DIFFUSE EDUCATION: A NEW PROPOSAL FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

The text presents an education model. A model built based in experiencies and practices and also an utopia not yet realized, but a model that is inspiring education in many places all over the world.

"Diffuse education" offers an alternative vision of our society, one in which the education of its youngest members is no longer a separate, specialist practice but, rather, increasingly becomes the responsibility of all members of the society and part of its life, taken as a whole. In this model, young children and adolescents are encouraged to involve themselves in real-world activities and tangible projects, and thus to learn and find agency in the flux of everyday life and participate in the opportunities it brings.

Keywords: diffuse education, education, mentor, society, learning through experience

The concept of "diffuse education" proposes a radical transformation in the education of young people of "school age". At its heart is the idea that the whole of society – and not just the school building – should be considered a suitable setting for learning, and that young people should enjoy intense, joyful, infinitely stimulating experiences that are encountered as far as possible in the real world rather than among the artifices of the school setting. The breadth and complexity of knowledge is far greater than that which is presented in our school curricula, and the educational needs of young children and adolescents are much broader – in relation to the varied talents, vocations, and emotional and physical natures of the individuals themselves – than those truly taken into consideration in the great majority of school institutions. Nor can their rigid timetables, fragmentation of knowledge, pervasive assessment, obsolete regulations and general climate of menace and surveillance be considered conducive to effective, lasting learning.

In this regard, the model of diffuse education follows in a long tradition of critically analysing and reformulating the processes of school education, a tradition rooted, on one side, in the so-called theory of deschooling (Illich 2010, Schérer 2006, Fourier 1966), and on the other, in the concept of experiential learning (Dewey 2014, Montessori 2008, Freinet, E & C 1976). In its own way, it also takes up aspects of community education (Tramma 2009), and the pedagogy of liberation (Vigilante-Vittoria 2011, Capitini 1967-68, Freire 2002), while in terms of practice it also has much in common with the libertarian pedagogies (Trasatti 2014, Codello 2016) and "school-neighbourhood" experiments of the 1960s and '70s.

For all these reasons, and more, the diffuse-education approach seeks to reduce the role of the school institution in education, and treat it more as a sort of base, or "*portal*" (Mottana, Campagnoli 2017, 38) to set out from, and return to, having encountered a combination of concrete, complex and cross-discipline experiences in the societal fabric outside the school, an available context that will only grow broader as the young people involved become progressively more autonomous. Diffuse education happens in society, in the experience of real situations and the inexhaustible variety of learning opportunities that can be prepared, organised or even simply encountered – taking an "accidental" approach (Trasatti 2014, Ward 2018) – in among the infinite aspects of the world in which we live. In such situations, young people are able to learn, contribute, collaborate, come up with ideas, participate, and – in turn – create new and genuine opportunities for open and collective learning.

Diffuse education, therefore, proposes that young people learn within society; society becomes, in its totality, a network of educational opportunities. As such, it proposes a cultural and social revolution designed to bring adults and young people together to live and grow within a less compartmentalised world, and – in this sense – to allow these young people fully to realise their citizenship. In this revolution, the school – perceived as an articulated system of experiences and learning opportunities – becomes more a "base", than a defined, delimited building-system.

It is a way of "doing school" that is founded on the practice of learning through experience, this taking place, for the most part, in the local environment beyond the school walls. Underpinning all this is the principle that authentic learning is only really activated and internalised if mobilised by a "passionate attraction" (Fourier, 1966), by desire, interest, curiosity; it is therefore much richer, and more effective, if it is effected through real (rather than fictive) experience, and if the planning of learning is shared with the young people involved.

Experience

At the heart of the diffuse-education model is the importance of experience: genuine, vivid, qualitative experience. Young people should be put in a position to engage fully with an "experience" and to express themselves within the real world; it is only in this way that we can give rise to an authentic form of learning.

Here, experience is meant in the full sense of the word, which is to say: individuals experiencing the stimulating situations in which they find themselves in the most complete manner, engaging every aspect of their person (sensitivities, emotions, intuitions, imagination, intelligence, and so on). Whether these stimulating situations lead to a measurable outcome is a secondary concern. What matters is that the encounter engages the individual's own passions, an act that cannot fail to introject a well-integrated set of knowledge and capacities, such is the positive experience in which these learning outcomes are brought together.

