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REINVENTING EDUCATION

VOLUME III

**Pandemic and Post-
Pandemic Space and
Time**

Via Francesco Satolli, 30 – 00165 - Rome, Italy

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***Title* Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” – Reinventing Education VOLUME III Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Space and Time**

This volume contains papers presented in the 2nd International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” which took place online on 2-5 June 2021. The Conference was devoted to the needs and prospects of Reinventing Education.

The challenges posed by the contemporary world have long required a rethinking of educational concepts, policies and practices. The question about education ‘for what’ as well as ‘how’ and ‘for whom’ has become unavoidable and yet it largely

remained elusive due to a tenacious attachment to the ideas and routines of the past which are now far off the radical transformations required of educational systems.

Scenarios, reflections and practices fostering the possibility of change towards the reinvention of the educational field as a driver of more general and global changes have been centerstage topics at the Conference. Multidisciplinary approach from experts from different disciplinary communities, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, economics, architecture, political science has brought together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate constraints and opportunities for reinventing education.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and inter-disciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners’ mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 800 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on research, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Space and Time

A Premise

Papers in this third volume deals with the Covid-19 pandemic which is having an enormous impact on education systems worldwide. Policy makers, teachers, school managers, parents and students have been called to the reinvent their way of 'doing school'. At the same time, the governance of the education system and schools' organizations have been exposed to unprecedented tensions.

Within a short period of time, radical changes had to be introduced, simultaneously, at various levels of the school system. At national and regional level, there has been the need to rethink the way in which teachers are recruited, engaged and managed. National assessment and evaluation systems have been suspended or redefined in their uses by school actors. The ways through which institutes were managed and organized had to be rethought, passing in a very short time through an on and off of dematerialization and hyper-normativity of time and space. Within schools, managers and teachers have been called to redefine the role of digital technologies in their didactic, as well as in their relationships with families and students. In some cases, these set of changes led to experience novel and unexpected daily proximities, in other prevailed a context characterized by distance and unsatisfactory relationships. Managers and teachers have been asked to re-invent their professionalism to rethink their organizational, didactic and relational competences. Students and families, on their side, have been called to rebuild and reimagine new way of being at school, re-inventing the spaces and time of schooling and the way in which they relate among each other and with teachers.

The pandemic emergency has been a lens revealing intersections and structural tensions among various level and actors of the education system, but also allowing opportunities of changes thanks to the exogenous shock. At the same time, it must be considered that the emergency is interacting on pre-existing inequalities and contradictions. The pandemic clearly revealed the deep disparities of educational opportunities associated to students' life and housing conditions, beyond their access and uses of technological devices. Remote teaching and the enactment of an 'emergency didactic' has exacerbated learning difficulties for underprivileged students (children facing material deprivation, students with migratory background, students with special needs or disable, etc.). The interaction between the pandemic and pre-existing inequalities created different contextual conditions for actors' agency, orienting

toward different directions the pandemic's transformational potential.

Higher education systems have been affected too: in constant evolution due to constant transformations of society and changed functions of knowledge, universities have undergone a structural change along with pandemic times. Simultaneously, the growing relevance of knowledge for the economic development of the capitalistic system has profoundly affected higher education systems, characterized by the neo-liberal approach which has subject of increasing critical analysis.

However, Higher education systems are starting to be affected by other somewhat inevitable changing processes due to the evolution of knowledge and the consequent forms of its transmission. These forms have to be necessarily new both because of the availability of new instruments and the increased need to develop interpretative models of a constant and often unpredictable change. In this juncture the university might assume a renewed central role. At Higher Education System level, the growing use of digital instruments is envisaged in order to cope with the rising of the management rates of the training offer as well as to answer to the growing differentiation of user categories. A feasible consequence could be the increasing of the already pressure for the differentiation among the universities, with the related social implications.

