

“BEING PRESENT” BEYOND THE DISTANCE. EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL ISSUES IN LIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC CRISIS

“ESSERCI” OLTRE LA DISTANZA. QUESTIONI EPISTEMOLOGICHE E PAIDEUTICHE ALLA LUCE DELL’EMERGENZA PANDEMICA

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Abstract

This article reflects on epistemological and educational, as well as anthropological and ethical-political issues, concerning the pandemic crisis and the subsequent transformation of the *places* of education (from a real context to a more virtual context). It sheds light on the pedagogical-educational need to promote and embody (traditional and/or online) curricula, inspired by the *humanism of beauty* and characterized by a particular *pedagogical style: the dimension of beauty*, popular not only in the Greek world (the concept of *kalos kai agathos* and *Platonic paideia*) but also in the Twentieth century (*the paideia of feeling* by María Zambrano). The focus on aesthetic emotions, to increase the level of positive emotional involvement, which can be increased through educational technology, plays a crucial role in understanding the infinite and heterogeneous *forms of humanity (depth ontology)* and in facilitating learning. In all of this, there must be an assurance of *pedagogical presence*, not always synonymous with *physical presence*. In modern times there are various types of *presence* (for example, digital presence) and pedagogical knowledge is called upon to consider innovative heuristic directions, to ensure relationships, empathy, care and attention even in online educational encounters. Therefore, the teacher-educator is required to acquire specific professional skills, which are not only educational-methodological, digital, etc., but also and above all emotional-relational.

Il contributo riflette su alcune questioni epistemologiche e paideutiche, nonché antropologiche ed etico-politiche, legate all’emergenza pandemica e alla conseguente trasformazione dei *luoghi* dell’educazione (da un contesto reale a un contesto sempre più virtuale). Si fa luce sull’istanza pedagogico-educativa di promuovere e concretare percorsi formativi (tradizionali e/o in rete), ispirati all’*umanesimo della bellezza* e contraddistinti da un particolare *stile pedagogico: la dimensione del bello*, già apprezzata non solo nel mondo greco (concetto di *kalos kai agathos* e *paideia platonica*) ma anche nel corso del Novecento (*paideia del sentire* di María Zambrano). Curare l’emozione estetica, per innalzare il livello di coinvolgimento emotivo positivo, incrementabile mediante le tecnologie dell’istruzione, può giocare un ruolo cruciale sia per cogliere le infinite ed eterogenee *forme dell’umano (ontologia del profondo)* sia per facilitare l’apprendimento. In tutto ciò va garantita la *presenza pedagogica*, che non sempre è sinonimo di *presenza fisica*. Nella contemporaneità esistono più *presenze* (per esempio quella digitale) e il sapere pedagogico è chiamato a riflettere su direzioni euristiche innovative, per assicurare relazione, empatia, cura e ascolto pure nell’incontro paideutico in rete. Al docente-educatore, allora, è richiesto di acquisire specifiche competenze professionali, non solo metodologico-didattiche, digitali, etc., bensì anche e soprattutto emotivo-relazionali.

Keywords

Virtual educational encounter; technological humanism; humanism of beauty; pedagogical presence; emotional-relational skills.

Incontro paideutico virtuale; umanesimo tecnologico; umanesimo della bellezza; presenza pedagogica; competenze emotivo-relazionali.

«Beauty alone has this privilege, and therefore it is most clearly seen and loveliest».
(Plato, Phaedrus, § XXXI, 250d)

1. The contemporary scene: the pandemic and virtual educational relationships

As we know, our daily lives have been turned upside-down due to this health crisis and there have been numerous opportunities to realize how much road there is still ahead of us in view of full social inclusion. During this time, there has been an increase in (theoretical and experimental) considerations on the lockdown period we are experiencing and especially on the change of guidelines for the future (Bertagna, 2020; Corsi, 2020; Chiosso, 2020; Crotti, 2020; D’Urso & Fazzari, 2020; Emili, Dario & Stadler-Altman, 2020; Morin, 2020; Musai, 2020; Roncaglia, 2020; Sacconi, 2020; Simonelli, 2020; Tognon, 2020). A rather complex scenario has emerged, which calls into question various heuristic fields; basically, these fields lead us to question what the emergency has represented (and represents) for education *tout court* and for the teaching-learning process.

