
WHICH SCHOOL FOR YOUTH IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM?

It is not uncommon to listen to teachers who complain about their students, claiming that every school cycle is worse than the previous one and that nowadays subjects and contents proposed in the past cannot be submitted anymore to the class. On the other side, many elderly people as well think with dejection that young people are not the same as in the past...

We may affirm that this is a usual intergenerational divergence where adults look at youth disapprovingly, while young people look at adults with dissatisfaction, although in some situations they all may be curious or pay attention to the other's world.

However, in the latest years this usual intergenerational divergence has surely deepened more and more and teachers – who are always in touch with young people and work with them – should have the reasons well clarified.

Studying the past can help us to understand better. For thousands of years, the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another has occurred through practice and orality: from father to son, from mother to daughter, from artisan to apprentice, from elderly to youth, etc...

Knowledge was a collective good and it was preserved from one generation to another. In the case of orality, the voice was the foundation of the transmission, the language employed forms encouraging memorisation (proverbs, poems, set phrases, etc.), and thinking – which is strictly connected to the language, as we already know – evolved through safe schemes where all new experiences were included. Still nowadays we partially learn through this method and a portion of the global population use mainly this form of knowledge transmission and preservation.

Things have changed with the invention of writing, but especially after the invention of printing, because it is thanks to this second innovation that writing became no longer only a tool in the hands of an élite in a very limited part of the world but a potentially universal communication means. The use of a concrete support (parchment, papyrus, paper, etc.) has had very important consequences: memory was not as necessary as before because contents could be copied on this support; as a result, the field of knowledge increased in size beyond what it was possible to memorise. The language on the paper has been organised in logical and sequential blocks, in different books divided in chapters and paragraphs. Consequentially, the thinking linked to this language has become analytical and systematic.

This way of thinking resulted in the creation of subjects as we understand them nowadays, organically divided in fields of knowledge and able to provide great in-depth analysis and

distinct specialisations. Therefore, let's not forget that subjects – many of us (especially the academic world) have been growing fond of – are an historical quite-recent product. However, this is the way of thinking of those people among us who were born before 1980s and I believe I am not the only one who first take into consideration the grammar, if I have to study a foreign language, and also who first look for the user's manual, if I buy an electrical appliance.

Since 1980s, for the second time in history, another technological invention (in this case, information and communication technology) has modified the way of knowing and transmitting knowledge. With a new digital support, another reticular and multimedia (no longer sequential anymore) language is necessary and the result is a new way of thinking which is focused on association and analogy (and no longer on logical connections), according to paths – which do not follow one and only straight road, indeed, they divide themselves in two and link back together.

It is inevitable that people – who, since they were born, have had at their disposal more and more different and complex digital tools – have a different way of thinking from those people who have had the opportunity to be familiar with those tools only in adulthood. Some scholars have even said that new generations are anthropologically different.

Therefore it is clear that students attending school nowadays are not the same as those young people who attended school in the past decades: they keep themselves informed, communicate and think in a different way, their logic is more associative than deductive, their concentration time is lower and they are more capable of switching from one context to another often in an intuitive way which does not mean it is less efficient.

Thus, it is easy to understand that school focused completely on subjects divided according to a time schedule, to a planning and to textbooks, and entirely oral didactics based on frontal teaching – which highlights the inner logic of subjects – cannot be possibly right for these students. It is not a case that many of the most brilliant minds of the latest years have been educated outside the school environment... In front of this epochal change, providing schools with interactive whiteboards and electronic class registers is not sufficient. Recognising and accepting the fact that students are different and not necessarily worse is very important. Teachers have to succeed in managing the dissatisfaction and disquiet they feel once they are aware that what they have taught until recently is no longer significant for this new generation: they obtain information through other channels and express themselves through other media, besides they have an extremely unclear future as citizens and workers.

This is the main challenge which the school has to face nowadays because its task is to transmit the essential cultural heritage coming from the past to new generations and to

prepare them to be good citizens and workers in their future life; however, this cannot be possible if the school denies to recognise that, in a digital and globalised world, education has to change radically in objectives, contents and methods. By saying this, I do not mean that teachers have to give up being themselves and to adapt themselves to students' logic. As in every and each case of divergence (also in the one between teachers and students), between adult and young people, principles of intercultural education shall be applied: not the judgement-prejudice and so the denial and misunderstanding, but the attempt to get to know each other, to understand each other and to try to establish knowledge and experience loans and innovative exchanges which are satisfying for both. And then who knows, teachers will be able to help students to understand why, according to them and to people with the same way of thinking, a literary book has great meaning, and they will be able as well to appreciate that students, once this meaning is understood, perhaps may use it in a text message in social media or in one of their multimedia products.

Author: Marina Medi*

** Marina Medi taught Italian and history. She trains teachers since 1993, especially on the design of history programs. She is a member of a number of teachers' associations in Italy.*