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Intuition as an Educational Strategy

ABSTRACT

Intuition, in pedagogy, is a strategy that mixes communication, art and even a political dimension, building social relationships both from the teacher's point of view (who must be able to understand the students and to relate to them), as far as the student's point of view and its possibilities for immediate creative experiences. From the intuitive method to Freire's ideas, the teacher becomes «politician and artist», capable of adapting to conditions and people, attracting their interest with non-pedantic teaching. Having and stimulating an intuitive attitude in the learning phase can prove to be fundamental for the formation of a critical and autonomous thought.

RIASSUNTO

L'intuizione, in pedagogia, è una strategia che unisce una dimensione comunicativa, artistica e perfino politica, costruendo relazioni sociali sia dal punto di vista del docente (che deve essere in grado di capire gli studenti e relazionarsi a loro), sia dal punto di vista dello studente e delle sue possibilità per un'esperienza immediatamente creativa. Dal metodo dell'intuizione alle idee di Freire, il docente diviene «politico e artista», capace di adattarsi alle condizioni e alle persone, attirando il loro interesse con una didattica non pedante. Avere e stimolare un'attitudine intuitive nella fase d'apprendimento può rivelarsi fondamentale per la Formazione di un pensiero critico e autonomo.

KEY WORDS: *intuition, education, pedagogy, intuitive method, learning processes.*

1. The thread and the net

What is meant by «intuition» in pedagogy? I'll start from my personal experience. I deal with citizenship training in relation to national and international cultural heritage; my activity takes place as part of the Master's Degree Course and teacher training at the University of Rome "Tor Vergata". In the classroom, we sometimes addressed the issue of intuition and reflection, talking about the *intuitive method*; to explain to the students what the difference was, I tried to give the mental image of the *thread* and the *net*. Reflective thinking is like a *thread*: it can be very long, twist-

ing in inextricable knots, but somehow it has a beginning, an end, and it is always possible to follow its line and trajectory, however complex it is. Intuition is like a *net*, perhaps a *fishing net*: it is extended in all directions, it is static, and in various points it can hold the most diverse elements, which apparently have nothing in common; but then the net is pulled up and all the elements come together in one place, giving an integral vision. In the intuitive pedagogical method, a similar thing happens: all the elements that must be learned are not immediately available and understandable, but through practice they are acquired without having to reconstruct the thread of reasoning and analysis, because you immediately get in touch with things themselves; knowledge is *direct*.

In the relationship with the students, over the years I have found the difficulty in establishing a dialogue approach, which involves the students in the pedagogical process, stimulates them to participate and, thus, to build together a *shared* knowledge (not only *mine*, transmitted and received almost uncritically). Part of this difficulty derives from the apparent “novelty” of the dialogical approach, that seems to catch them unprepared; which makes me understand how rare the stimulus to creative participation in the classroom is. On the other hand, the difficulty is also mine, in being able to understand the different ways I could relate to learners; nothing, in my experiences or studies, has concretely opened up the possibility of operating beyond the rational, reflective and analytical approach to any type of problem. Yet a more intuitive attitude can prove to be fundamental for the subsequent awareness, on problems, relationships and so on; above all, not to leave this awareness as a mere rational observation, but to transform it into the stimulus to action, to the transformation of reality, as of one’s self.

When I am speaking of «educational strategy», I mean above all a *field vision*, a propensity towards a field of production of pedagogies that make intuition their horizon. Various pedagogical models implement education, different from each other both in terms of objectives and methods. The objectives are dictated by necessity and interest, about what kind of person, citizen, society you want to train. This implies medium and long-term choices that can be defined *strategies*, in the sense of future-oriented planning. The distinction that Durkheim (1922) made, that education is *permanent* and pedagogy is *transitory*, comes to mind: by saying this, he meant to distinguish between the teaching and learning process itself – which is permanent for it is inherent in the social nature of human being, in every age and in every context – and the organized and studied forms to make this process efficient and effective in concrete situations, subject to change.

2. The intuitive method

On methods: here we enter the field of the relationship between theory and practice. And when we talk about intuition in pedagogy, we talk about the so-called *intuitive method*, which has developed throughout the modern era, and is based on the idea that the learner's operativeness in the learning phase is more effective, for an understanding of the object of study, compared to simply listening to the oral frontal lessons. It opposes the *logical-argumentative method*, often defined as an "intellectualist", especially at the turn of the XIX and XX centuries, when the movement of New School takes hold internationally. This anti-intellectualism is to be understood as a liberating attitude towards the organization of knowledge, that is, in the freedom of the learner to determine which studies to face in order to build their own path, rather than undergoing objectively determined programs.