The long closure of schools, as well as social distancing health measures have required (and still require) us to reconsider the traditional models of educational relationships and to find alternative methods, in order to bring learning activities online and attempt to make the most of the virtual educational relationship. Therefore, it is a matter of reflecting on *how* the pandemic can be a precious opportunity for education, in order to reinvent the present as well as the future. In fact, to some extent Covid-19 has challenged the pillars of the traditional model of teaching-learning. In this regard, the opinions expressed by Professors P.C. Rivoltella¹ and P.G. Rossi² in recent webinars are interesting and valid. Firstly, they shed light on the need to avoid so-called *cognitive shortcuts* (Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky, 1982; A. Kahneman, 2020), in order to identify what can be best in a digital environment. Secondly, in contemporary times we can no longer think of mere presence in the traditional sense (physical presence in the real world), which however is still important. Smart working (or rather home working – Burchi, 2020) and online relationships have made it clear how essential human contact is, however at the same time they have also filled an otherwise insurmountable void, due to the risk of infection. Therefore, today it is necessary keep in mind that there are several types of *presence*, for example *digital presence*, which must be corroborated and above all used properly, in accordance with a responsible use of digital media (Rivoltella, 2015). The first step to be taken undoubtedly concerns the reduction of a clear and persistent digital divide (due to generational, cultural and economic factors), which makes it difficult for real social inclusion to materialize³.

What are some of these heuristic fields, which help to reflect on man, his way of *inhabiting* himself and the world, and therefore the process of human perfectibility? It is appropriate here to dwell briefly on each of them (*anthropological, ethical-political, epistemological and educational fields*), in order to provide some useful insight to shed light on meaningful aspects of life, on the changes in the epistemological status of pedagogy (determined by the changes taking place in the contemporary world) and on the teaching-learning process.

2. The anthropological field: the remodelling of human beings

The home confinement imposed by the health crisis also transforms the psychological conditions of human beings and raises various questions. It basically leads us to ask: “*What does this all imply on a human interaction level?*”. And: “*In a digital environment how can we ensure presence, relationships, empathy, care and attention?*” (Bellingeri, 2020, pp. 41-64; Buber, 2019; Mortari, 2019; Spina, 2018).

By looking back to the past, we realize that great literary works, from Manzoni to Camus

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-CJ8S30FBQ&t=419s>

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAA_kc5U2No

3 <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/236920>; <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/240949>

(Manzoni, 2014; Camus, 2017), have already masterfully narrated what an epidemic can lead to, first of all regarding the human mind, even before the body. Under these circumstances, we are witnesses of a real *anthropological remodelling*. Indeed, the fictional Algerian city (Oran) created by Camus, whose borders are totally rewritten by the plague, becomes a sort of *anthropological laboratory*, in which we can observe a multitude of changes, concerning not only corporeality but also, and above all, interiority.

In the post-modern experience of the virus, it is possible to trace back many aspects that were already narrated by literature: from the myth of isolation to the experience of fear and denial; from the heroic epic to a new kind of rhetoric, which can be summarized in the well-known expression “*Everything is going to be alright*”.

The body’s status (as well as the human mind) is disclosed in the new situation experienced; a body constrained within an enclosed space, which experiences the life of an isolated and exiled, or even sick person. It is a limiting experience compared to the infinite traditional gnoseological and relational possibilities. At the same time, however, it should be noted that today (compared to the past) the body also experiences its virtual development on the Internet. This invites us to consider an alternative to relationships and technological tools, which open the way for new educational scenarios.

3. The ethical-political field: the issue of fundamental rights (life, freedom, education)

The restrictions mentioned earlier also affect (as already noted by Camus, 2017, p. 46) the concept of *freedom* (Jullien, 2019; Savater, 2006; Sen, 2001) and its practical experience. In this regard, of particular interest is the debate between philosopher J. Habermas and legal expert K. Günther. It is a Transalpine dialogue on fundamental rights, which deserves a greater attention compared to its original context. Published in the influential German newspaper, *Die Zeit* on 9 May 2020 (Habermas & Günther, 2020) it addresses the issue of whether the right to life has the same weight as other constitutionally protected rights. This dialogue exchange, far from wanting to provide solutions, leads to numerous questions: “*What is important (or should be most important) in the fight against the pandemic? The protection of life or the guarantee of freedom?*”. And therefore: “*Is it fair to restrict freedom when people’s lives are in danger? Or is it right to sacrifice the lives of a few in order to guarantee freedom?*”

Habermas’ stance conveys a clearer defence of the priority of the life of the individual, seen as a fundamental right which does not have the same weight as collective freedom (Habermas & Günther, 2020, p. 63). On the other hand, Günther proposes a more articulate argument. Starting from the principle that all fundamental rights have the same weight, he then admits that sure outcomes are not always guaranteed and therefore the State should have an assessment prerogative on the matter (Habermas & Günther, 2020, pp. 63-64).

