Blended and Hybrid Learning: what kind of integration is possible?

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Abstract
In this paper we discuss the possibility of conjugating blended and hybrid learning along a relational dimension. We explore how a plurality of approaches may be weaved together in order to achieve pedagogical effectiveness, in a context that is not merely constrained by today's contingencies, but aims at having long-term and universal validity.

Keywords [1]
distance learning, situationality, hybrid learning, blended learning, integration, pluralism

1. Introduction

The health emergency has made remote teaching a necessity of sorts and an exceptional remedy, like a raft that fortuitously and fortunately allows for the crossing of a stretch of sea unharmed and which, like any rescue system, tends to be used only one time for particular and limited circumstances. Instead, we would like to discuss about remote teaching regardless of the limitations or constraints of the current situation, going beyond the "state of exception"[1] in order to avoid the risk of undermining the prerogatives and the potential of a teaching method that must be able to find all its useful potential, both on a large and small scale [2].

We would like to talk about e-learning on the thrust of what happened in the emergency phase, but carefully avoiding to relegate e-learning to a use limited in time and space[2], when the ordinary does not apply, overcoming the now usual misrepresentation of e-learning as a simplistic online "transfer" of a linear didactic structure which emerges from the usual paper textbooks, following a didactic offer already sub-optimal, retraced onto and mimicking the traditional one, rather than re-interpreted as an innovative and granular product, bearing a new stimulus and pointing to new cognitive horizons [3].

2. Didactic setting and flexibility

Let us start by considering two fundamental issues concerning, on the one hand, the communicative depth of the digital proposal, and on the other the its effectivness and unfolding in time.

Regarding the first issue, it is important to underline the actual potential of digital medial, which suggests the integrated use of multiple communication codes: from audio to video, from conceptual

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[2] Here and elsewhere we use the expression "e-learning" and "distance learning" as "third generation distance learning" [4].

maps to images, from bibliographic references, to networks of linkable insights, according to the logic and architecture of hypertextual compositions.

It would really be a shame to take away from the lesson the advantages that can derive from the joint use of different media and different tools, as it often happened during the emergency phase.

In the same way it would appear incomprehensible not to take full advantage of the possibility of e-learning to expand over time, thanks to the repeated usability allowed by the digital media, which widens the temporal perimeter of didactic use, no longer limited to the time of the lesson or to the sole space-time condition of the teacher's didactic gesture.

The epistemological keystones of distance learning lie in the richness of the messages entrusted to the hypertext and in the wide and differentiated range of opportunities for fruition, which thus makes learning less evanescent, less volatile and paradoxically even less fluid and liquid [5] than other forms of didactic interlocution. Distance teaching guarantees, where desired, and given adequate technical support for storage and accessibility, a continuous permanence and usability, which would be unwise to squander or prevent.

Being able to access the didactic setting with maximum flexibility characterizes the online lesson, and presumably pushes it towards new perspectives, as long as it is possible to avoid two of the most common mistakes that are made when one first tries out remote teaching. The first is to understand and practice it just as an augmented didactics, a makeshift virtual reality of sorts; the second is that of understanding the teacher called to design the structure and content of lessons for remote learning, as a professional figure that is already able, versatile and experienced in this sort of tasks.

If we really want to compare the teacher struggling with digital teaching to other professional figures, we would say, albeit with the necessary distinctions, that the teacher is the architect of the didactic construction, but in the manner of Phidias, aware that the stability of a structure does not lie in the beauty of the capitals, but in the supporting columns and solid foundations, or to a screenwriter, skilled with dialogues, capable of transferring in an intelligible way the written narration of a novel into a spoken exchange between movie actors. Such would be the role of a teaching and learning technologist: to translate a text into a hyper-text [6] or, from a more modern point of view, an interactive text.

3. Conceptual architecture of e-learning

The choice of setting up learning environments suitable for the paradigm based on rethinking teaching rather than on the mere retracing of paper textbooks, starts from the premise of a learning community within which each participant assumes responsibility for his own growth and sharing. It is therefore a highly relational learning, anything but solitary or separate or disjoint as up to now deceptively understood and practiced. Within the e-learning community, linguistic and cognitive action is at least dual and each individual access to contents requires or involves the reconfiguration of previous knowledge through the sharing and the availability to multiple relational and cognitive unexpected events, inevitable in a path within which teaching is a cultural mediator and the crafting of meaning is collective. After all, it is characteristic of e-learning to move from the logic of the transmission of knowledge that sees the expert bending over the inexperienced, to time independent learning and distributed learning, up to a nearly autonomous learner, capable of independent study supported by multiple interactions in real time.

