BODY AND TIME IN DISTANCE LEARNING.
OXYMOR OR EDUCATIONAL CHANCE?

CORPO E SPAZIO NELLA DIDATTICA A DISTANZA.
OSSIMORO O CHANCE EDUCATIVA?

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Abstract

No doubt the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has changed the way we live and inhabit the world. From the reduction of our living spaces – which have been almost essentially confined within our homes – to the reduction of daily commuting, up to the transformation of our relationship with health, coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) is still continuing to change our lifestyles, probably improving some aspects. Thus, 2020 also gave a big boost to distance learning. The health emergency, in fact, has prompted the use of distance learning solutions which – although had been already deepened in pedagogy and didactics by Media Education – until today were considered marginal, both in working and school/university training contexts. At the center of the contemporary debate on distance learning there is certainly the relationship among body, space and time, which urges us to reflect on some questions. Is presence a value and distance a disvalue? Does presence learning guarantee the educational relationship and does distance learning impoverish it? What is the perspective to follow? The common sense would seem to lean towards a golden mean, further nourishing those dichotomies between body/mind, space/time, presence/distance. The aim of this paper is to reflect on these aspects, supporting a perspective that consider distance learning an educational chance which, however, needs to be designed in a more competent way.

Senza dubbio alcuno, la pandemia da coronavirus ha decisamente cambiato il nostro modo di vivere e abitare il mondo. Dalla riduzione dei nostri spazi vitali – i quali sono stati confinati quasi essenzialmente all'interno delle nostre abitazioni – alla riduzione del pendolarismo quotidiano, fino alla trasformazione del nostro rapporto con la salute, il Covid-19 sta continuando a cambiare i nostri stili di vita, probabilmente migliorandone certi aspetti. Il 2020, così, ha dato un grosso impulso anche alla didattica a distanza. L'emergenza sanitaria, infatti, ha sollecitato il ricorso a soluzioni didattiche digitali che, seppur già da alcuni anni or sono erano state approfondite in ambito pedagogico e didattico dalla Media Education, erano comunque state considerate più ai margini, tanto nel lavoro quando nella formazione scolastica e universitaria. Al centro del dibattito contemporaneo sulla didattica a distanza vi è, certamente, il rapporto che intercorre tra corpo, spazio e tempo, il quale ci sollecita a riflettere su alcuni interrogativi. La presenza è un valore e la distanza un disvalore? La presenza garantisce la relazione educativa e la distanza la impoverisce? Qual è la prospettiva da seguire? Il senso comune sembrerebbe propendere per un giusto mezzo, alimentando ulteriormente quelle dicotomie tra corpo/mente, spazio/tempo, presenza/distanza. Lo scopo del presente articolo è quello di rilettere proprio su tali aspetti, avvalorando una prospettiva che vede nella didattica a distanza una chance educativa che, comunque, abbisogna di essere gestita in maniera più competente.

Keywords

1. Postmodernity & Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has caused a profound crisis, not only health and economic but, more generally, social and cultural. The change that has occurred in the last year now seems a too great suffering to cope with, although the human species has overcome worse events in the course of history. But why is this happening? It probably happens because we find ourselves in the condition in which all of our everyday life, technology, globalization, the labor market suddenly finds itself dealing with the simplicity of human existence. The reflection therefore refers to the following question: is man still inhabiting the world or is the world inhabited only by the technique that has dominated the man himself who produced it? In fact, technique is much more than a tool in the hands of man, but it is the environment in which man lives and is educated (Galimberti, 2020).

For these reasons, probably, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) will mark the end of the postmodern thought that has accompanied the liberal ideology prevalent in recent decades and this is because we are faced with the unexpected. We thought we were in control of everything and instead we control nothing when biology expresses its revolt through an uncontrollable and poorly predictable virus in its mutations.

