

THREE START-UP OF THE GAME

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In order to challenge the world a child must arm himself with optimism and trust. And let's not forget about the educational value of the utopia. (Rodari, "The grammar of fantasy")

ABSTRACT

If we'd have the courage to cope with the future with optimism, at least three different "start-up" would open our teaching path: educating to deal with the uncertainties of our times, education through reflection and processing a project. These three goal can be achieved through different games.

Teaching to live with uncertainty of our times begins with learning to keep distances from excessive control. Submitting a dialogue game is a wonderful way to learn how to respect rules.

Teaching to live with uncertainty reflection can be cultivated through games which deal with life issues sustained by a debate. This "ludosophical" practice stimulates children to think by themselves.

Teaching to the project means offering different opportunities to put into practice their own skills to obtain a specific goal, like, for instance, inviting the children to create a project of a toy with a few simple materials.

The greatest exponents of our times invite us to travel through different paths to educate children to cope with the future and most of these paths can be enjoyed through games.

Keywords: education, game, play, project, reflection, uncertainty.

1. START-UP

"We have to get into the game", is a sentence that we hear always more frequently in finance, politics, and education. In order to emerge from the present crisis of values, we have to "get into the game!"

It is also the beginning and end of many debates regarding the birth of the "start-up", the starting point of an idea born of a small group of young people, heterogeneous in hopes, personal qualities and competence. It is an idea that encourages the financing of an undertaking.

The "start-up" phenomenon has seen growth in a variety of areas (technology, tourism, social networking). Investments are growing

exponentially (by banks, foundations, governmental sectors) in an effort to introduce new ideas. In 2013, for example, a Venetian "start-up" (Solwa) circulated a do-it-yourself kit that rendered non-potable water (salt or polluted) drinkable, using only radiation from the sun. The United Nations called this "an innovation for the development of humanity". Not all "start-up" reach these heights. Seventy-five percent disappear after a short period of time. But the creation of something that hasn't existed in the past, respecting man and his environment, is perhaps the most difficult and important task we can follow to face an insecure future.

An education that looks towards the future must aim to coexist with the insecurities of its time, to cultivate critical thinking and to encourage project creation.

This does not mean that education must follow the dictates of the economy, nor must it program training for entrepreneurship. Education can't be the driving force of a system in crisis. Rather, we would like to consider the "start-up" as a means of interpreting a new tendency, beyond the economic, social and cultural, an aspiration that gives us faith in the inventing of the present.

The "start-up" transmits the following: individualism is being replaced by the group project; new ideas are nurtured by reflections that aim to improve the world; we must know how to begin again after a failure and not remain paralyzed in the face of today's uncertainties.

If we face tomorrow with optimism, we can activate at least three game "start-up" in the pedagogic present: first, to teach uncertainty, second, to teach reflection, third, to teach "the project". We can do this by "playing". This affirmation may seem a utopia. Let's try to put this into practice, starting with the words of the poet, Delmore Schwartz: "in dreams begin responsibility".

2. TEACHING TO LIVE WITH UNCERTAINTY

Teaching to live with uncertainty begins with the responsibility of distancing oneself from excessive controls.

It is difficult to define with certainty the meaning of "the game". Many have tried to through philosophical, sociological and anthropological means. We can venture to say that the "game" is such if uncertainty reigns.

When "playing", we never know what might happen, what the players' reaction might be, how the "game" will end. The game changes each time it is played. Rules vary from place to place, from player to player, from moment to moment. The uncertainties of the game are dependent upon environmental, individual and cultural elements.

Our culture strives to dominate uncertainty... the more uncertainty, the bigger the attempts to dominate.

"Red light! Green light!" loses something fundamental the moment the behavior of the players becomes evident...for example, if the head of the game is supervised to make sure he has "moving" players return to the start when required.

"You're it!" loses something fundamental as soon as there is uncertainty due to the conformation of the field. A flat surface is predictable... one with trees, steps and hills is not.

"Quattro cantoni" loses something fundamental if interpreted with a moral point of view; for example, if a player changes his mind and puts his ally in a difficult situation. This might be judged as disloyal. However, in this type of game, "tricking" is the most interesting of the aspects of the "game".

When we play volleyball (or any other sport) on a regulation court, with a referee and international rules, we are not "playing" in reality. In fact, we are performing a "sport", but we call it a "game" because elements of surprise still exist. Thus a "sport" is quite different from a "game": a sport is regulated externally (rules that are dictated, referees, technology). A game, however, is regulated by the players themselves (who decide how, when and where to play it). At the same time, a soccer match becomes a game if played on an uneven bumpy field with tall grass, if the players themselves decide when there's a corner, a goal, a penalty shot, the number of players, males against females, only one goal post, etc.