Intuition in pedagogy is therefore understood in a slightly different sense than in general psychology. Especially with regard to child learning, the enhancement of "doing", that is, manual activity, play and work, which *precedes* theoretical knowledge, acquires a great importance. Knowledge is by its nature formal, intellectual, based precisely on the conscious and mediated processing of information about reality. Activist methods, instead, point to immediate knowledge of objective reality through the possibility of manipulating, observing and explaining it.

I believe that someone has now *intuitively* thought about Maria Montessori, and certainly Montessori's activism is a pivotal example of education aimed at stimulating the autonomy creativity of the child, and therefore learning without the constant and direct mediation of the teacher. This method ultimately becomes a *self-education*, both of the learner and of the teacher, who, through the observation of the activities and the preparation of the environment, learns to know the learners, to understand their inclinations and abilities and finally to intervene gradually, that is, only when necessary (Montessori, 1917).

The point is, the intuitive method in pedagogy is always adopted in admixture with *a priori* forms of organization of the school environment, which do not automatically exclude the logical and consequential argumentation, but subordinate it to direct experimentation; for example sensory, visual knowledge. Here the importance of psychology gets closer to pedagogical questions: the first example of great attention to the psychological form of learning is, without a doubt, the Gestalt school, whose experiments have highlighted the importance of intuition as a *premise* for intelligence. As in Köhler's famous experiments on *insight*, the "flash of genius" that occurs when you have your mind free from preconceived concepts, or procedures already adopted in solving problems. This intuitive understanding of the solution of a problem differs from rational, conscious and elaborate reflection, because it is

sudden, with the mind operating in background, which therefore quickly processes information and data in a creative way, before they are “caught” by reason.

3. Intuition and cultural context

On the other hand, in the pedagogical context, this attention to the results of psychology must necessarily relate to other fields, such as the sociological understanding of different realities, contexts and needs, which from time to time emerge in the contingency of educational relationships. Moreover, some of the major psychological schools support this: first of all I would remember Vigotsky (1926) and the Soviet cultural-historical school, in which the mental processes of the individual are determined by both physiological and cultural factors, so they cannot be understood beyond outside the cultural mediation of the subject’s life context. In the same way, Bruner (1966), while starting from completely different premises, affirms the fundamental importance of cultural contexts and differences in communication, language and symbolic representations in the psychological development of individuals. In short, *no man is an island*, every person has a reference environment in which the influence between subject and context is mutual.

I would like to give a very general and simplified example of diversity in the attitude toward studying and solving problems between Europeans and Americans. We Europeans, by cultural tradition, tend to study theory in depth first, then move on to action, experimenting with what has been learned theoretically; if we make a mistake in the results, we collect the data, analyze it, improve the theoretical knowledge and retry the experiment. That is, we give greater importance to rational knowledge, subordinating experimental practice to it. The Americans, equally by cultural tradition, only differently set, proceed by trial-and-error: first they act, if they make mistakes they draw the consequences, then they formulate the theory and try again. In essence, experience, or perhaps experimentation, is at the heart of the American approach to study; rationalization is at the the heart of the European one (Krogerus & Tschappeler, 2008). Of course, the two perspectives do not necessarily overlap the difference between intuition and conscience, but can make the idea of cultural diversity that affects, also in a profound way, the formation of the individual and collective mind through the contexts of belonging.

The orientation towards the goals to be achieved also varies according to the context. Different pedagogical approaches that give priority to the activity may seem similar; however, they set objectives referring to the idea of society to build. If we relate manual operation to programmatic theories, it is present both in Dewey’s Laboratory School (1899) and Montessori’s Children’s House, but in the educational or-

ganization it differs according to the purpose: in the Laboratory School, the manual skills and direct observation recreate the mechanisms of society in a small scale, in order to experiment with the organization of work and collaboration for problem solving, to bring closer and deepen the relationship between school and society and to train new citizens. In the Children's House, which also deal with a lower age group, the purpose of manual activities is aimed at the development of individual autonomy, of growth in awareness of one's own abilities and possibilities.