As is well known, postmodernism is opposed to modern thought for a series of characteristics such as the devaluation of *rationality and science* (Vattimo, Rovatti, 2010), *work* (Boyer, 1986) but, above all, *history and ideals* (Gehlen, 1956). And it is precisely the "devaluation of history" that has probably had the most widespread repercussions. That history which, in the Christian vision appeared as the history of salvation, first became the search for a condition of worldly perfection and then, gradually, the history of progress: but the ideal of contemporary progress is empty, its final value is to create conditions in which ever new progress is possible (Galimberti, 1999). Postmodernism, then, has no longer become just a contemporary condition of knowledge. Not a style, nor a philosophical current, it is configured as the only cultural dominant, the ideology underlying *late capitalism* (Jameson, 1984), a period in which the evolution of bourgeois capitalist society led to the transformation of the whole into a product.

A probable crisis of postmodernism as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) can, however, make us fall out of the frying pan into the fire: either we return to strong and authoritarian ideologies (as has been the case with some political regimes) or to religious ideologies, therefore dogmatic. The virus, the critique of the consumer system, the fascination of goods, the schizophrenia of the consumer/spectator, the immortality of technology (and the mortality of man) are very current scenarios, but which Jean Baudrillard (1992) had already anticipated a few years ago in a visionary way.

In Baudrillard's thought, in addition to tracing several contemporary images (such as nature regaining its vital spaces) it is possible to read and interpret the widespread crisis that hovers in our lives and that pervades every space (Baudrillard, 2007). In a world of copies and clones where everything can instantly be created by technology, time and space seem canceled and humanity is projected into a virtual future where man will leave no trace of himself. *Immortality*, *homologation* and *cloning*: these are – according to Baudrillard – the founding values of the third millennium (*Ibidem*), the passage of which represented a missed opportunity, throwing us towards a historical, spiritual and cultural regression.

What happens when all this touches and pervades teaching and education? We witnessed and then became the protagonists of a radical change in habits but, above all, of the epistemological and communicative frameworks put in place to cope with an unexpected and changing didactic scenario but already under the attention of media education in last years (Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019).

2. Distance Learning in *Onlife Era*: Governing the Unexpected?

The emergency has forced learning and teaching practices of schoolteachers and university professors to consider distance learning as an unavoidable necessity. This, in particular for digital technologies and innovative teaching methods, has meant the possibility of finding space

among experiences and of giving life to experiments that in some cases have stood out for their significance and effectiveness. The spread of digital and social media and their pervasiveness of impact on people's lives during coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has favored a process of normalization of media education: from a niche attention, it has become a widespread concern (Rivoltella, 2020).

Media are no longer separable from everyday life but are gradually disappearing inside things and inside our lives. As Eugeni (2015) well argues, then the discourse starts from the following question. After postmodernism, have we entered the so called "postmedial age"? The question assumes that the media are dead: and that is exactly what this question claims. The devices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that we used to call "media" have actually dissolved into the apparatuses of commerce, control, travel and relationship typical of contemporary society. Life in the postmedial age implies a patient reconstruction of the meaning of our daily practices, through three great epic narratives: the *naturalization of technology*, the *subjectivation of experience* and the *socialization of the relational bond* (*Ibidem*).

Paradoxically, it is no longer the subjects that are "online", but the media that are "onlife". So *onlife* is a neologism used to describe the experience lived in a hyper-connected world where the distinction between "being online" or "being offline" no longer exists. From this perspective, it is no more reasonable to ask whether someone is online or offline (Floridi, 2015). The word *onlife* well explains the fusion of the digital in the analogue caused by information and communication technologies, demarcating the historical period from the hyper historic one (Floridi, 2010). We are probably the last generation to experience a clear difference between offline and online. In fact, the obvious dichotomies such as those between real/digital or human/machine will no longer sustainable in a clear way (Floridi, 2018). This means that it is no longer possible to isolate tools, devices, contexts and system of relations of which today they represent a constituent part.

