

THE DE CHIARA DE MAIO FOUNDATION: EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO ART IN A CONTEXT OF PROXIMITY

LA FONDAZIONE DE CHIARA DE MAIO: APPROCCIO EDUCATIVO ALL'ARTE IN UN CONTESTO DI PROSSIMITÀ

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Abstract

The De Chiara De Maio Foundation operates to promote art in a small municipality in Southern Italy. They have recently started working with students from primary to upper secondary school. In order to create meaningful experiences, they have been implementing principles of embodied cognition and situated learning's theories. This paper aims to recollect their early projects, underlying the managing phases of learning episodes and their outcomes.

La Fondazione De Chiara De Maio è attiva nella promozione dell'arte in un piccolo Comune del Sud Italia. Recentemente è iniziata la collaborazione con studenti e studentesse delle scuole di ogni ordine e grado. Al fine di strutturare esperienze significative, vengono applicati i principi della embodied cognition e dell'apprendimento situato. Lo scopo di questo articolo è di presentare i loro primi progetti, evidenziando le fasi di gestione degli episodi di apprendimento situato e i relativi risultati.

Keywords

Art; teenagers; contemporary; embodied cognition; situated learning.

Arte; adolescenti; contemporaneo; embodied cognition; apprendimento situato.

Introduction

The De Chiara De Maio Foundation, established in 2019, is committed to "supporting every form of Art and planning and carrying out recovery, preservation, restoration and enhancement of the Italian and foreign artistic and cultural heritage". In addition, engagement with local students is fundamental. In this context, the Foundation has two objectives: to support emotional education and to promote skills that facilitate employability in the cultural sector.

After two years of activity, carried out mainly in temporary loans to private and public institutions, the Foundation inaugurated its operational venue (La Conceria, 2021), in response to the desire to build a dynamic and permeable space where adults, children and teenagers could meaningfully approach Art.

In a small municipality, this aim is a challenge. In fact, Solofra, in the province of Avellino, where the venue is located, is classified as a "belt municipality" within the "National Strategy for the Internal Areas" (Accordo di programma quadro, 2017). As of January 1, 2022, the population was approximately 12,000 (ISTAT, 2022).

There has been an immediate need to interact with schools in order to have that positive impact on the community that is one of the Foundation's statutory objectives (Falk, & Dierking, 2000). In the last two years, the E.C.S. G. Cipolletti School in Montoro, the Solofra Teaching Department, the F. Guarini Comprehensive Institute, the G. Ronca Higher Secondary School and the V. De Caprariis Lyceum in Solofra have been involved in several projects.

For the purpose of this work, only the projects carried out with the private school E.C.S. G. Cipolletti, the Solofra Teaching Department and the V. De Caprariis Lyceum will be considered. The pedagogical commitment of the Foundation, in fact, began with a project carried out in collaboration with the school G. Cipolletti and the University of Salerno. This work, which applied the theory of embodied cognition, involved children in a process of embodiment of visual arts and music (Criscitiello, 2021; Shapiro, & Stolz, 2021). After this first experiment, all subsequent approaches to education were consistently oriented by developing episodes of situated learning (Noorgaard, & Stenderup, 2016).

Embodied Cognition Oriented approach to art

Between November 2020 and May 2021, some students from G. Cipolletti school have carried out workshops aimed to recognize "fully the contribution of all mental and bodily systems, including subjective feelings, emotions and kinesthetic awareness" (Savarese, 2021). The workshops were part of the project "No anxiety from Covid-19... Let's start from music and art for our well-being", promoted by the De Chiara De Maio Foundation in collaboration with the G. Cipolletti school and the chair of Psychology of Development and Education of the Department of Medicine, Surgery and Dentistry of the University of Salerno. The initiative aimed to provide children with a context of introspection thanks to the enjoyment of art in different forms, once it had been established that their emotional and psychological states were altered by the new existential situation caused by the application of the containment measures to the Covid-19 epidemic. This alteration emerged through the involvement of the parents, after they had taken the questionnaire on the health of the child PF50. The analysis of the data revealed "concerns about the emotional state and social, scholastic and sporting limitations" (Savarese, 2021).