This attention to the context, to the personalities of the learners, to their cultural location and to the connection with the evolution of society, acquires a further perspective if we try to discover the value of intuition in educational relationships that we could define "difficult". Therefore, I would like to briefly focus on two pedagogists who understood, in very different conditions, the limits of a merely logical-argumentative educational approach. The first is Anton S. Makarenko (1933), who took care of the recovery and reintegration into society of all those disarranged orphans who, having lost everything during the Russian Civil War (1918- 1921), gathered in small groups that survived the crime (today we would talk about baby gangs). The re-education of these orphans took place through community work, which had as its purpose the teaching of social, collective responsibility. In front of the very harsh and ruthless life that the orphans had experienced, a traditional school teaching would have been worthless, which had no relevance to their concrete reality; while collective work, organized in a disciplinary way, gave the opportunity to experiment, without aprioristic reasoning (nor foolish "spontaneisms"), the validity of cooperation in daily life, through results. So, only the experience on the field could prepare the students to re-enter society and, at the same time, prepare the teachers to understand who they were facing and how they could relate to difficult subjects, in the construction of those particular «perspective lines» of Makarenko's pedagogy, whereby the individual and the community relate mutually from different yet converging points of view.

The other example of a difficult educational relationship concerns adult education and connects with Paulo Freire's practical-theoretical experience (1967). I am referring to the particular area of *literacy*, which I define as "difficult" as one works with already trained subjects, who carry with them a load of experiences, beliefs, bias and stances towards the world and humanity, which are already consolidated. Freire was the first to argue that the fight against illiteracy in the adult population could not be conducted (we are talking about Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s) with the same methods used to teach children to read and write. Instead, it was necessary to get to know the students in their daily life, to understand in which environment they moved and in what way they communicated, to then start from the analysis of the most used and meaningful words for them, basing the process of knowledge not only

of the words, but above all the social themes that those words could generate. In fact, for Freire the best method of literacy, and therefore of educating people in communication, coincided with the practice of dialogue. Through this practice, the words to be built syllable after syllable were not simple *examples*, but *daily meanings* with which to explain and problematize one's relationship with the world. Because being able to communicate meant being able to participate.

For this reason Freire said on one occasion that the teacher must be *a politician and an artist*, an expression that can be understood in various ways: the teacher must certainly be aware of the social reality in which he works, that is, have political consciousness; must know how to relate to learners, open up to their reality and be able to communicate their own, building an educational relationship aimed at socialization; for this reason he cannot be pedantic, he cannot put himself "in the chair" and pour his knowledge on the students, but must attract them to himself, stimulate them to communicate and to express themselves; this implies the development of creativity, which is in itself artistic, fluid, and adaptable. Here too, teaching and learning are a unique process, in which the teacher self-educates himself in the act of educating the learner. Although the practice of dialogue has in itself a strong logical-argumentative component, it is however creative and dynamic, therefore it requires an intuitive attitude to be able to follow the relational paths that are being created.

IV. The artistic experience and other possibilities

I conclude this speech by reflecting on some possible ways of realizing the intuitive experience in the field of education. The difficulty of inserting intuition in pedagogical models is due to the substantial uncertainty of intuition itself: it is more accentuated in some individuals, much less in others, therefore a "universal" application of tactics and strategies that target it, is almost impossible. In the face of the lack of intuitive vocation in the students (as well as in the teachers – and here I would refer to my initial considerations), one could try the way of *training* to intuition, that is, find methods to calm the inner monologue that we all constantly have in our thoughts, making that *mental silence* free of distractions and preconceived ideas, *bypassing* the processes of excessive rationalization of the information received¹

First of all, I would like to mention Dewey (1934): art does not reside in the object itself considered "artistic", but in the way of carrying out a specific creative activity; consequently the object, as a product of art (a temple, a statue, a painting, a poem, etc.), is not itself a work of art, but is the experience of the encounter between the knowing subject and the product of art, or the moment in which the work of art is

¹ It would be like a problem-solving process that comes after a good sleep.

built through perception and what arises from it. The artistic quality varies together with the uniqueness of each individual, as existential; the aesthetic experience is not purely intellectual, but also physical, *organic*, when physical symptoms indicate complete emotional and sentimental participation, in a full and immediate way².