At individual university level, it is foreseeable the demand for university involvement in tackling the problems of society and the economy will increase. And this at global, national and local level. From an organizational point of view the most significant feature is represented by the accumulation of traditional and new tasks that do not seem to be possible to manage. Whatever form the higher education systems will come to take, it remains that a central point to be clarified concerns the management of change. It will be the market that will impose its rules and the universities will organize themselves individually within the invisible enclosures that will guide their policies (with predictable growing social and territorial differences), or instead the State will choose incentive policies to direct its training system. It remains that in a condition of uncertainty and constant change the university's roles multiply and become – at least potentially – more and more central. It can therefore be argued that the university is not only called upon to respond to the demands of society but by elaborating answers and solutions to the problems it progressively affects the functioning of society.

We are fully aware that each educational experience produces specific results and definitions of teaching-learning practices. The well-established model of the magister teacher, based on a one-to-many transmission of knowledge, is complemented by new configurations of teaching-learning practices. There are

teaching practices that cultivate the ambition to combine the technological innovation with the psychological and pedagogical issues. Educational technologies, such as the Interactive Whiteboard, incorporate a new grammar and pragmatic in which the emphasis is placed on the involvement and the participation of the student, as well as on a “reverse teaching”, compared to the traditional one. The diffusion of online educational platforms, based on algorithmic architectures and data-driven approaches, also draws attention to a personalized way of learning and a datafication of teaching. Digital technologies are therefore stimulating a series of transformations in the socio-material order of the class affecting the spatial and temporal configuration of teaching. At the same time, they are embedded in the complexity of the educational contexts that rework their practical and symbolic value.

In the European framework of strengthening the relations between the labour market and education, we also witness the implementation of teaching practices associated with the idea of knowledge as an economic and social investment. Recently, a large field of critical investigation has highlighted how teaching aimed at improving the employment prospects of students is deeply affecting public values in education. At the same time, different points of view in the educational field claim to postpone the transmission of skills related to the labour market to broader educational objectives of social inclusion and civic participation.

The new proxemics imposed by the current pandemic challenge traditional spatial configuration, from the arrangement of desks to the mobile use of chairs, from the forms of communication in virtual environments to the interaction in the classroom. Therefore, this is to register the need to re-elaborate the ecology of the educational practices, starting from the socio-material space of learning.

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A Universities Programme of Art-Based and Art Informed Research

Franca Zuccoli and Elisabetta Biffi

Università Milano Bicocca, franca.zuccoli@unimib.it

Università Milano Bicocca, elisabetta.biffi@unimib.it

ABSTRACT: *Recent decades have seen growing recognition of the role of artistic languages in educational and research settings. What was once an exclusive focus on the expressive production of children has now expanded to include far greater use of artistic languages in the domain of education, including with younger and older adults. Artistic production itself has become a key tool for interpreting society, and has thus been accepted into mainstream research as a language that it is no longer possible to do without. Proponents of arts-based research (ABR) and art-informed research are currently calling for a focus on «systematic use of the artistic process [...] as a primary way of understanding and examining experience» (McNiff, 2008, 29). These methods are alternative means of exploring aspects of reality that are inaccessible to traditional forms of knowledge and more conventional methods of inquiry. In a contemporary era that is different to the past and characterized by greater uncertainty, ABR offers a strategy based on a form of observation that is complex and wide-ranging, and thus more appropriate than exclusively linear and causal approaches. This paper presents a post-graduate course in ABR that takes the form of a virtual international classroom entitled Global Classroom in Arts-Based Research. This programme involves – in addition to the Human Sciences and Education Department at Milano-Bicocca University – Florida State University, Drexel University, University of Leuven, FLAMES, and Northern Illinois University. It is offered to PhD students in education, with a view to familiarizing them with the potential of artistic languages, getting them to constantly compare notes concerning their practices and documentation, and helping them to design research actions that include the use of these languages.*

