



I CREATE: A New Paradigm for Arts Education

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Abstract

According to the Seoul Agenda, which synthesizes the conclusions of the 2th UNESCO Conference, 2010, arts education must be considered 'as a fundamental and sustainable component of a high quality renewal of education', in order to 'contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world'. I think that in order to accomplish this task we need an epistemological shift. I have synthesized my approach in the 'I CREATE Paradigm', which means the Intersubjective, Creative, Reflexive, and Enactive Approach To Education. I believe that these are key concepts to understand the processes of arts education, and that they can provide us with tools to guide them, in order to foster creativity and empathy, which can be major forces to face the challenges of the 3th Millennium.

Keywords: Arts Education, Creativity, Empathy, Intersubjectivity, Reflexivity, Enactivism

*Any education that neglects the experience of delight
will be a dry and tasteless diet with no nourishment in it.
(Philip Pullman)*

Introduction

Sir Ken Robinson suggests that the major flaw of current Western education is that its principles and aims are still patterned after the obsolete standards of the Industrial Revolution, which assimilate the classroom to the factory floor. If this is true, I cannot help being a bit worried about the recent developments of the education policies in Italy. They certainly provide a few new teaching tools, and some extra funding that can be a shot in the arm for our ailing public schools. On the other hand, it is evident that their overall structure is nothing more than an update of the above mentioned standards. It emphasizes digital skills, problem-solving abilities, and a early involvement with the complex and shifting labour market; nevertheless, it continues to be rooted in the outmoded notions of transmission, individualism, and competition. And unfortunately they do not seem able to deal with the actual school's nightmare: the fact that the decline of the school matches the decline of the education itself. Italian public opinion has been shocked lately by the images of a wild young student bullying an old teacher, and threatening him in a mafia-like style. As you can imagine, many appeals have been made to restore 'the good old methods': in other words, violence against violence. I guess this is not a very reasonable answer, but this is not the right place to discuss it. I would like to address instead a deeper issue: what can we do in order to prevent these kind of problems? What has been missing in the educational process that might counteract them?

I am not able to provide a clear-cut answer; however, I reckon that it depends very much on the role we ascribe to education: it cannot be just a matter of moulding the producers and consumers of the future, but it must resume its noblest goal, which Edgar Morin, quoting Rousseau, strongly claims: teaching how to live.

But what kind of life are we called to teach? Let me make a couple of general reflections.

The sea-changes we are going through in this beginning of the third Millennium require great choices: we must decide whether to go on with a developmental model whose destiny seem to run faster and faster, crushing in its race not only the delicate balance of the environment but also people's values and feelings, or strive to envisage a different, more 'convivial' way. Jeremy Rifkin suggest that we might be on the verge of an 'empathic civilization': both the latest researches in neuroscience and the chances offered by the new technologies converge in modelling a possible society founded on altruism, cooperation and mutual aid, where the respect for the environment is paired with the respect for the other human beings. And Rianne Eisler declares: 'We humans are the most creative life forms on our planet – amazing beings who can change not only our environments but also ourselves. With a clearer understanding of who we are, what we can be, and what is needed for a more sustainable, equitable and peaceful global culture, we can use our enormous creativity to construct foundations for truly civilized cultures' (Richards 2007: 272).

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Empathy and creativity are essential features in order to meet the challenge of rebuilding human communities upon more human bases. I believe we need a new paradigm for education, which puts these features at the centre of the teaching process. My latest book, *Educazione all'arte/Arte dell'educazione* (Pitruzzella 2017) is aimed at demonstrating that this new paradigm has deep and ancient roots, which can be traced in many pedagogical projects of the past, from Comenius to Froebel, to Freinet and Lodi, and that these roots match the recent researches of neurosciences, psychology and philosophy of the mind. I maintain that Arts Education can be pivotal in this paradigm shift, and I describe an inclusive theoretical frame into which its most relevant aspects can be identified, understood, and addressed towards the necessary pedagogical change. I synthesized it with the acronym I CREATE, which means the Intersubjective, Creative, Reflexive, and Enactive Approach To Education. I will briefly mention its main concepts.

1. Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity is a field of interdisciplinary research that has been developed in the past thirty years². Its major findings can be resumed under three main headings: togetherness, connection, and empathy. 'Togetherness refers to the innate tendency to establish affective bonds. (...) It is a primal motivation for children's early behaviours, prior and more important than the satisfaction of self-centered needs; it is rooted in evolution and inscribed in our neuro-biological system. Connection refers to the simple fact that we are relational beings: individuals are not compact and autonomous nucleuses (like Leibniz's 'windowless monads'), but open-ended complex systems that continuously rearrange themselves according to the tangled web of relationships into which they move. (...) Empathy refers to the mature manifestations of the previous two in human life, which entails our ability to comprehend the other's feelings and resonate with them, yet maintaining the right distance that enables care' (Pitruzzella 2017: 219-20).

