



Open and Interdisciplinary
Journal of Technology,
Culture and Education

Special issue
Enhancing Multi-Sensory
and Handling-Based
Psycho-Pedagogical Approaches
through New Technologies

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Registrazione del Tribunale di Bari
n. 29 del 18/7/2005
© 2018 by Progedit
ISSN 2240-2950

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Editorial

Orazio Miglino*, Michela Ponticorvo*

Enhancing multi-sensory and handling-based psycho-pedagogical approaches through new technologies

Since the first steps in the history of humans and human culture, learning and teaching processes have been mediated by the use of tools. Instruments to learn to write have been invented (consider the evolution from the cave paintings to the actual pens and workbooks), tools to count have been created (every human culture has developed abacus or similar-oriented materials to teach math at various complexity degrees), vehicles for cognitive functions such as memory, reasoning and problem solving have been designed (consider as an example, logic and symbolic games such as chess, and checkers or go).

It is therefore without a doubt, that in parallel to the development of teaching methods, the complementary, and equally relevant, field of *learning technologies* has evolved.

Up to the computers' arrival, these technologies were essentially physical and tangible tools, as, just to cite, in the case of educational materials designed and built by Maria Montessori.

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These materials strengthen and favor the learning process through multisensory stimulation and the concrete chance to manipulate educational objects with mass and physical consistency.

With the progressive mass diffusion of computers in the 1950s, a parallel progressive digitalization of learning technologies has had place. Gradually, powerful educational tools have been designed and built where manipulation and fruition happens in a virtual, digital and de-materialized way. Physicality and corporeity are gradually expelled from learning process.

Nowadays, *Massive Open On-line Courses* (MOOC) allow students to attend lessons without going to a classroom, *social media* allow individuals to interact with a community without sharing with them any physical space, *serious games* allow people to experiment with phenomena and processes on a computer screen, educational apps reproduce digitalized versions of Montessori materials and so on.

The advantages of this progressive and totalizing de-materialization process of educational tools are evident: it is possible to have instant contact with infinite information and people, and to train our cognitive functions in virtual gyms easily accessible from mobile devices.

All the interaction takes place in an impalpable world where odors, tastes, tactile contacts, sharing and occupying of physical space are cancelled.

Our mobiles, tablets and computers are the doors that swallow us up in a dimension made of non-matter that is cognitively and socially appealing. It is therefore useful to pose a question: can this physicality expulsion from learning environments, together with the recognized advantages, lead to non-desirable collateral effects? Indeed, the recent scientific literature has started to highlight some distortion on children's cognitive development if massively exposed to these technologies, even before they can walk or talk. There are clear indications that attentive capacities and reflective reasoning are worsened by the high interactivity and immediate responsiveness of digital technologies. Many scholarly voices are suggesting that this tendency can be limited by re-introducing the physical and tangible components in de-

signing and building educational materials, keeping the advantages of both the physical and digital elements.

In this special issue of *Qwerty*, we have given voice to this debate, in the learning technologies research papers that are attracting interest from a wide variety of specialists including psychologists, pedagogues, educators etc. with different backgrounds and views.

The contributions included in this issue cover different perspectives on how it is possible (and fruitful) to connect, both technologically and methodologically, traditional physical and tangible educational materials with virtual and digital learning environments. In particular, Antonio Cerrato, Giovanni Siano and Antonio De Marco report on an experience by presenting a technology, developed by them, based on artificial vision systems that can interact with the computer through direct manipulation of educational materials. The work by Franco Rubinacci and Fabrizio Ferrara analyzes the level of acceptability of some hybrid educational materials, physical objects with digital functions, by teachers in primary schools. Michela Ponticorvo and Orazio Miglino explore the possibility of building a hyper-book where the digital and physical coexist, and examine examples for different subjects. The last contribution proposes to introduce in digital story-telling systems and multi-sensory elements to stimulate the sense of smell and touch.

This research debate is extremely lively and, in our opinion, it will represent in the next decade one of the most challenging issues in the field of technology-mediated learning.

Editorial

Depuis l'aube de l'humanité, une grande partie des processus d'apprentissage des êtres humains est basée sur l'utilisation d'outils. Divers supports ont été inventés pour apprendre à écrire (des graphites de roche, par exemple, aux stylos et cahiers), à calculer (développement d'Abacus et/ou d'outils similaires pour enseigner les mathématiques à différents niveaux de complexité) ou pour exercer des fonctions cognitives telles que la mémoire, le raisonnement ou encore la résolution

de problèmes (par exemple, tous les jeux à fort contenu logico-symbolique tels que les échecs, les dames ou le jeu de go). Parallèlement à l'affinement des méthodes pour enseigner à apprendre, un champ, complémentaire mais tout aussi important, a été développé: celui des technologies d'apprentissage, qui jusqu'à l'avènement de l'ordinateur étaient essentiellement physiques et tangibles.