KEYWORDS: *Art, Education, Research, Teaching University, ABR.*

Introduction

In recent decades, the debate surrounding educational and social research has no longer exclusively focused on the use of quantitative versus qualitative modes of inquiry, viewed as essential to carefully observing reality and attempting to impact on it by developing shared proposals for potential change. Theoretical reflection now also considers the languages used, which are no longer limited to oral or written words or to logical and causal thinking. A new line of inquiry emphasizes the

importance of using plural languages and more specifically artistic languages: iconic, figurative, photographic, video, bodily, performative, and musical languages have all proven their value and importance and have begun to be used to for the purposes of observing and collecting data, and not only to be used by the research participants, but also by the researcher, to whom they offer an alternative perspective on his or her journey of inquiry. Research practices that deploy artistic languages have thus multiplied and the debate has intensified accordingly. These developments have created the need for a focused and in-depth conversation between researchers from different disciplines and cultural contexts, with a view to enhancing even further the awareness of the potential to draw on arts-based languages in research and building a research community with a specific focus on this approach. In parallel, scholars have also begun to develop a focus on the different types of intelligence (Gardner, 1983), and consequently an emphasis on the importance of always considering the different routes to learning and knowledge building, and of respecting and valuing individual preferences. Innovative and avantgarde research is often conducted on doctoral research programmes, which are therefore among the key places where the potential for artistic languages to play a role in scholarly inquiry is likely to be taken into consideration. Accordingly, in this paper, we present a currently on-going international Global Classroom for PhD students, that offers a specific focus on arts-based research (Leavy, 2015, 2019).

1. Why can art play a key part in a journey of inquiry?

It is crucial to ask ourselves why art and its languages can play a key part in educational and social research among other fields of inquiry.

As Graeme Sullivan reminds us, the contemporary world is characterized by a constant lack of certainties and inalienable definitions, as well as by the need to be capable of coping with uncertainty. A mode of inquiry that draws on both instruments and paradigms that are predefined and closed paradigms risks losing some of the richness that is given by complexity. Hence, our contemporary era calls for competence in using open and exploratory methods that are better suited to capturing the latest developments in human thinking and achievements. «The realization that in an uncertain world there is a need to develop more widespread means of exploring human understanding and that visual arts can play a key role» (Sullivan, 2010, xxiii)

This concept has been echoed by Patricia Leavy, who in her work has described the importance of the contribution of art and specific value of arts-based research (ABR). In addition to these key theoretical reflections concerning the domain of research, we must take a step back to consider that art itself, and the work of artists, is itself a form of constant inquiry. Some artists have explicitly described their particular mode of action, and

how they have questioned it, proceeded, acted again, and reflected again, thus pursuing their own journey of inquiry in their own unique way. Emulating and making explicit such an approach in educational and social research, could be of value, although it should remain clear that researchers who use arts-based instruments and languages are not necessarily artists. A first consideration to bear in mind in relation to arts-based research is that it should in no way be viewed as a simplified or superficial approach to inquiry. On the contrary, we oppose such a mistaken view, advocating for the hidden depths of this approach to be taken seriously. ABR represents a complex field of knowledge, made up of countless factors, among which: the world of art itself, with contemporary artistic actions to the fore; the availability of the most up-to-date media and materials; the specific features of the children's, adolescents', and adult's graphic and three-dimensional productions; people's relationship with cultural heritage; advances in artistic inquiry itself.

A second point is that some have sought to restrict the definition of what may be viewed as art, an attempt that we have been warned about by Caterina Zaira Laskaris, who questions the reason for this need:

We are generally obsessed with the meaning of art (and Art), or rather, with the idea that art must have meaning. In reality we too often forget that this is a historicized, modern sensitivity and that for centuries art had no meaning 'in itself', of itself, in absolute terms; that is to say, it was independent (ontologically) of its practical function as an object (and type of objects) and its meaning as an image (representation code, ornamentation, reading). Let us think, for example, of the function of a reliquary or an altarpiece, or of the meaning – over time, iconic, symbolic, decorative, cultural – of a fresco or a bas-relief, etc. Form, for a very long time, was not detached from content, rather they were mutually dependent. (Laskaris, 2017, 15)