The project consisted of two parts, music and visual arts. With respect to music, students were involved in a series of activities "based both on listening to songs and on the direct interpretation of the same" through the technique of body percussion, with the aim of stimulating the embodiment of the melodies. With respect to visual art, they took part in a series of meetings called "Breath of art", consisting of nine lessons held every two weeks (Picciocchi, 2021). Each lesson included the analysis of one or more artworks. The works considered are: Nativity (1403) by K. Von Soest, compared to a miniaturized nativity from a text by J. De Besançon (1450 ca.); the so-called Temple of Neptune or Poseidon (mid V sec. b.C.) located in the Archaeological Park of Paestum (Salerno) and the plaque covering the tomb of the diver (480-470 b.C.) exhibited at the National Archaeological Museum of Paestum; the statue of the goddess Hera (second half of the V sec. b.C.), exhibited at the National Archaeological Museum of Paestum; diptych of the dukes of Urbino (1465-1472) by Piero della Francesca; "Two dancers on stage" (1874) by Edgar Degas; "Spring" (1478) by Sandro Botticelli; "The kiss" (1907-1908), "The Tree of Life" (1905-1909) and "Lady with the fan" (1917-1918)

by Gustav Klimt; the mosaics of the museum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (425-426 b.C.); "Moses rescued from the waters" (1620 ca.) by Antiveduto Gramatica, from the collection of the Foundation. Each lesson was articulated into two phases: "observation activities, in order to stimulate the critical spirit and enhance the capacity for reflection, analysis and research"; "artistic phase", or laboratory activity, in order to "develop creativity, stimulate imagination and learn through hands-on experience". The output of these activities was the rendition of the artworks in dioramas built by the children, such as a cork model of the Temple of Neptune and a pop-up scene of "Spring". Although some lessons were held remotely, the implementation of the principles of collaborative education was ensured. The conclusion of the project was a moment of introspection, in which participants were asked an existential question: What is Art for you? Please find below the answers given. "It is a colour, an expression, an imagination"; "it is beauty and truth"; "it is freedom and joy"; "it is a source of inspiration and helps me grow in difficult times"; "it is joy and happiness, because it represents a moment of creation and sharing with my classmates and the teacher"; "it is beauty and when I look at the paintings I see many colours and things from the past that make my imagination grow"; "it is a source of inspiration, it is beautiful and relaxing, it is not what you see, but what you allow others to see"; "it is beautiful, creative and challenging"; "it is the ability to express emotions and can be a flower or a colour"; "it is emotion, harmony and inspires joy and happiness"; "it is colour and feeling"; "it is a universal language, a form of communication to express feelings, emotions or send a message to the observers"; "it is colour"; "it represents our mind, it is not important to be good at drawing, but to have fun"; "it is like talking without using words".

Situated learning of art

Children of the primary school Solofra Teaching Department have taken part in a project of situated learning articulated in two phases. The first phase consisted in a field trip at the exhibition venue, to start learning about the exhibitions related especially to the history of local art; the second phase was developed on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Starting from the assumption that "children learn through interaction with the environment: they should be guaranteed the opportunity to explain what they have experienced", cyclical activities have been organized in consultation with the teacher, aiming at connecting the classroom environment with the broader community, in which the Foundation operates. Cyclicity has been articulated in the alternation between work in the classroom and work outside the classroom, given that "situated learning is the result of a social process that includes the modes of interaction in specific environments" (Clancey, 1995).

Students, therefore, were involved in a first learning activity in the classroom, based on the observation of the characteristics of seventeenth-century painting, in particular the influences of Caravaggio's techniques, through stimuli provided by the teacher. In a second phase, the preparatory visit to the Foundation's exhibition venue took place. Students were accompanied in a first exploration of the works on display in the venue, which, consistent with what had been experienced in class, were mainly by key authors of the Neapolitan seventeenth century, such as Luca Giordano and Francesco Guarini. The tour began in the room dedicated to modern art. Here children were asked to gather in front of the painting by Nicola Pucci portraying the president's parents, who inspired the activity of the Foundation. In this way, the observers had the opportunity to appreciate, at a glance, modern paintings, especially baroque, and a contemporary painting (Di Tore et al., 2020). The guide, in fact, articulated the visit in two moments: one dedicated to the observation of the technical and stylistic differences of the exhibited works, and the other dedicated to the thematic analysis of the subjects. After a brief description of the purpose and history of the Foundation starting from the painting by Pucci, children were asked to observe the differences between that painting and the others, starting from the most obvious aspect: the surface of the painting. At this stage, they had the opportunity to understand how that learning episode would have taken place, and the guide/educator was able to get a first idea of the functioning of the class group and to identify the most uninhibited subjects, who loudly expressed their impressions, and those with a more private approach. In this phase, comparing the surface of Pucci's painting with that of the nearest one, "St. Agatha" by Francesco Guarini, children were maieutically led to reflect on the meaning of terms such as "dynamism" and "textured": from this moment on, they began to dig into their previous knowledge and skills, even latent or related to other contexts than the artistic one. Even if the guide had in mind the order in which to propose the different artworks, they kept as elastic as possible, giving priority to the interests of children as they emerged. As an example: a