Considérons, par exemple, le matériel éducatif conçu et fabriqué par Maria Montessori. La démocratisation des outils informatiques et l'utilisation massive de l'ordinateur au quotidien, a eu comme impact une numérisation des technologies de l'apprentissage. La présence physique et la corporéité ne constituent plus des conditions indispensables à l'apprentissage. Ainsi, aujourd'hui, de nombreux exemples peuvent être cités tels que les cours en ligne massifs (MOOC), qui permettent de suivre des cours sans être obligé d'aller en salle de classe; les médias sociaux, qui font interagir les apprenants avec une communauté de pairs sans partage d'un espace physique commun; les *serious games*, qui permettent d'expérimenter des phénomènes et des processus sur l'écran d'un ordinateur et les nombreuses applications éducatives, qui reproduisent les versions numérisées des matériaux Montessori. Cette liste est loin d'être exhaustive et elle pourrait être bien plus longue. De nombreux avantages de ce processus progressif et global de dématérialisation des outils pédagogiques peuvent être mentionnés. Un premier avantage, qui peut être cité, est le fait de pouvoir apprendre et enseigner sans tenir compte des contraintes de temps et d'espace. Un second est celui d'entrer immédiatement en contact avec une série infinie d'informations et de personnes. Un troisième avantage pouvant être mentionné est celui d'entraîner nos fonctions cognitives dans des gymnases virtuels facilement accessibles à partir de divers outils: de l'écran du téléphone portable à celui de sa tablette ou de son ordinateur.

Dans ce contexte de dématérialisation, une question se pose: cette absence de physicalité des environnements d'apprentissage, malgré tous les avantages incontestables qu'elle peut présenter, peut-elle néanmoins avoir des conséquences négatives? En effet, nous pouvons trouver dans la littérature récente, des recherches mentionnant des impacts négatifs sur le développement cognitif d'enfants étant expo-

sés massivement à ces technologies, et ce trop précocement (à savoir, avant même de savoir marcher ou parler). Étant données ces études récentes, nous ne pouvons plus douter des effets néfastes de ces technologies sur, par exemple, les capacités attentionnelles ou encore les processus de raisonnement réfléchi et prolongé. Il semble désormais entendu que pour endiguer cette tendance à exposer trop précocement les enfants aux écrans interactifs, il serait plus que nécessaire de réintroduire une composante physique et tangible dans la construction des matériels éducatifs. C'est ainsi que, dans ce numéro spécial de *Qwerty*, nous avons souhaité donner une place toute particulière à ces questions de recherche, très actuelles, qui sont abordées par diverses communautés scientifiques (psychologues, pédagogues, didacticiens, éducateurs, etc.) et qui représenteront, selon nous, l'un des plus intéressants défis des prochaines années dans le domaine de la relation entre apprentissage et technologie.

Editoriale

Dagli albori della storia dell'umanità buona parte dei processi di apprendimento degli esseri umani si fonda sull'utilizzo di strumenti. Sono stati inventati supporti per imparare a scrivere (si pensi all'evoluzione degli strumenti che ci hanno portato dai graffiti rupestri alle penne e ai quaderni), a far di conto (ogni civiltà umana minimamente evoluta ha sviluppato pallottolieri o attrezzi simili per insegnare la matematica a vari livelli di complessità) o per esercitare funzioni cognitive quali la memoria, il ragionamento e il *problem solving* (un esempio sono tutti i giochi a forte contenuto logico-simbolico come gli scacchi, la dama e il go).

Parallelamente all'affinamento dei metodi per insegnare a imparare si è sviluppato il campo complementare, ma altrettanto importante, delle cosiddette *tecnologie dell'apprendimento*, che fino all'avvento del computer erano essenzialmente di tipo fisico e tangibile.

Si pensi, per esempio, ai materiali educativi progettati e realizzati da Maria Montessori. Con la progressiva diffusione di massa del computer si è assistito a una parallela digitalizzazione delle tecnologie dell'apprendimento. La fisicità e la corporeità vengono gradualmente

espulse dai processi di apprendimento. Oggigiorno i *Massive Open On-line Courses* (MOOC) ci consentono di assistere a delle lezioni senza recarci in un'aula, i *social media* ci possono far interagire con una comunità di discenti senza condividere con loro nessuno spazio fisico, i *serious games* ci permettono di sperimentare fenomeni e processi su uno schermo di un computer, tantissime app educative riproducono delle versioni digitalizzate dei materiali montessoriani e così via. I vantaggi di questo progressivo e totalizzante processo di de-materializzazione degli strumenti educativi sono abbastanza evidenti. Possiamo apprendere e insegnare senza tener conto dei vincoli di tempo e di spazio, entriamo immediatamente in contatto con una serie sterminata di informazioni e di persone, possiamo allenare le nostre funzioni cognitive in palestre virtuali facilmente accessibili dal monitor di un cellulare.

A questo punto è lecita una domanda: questa espulsione della fisicità dai nostri ambienti di apprendimento, oltre agli indubbi vantaggi, può produrre non auspicabili effetti collaterali? In effetti, la recente letteratura del settore comincia a rilevare delle distorsioni nello sviluppo cognitivo nei bambini che vengono massicciamente esposti a queste tecnologie prima ancora di imparare a camminare. Sembrano consolidati i dati che rilevano un deterioramento delle capacità attentive e dei processi di ragionamento riflessivo e prolungato prodotti dall'elevata interattività e responsività delle tecnologie digitali. Da più parti è stata ventilata l'ipotesi che per arginare questa ormai progressiva tendenza sia necessario re-introdurre la componente fisica e tangibile nella costruzione dei materiali educativi. In questo numero speciale di *Qwerty* abbiamo voluto dar voce proprio a questo attualissimo campo di ricerca che sta progressivamente raccogliendo l'interesse di diverse comunità scientifiche (psicologi, pedagogisti, educatori, ecc.) e che rappresenterà, a nostro avviso, una delle sfide più stimolanti nel campo del rapporto tra apprendimento e tecnologia.