Intersubjectivity studies had shown that such an innate tendency, biologically and evolutionally rooted, can be either nurtured or hindered by experience. We can cultivate our children's 'intersubjective matrix' right from birth, with adequate care and affective exchanges. I maintain that the arts are a valuable tool in order to activate people's intersubjective nature: when children play, dance, sing, paint or perform together they are experimenting with relationships, and are enabled to be receptive to the others' inner states.

2. Creativity

We call creative a process that leads, by reworking, rearranging and transforming pre-existent elements, to produce something that is novel, original and adequate (Pitruzzella 2008). This simple definition entails two major aspect of the matter. First, that the creative attitude is far from being a privilege of the geniuses (just like empathy is not a privilege of wise and holy people): it is rather a function of the personhood, like affects or cognition. Like empathy, it is potentially present in each single infant, and can be fostered or frustrated. Second, that its scope outreaches the fields of arts and sciences, and concerns also our everyday life.

Can we teach creativity? Of course not. But we can arrange educational settings where it can grow. We can provide the conditions for the spontaneous development of what I have called 'the emblems of creative attitude': curiosity, flexibility and presence. The artistic experience is the natural cradle for all this. The arts are the playground of creativity: they imply not only learning techniques and methods, but also experimenting, inquiring, making hypothesis and counterfactuals; the creative process in the arts mingles spontaneity with careful planning, imagination with self-awareness; it balances the power of emotions with the intelligence of feelings. Most of all, it can be a joyful and blissful experience.

3. Reflectivity

To be alive is to be constantly submerged by a flow of events, both external and internal: sensations, perceptions, emotions, images; thoughts turning into words, words turning into thoughts. To stop momentarily the flow to make sense of what happens is what changes an event into an experience. It means reconstructing it within ourselves, allowing ourselves the possibility to explore it and comprehend it, but also mirror ourselves in it, understanding ourselves on the basis of our understanding of it. This reflective process that engenders experience is fundamental for children's growth, as it goes together with the making of individual identity. It is particularly important in our

² See, among others, Bråten ed. 1998, 2007, 2009, Decety and Ickes eds. 2009, De Waal 2009, Stern 2004.



'liquid' world where the flows of events are multiplied, accelerated and often distorted by our technological devices.

Education is called to restore this reflective possibility, to contrast the overpowering *Chronos* giving room to *Kairos*: in Daniel Stern terms, dignifying the 'now moment' as the cradle of possibilities. In the arts, the fact itself that the creative process leads to a product, as provisional as it may be, enables reflection. Malcom Ross makes a distinction between 'reactive feelings' and 'reflective feelings'. The former are emotional discharges that manifest themselves as responses to occurrences, while the latter is to feel the necessity of staying with the experience. 'In the creative experience of art-making, reflective feelings guide the formative process by allowing the artist to make the series of adjustments that will bring the work closer to the heart's desire' (Ross 2011: 10).

4. Enactivism

Enactivism is an invitation to adopt a complex viewpoint in order to understand the world and ourselves. It has two complementary facets. On the one hand, it holds the principle that the whole is more than the sum of its parts: in other words, to understand a complex system we should look not only at its components, but mostly at the relations among them, as they are interconnected in a way such that if we acts on one of them, we act on all. On the other hand, each system does not subsist in itself, but can grow and learn by virtue of being part of larger systems, and by constantly interacting with other systems. When a complex system enters into contact with another one (or more than one), they willy-nilly influence each other's balance: they make what Francisco Varela (1991) has called a 'structural coupling', forming a new complex system that includes them all, and presents new emergent properties. This principle encompasses not only the relationships we entertain with the others, but also the way we the construe the world as a whole. We create the world we inhabit on the basis of our predispositions, which are the characteristics of the psycho-physical systems we are, but these constraints are not of our own: they are rather part of the world that had created us. Therefore, knowledge cannot be but embodied (going through the body), and enacted (going through action). The mind and the world play in each other's hand, or there is no play at all.

In the perspective of education, this principle implies a relationship of interdependence among the subjects, and a mutual creative arrangement (Dolci 1988); it implies that reality (and accordingly, knowledge and values) is not pre-given, but rather it is always the fruit of a co-construction, an emergent property of the dynamics of the systems involved.

Conclusions

My firm conviction is that these principles are implicit in arts education, and they can provide us with a new awareness of the fundamental role it can play in fostering a pedagogy of empathy and creativity, fulfilling the above quoted recommendations of the Seoul Agenda. Furthermore, I believe that they can support us in devising new tools and methods to help people make good art, which means following beauty and truth.

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