class spent 25 of the 30 minutes scheduled in the modern art room to discuss exclusively the painting of Pucci. Students were particularly attracted by the artwork, and continued to extrapolate meanings, even debating among themselves and using the filter of historical knowledge acquired at school. The experience ended in the room dedicated to contemporary art, which at that time housed the personal "Memory" by Gino Quinto. Here children were invited to notice how the artworks, unlike those they had observed in the other room, were intelligible through the sphere of feeling rather than the one of knowledge. The baroque paintings, in fact, reproduced subjects and scenes with which the class was familiar: "St Agatha" and "St Michael", patron saints of the City; "Our Lady of the Rosary", of which a rather large picture is preserved in the main church of Solofra; some glimpses of this church and the square in front of it rendered by members of the School of Posillipo. If the cognitive effort in front of these works implied recognizing and transferring them in their own daily context, with the installations by Quinto students had to spend themselves in giving them a subjective meaning. Here the participation was particularly satisfying; unlike the adult or adolescent observers, children showed spontaneity and ease in their approach to contemporary art, lingering on the exploration of meanings; compared to adults, it seemed that they did not explicit to themselves and others the question "what is the sense/what does it mean?" but they rather dove right into sense attribution.

Ultimately, the role of the guide was to describe the context with which they were interacting, so to "facilitate social interaction, meaningful discussions, constructive conflicts and to offer environmental stimuli to provoke reflection by boys and girls" (Pitri, 2015).

Once the activity had finished, children were invited to elaborate a rendering of the experience in two moments: immediately after, by writing a thought on the guest book, and once back in class, by creating paper clouds in which to collect memories and feelings of the episode. We report some of the writings that best summarize the purpose of the initiative. "We went to the foundation "De"; we saw many paintings and many sculptures. Each sculpture and each painting had a meaning, we expressed many opinions and feelings. There are many ways to draw on a canvas, it takes patience and concentration, I understood how spectacular ART is, and it makes express many opinions. Beautiful EXPERIENCE!!!!"; "the visit to the foundation "De" was very nice and exciting. Mrs. Carmen explained the history and meaning of all the artworks. I really liked the one about the swan representing pollution. It was beautiful and I can't wait to go back with my parents"; "this foundation is very beautiful, I felt good because we had a young lady who explained gracefully, and because I saw the paintings and imagined them in my own way"; "I really liked it/in fact my heart has melted/with all that beauty/and also strangeness/I would go again/because I felt like a chick out of the egg"; "I was really impressed by this experience because even if it is a small art exhibition it hides the history and legend that describe Solofra".

Based on these reflections, the project managers extrapolated ideas to give a measure of the work accomplished. From the thoughts it seems that children were aware of the ways in which the learning process took place during the episode of situated learning, that is to say by directly activating the production of intellectual content ("[...] we expressed many opinions and feelings"; "[...] I saw the paintings and imagined them in my own way"). Even the relationship with the guide/educator seems to have been identified, recognizing her interventions as "environmental stimuli" ("[...] we had a lady who explained gracefully"). The contextualization of the activity with respect to the "broader community" ("[...] hides the story and the legend that describe Solofra") has also been outlined. Finally, and this is a fundamental aim of the work carried out with the schools, it emerged the desire to repeat the experience, extending it to the peer group and the family ("[...] I cannot wait to go back with my parents; [...] I would go again").

For the second phase of the project, the classes were involved in activities organized on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The Foundation organized an ad hoc exhibition on the theme of prevarication and faith. In this case too, children took part in a first initiative carried out in class: starting from a poem by Alda Merini, they were asked to produce textual and artistic works, in which the visual part refers to the installation "Zapatos Rojos" by Elina Chauvet. These papers were read at the Foundation's venue on November 25. This second pedagogical episode began with the sharing of the thoughts children had developed about the phenomenon, to continue the reflection started in class and "situate" the intervention in the context of the exhibition space.

Later on, students had the opportunity to experience the new exhibition with the awareness of the learning process acquired during the first learning episode. This second time, in fact, it was possible to appreciate the acquired ease, as well as the skills related to the analysis of the artworks.

At the end of the activity, the children were asked to take part independently at the opening of the next exhibition of contemporary art, which would have taken place on December 3 and 4. They were given minimal information: name of the artist, Carla Viparelli, and title of the exhibition, Zona Franca. The return rate recorded at the vernissage was 17.5%. On this occasion, children had the opportunity to interact directly with the artist, who began with them a dialogue made of exploration of meanings. The children were, overall, at ease in the inner exploration and in the explication of their thoughts.

The Program for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PTSO) at the Scientific Lyceum

Both last-year classes of the Scientific Lyceum V. De Caprariis, located in Solofra, took part in a project within the PTSO. The teenagers had the chance to participate in the organization of a contemporary art exhibition. Since May 2022, in fact, the Foundation has inaugurated "Colours", a permanent festival of contemporary art, where personals of different artists alternate every three months.