Within this framework, which is full of potential, one should place both the discussions on mixed formulas, better known as blended teaching, and those recently emerged on hybrid teaching. Of course, it should be taken into account that blended learning is a practice [7], while the hybrid model is a methodological approach that takes into consideration a series of processes and practices. The conceptual architecture on which both are based requires the right balance between analogue stagnation and digital integralism.

Neither, in fact, deny the paper book, nor the hypertext, nor the frontal teaching, nor the online teaching, but these tools may all be used in a discretionary way with those who find themselves in the classroom, either in presence or remotely.

However, it is not enough to relegate the blended mode of teaching to the level of contents and to transfer the hybrid one to the level of environmental contingency, because both refer to a question of a theoretical nature and at the same time to a question of a technical / technological nature.

The theoretical question, which is eminently cultural, and which partly or wholly resembles the great cultural revolutions of humanity such as the passage from the oral to the written tradition, or the subversion of the quiet living in the aftermath of the discovery of Gutenberg's movable type, is reconnected to the inevitable observation which teaching must take into account: in the digital mediasphere or infosphere it now appears impossible to separate and isolate a formal learning environment from all the other narratives or cognitive stimuli that constantly mushroom outside of the (virtual or physical) classroom.

Cognitive mythologies, linguistic and conceptual metaphors, biographical or autobiographical or automitopoietic stories coming from the most disparate media environments, often alien to the classroom environment, or at least missing from the immediate awareness of the teacher, increasingly and more effectively assume those hybrid, re-mediated, or cross-referenced narrative forms which, if intercepted or implemented in the dynamics of interaction, sharing, and collaboration mentioned above, make the old distinction between physical reference environments or fluid reference environments obsolete, but place us both in the presence and at a distance in a porous context, and irreversibly so. As if to say that the infosphere in which we are located in our social or didactic relationality makes some old formulas obsolete (such as CD-Roms, forums, blogs, but perhaps we would even say some new processes), to place ourselves in a dimension that is now permanently changed, and still not easily ascribable to any used category. The evolution of the communicative environment makes the separation between the worlds of education more and more out of date: the net, the blended (e-) learning, the hybrid mode wedged between formal, non-formal and informal, the open education are all available for new learning architectures, which can also determine new political and institutional choices [8].

4. A dynamic poly-structural place

The current change of epoch encompasses the foundations of the world of education, transforming the paradigms of learning through which the central issue (that we think is still too marginal in the public debate) remains the relationship between education and the cognitive stimuli / media, or, in other words, the act of living, crossing and transforming the world experienced by subjects who until recently exchanged and socialized mainly through the submission to imperatives (moral, political or social) that were essentially plural or collective but constructed as monolithic institutions of the heritage, while today they are increasingly inclined to seek individually the meaning of their existence, but through the relationship with others [9]. This relationship passes through self-education of an ethical nature (through the comparison between the different possibilities available and usable in the infinite in the world of net) but also of an aesthetic nature (both in their communicative and in their symbolic behavior). In other words, the learner finds himself immersed in an interaction that requires both a strong individual investment but also an exceptionally strong exposure to the public sphere. In this context so new but also so vital, a subject, achieving different experiences, finds himself floating from the formal to the informal dimension without any solution of continuity [10].

This dimensional passage stems from the most important, eye-catching and plastic aspect, that is, from the graft of different digital and learning technologies, which leads us to the second issue mentioned in the opening, that of the effectiveness of the digital tools.

Basically, in the mixed (blended) system, the designer is responsible for establishing what to entrust to digital and what to deliver by other methods, also specifying the timing and rhythms of alternation between presence and distance.

In the hybrid system we go further, because it is crucial to establish the dynamic links that connect "presence" and "distance" together, and therefore which activities, which processes, which dynamisms legitimize the different types of teaching and learning .

Now, using a highly intuitive mechanical metaphor, we see how in the so-called hybrid cars the transition from the use of the internal combustion engine to the electric one takes place automatically, without the driver noticing.

It is therefore necessary to think of a strong integration between moments in presence and moments at a distance, an integration that enhances the two aspects and brings them back to unity.

In general, the role of connective hinge can be entrusted to exploration and research activities, to be graded - obviously - according to the age of the students and according to the contexts.

Thus, without any stretch and in terms of maximum effectiveness - both for teaching and for learning - one recovers the specific role of higher education institutions, that aim at offering opportunities for apprenticeship the development of research skills [11].