An example that comes to mind along these lines is the practice of a university professor whom I met during my research in Brazil, prof. José Euzebio de Oliveira Souza Aragão³: his interest in cinema led him to use scenes from national and international films as a teaching tool to stimulate the immediate acquisition of concepts and problems, on which to set up class work. The intuition for the students comes through the artistic moment: at the beginning and during the lesson, each selected scene expresses a content to be experienced before being discussed. Lessons on racial and cultural discrimination were introduced, for example, by the hanging scene in the movie *True Grit* (2010), where three condemned men are on the gallows, waiting for the executioner; the first two, white, have the opportunity to say their last words, then they are hooded, while the third, Native American, is immediately hooded as soon as he begins to speak – thus showing a contemptuous disinterest towards him, even in his final hour. This artistic stimulus is clearer, immediate and direct than any discourse, bypassing the prejudicial “walls” that students may have, and then leaving room for rationalization and argumentative revision of what has been experienced first.

Considering the intuitive method as an enhancement of the practice and action on the logic of the speech, it can be said that it already has something similar to a training, a constant practice that aims to achieve a result through operation and experimentation. To broaden the question also from an imaginative point of view – at the cost of digressing a little – I would like to refer to an example of psychological interpretation that prof. Serino (2020) recently dealt in a seminar on Jung’s *Red Book*, in which the Swiss psychologist uses esoteric and alchemical symbolism to shape the unconscious dynamics of his own psyche. Alchemy, as a discipline, is re-proposed in Jungian research as a symbolic model of transformation: the alchemist

² See in particular chapter 10, where the author notes that language cannot however adapt, nor be sufficient, to the infinite and ineffable situational variety of natural reality, which operates in human experience. It can only reduce reality to classification orders, suitable for managing it. The words are “practical devices” that orient the better the more generic and simple they are; instead, the detailed and specific description or indication tends to confuse more and more. For this reason the colors, flavors, forms etc. are given as “universal”, for logical-formal purposes; but no sunset, for example, is *red* and *beautiful* exactly like another, because there is always some different shade or other different details.

³ Director of the *Departamento de Educação* of the Universidade Estadual Paulista “Júlio de Mesquita Filho” (UNESP), Campus of Rio Claro, São Paulo, Brazil.

who manipulates the elements is the person in search of his own identity, working with tools that are actually reasoning, interpretations, self-analysis and mental exercises. The laboratory with the oven, the stills and the equipment is revealed as *the body and mind* of the person himself, and therefore the *transmutation of the base metals into gold* symbolizes the psychological change, the discovery and the construction of the Self, as well as the healing from the psychic distress.

This Jungian idea certainly meets my favor; however, it is interesting to note that modern proponents of alchemy – *stricto sensu* – reject this symbolic and purely esoteric interpretation (Zecchini, 2009). The so-called “great work”, that is the experimental work carried out in the alchemical laboratory, would have a dual nature, material and spiritual: through the manipulation of elements such as mercury and sulfur, with procedures similar to chemical processes, the alchemist would catalyze on himself the “sacred fire”, or the divine cosmic energy that radiates from the Sun, starting the process of transmutation with which it would become a “divine creature”, both in body and in spirit. The difference with Jung’s approach, however, lies in the role that art, understood as disciplined action on matter, plays in the process of change; in fact, in Jung’s perspective it is profound psychology that comes out in its fundamental nature, through an “excavation” work in its dark language, bringing about a change from within. In the alchemical process, change occurs from the outside, through the experimental action of manipulating reality with which the spiritual/psychological transformative process is introjected. Alchemy, presented as science, religion and *art* at the same time, despite the esotericism of symbolic language, seems to rest firmly on the idea of direct and active experience as the driving force of change from one psycho-physical state to another.

In conclusion, speaking of intuition as *adaptation* and *encounter*, it is not a question of privileging practice over theory, but of uniting them in a single process, in which interiority and exteriority, psychological plan and sociological questions, emotional sphere and reason, collaborate in the construction of an educational experience throughout the life course, with a view to increasing not only awareness, but also the possibility of acting following it. In short, pedagogy understood as art combined with the sciences of education, which apply the results of disciplines often distant – if not in contrast – to each other, in the pedagogical field. Otherwise, an exclusively logical-argumentative education risks detaching the person from his environment, leaving him in a position that observes reality, but does not participate, as if looking at the world from a window, or *from a screen*.

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