For this project as well, the circularity between the classroom environment and the broader community was guaranteed, starting the interaction through a situated learning episode.

The classes were invited to visit the Foundation firstly. In order to create a program consistent with the work that they would have done later, the workshop focused on the contemporary exhibition hosted at that time, the above-mentioned "Zona Franca" by Carla Viparelli. The artist was present on the spot, and led adolescents to discover her works. The interaction was quite satisfactory: the majority of students showed vivacity and involvement, as well as a certain flexibility of connection with the topics studied at school, in particular with the philosophy of the twentieth century (Illeris, 2005). The artist explained them only the concept of the exhibition; in front of each work, then were provided stimuli through questions about sensations and reflections and invited to a moment of recollection. At the end of the experience, students were asked to write a thought on the guest book; here are some of their feedbacks. "Having an exhibition within walking distance in our village is quite pleasant and also admirable. [...]"; "exciting journey between present and past, the discovery of a timeless art, because expression of our emotions"; "great welcome and great atmosphere, walls full of culture and feelings"; "the moment you cross the threshold of the door, you enter a completely artistic dimension and it seems that the present stops"; "the artist Viparelli transmits through her works the importance of knowing how to go beyond the border, overcome the past, welcome the future and be strengthened thanks to the arduous paths which life places us on"; "thanks to Viparelli Carla I can perceive art in a context different from the boring school context, but it makes me want to start again to be more artist than worker, despite working with my hands, heart and head". We also report the feedback of the experience by Viparelli herself. "I am a relational artist. For me, art is an ideal form of communication. Art manages to generate relationships based on sensitive factors that go beyond common sense and reveal surprising understandings and insights. Meeting with classes of students of all ages and nationalities is a time when these openings take place better. Therefore, when the opportunity presents itself, it is an experience I live with momentum. I know something will happen for me and for them. We will both be enriched. We play together, we allow ourselves to feel lightness and depth at the same time. With the last-year students of Scientific Lyceum V. De Caprariis in Solofra it did not take long to open this window. My works exhibited at the De Chiara De Maio Foundation lend themselves to the free play of interpretations, since they can be read in many ways. Contemporary art is maieutic by definition. Like the koans of Zen philosophy, it scatters the cards of common logic and opens up to more wide-ranging recompositions. For example, some students, asked to express themselves on the same artwork, gave two opposite interpretations, both valid and super interesting. In this way, everyone has expressed himself genuinely, at the same time experiencing the diversity of their classmate. Each of them has experienced the legitimacy of their own vision, of their own insight, valid just for the fact of being and self-manifesting, without needing to be equal to that of anyone else. I think about how important such an experience is for a

young person: it helps to understand that very often the oppositions do not represent the ultimate truth and that at any moment you can go further, towards a greater understanding”.

The approach of "Zona Franca" was used to introduce the classes to the aim of their PSTO: to organize an exhibition of contemporary art. The exhibition in which teenagers will work together is "Leuth" by Pantaleo Musarò. The participants were set into two groups: the "editorial group" works on the catalogue and press release; the "communication group" works on the online promotional campaign (Rivoltella, 2006). The groups were formed based on previous individual skills, collected through an online questionnaire submitted during the preliminary meeting. The respondents were asked: "Do you work or have you worked and/or volunteered in one or more of the following areas?". The answers (up to two) were selected from: "enhancement of cultural heritage", "communication", "production of digital content", "work with the public", "organization of events", "none" and "other". Those who had no experience in the areas indicated were randomly assigned to one of the two groups. At the same time, respondents were asked to self-evaluate their theoretical and empirical skills with respect to the activities they would have taken part into; a Likert scale was used with values from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much"). This part of the questionnaire is used for ex ante and ex post evaluation in order to verify the project's effectiveness to achieve the objectives identified together with the teachers. At the end of the project, which will coincide with the opening of the exhibition on March 5, 2023, the students will be given the same questionnaire to check the progress of their skills.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the proximity and familiarity of the exhibition venue of the De Chiara De Maio Foundation seem to determine the right context for the implementation of situated learning episodes. During the first months of this experience, the results observed were satisfactory enough to justify continuing activities in this direction. Students of primary schools have manifested the need and the will to live emotionally significant experiences, showing particular ease in the expression of thoughts and feelings elicited by artworks. On the other hand, the PTSTO with students of the upper secondary school has brought out the need for empirical activities that provide the actual learning of skills that can be used in everyday life (Todino et al., 2018). From the involvement of the classes, it was possible to appreciate in particular the added value of intergenerational work: the adolescents showed elasticity and intuition in planning a communication campaign through social networks, explicating a peculiar aesthetic taste (Rivoltella, 2020).

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