When we eliminate the elements of ludic uncertainty, children will ask after playing a structured game... «Can we go play now?», as if to say, «Thanks for trying so hard to let us play a game. But since we were many, some of us a bit wild, and since you didn't want anyone to get hurt and you wanted everyone to follow the rules.....there wasn't much room for uncertainty, and now we would like to play in small groups, making up the rules as we go along. We would like to fight a bit (playfully, of course!) and run around a bit....even if it has nothing to do with the "game"!».

An educator must take risks and live with the unpredictable. Teaching to live with the "game".

3. TEACHING REFLECTION

"Teaching reflection" starts with the responsibility of playing far away from excessive stimuli.

Today's children are exposed to a multitude of stimuli and, often, there isn't enough time to absorb lived experiences, thoughts and emotions. "To do a lot" doesn't mean "to know a lot". A cultured child asks questions, reflects, and forms hypotheses. A competent child incorporates what he has learned into his life.

How can we give meaning to children's thoughts? By slowing down, by giving them time to think, to find the right words to express a reflection, to listen to others; through conscious learning, where it is possible to narrate experience, where what is lived becomes knowledge; to cultivate curiosity and facilitate discussions that evolve from daily occurrences.

Playing and thinking can coexist. We can "think" while having fun. If such weren't so, it would signify transmitting the message that "thinking" is fastidious. Facing life with a playful attitude creates pleasure even in the most difficult moments, it increases positivity (even while suffering), it feeds optimism.

One can have fun in tranquility, in silence, while thinking. There are many shades of playfulness. Playing doesn't mean being in a constant state of over excitement. To have fun "by force" is a contradiction. In a "super-active" world it is important to feed the pleasure principle in slow motion and guarantee the right not to play.

Therefore, before or after (sometimes during) a game it might be fun to debate a theme that may seem far away from the world of play. Children already do this when they play in small groups. They discuss what is and isn't "right", friendship and love, death and violence. Children like to philosophize!

There are some games where reflection is spontaneous: a game where one plays dead ("E' morto Sansone" for example), leads to thoughts and discussion about death. At the same time, there are thoughts that spring from daily occurrences which they play out: if children reflect on violence, we can propose war games (like "Il naufrago e gli squali").

The role of the adult, sensitive to "ludosophy", the philosophy of the game (playing and thinking to life themes), will be that of proposing certain types of games, gathering the thoughts of the children and facilitating the debate. He must be careful not to influence the game in the direction of the "reflection" that he aims for and the "reflection" in the direction that he is thinking about.

During the philosophical dialogue, which can be extraordinarily ludic, it is essential that the adult alienate his thoughts, but above all that he only asks questions (opened, closed, procedural, exemplary) without entering into the discussion. Any adult comment would influence the children's thoughts. The end-all is to think, that is, to take conscious of one's own way of seeing the world, of listening to one's self and the others.

The adult can search out those games which touch life themes and support the children's queries on actual philosophical reflections. The "ludosophy" is a method of stimulating and developing a critical attitude towards everyday topics and of nurturing the courage to think with one's own mind.

4. TEACHING TO THE PROJECT

"Teaching to the project" begins with the responsibility of playing distant from excessive "techniques".

It is important to be familiar with a variety of techniques (artistic, manual, musical, etc.). They are as fundamental as design skills. If we concentrate only on technique, we risk teaching a working approach to the world. We must always leave room for moments where children can put into use acquired grammar and skills; in other words, "teaching to the project".

When children are left to play by themselves, they are tireless architects. One has only to watch them playing outside in contact with nature. They take note of what the environment offers. They make a mental map of materials available; beautiful, rare, resistant. "Let's gather some of these things", they observe. They ponder. They look for a gesture that goes well with the gathered material, and an idea is born! When they realize that the next game is the "project", they exclaim, "I have an idea"! The project has been designed in their minds. They don't always agree but contribute their different points of view. Some hypotheses fail, other ideas are born. They must follow through on the project, because often the final result doesn't correspond to the initial idea. In fact, sometimes there will be no product, or it will be quickly dissolved (a sand castle, for example).

When children plan and project in contact with nature, they do something similar to a land-art artist. This is a form of behavioral art (centered on the artist's actions) that partakes of the natural environment using what nature offers in that particular locale. Landscape art distinguishes itself from the technical art of our society. It is a transitory art.

When children play and project with objects, they become artists, architects, engineers, scientists...

A project is born and develops from the need to understand. Children, parting from a question of everyday life and from an exploration of daily materials, can live an original experience constructed from their own knowledge. This knowledge is made up of hypotheses, examination, confrontation, and rethinking that lead to new ideas and the realization of projects that are always more complex.

In order to "teach the project", an adult must "project the project", parting from available tools:

- observe the children and note their interests;
- look for, make available and propose materials that can satisfy observed interests;
- note their skills and reflect upon the experience with the children;
- re-suggest the fulfillment of one of their ideas using a specific material;

- make the children realize how they came upon their ideas and what they would still like to accomplish;
- look for, together with the children, materials that could be useful for the new projects;
- propose technical activities (structured and/or semi-structured) to further explore the children's interests;
- offer and propose new materials to complete the new project;
- maintain a dialogue with the children to acquire knowledge regarding their abilities;
- reorganize the environment with new materials (or creation or renewal of the project space).