A further reflection on this theme has been contributed by Dino Formaggio, who saw art as independent of its specific functions and definitions that cast its position in stone:

Art is all that men call art. This is not, as some might believe, a simple ice-breaking remark, but rather, perhaps the only acceptable and verifiable definition of the concept of art. Such a definition is the most valid, and – if you will – based on well-known theories of contemporary logic, it is not even tautological. It possesses, first of all, a healthy negative validity: that of preventing one from going in search of a 'real', essential, or concealed definition, as all the poetics have done for centuries, arguing that art is intuition or that art is form, or that art is an idea, or that it is prayer, that it is this or that it is this that, always under the truly Don Quixote style illusion, on the part of each of these positions, that they and not the others, have captured it, impaled it on the sharp lance of their conceptual system, the very universality of art, all art and forever. (Formaggio, 1981, 11)

He subsequently continues:

As a form it is empty. It is coloured with the colours of the cultures that it permeates, it emits the reflections of the experiences of the moment: but neither is it a static crystal of pure reflection. It is a combination of the active motion of the concrete artistic experience in progress and the equally active motions of the reflection. Thus, every epoch, every people, and every culture give life to a certain specific way of filling the general notion of art with meaning (Formaggio, 1981, 12).

These reflections lay the ground for the project presented in the next section, as they suggest that art can support inquiry effectively because it evolves in tandem with changes in society. An additional way of advancing our understanding of the potential inherent in the process of creating art is to engage with the first-person accounts of artists. For example, the following are Jackson Pollock's answers during an interview by William Wright on a 1951 radio show.

Pollock, what do you think is the meaning of modern art?

For me, modern art is nothing more than the expression of the ideals of the age in which we live.

Did classical artists have the means to express their era?

Yes, and they did it very well. All cultures have had the means and techniques to express their ideals. The Chinese, the Renaissance, all cultures. What interests me is that today painters are no longer obliged to look for a subject outside of themselves. Most modern painters have a different inspiration. They work from the inside. [...]

There has been a lot of controversy and comments about your method of painting. Would you like to tell us something about it?

I think new needs require new techniques. And modern artists have found new ways and means of getting across their ideas. It seems to me that a modern painter cannot express our age, aviation, atomic science, radio, using the forms of the Renaissance or other cultures of the past. Every era has its own technique. [...]

Let us return to the problem of technique, which many today find important. Can you tell us how you developed your technique, and why you paint this way?

In my opinion, technique is naturally developed based on a need, and from this need, the artist draws new ways of expressing the world around him. I use methods that are different to traditional painting techniques. Today it seems strange, but I do not think it is really so different. I paint on the ground, but that's not such an abnormal thing. The Orientals used to do it. [...] the colour I use is almost always liquid and very fluid. I use brushes more as sticks than as actual brushes. [...] I think it is possible, to control how the colour come out to a large extent, and I do not use... I do not use chance – because I reject chance. (Pollock, 2006,79-81)

2. The ECQI conference in Leuven: the beginning of a journey

During the ECQI European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry conference organized by the University in Leuven in 2018, a group of university lecturers who had been experimenting for years with incorporating artistic languages into their research practices, came up with the idea of organizing a seminar for the doctoral students of their universities.

