

Editorial

COVID-19: turning a huge challenge into an opportunity

*Giuseppe Ritella**, *Nadia Sansone***

DOI: 10.30557/QW000024

Over the last two decades, educational institutions at all levels have been struggling to make “good use” of digital technology (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger, & Aston, 2015). Even in those countries where the infrastructure is sufficiently developed, the features of emerging technologies are not always exploited. Instead, many teachers make limited use of technology and merely relocate part of their teaching online (Sansone, Cesareni, Bortolotti, & Buglass, 2019) without fully appropriating the technology (Ritella, Ligorio, & Hakkarainen, 2016). As a consequence, technology-enhanced learning is not the first choice when it comes to planning learning paths, both at school and at university level.

Suddenly, in February 2020, the COVID-19 crisis forced the Italian educational system to embrace distance education after the forced closure of schools and universities. Since then, the widespread efforts of the teaching community have been summoned to resume the scholastic or academic year. The results, however, are variable, depending – for instance – on the educational level of the institution and its geographical location. The general impression is that teachers are facing the complex issues rising from this crisis on their own, without clear coordination and sufficient information, nor the support of the academic community.

* University of Helsinki.

** Unitelma Sapienza Università di Roma.

Under growing pressure, teachers are rushing to find the right tools for video-recording lessons, assigning tasks and verifying individual study and online activity, with insufficient reflection on how to design successful online teaching/learning practices. In the background, families are struggling to support their children through technological drawbacks and challenges, while many students with special educational needs or suffering socio-cultural disadvantages are left behind.

On the other hand, the pervasiveness of networked technologies has seen adolescents and children move most of their lives online, where – without the adults’ guidance and support – they risk developing problematic behaviors, such as gaming and internet addiction. It is then of the utmost importance that the educational institutions reclaim their educational agency, by guiding the younger generations towards a safe, critical and thoughtful inclusion of technologies in their daily practice.

This issue of *QWERTY* presents four contributions that we consider possible starting points for a shared reflection about effective ways to address some of the challenges raised by the present situation, and perhaps even contribute to turn them into an opportunity. The article by Verrastro and colleagues, confirms that young people’s use of social media is strongly connected with their body image, with potential negative consequences for their psychological development. The question is, how can teachers develop online teaching practices helping students to make good use of technology? It is in fact well known – as also reported in the article by Trindade, Moreira and Ferreira – that many of the teachers who today are forced to use technologies show low-level of digital skills on average. As discussed in the article by Ritella and Sansone, the successful adoption of technology is not an easy task for teachers, since it depends on the nature of the learning task and on the pedagogical approach adopted. Teachers’ awareness of the true potential of technology might support their ability to design and implement inclusive technology mediated learning tasks and teaching practices. In this sense, teacher training is one of the keys to the success of this common enterprise that, before and beyond the current health emergency, is of primary importance. In

their contribution, Sansone and Ritella provide some useful findings as they describe a training path specifically aimed at fostering teachers' awareness and understanding of how to support students' meaningful learning through collaborative work practices mediated by technology.

In closing, we agree with Hakkarainen (2009) that technology can only be fruitfully integrated in educational contexts by the means of transformed knowledge practices. Now more than ever, to reach this aim a partnership is needed between educational research and practicing teachers. The studies presented in this issue illustrate that this is a multifaceted problem requiring an interdisciplinary approach. Teachers should not have to fend for themselves, especially when a worldwide crisis is having such a strong impact on the daily practices of schooling. Now more than ever it is necessary to rethink the role of the teacher as a designer called to plan rich and hybrid learning environments, strongly anchored to validated design principles (Kauppi, Muukkonen, Suorsa, & Takala, 2020).

Equipped with both the wisdom that teachers have developed across many years of teaching experience and with the scientific knowledge developed by the academic community, the current crisis offers an opportunity to explore the potential of technology to enhance teaching practices, and help young people to develop a healthy relationship with the digital world while building new knowledge together. In the end, technology may become the first choice when it comes to planning learning paths, both at school and at university level.