In March 2020, schools and universities were overwhelmed by a widespread emergency: lessons suspended, students and teachers at home and distance learning. In September 2020, school and university life resumed, but as soon as the virus began to circulate more some regions, returned distance learning, then the government also chose it to start from the second grade and for high school, to cope with the second wave of pandemic.

Educational research in media education believes that is possible to "manage the unexpected" also in didactics (Rivoltella, 2020), sharing new ideas to foster a systemic reflection that overcomes the abused and reductive dichotomy of presence and distance. In schools and universities, some of these shortcuts are the belief that presence is better than distance. The idea that schools and universities are a place where we teach and not where we learn. The unexpected is governed by avoiding these shortcuts. And it can mean, for example, thinking about everything that can be done better in a digital environment and instead think of everything that cannot be done except in presence. Not to consider presence and digital as substitute situations, but as coexisting dimensions.

Pier Cesare Rivoltella (2020) calls this way of thinking and acting a sort of "cognitive shortcut". From this perspective, a cognitive shortcut in teaching-learning processes seems to be a choice that saves time and effort. It means relying on simplifications, relying on what had been done in the past in similar cases and had been successful, being content to propose it again. The impression is that the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has been addressed by resorting to some of the cognitive shortcuts deepened by Rivoltella, shortcut to set the whole debate on the basis of the dichotomy between presence and distance. Presence is value, distance is the fallback. Presence involves risks while distance puts schoolteachers and professors in safety. Presence guarantees relationships while distance impoverishes them. It seems that it is enough to dose the two parts of this new kind of didactics: a little distance and a little presence, in presence as long as students can, then in the worst scenario they go back to distance. But is this conceptual dichotomy still thinkable?

The risk is to refer teaching to a routine behavior almost exclusively tried out in daily prac-

tices, which is to the detriment of reflexivity (Schön, 1983). For this reason, schoolteachers and professors give up formidable opportunities for reflection on themselves and their professionality, fundamental aspects useful for improving the quality of daily didactics. More specifically, it involves the use of a sort of improvisation learned from practice at the expense of a professional epistemology based on *reflection-in-action* (*Ibidem*).

From these premises it is therefore possible to speak of "reflective teachers" too (Fabbri, Melacarne, Striano, 2008), teachers who are capable of integrating theoretical, disciplinary and methodological knowledge with those of a practical-empirical nature, teachers that are capable of providing effective answers to the problems emerging from daily teaching, and that of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) is certainly a very significant circumstance

3. Today's Teachers as *Middle-Class Vestals* 4.0?

Nowhere is the challenge of innovation greater than in didactics, where centuries-old teaching practices are embedded in political and organizational structures that are resistant to new ideas and technologies, even in the face of growing evidence-based data attesting as traditional ways of teaching nowadays are no more effective (Resnick, Spillane, Goldman, & Rangel, 2010).

The change in socio-cultural students' characteristics that took place around the Sixties necessarily led to the theorization of new teaching methods which – although supported by the evidence of psychological and sociological research (Barbagli, Dei, 1969) – did not immediately meet the proper attention of most of the teachers. On this aspect, the volume *The Middle-Class Vestals* was certainly a very significant research outcome (*Ibidem*). During the Sixties we were struggling with the realization of what we could consider as the only "structural reform" of the Italian school in the seventy years of the Republic. The Middle School as a response to the coherent interpretation of the constitutional principle of compulsory schooling of eight years. The construction of a "citizenship knowledge platform" common to all citizens, mandatory and free. The real change happened only fifteen years after the Constitution. The programs that were to give substance to it appeared after fifteen years more, and the Barbagli & Dei's research signaled the cultural and professional resistance of teachers referred to a scholastic innovation that wanted to be epochal.

In this regard, Marcello Dei's questions about the results of his four-handed research seem to be very interesting to us. Where did the teachers stand? Do they act as agents of class ideologization and the mass domestication of students or are they subordinate workers whose interests' conflict with those of the bourgeoisie? Are they involved in the legitimation of class society without being aware of it? Are they proletarians or guardians of the established order who operate with persuasion and conviction? (Dei, 2019).