The spread of mobile devices and their adoption since an early age has not only facilitated the education with digital media, thanks to their widespread and ubiquitous use, but it has ensured that the producers of apps focused above all on educational games (also called "serious games") starting from the graft between hardware and software. It is evident that new media push towards learning by navigation, exploiting the prominence of the hyperlink, leveraging search engines that allow one to easily and quickly find references, sources and connections [12]:

> "This model should be corroborated and managed in the specific area of education - at least in theory - with a user-centered design, based on the ability of learners to be able to customize navigation systems based on objectives. And the technologies of digitized classrooms (for example tablets connected to projectors or other devices on which the teacher reproduces the lesson or on which notes are taken and instantly viewed by others, then put online and distributed on the network) are only useful if they ensure and facilitate this type of navigation, and if they favor group work, emulating in the classroom what happens online with social applications and platforms, such as wikis, blogs or even Facebook (YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, etc.) and in general with all systems for sharing, brainstorming, producing and discussing content".

From the frontal communication that involves sharing the same space / time and sharing the same text and the same "plot" in which the communication takes place, we have been ferried (translated) towards a lesson that subjectivizes space and time in a labyrinthine proliferation of more or less fluid relationships that are built and dissolved in the network of strong and weak bonds and in the expectation of dynamics unpredictable in their creation and construction, where perhaps the teacher-learner relationship is overturned (also to give rise to new dynamics along the lines of an unprecedented flipped-classroom) or where one relocates to a site intended not just in a purely information technology sense but also in a locational / experiential sense, characterized by an absolutely new space-time dimension.

Techno-digital infrastructures have also been existential infrastructures for some time, i.e. infrastructures crossed, trampled on, by the existence of man and which at the same time cross, sometimes abruptly perforating, his existence, when they have made possible a spatial short circuit, a mixing, that doesn't allow anymore for distinctions of the here with the elsewhere, of the hic with the alias, allowing an unprecedented cancellation of the physical distance due to an intensification of the immediate exchange, of the instant sharing, of the accessibility, of the evidence or even only of the perception of the existence of others, or of everything that is dissimilar (cultures, individuals, religious or architectural realities) and that is sucked into the order of the similar, or even the plausible (with all the problems that this entails such as the renewal of false beliefs and false news, and with the renewal of new relational intolerances).

In any case, the encounter with the other and with the elsewhere no longer requires a physical movement because they are close, contiguous to us.

Indeed, the elsewhere shares our same space: the elsewhere therefore ceases to be a different where.

Digital learning involves technical aspects through successive approximations, such as a meshwork held together by electronic links whose use is called navigation, graduating through a multilinear, branched, multisequential, interactive, polyphonic mode.

A digital environment - and even more a digital learning environment - reproduces and extends itself in an autopoietic dynamic that realizes and creates a new relationality to the point of inducing us to think that "net" is not a place but a new, extended, potentially infinite dynamics of relationships.

Precisely because of its intrinsically relational essence, the digital communication network could (the conditional is a must) become a privileged learning and teaching environment, when it creates

and establishes a new otherness and it, becoming and undoing itself independently from the site in the which one finds oneself and realizing a new extremely ramified and labyrinthine situational reality [13], could transform and alter the relationship with oneself and with others, with reality and its representations, modifying humanity's lifestyle.

By implementing a plurality of approaches and visions as well as tools, learning platforms - different from each other, but in any case intended as open and communicating places - distance learning, combining cross-media and intra-media, could achieve a fusion of horizons corresponding not only to a simple methodological multilingualism but to a sort of "dialogic pluridiscursiveness", that is, to a vital and heterogeneous ecosystem that acquires an educational and pedagogical function (a sort of furthered or augmented educational agency, if compared to classical educational agencies, just as reality may be augmented by using virtual tools) as a transcendental condition, background and scenario of every form of critical, ethical and educational consciousness.

These considerations lead to the awareness that the forms and methods of on-line teaching, far from being a merely technical and technological problem or at most a methodological one, are a geometric problem, a "dynamic poly-structural place"[14], which sets itself up and prepares itself to become a semantic, theoretical, methodological, pedagogical and didactic place if not par excellance, at least extremely suited for the dissemination and teaching of didactic topoi. The digital environment is ultimately conceived as a topos of topos or as an extremely open space, as a horizon of a horizon of meaning beyond traditional distinctions: when it becomes the content and container of those categories necessary for the hermeneutics, such as dialogue, language and thought and their representation, the digital environment, transforming links into lectón, or in a literary sense, into gates or accesses (cognitive, experiential or informational), necessarily becomes a place of human relationality, even educational.

5. Conclusions

Our proposal, then, is to try to invert the man-machine relationship with pedagogical wilfulness, in order to investigate the way in which not only technique acts on thought, but also to understand if and how in the digital universe thought can live a kind of deconstruction (linguistic and formative): online teaching can be built on that aiming at identifying potentials and perspectives. If deconstruction, even and above all pedagogical, like a crisis, is the bearer of novelty [15], then it is possible to settle in the theoretical concerns and the didactic attentions necessary for a formative effectiveness in line with today's expectations, characterized, indeed, by a fracture and a rupture of system and habits.

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