Beyond the interesting implications raised by the two leading figures in this dialectic debate, it should be acknowledged that this is a difficult ethical challenge, an arduous discussion on fundamental rights, their limits and the impossibility of ordering them according to a hierarchy. Indeed, when a fundamental right (which may be freedom or education) is given less importance in the name of safeguarding an equally fundamental right (precisely life or public health) a democratic society, to some extent, registers a defeat. As long as rights are arranged according to an order of priority, there will always be a collective subject placed in a subordinate position (Macinai, 2020, p. 19).

4. The epistemological field: the identity profile of pedagogy and *technological humanism*

This argument is also connected to the epistemological field. This is because the current crisis is redesigning human beings (subject to constant anthropological remodelling) and, as a result, society, by calling into question pedagogical sciences as well. The latter has the task of constantly redefining its own epistemological status, while it studies personal and social transformations, and teaches how to manage them. The result is that for pedagogy it is crucial to investigate innovative heuristic directions. Indeed, pedagogical discussions are now addressing

a humanity that is looking more and more to the use in education of advanced technologies and which has rediscovered social networks as well (almost demonized until now, like a *clinic of security and/or clinic of the void*: Recalcati, 2019) as a relational and entertainment means, in order to continue to “*be present*” *beyond the distance*.

Technological humanism, which is making its appearance more and more clearly, should not forget to place the *person* at the centre and to have as its end the improvement of human existence. This is also a case of great ethical challenge, since there is a very short step from “*What will man be able to do with technologies?*” to “*What will advanced technologies make of human beings?*”.

In the XXI century, the important scientific, cultural and epistemological changes have led to the coevolution of the natural dimension and the artificial dimension. The processes of hybridization between man and technology have resulted in a constant anthropological mutation, which seems to be leading to the *post-human cultural paradigm* (with all the problems it involves).

The epistemological task of pedagogy, in view of the planning of educational processes, is to investigate human beings in relation to these major changes undertaken in order to consider the possibilities/impossibilities that emerge from the phenomena of biotechnological contamination. Therefore, it is a question of reflecting firstly on modern man, his nature and functions, the relational and communicative dynamics used; secondly, on the political structures, the circulation of culture, the macrosystems of corporate life and the organization of the global market.

In addition to changing human beings and their way of *inhabiting* themselves and the world (living, leisure and working spaces; dimensions of experiencing, knowing, communicating, building interpersonal relationships, etc. – Pinto Minerva & Gallelli, 2004), at the same time places of education are being transformed (for example, there has always been a shift from a real context to an increasingly virtual context). In view of this scenario, the pedagogist is called to examine these factors of change, which are “ferrying” mankind towards the advent of a *post-human reality*, disturbing at times, nevertheless bearing in mind that the specific intention of pedagogy is to *cultivate* man (Spadafora, 2016, p. 43). It is necessary to think about how technological innovations can be used with respect for human dimension, by becoming part of the mindset of each individual and thus dealing with this reluctance to change, the attitude aimed at ensuring that everything stays the same, frozen, in “the hands of dinosaurs”, thus recalling the famous line from the awarding-winning film *The Best of Youth* (2003), which masterfully narrates the crucial events of Italian history of the last forty years.

6. The educational field: aesthetic emotions and *depth ontology*

Postrema autem non minimus, the educational field, which likewise helps to reflect on the sudden transformations determined by the pandemic crisis and calls us to embark on innovative study programmes. It should be recalled that back in the Eighties of the Twentieth century one questioned what impact advanced technologies would have in the field of education. In contemporary times, and especially in this period of history, there is an increasing pedagogical-educational request to continue to reflect on educational relationships, which mainly take shape in a totally virtual or blended, rather than real, context.

There is agreement on the need to nurture 3 areas simultaneously: the *cognitive area* (attention, perception, memorization, symbolization, cause-effect relationship, etc.); the *area concerning work organization*; and above all the *affective-relational area* (which concerns the motivation to learn, self-esteem, reaction to failure, etc.).

But in the online educational encounter, what is the role of the cognitive, affective and relational components, aimed at promoting both the knowledge of self and others and learning? In what way can online educational relationships be qualified? How can the level of positive emotional involvement encourage at the same time the willingness to accept one’s own and others’ *appeal* (Buber, 2013), as well as promote the learning process?

Positive emotional involvement can be increased through educational technologies capable

of ensuring a greater experience of interpersonal contact; an aspect that has a greater need to be reinforced and promoted in online learning, in order to guarantee the quality of virtual educational relationships.

