accessible to all students, regardless of their physical abilities or socio-cultural backgrounds.

Regarding the implementation of innovative practices and the use of emotional intelligence, creativity, and lateral thinking, several case studies and methodologies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the combination of these tools.

Firstly, regarding emotional intelligence, it has been shown that teaching emotional skills helps students develop the ability to identify and manage their own emotions, understand those of others, and manage difficult social situations. In particular, Bar-On's model (1997) has identified five components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, emotion management, emotional autonomy, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to adapt to change. The teaching of these skills can be achieved through teacher training and the creation of specific programs for students.

It is important to emphasize how creativity and lateral thinking can be developed through inclusive education. Lateral thinking configures a way of thinking that seeks to overcome conventional mental patterns, aimed at problem-solving, innovation, and the creation of alternative solutions. In this sense, inclusive education can promote creativity by encouraging students to explore different options and find innovative solutions to problems.

An interesting testimony of how inclusion and creativity can promote effective and stimulating teaching is represented by the project "Theater as a tool for school inclusion" (Lazzeri et al., 2019), which demonstrates how students' participation in theatrical activities can improve their self-esteem, communication skills, and ability to relate to others. In another study, the implementation of an art education program led to an improvement in problem-solving skills and creativity in students (Burton et al., 2019).

Another didactic methodology that can be used to stimulate creativity and lateral thinking is design thinking. This involves producing innovative solutions to problems through empathy, observation, and prototyping. Design thinking has been successfully used in many contexts, including educational ones, to promote innovation and creativity. For example, in a primary school in a suburban area of Rome, the design thinking methodology was used to engage students in the design and resolution of environmental problems in their community. Students were divided into groups and, through interviews and observations, identified environmental problems in their area, such as air pollution and lack of green spaces. Subsequently, through design thinking, they proposed innovative solutions, such as creating urban parks and using solar energy.

The need for a holistic approach to inclusive education always comes to the forefront. It must be reiterated that knowledge should be seen as total, interconnected, and complex, rather than fragmented and in stagnant compartments. Only in this way can a deeper understanding of phenomena and problems be reached to reclaim the sense of community and care for others, which are fundamental to the Italian Constitution. The importance of community, as an element of inclusion and belonging, is emphasized by Article 2 of the Constitution, which states: "The Republic recognizes and guarantees the inviolable rights of man, both as an individual and in the social formations where his personality is developed." Furthermore, Article 3 establishes: "All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, or personal and social conditions." These articles

underscore the importance of inclusion and equity as fundamental values in our society. These rules are not just a manifesto of important values but also symbolic horizons, the non-implementation of which would constitute a violation of the societal program desired and outlined by our fundamental Charter.

In light of the above, the significant role played by extracurricular activities and the creation of inclusive and fair learning environments also comes to the forefront.

According to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, an inclusive society requires the use of cognitive and social skills such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and lateral thinking. The excess stimuli and information in contemporary society can lead to an inability to understand and relate to others, increasing loneliness and isolation. To overcome this problem, Han suggests that society needs individuals capable of developing empathy, the ability to understand and identify with the emotions and feelings of others, creating meaningful relationships. Moreover, emotional intelligence is essential for managing one's emotions, developing greater self-awareness, and understanding others. Lateral thinking is crucial for addressing the complex challenges that society presents, as it involves the ability to find innovative solutions and think outside conventional frameworks. In an inclusive society, lateral thinking can be used to create new opportunities and solutions for complex social problems, fostering creativity and diverse thinking (Han, B-C, 218).

Schools have the task of providing the necessary tools for the development of an inclusive and belonging culture, where each individual can feel respected and valued for their unique qualities and differences, without experiencing any form of discrimination or marginalization. In this sense, schools must ensure that inclusion becomes a foundational value in their educational actions, where teachers, parents, and students themselves feel involved and engaged in a common project.

Only through a sharing of intentions and objectives can a healthy and productive educational environment be created, where all individuals feel appreciated and accepted for who they are. Additionally, schools must encourage the use of creativity and lateral thinking as tools to address the challenges of everyday life, both in the academic and extracurricular spheres. Finally, to promote the establishment of an inclusive and fair school community, it is necessary for schools to adopt innovative teaching practices that can stimulate student participation and engagement, fostering active learning and peer collaboration. In this regard, some teaching methodologies can be mentioned, such as the flipped classroom, which involves delivering content at home through the use of video lessons, while class time is dedicated more to group work and critical discussion of the learned content. Another example can be the aforementioned cooperative learning, where students work together to achieve a common goal, developing social and cognitive skills essential for their future.

Educational inclusion represents an indispensable value for a democratic society in which all individuals have the right to access education and realize themselves as people. In this context, schools play a central role in educating young people about diversity, empathy, and emotional intelligence, fostering the development of a culture of inclusive belonging that allows each individual to express their potential to the fullest and live a fulfilling and satisfying life.

Conclusions

Considering what has been said so far about the importance of a holistic culture, it seems relevant to mention a famous study known as Rat Park, conducted by Bruce Alexander, a psychologist renowned for his work on addictions in the late 1970s. In these experiments, Alexander and his colleagues challenged the prevailing social view of drug abuse by examining the impact of the environment on drug addiction in rats.

The conventional interpretation at the time suggested that addiction resulted from simple exposure to drugs. Rats kept in isolated and sterile cages had access to drugs and showed high rates of drug consumption, reinforcing the belief that drugs alone were the main factors of addiction.

However, Alexander's experiments with "Rat Park" provided a different perspective. In these experiments, rats were placed in a rich environment called Rat Park, including toys, tunnels, and social interactions with other rats. Surprisingly, the rats in Rat Park showed a total disinterest in drug consumption compared to their counterparts placed alone in isolated cages.

Alexander argued that social and environmental factors played a crucial role in shaping addiction, challenging the simplistic view that drugs alone were the main cause of addiction.

To conclude, it seems not irrelevant to recall the experience of the great performer Marina Abramović. The artist is known for her ability to emotionally engage the audience through her artworks and for structuring a context that focuses on social interaction. Her philosophy and artistic methodologies are based on empathy, divergent thinking, and emotional intelligence, fundamental aspects for the realization of engaging and infinitely inclusive artistic performances.

In her performances, Abramović completely exposes herself, expressing her emotions and creating an intense connection with the audience. This bond represents the necessary condition for the performance to come into being. All this allows overcoming barriers of gender, race, culture, and language, fostering inclusion and a sense of belonging to a community of people who share their emotions. Divergent thinking is also an essential element in Abramović's performances because it allows her to create art by synthesizing alternative viewpoints capable of generating that open-minded attitude mentioned at the beginning of this article.

It is, therefore, possible to affirm that, just as there are no endpoints in artistic experience, in its constant adaptation to the new sensitivities that history gradually delivers to society, pedagogy must rely on the continuous search for ever more effective educational tools for the construction of a free and conscious society.

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