The initial experimental phase of this project, entitled Global Classroom, aimed to offer systematic and reflective experience of the principles underpinning Arts-based Research (Baron, Eisner, 2012; Barrett, Bolt, 2016) and Art-informed Research (Cole, Knowles, 2008). The first Global Classroom, was implemented between October 2018 and April 2019, with the involvement of two universities: Drexel University and the University of Milano Bicocca. The group of lecturers involved in the project were: Professor Nancy Gerber and Jacelyn Biondo (Drexel University, Florida, USA), Elisabetta Biffi and Franca Zuccoli (University of Milan Bicocca). The students who took this course were able to attend it in video conference mode, from the campuses of their respective universities. The second 2019-2020 edition involved two additional universities, University of Florida University and KU Leuven and was implemented from February 2021 to end-June 2021. The lecturers involved in the design and running of this Global Classroom were: Nancy Gerber, Florida State University; Elisabetta Biffi and Franca Zuccoli, University of Milano-Bicocca; Jacelyn Biondo, Drexel University; Sara Coemans and Karin Hannes, University of Leuven, FLAMES and Richard Siegesmund, Northern Illinois University. In this case, the students involved were from four different universities and the students joined the video conferences from their homes rather than from their respective campuses, on account of the public health emergency. The distance education format previously imposed by the geographical distance between the partner universities ended up foreshadowing the online formats forced on universities by the restrictions adopted due to COVID-19. In keeping with the theme of artistic languages, the use of video and digital technologies, right from the first edition of the Global Classroom, imposed a divergent, participatory and artistic approach, as well as a use of the body and of various instruments and materials, that was far removed from conventional online classes. From the outset, the distance format was approached from the point of view of its artistic potential.

The syllabus for the seminar states that:

We have created a new course for doctoral students and interested faculty based on a partnership between the University of Milano-Bicocca, the University of Leuven, and Florida State University to explore:

- 1) the various definitions of arts-based research in the US and Europe;

- 2) philosophical, theoretical, and methodological approaches to ABR across multiple disciplines in the social sciences, education and healthcare;
- 3) the social and cultural influences impacting the advancement of ABR;
- 4) a global research agenda specific to ABR; and,
- 5) strategies for promoting the advancement of ABR on a global scale.

In order to accomplish these goals, we will use a hybrid pedagogical approach integrating technology to conduct distance videoconference classes in which faculty and students will meet to study the current status, trends, approaches, and social and cultural positioning of arts-based research.

The class is conceived as a learning laboratory in which students will discuss, critically and reflexively evaluate perspectives, philosophical positions, and research questions culminating in the design and construction of their own collaborative research projects using arts-informed or arts-based research.

During the Global Classroom sessions, many projects were presented and implemented by faculty and doctoral students, in which artistic languages played a key part in the inquiry process. Concrete experience was always the starting point for learning, with the integration of theoretical frameworks, but heavily based on laboratory methods, which gave the doctoral students the opportunity to experiment with and explore a selection of artistic languages.

Learning laboratory structure

Reading, Discussion, and Reflection

Arts-based Research workshops (collage, assemblage, dance, painting...): Arts-based research practices will be integral to each class, as students explore how the arts can inform each phase of their research from conception, definition of research question, organization, data generation, data analysis, data synthesis, interpretation, representation, and dissemination. Students work in transglobal pairs to investigate and document how different artistic processes, media, skill levels, and team collaboration may be used at the various stages of a research project.

Discussion

Reflection and journal writing

Tutoring and academic support were offered to small groups in parallel with the main large group sessions. The students' feedback about this PhD module was positive. For example, one student wrote that:

This feeling of dialogue and true experimentation was perceived by all the students who participated as holding the potential to impact on their own research journeys, alongside having made contact with other universities and other doctoral students engaged in the same process.

Conclusions

This paper presented a Global Classroom for doctoral students on Arts-based Research and Arts-informed Research. It has been already been implemented over two academic years, and is expanding, in terms of the number of participating students, faculty and universities. The concept underpinning this offering is that PhD students, who are training in conducting research in the educational and social science fields, need to learn about artistic languages and their use in the research domain. It is not so much and not only a matter of keeping artistic languages in mind in order to collect different types of data (for example by collecting drawings by children, adolescents or adults, or the photographs of research participants, or biographical or autobiographical texts, musical compositions, collages (Biffi, Zuccoli, 2015, 2016), or three-dimensional compositions...) but rather to use art in the very process of inquiry itself (Biffi, Zuccoli, 2019; Gerber *et al.*, 2020; McNiff, 2013; Wang, Hannes, 2020). Enhancing doctoral students' awareness of this domain and facilitating exchanges between doctoral students from different universities opens up the possibility of more fully exploiting the true potential of these languages.

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