Learning through experience is generally interpreted from a pragmatic standpoint, in terms of behaviours. However, it is worth remembering that the expression was coined in the field of psychoanalysis to indicate the way that certain content could be introjected at a profound level when situated in an emotionally positive context linked to desire and genuine affective involvement (Bion 1990, Mottana 1993). Learning through experience means not so much – and certainly not only – the performance of a series of problem-solving operations. Rather it means to experience, internally, that which we enter into relation with.

As such, it is a case of learning as a form of process, one that can begin with a certain level of involvement and, from there, gradually become more intense.

Knowledge

It is to be assumed that as they experience a powerful sense of involvement in what they are doing, assisted by moments of reflection on what is happening – as and when it happens – children and adolescents will also learn to better understand themselves and their attitudes, enthusiasms and desires (and be able to draw on these resources in developing and strengthening their talents).

They will also learn to test themselves in various contexts and social realities outside the school setting, thus helping to build a sense of belonging, of citizenship.

Having acquired this greater awareness of themselves and their "world", they will be better able to orient themselves in relation to the choices on offer in their immediate context, thus enhancing their capacity for planning, their sense of pragmatism and their ability to perceive the environment and the opportunities it offers.

Setting aside basic competences for a moment, when compared to a traditional pathway this self-experimental model favours the development and consolidation of meta-competences, rather than the more technical, targeted competences associated with compartmentalised subjects. Furthermore, any risk of a shortfall in this latter form of competence would be compensated for, we maintain, by the development, in the young student, of a greater capacity for critical forms of enquiry exploring subjects in greater depth in a more autonomous manner.

The fact, too, that the students are induced to test themselves across multiple aspects will lead them to cultivate expertise in numerous fields of operation that are not traditionally explored in the school context, particularly areas such as symbolic expression, the physicality of their bodies (in the widest sense), the world of work, public service, and urban and natural environments.

Time and Space

The classroom – which, shorn of the need for desks (teacher's and pupils') and benches, would be personalised and, as far as possible, made warm, colourful, welcoming, appropriate to the *dynamic bodies* of young children and adolescents (e.g. with child-size sofas, or bean bags) – is no longer itself the place of learning, but a base to meet in before setting off in little teams and to return to as a group to share, rework and explore further.

These (and other) spaces would be redesigned and organised by the participants themselves to suit their requirements in terms of comfort and aesthetic harmony along with any functional needs. Part of the necessary ground work for diffuse education lies in the appropriation of the space as the young persons' own space. It becomes a place to set out from, which they care about and enjoy returning to.

With the exception of certain workshops, for the most part the spaces used for learning itself remain outside the school, in the local area.

Managing and making the most of the outside space is therefore a primary consideration; it will be necessary to negotiate with a combination of public and private actors to identify not only the learning spaces themselves, but also locations that could function as reference points for the children and

vehicle-free routeways (cycle paths, pedestrianised areas etc.) that would allow young people to move around their local area safely and achieve ever greater autonomy.

The aim is also to make the distinction between time inside and time outside the school framework less obvious, with both effectively becoming part of the same, rewarding "lived" time.

The total time spent in education over the week would remain the same (30-40 hours), but in certain situations, with parental agreement, the timetable would be modified to fit with the requirements of the planned projects and activities.

Mentors

The roles required of educators will become more complex: they may physically accompany the learners (when strictly necessary), but at different times they must also function as guides, planners, experts and consultants, and chair groups in which students learn and explore specific skills and areas of knowledge in greater depth, air and explore concerns, or give and receive encouragement and support, etc.

Some educators will adopt a more overarching role. They will be responsible for organising and negotiating, and subsequently monitoring, the routes explored by the learners, and for providing both a fixed point of reference for individuals and groups operating in the local area and a contact for external collaborators.

In our model, these "mentor" figures (cf. Mottana 1996, 2010) would be responsible for coordinating a group (or gang/flock etc.) of no more than 20 individuals. They would negotiate and arrange the use of spaces, making the necessary preliminary visits, as well as working with the young people directly to initiate the activities and bring them together at the end. During activities, they would support individuals, and should always be easy to find. They are to talk with the children, listen to them, attempt to recognise their attitudes, identify their expectations and qualities, and provide guidance to help them fulfil their hopes and cultivate their talents. They are also to be receptive, and help the other educators and teachers to keep in step and work in harmony with the project. It is a role that better suits the term "educator", taken in a broad sense, that it does the term "teacher", and it requires individuals blessed with love for their young people, and with sensitivity, intuition, energy and creativity. They are key figures in taking the project forward, in reviewing, adjusting and preserving its integrity in light of the issues and opportunities that emerge; as such, they should be selected and trained specifically for the role.