Editorial

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, l'ensemble des institutions éducatives a eu des difficultés à faire un «usage efficace» des technologies numériques (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger, & Aston, 2015). Même dans les pays où les infrastructures sont suffisamment développées, de nombreux enseignants utilisent la technologie de manière limitée uniquement en déplaçant en ligne une partie de leur enseigne-

ment (Sansone, Cesareni, Bortolotti, & Buglass, 2019) sans s'approprier pleinement des opportunités la technologie (Ritella, Ligorio, & Hakkarainen, 2016). Par conséquent, l'apprentissage soutenu par les technologies n'est jamais le premier choix lorsqu'il s'agit de planifier des parcours d'apprentissage, tant au niveau scolaire qu'au niveau universitaire.

En février 2020, la crise du COVID-19 a brusquement obligé le système éducatif italien à adopter l'enseignement à distance pour faire face à la fermeture des écoles et des universités. Depuis lors, de nombreux efforts ont été faits par la communauté enseignante pour faire redémarrer l'année scolaire et universitaire, mais avec des résultats inégaux. Sous la pression croissante des événements, les enseignants se précipitent pour trouver les outils efficaces pour préparer des vidéos des cours, gérer les devoirs des élèves et évaluer les activités en ligne. Tout cela avec une réflexion insuffisante sur la façon de concevoir en ligne des pratiques d'enseignement et des parcours d'apprentissage efficaces. À l'arrière-plan, les familles peinent à gérer les difficultés et les efforts que les transformations technologiques demandent à de leurs enfants. Entre-temps de nombreux élèves ayant des besoins éducatifs spéciaux ou qui nécessitent de mesures de compensation des désavantages socioculturels ne sont plus suivis de manière adéquate.

Il faut aussi considérer que depuis quelques années, les adolescents et les enfants ont largement déplacé leurs vies «en ligne», avec tous les risques de développer des comportements problématiques, tels que les addictions aux jeux vidéo et aux différentes activités en ligne. Il est alors très important que les institutions éducatives reprennent pleinement leur rôle de formation des jeunes générations à partir de la question de l'intégration des technologies dans leur pratiques quotidiennes.

Pour atteindre cet objectif, nous ne pouvons que convenir avec Hakkarainen (2009) selon lequel les technologies ne peuvent être efficacement intégrées dans les contextes éducatifs que à travers la transformation des pratiques d'accès aux connaissances. Les contributions présentées dans ce numéro montrent, en effet, qu'il s'agit d'un problème complexe nécessitant d'une approche interdisciplinaire. Lors

d'una una crisi mondiale avec un si fort impact sur les pratiques éducatives, les enseignants ne doivent absolument pas être laissés seuls. Plus que jamais, il est nécessaire de repenser le rôle de l'enseignant en tant que concepteur appelé à planifier des environnements d'apprentissage hybrides et innovants, fondés sur des conceptions prouvées (Kauppi, Muukkonen, Suorsa, & Takala, 2020).

Profitant à la fois des expériences acquises par les enseignants au fil des ans que des connaissances scientifiques développées par la communauté universitaire, il semble possible l'exploitation des technologies pour améliorer les pratiques pédagogiques et favoriser chez les élèves des relations saines avec le numérique, tout en favorisant l'émergence de nouvelles connaissances. En fin de compte, la technologie devrait à juste titre devenir le premier choix en ce qui concerne la planification des parcours d'apprentissage, aussi bien à l'école que à l'université.

Editoriale

Da vent'anni a questa parte, le istituzioni educative a tutti i livelli stanno faticosamente cercando di fare un "buon uso" della tecnologia digitale (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger, & Aston, 2015). Anche in quei Paesi in cui l'infrastruttura è sufficientemente sviluppata, infatti, molti insegnanti fanno tuttora un uso ridotto della tecnologia, limitandosi a trasferire parte del loro insegnamento online (Sansone, Cesareni, Bortolotti, & Buglass, 2019), senza però appropriarsi pienamente del potenziale offerto dal digitale (Ritella, Ligorio, & Hakkarainen, 2016). Di conseguenza, l'apprendimento mediato dalla tecnologia non è quasi mai la prima scelta quando si tratta di pianificare percorsi di apprendimento, sia a scuola che a livello universitario.