But how can we increase the level of emotional involvement? According to studies, one way is given by the influence of aesthetic factors. This means that living out the learning experience or teaching materials proposed as “agreeable” usually facilitates the learning process (Biasi, Bonaiuto & Cordellieri, 2004; Musaiò, 2015). As a result, the cognitive structure is supported by the motivational structure and thus acquisition is made easier for the student. Learning (according to Piaget’s processes of *assimilation and accommodation* – Piaget, 2000) is thought to progress according to a progressive integration, in older schemes, of new content, experienced to a certain extent as agreeable, interesting and “attractive” (*assimilation*). This means that new information is thought to be absorbed and then processed, in order to be fitted into existing mental categories which therefore are not transformed by new stimuli. This is thought to be followed by a progressive restructuring of this content (*accommodation*): faced with new experiential situations, if there are no existing mental categories in which they can be inserted, these structures undergo changes.

In light of Piaget’s theory of cognitive development (Liverta Sempio, 1998, pp. 121-221), it is believed that the reinforcement given by the student’s positive emotional involvement, thanks to aesthetic emotions, plays the crucial role of facilitating learning. In this regard, of particular interest is María Zambrano’s contribution, which enables the foundation of a *paideia of feeling* (Zambrano, 2012; Spina, 2019), since Andalusian philosophy attaches great importance to feelings and art, and in particular painting, namely the most human of the arts (Zambrano, 2002, p. 61; Bombaci, 2007).

To nurture a love of the arts, of the beautiful, to be inspired by the *humanism of beauty* (Musaiò, 2016) can lead to the definition of an educational itinerary, capable of satisfying the human need to be heard and understood, to speak and confide, to perceive *presence* and proximity (beyond any possible physical distance). Aesthetic emotions make it possible to shed light on the infinite and varied *human forms*. Art can enlighten what man mainly does not know or does not want to see. By means of the artistic experience, he can read and interpret the *truth* of every subjective universe of meaning (as well as the historical and cultural world); that is, he can capture the *authentic reality* he still experiences in a primordial manner. The aesthetic component makes it thus possible to lay the foundations for an *education to see in depth*, so that everyone can acquire the sensitivity to descend to the depths of their soul, in order to grasp the *degree of a person’s depth*, namely *depth ontology* (Bellingreri, 2020).

In the teaching-learning process, it would therefore be appropriate to verify the relationships between the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences, and the levels of aesthetic appreciation of educational-teaching communication. When the student develops a greater aesthetic experience (and therefore a greater positive emotional involvement), he experiences not only the opportunity to get to know himself and the otherness but also (as proven by empirical investigations) to learn more and remember better in reference to verbal and non-verbal content which is presented, for example, through educational films (Biasi, 2017).

This discussion cannot but take root in what philosophical thought has transmitted in terms of harmony, since it has outlined and offered a *paideia* and an ethical-aesthetic ideal of education, which to this day is valid, up-to-date and meaningful. We need only consider the Greek world, within which the concept of beauty is not merely understood in a formal and aesthetic sense but also in an ontological and moral sense. *Ideal beauty*, equivalent to the Greek ideal of perfection (especially in the *Platonic paideia*), thus becomes the unitary synthesis of good and beautiful (*kalos kai agathos* – Limone, 2018). The Platonic thought sheds light on the privilege of beauty, which consists in uniting the ideal and the sensitive. Aesthetics thus acquires importance: it is by virtue of it that the foundations of a scientific knowledge of the sensitive are laid, without sacrificing ideal transcendence (Plato, 1943).

In conclusion, by starting from these interesting insights, it appears appropriate to request the understanding of the dimension of the beautiful as a *pedagogical style*, to be rendered as typical of educational practice. At the same time, we must bear in mind that the (traditional and/or online) educational relationship, as well as the levels of learning, can be improved by means of a greater experience of presence and contact between the teacher and the student. We must bear in mind that *physical presence* does not always correspond to *pedagogical presence*. The latter must be nurtured and embodied by education professionals in a real and virtual educational encounter, by implementing personal empowerment and a variety of flexible teaching strategies (Laneve, 2017). It follows that, in addition to acknowledging the importance of aesthetic emotions and educational technologies (Rivoltella, 2020), which are so valuable to strengthen positive emotional involvement, another crucial aspect can be confirmed: the importance of the professional skills of the teacher-educator. In addition to planning, methodological, organizational, digital skills, etc., in the present age emotional-relational skills also emerge (Mariani, 2020, pp. 51-84). After the so-called acknowledgement of the Cartesian error (Damasio, 1994), they are construed as real virtues (Rossi, 2014, 2019), required of the figure of the educator, in order to promote in every student both the willingness to learn and the personal and relentless process of human perfectibility.

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