Mutatis mutandis, some questions related to teachers' resistance to change during Sixties arise today too (Cunti, Priore, 2014), also with regard to technological innovation and distance learning at school and university. From an educational perspective, if learning occurs in ways that are not unique among subjects, if knowledge is a construction experience and if intelligence is a multi-dimensional construct (Bruner, 1990, 1996; Gardner, 1989,1991) all this necessarily implies attention to those renewed didactic models that take these aspects into account. Just as the teachers of the Sixties tried to carry on an obsolete idea of teaching and learning, do the teachers today try to perpetuate a way of thinking about these processes which – in the light of what happened – risks to become anachronistic? On the pedagogical and didactic side, it is legitimate to question whether we are not faced with a phenomenon similar to the one described above and which, in this case, prompts us to think about a return of *Middle-Class Vestals* in a 4.0 version.

4. Didactics, Distance Learning and New Professionalism: Looking for Teachers 5.0?

The teachers today always need to search for new teaching methods, de-constructing linear itineraries (Berthoz, 2009), fostering flexible teaching methods adaptable to continuous change,

first of all through a change of *frame of references* (Mezirow, 1990), also in teaching.

No doubt, distance learning has crumbled traditional didactic spaces through a "non-linear potential of didactic action", a synthesis between proxemics and communication (Sibilio, Zollo, 2016; Sibilio, 2020). These spaces were precisely based on interpersonal distance which was inspired by the elements that guide private, social and institutional relationships (Hall, 1966; Argyle, 1992) consequently applied also in schools and universities. The neo-functionalist idea that it is necessary to educate students in line with the competences they will have to perform in the production system and in society and that – doing it in a 4.0 and 5.0 society – can only mean anticipating the encounter with digital, from the point of both the mastery of languages and the knowledge of applications and devices.

From this perspective, it is appropriate to think a sort of "teachers 5.0", where body, space and time take on different connotations from the past. Much of the current rhetoric about distance learning claims that there is no body in this process of teaching-learning. This arises from a non-embodied vision whereby the body is the channel between the brain and the world and only necessary to communicate with the other. It is difficult to perceive that in online relationship the other appears on the screen but, in reality, he/she inhabits a real space. There is a sort of "liquid space" that includes not only the screen but also the spaces experienced by the actors, their premises and their contexts (Rossi, 2019). Moreover, having overcome the concept of the body as a channel, the body fully participates in the conceptualization and in any case intervenes in the intra-personal recursive process. There are therefore three spaces: those experienced by the two actors and the virtual one (*Ibidem*). After all, knowledge – even those in which body and space lose their canonical characteristics – is always accompanied by patterns of actions (Maturana & Varela, 1980), which makes us understand that knowledge is rooted in the biological structure of individual, therefore didactics is urged to investigate the potential of the body in action, even in distance learning.

Distance learning can be a valid support, but it is necessary to remember that online teaching is not the same as transferring one's usual teaching online. Each tool or environments has its own characteristics and the teacher who uses it must take into account (Rivoltella, 2020). No doubt, distance learning requires specific skills, not always possessed by teachers who, on the other hand, have a great experience of teaching in presence. We don't want to absolutely replace face-to-face teaching with distance learning. Distance learning and face-to-face teaching, if well organized, have advantages and disadvantages, allowing the development of teaching-learning processes that are valid both on a training and educational level, but we believe that it is almost impossible not to use digital tools in current teaching.

Reflecting on the role of the body and space in distance learning thus represents the keystone through which schoolteachers and professors are able to investigate the implicit knowledges that too often guides their professional practices, allowing them to delineate a deep furrow between technical rationality and knowledge of practice. Such discernment allows them to transcend *reflection-on-action* (posthumous and consequent to an action that has already taken place) in favor of a *reflection-in-action* (took place during the course of the practice itself), which allows schoolteachers and professors to rethink the traditional dichotomies between body/mind, space/time, weight/distance in didactics.

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