Improvvisamente, nel febbraio 2020, l'emergenza sanitaria COVID-19 ha costretto il sistema educativo italiano ad adottare la didattica a distanza come conseguenza della chiusura forzata di scuole e università. Da allora, sono stati registrati numerosi sforzi della comunità degli insegnanti per garantire la prosecuzione dell'anno scolastico o accademico, ma con risultati non sempre all'altezza della

situazione. Sotto una pressione crescente, gli insegnanti si sono affrettati a ricercare gli strumenti giusti per videoregistrare le lezioni, assegnare compiti e verificare lo studio individuale, in assenza di un'adeguata riflessione su come progettare pratiche efficaci di insegnamento/apprendimento online. Sullo sfondo, le famiglie hanno dovuto sostenere gli sforzi tecnologici dei propri figli, mentre molti studenti con bisogni educativi speciali o svantaggi socioculturali sono stati inevitabilmente lasciati indietro. Senza tralasciare poi come già da alcuni anni adolescenti e pre-adolescenti vivono la maggior parte della loro vita online, dove rischiano di sviluppare o essere vittima di comportamenti problematici, come dipendenza da Internet e cyberbullismo. Ora più che mai, quindi, è della massima importanza che la scuola rivendichi il suo ruolo di agenzia educativa, guidando le giovani generazioni verso un utilizzo critico e ponderato delle tecnologie nelle loro attività quotidiane.

Per raggiungere questo obiettivo, concordiamo con Hakkarainen (2009) che la tecnologia può essere fruttuosamente integrata nei contesti educativi solo attraverso la trasformazione delle pratiche di sviluppo e rielaborazione della conoscenza. Gli studi presentati in questo numero mostrano, infatti, che si tratta di un problema complesso che richiede un approccio interdisciplinare e che gli insegnanti non dovrebbero essere lasciati soli nell'affrontarlo, soprattutto quando una crisi mondiale sta avendo un impatto così forte sulle pratiche quotidiane della scuola. È quanto mai necessario ripensare il ruolo dell'insegnante come progettista chiamato a pianificare ambienti di apprendimento ricchi e ibridi, fortemente ancorati a principi di progettazione validati (Kauppi, Muukkonen, Suorsa, & Takala, 2020).

Integrando la saggezza che gli insegnanti hanno sviluppato nel corso di molti anni di esperienza con la conoscenza scientifica sviluppata dalla comunità accademica, è possibile sfruttare appieno il potenziale della tecnologia per migliorare le pratiche di insegnamento aiutando, così, i giovani studenti a sviluppare un rapporto sano con il mondo digitale mentre costruiscono insieme nuove conoscenze. In questo modo, l'uso della tecnologia potrebbe legittimamente diventare una prima scelta quando si tratta di pianificare percorsi di apprendimento, sia a scuola che a livello universitario.

References

- Hakkarainen, K. (2009). A knowledge-practice perspective on technology-mediated learning. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, 4(2), 213-231.
- Henderson, M., Selwyn, N., Finger, G., & Aston, R. (2015). Students' everyday engagement with digital technology in university: exploring patterns of use and 'usefulness'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 37(3), 308-319.
- Kauppi, S., Muukkonen, H., Suorsa, T., & Takala, M. (2020). I still miss human contact, but this is more flexible. Paradoxes in virtual learning interaction and multidisciplinary collaboration. *British Journal of Educational Technology*. doi:10.1111/bjet.12929.
- Ritella, G., Ligorio, M. B., & Hakkarainen, K. (2016). The role of context in a collaborative problem-solving task during professional development. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 25(3), 395-412.
- Sansone, N., Cesareni, D., Bortolotti, I., Buglass, S. (2019). Teaching technology-mediated collaborative learning for trainee teachers. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 28(3), 381-394. doi: 10.1080/1475939X.2019.1623070.