"To play to project" signifies adapting to the limits that reality provides....to try and approach them solely for the fun of creating an idea. This is true of the child as well as the adult who wants to "project the project".

5. THE FUTURE IS IN THE PRESENT

A utopia is a dream that can become reality if each of us takes responsibility, if each of us joins the game by following ideals without losing hope. A ludic approach to educating to the future allows us to face life's challenges with optimism. We can also meet these challenges while playing.

"Education is in every moment", according to Giselle de Faily, founder of the Cemea education movement, therefore also during games; games that put things in play, three game "start-up" that have fundamentally different pedagogical roots.

The majority of literature regarding the study of games show us that playing can not be inserted into a rigid rule system. we learn that games are in the reign of uncertainty from the writings of Froebel to Dewey, from Freud to Klein, from Vygotskij to Piaget, from Huizinga to Caillois, from Bateson to Parlebas. But, above all, the importance of educating to face uncertainty is supported by all the major educators of our time, from Edgar Morin to Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman, in "The society of uncertainty", makes a continuous reference to the game, to playing and to the player as a metaphor to illustrate a way of confronting certain insecurities of contemporary society and writes, «Nothing in the game is entirely predictable or controllable, but nothing is unchangeable or irrevocable» [1]. We can interpret this also by exchanging the word "game" with the words "life today". In his video interview for "Progettare futuri" - "Designing futures" - (Reggio Emilia, 2003), affirms; «Doubt alone isn't part of education, but all sciences today teach how to deal with and negotiate uncertainty; whether we speak of micro physics or human sciences. We must teach that each person's destiny depends on uncertainty from birth. We

don't know what illnesses we will be affected by, the date of our death, whether or not we will be lucky in love. History, too, has become uncertain. We thought for a long time that history was a locomotive that relentlessly followed its tracks towards a better future. Now we know that tomorrow is an incognito. We can only strengthen character by teaching to deal with uncertainty» [2]. When we relate these reflections to the pedagogy of the game, we can believe that by allowing players self-regulation we can help them learn to live with uncertainty.

While continuing to reference pedagogues who influenced thinking over the last century, let us arrive at conclusions by referring to recent thinkers. Lipman writes of his mentor Dewey (one of the major exponents of active pedagogy), «John Dewey was convinced that education had failed because victim of a gross categorical error: he confused the refined products of research with with basic and unrefined initial objects and he tried to teach students the solution, instead of pushing them to analyze the problem and to face research with their own means. Like scientists, students should apply the scientific method when examining problematic situations if they want to learn how to think with their own minds. We, instead, ask them to study the final results of the scientists' discoveries, ignoring the process and fixating on the product. When problems aren't analyzed first hand, interest nor motivation will be generated and what we continue to call "education" is reduced to farce. Dewey was convinced that there should be "thought" in the classroom; independent, imaginative, and clever» [3]. In the 70's, Lipman founded "Philosophy for Children", a method that considers a group of children a "research community" where each one learns to reflect deeply, to take an autonomous and motivated position regarding proposed questions and to confront without judging different concepts of the same theme. Lipman didn't want to teach philosophy, but to stimulate the natural curiosity to learn. We can use this model when we practice those games that cause us to reflect of life's themes.

During this reflection we discussed "processing the project" . This programming can not be linear and characterized by a gradual reaching of pre-established objectives. It must, instead, be a "programmazione reticulate", a gridded program, where each turn can bring us "indietro" back. In order to weave a solid web of responsibilities we must move in all directions. If we only go forward we risk being left in the lurch. One of the educational theorists closest to Dewey was Kilpatrick, who designed the "project method" in the 50's. For Kilpatrick, the method is both the best way to learn specific things as well as that which relates learning to daily life. In this sense, each thing learned, is considered a more complex unit of things learned (adding 2 plus 2 is not only the result of learning mathematics, but of linguistic, visual, psychological and social learning too). While projects have to begin with real questions, they begin with the idea, they continue along doable lines, and are then executed and verified. The projects, still according to Kilpatrick, can be of four types; "of the producer"

(practical projects), "of the consumer", (aesthetic projects), "of the problem", (projects proposed to resolve hypotheses), "of practice", projects proposed to achieve specific learning. Lamberto Borghi concludes his text, "Il metodo dei progetti", dedicated to the spread of Kilpatrick's thoughts in Italy, affirming, «Here process and content show their deep connection» [4]. This approach can be used in the set up of ludic spaces, in the choice of play materials, in the method of conducting a manual activity, for example, the project for a toy.

Thus, thinking about both who has given a fundamental contribution to contemporary pedagogy as well as those children who ask us to play, to reflect with their own minds and to play at designing ideas, we have to search for proposals that also cultivate pride and the optimism to be teachers and educators. And this could be a start-up for those who desire to follow the calling of an educator.

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