Other actors would contribute according to their capacities – some in more explicitly didactic roles, others accompanying the learners, or monitoring or supervising – together building less a faculty of teachers who need only work together when coordinating who teaches what and how students are graded, and more a genuine team, one that meets frequently and works wherever possible to achieve a uniformity of behavioural, communicational and relational styles.

Subjects

In terms of the organisation of subject matter, with the diffuse-education model we find ourselves once again faced with radically rethinking traditional, subject-specific curricula.

Instead of series of objectives and content arranged by subject, the model proposes a series of themed areas of focus. These would be broad themes – identified depending on the opportunities offered by the specific locality – that intersect with the children's interests while, at the same time, attempting to weave together a coordinated body of know-how and expertise capable of providing them with skills and knowledge in a way that references contemporary life and the socio-cultural context in which they find themselves.

Areas such as "symbolic expression" (art, music, dance, poetry, theatre, cinema etc.), for instance, can be treated in a way that engages both with the young people's interests, and touches upon the issues they face in their lives. Other potential themes include: "the physical body" (martial arts, yoga, meditation, massage, sport, sexuality etc.); our relationship with nature (animals, plants, the landscape, ecology etc.); emotion and feelings (exploring feelings, fears, anger, love etc.); creativity and applied knowledge (planning, building, materials, design, physics, technical skills, chemistry etc.); questions of pain, illness, death and disability; social services (helping the needy, small acts of care, offering assistance to people with disabilities etc.); and the world of work (with visits to workplaces, involvement in small enterprises, setting up small markets or stalls etc.).

Essentially, the idea is to identify themes that reflect wide areas of experience – and that, in turn, could intersect with one another – and develop them educationally using as engaging a set of real-world-based activities as possible (e.g. visiting, exploring, observing, carrying out interviews and enquiries, producing video reports and projects, providing simple services, developing art projects and shows, participating in decisions, consultations and seminars, and taking part in festivals and public demonstrations): the possibilities are endless, and the choice will depend to a large extent on what the local area has to offer. At a later stage, there should also be time set aside for study and reflection, for exploring experiences and learning in greater depth, for practising criticism and acquiring new

practical skills within a controlled environment (that of the school itself), for cultural nourishment and cognitive training.

New forms of ongoing record-keeping and critical observation will be needed (journals, group debates and discussions, self-evaluation and review, etc.) that will gradually replace common forms of assessment. These will be associated, increasingly, with the completion of activities and projects, real-world tasks whose processes and component operations will be improved, as necessary, through a process of ongoing review.

The individual skills, abilities, pieces of knowledge, etc. that are acquired during learning can only be partially determined in advance (a table can be prepared to analyse the content of the programme and set out certain tasks in advance). They can be identified far more effectively in retrospect, however, by actively recognising the activities carried out and the learning outcomes achieved.

Impact on society

This model of diffuse education does not simply entail a radical change to the pupils' experience of education. It also implies a radical transformation of the profession of teacher and, above all, a significant, beneficial change in the life of the wider society, which will once again find its youngest members participating, not as mere minors awaiting the judgement of their seniors, but as fully-fledged citizens.

These young individuals will have the agency to observe, to contribute, to participate, to better the life of the society with their creativity, intelligence and imagination, to enrich it with vivacity, energy and sensitivity, and infuse it with their freshness and spontaneity.

What is proposed is therefore a genuine revolution that does not only affect the world of education but rather the totality of a society that, no longer split into a world of adults and a world of children, would now be open to all. With the reintroduction of its young participants, society would be forced to re-envision itself from the ground up, to question its rhythms and relationships, and to share, in the most communal (indeed diffuse) manner, the joy of contributing, in turn, and taking responsibility for educating and creating space for its young people as a matter of everyday life.

All this towards a richer and more varied, harmonious and – at last – democratic world: it is starting with the reintroduction of young people to our shared space – children and adolescents previously

marginalised and enclosed in compartmentalised, artificial settings – that we can return the world to a state of organic, affective inclusivity.

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