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"Il grande libro dell'Alta Murgia": Designing Authentic Tasks for Sustainable Engagement

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Abstract: This paper describes and analyses a place-based civic education project carried out at the "Bosco-Manzoni" comprehensive school in Toritto (Apulia, Italy) between 2019 and 2022. The project comprised the postcard initiative "Una cartolina per Toritto" and the interdisciplinary learning unit "Il grande libro dell'Alta Murgia", whose outcome was an interactive map and a printed book of about two hundred entries. Adopting a descriptive qualitative case-study design based on document analysis, the paper asks which design devices and documentation practices make it possible to turn a territorial civic education experience into a communicative artefact. As no systematic learning data were collected, the study does not assess effectiveness; it discusses the design in the light of situated learning, semiotic mediation and the standards of authentic instruction, and proposes an evidence-collection matrix for future implementations.

Keywords: educational agency; task authenticity; technological mediation; civic education; real-life task

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1. Introduction

Law no. 92 of 20 August 2019 introduced the cross-curricular teaching of civic education in schools of every level, organising it around three thematic cores: the Constitution, Sustainable Development and Digital Citizenship. The guidelines were issued by Ministerial Decree no. 35 of 22 June 2020 and subsequently updated by Ministerial Decree no. 183 of 7 September 2024. At the "Bosco-Manzoni" Comprehensive School in Toritto, in the province of Bari, an experiment inspired by Article 9 of the Constitution and entitled "Una cartolina per Toritto" had already been launched in the 2019–2020 school year; it partly anticipated the later ministerial indications, both with regard to some of the thematic cores subsequently identified by the Ministry and with regard to the participation in the project of teachers of various disciplines. At the beginning of 2020–2021 the school then built a coherent vertical curriculum, organised around the three thematic cores, into which the earlier experiment fitted without difficulty. From the place where the pupils live, the focus moved to the territory bordering the municipality of Toritto: the Alta Murgia.

The decision to start from the territory reflects an idea of civic education that is not limited to knowledge of the rules but passes through the experience of a concrete place. Article 9 of the Constitution, which entrusts the Republic with the

protection of the landscape and of the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation, offers a natural normative anchor; the 2030 Agenda, with its goals on sustainable communities and terrestrial ecosystems, offers one at the level of sustainable development. In a context such as Toritto, within the area of the Alta Murgia National Park, the landscape is at once the everyday environment of the pupils and a common good to be known and protected. The landscape is a collective and shared work of art, the result of the transformations brought about by communities; it makes sense only if there is a human heritage that is aware of it, takes care of it, and feels it as its own. Human heritage is made of memories, attentions, relationships and narratives; it is what makes us participants, present, custodians of a situated knowledge to be handed down to future generations (Council of Europe, 2005, art. 2). In the works presented, heritage becomes an interdisciplinary learning environment.

The question guiding the analysis is the following: which design devices and which documentation practices make it possible to transform a territorial civic education experience into a communicative artefact?

The theoretical framework weaves together the perspective of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and Vygotskian semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1978) with the five standards of authentic instruction (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993) and with Perla's (2013) reflection on documentary writing as part of experience, which makes its implicit level visible and its content shareable, and constitutes an archive to work on. It is an act that converts the experience taking place indoors, in a school classroom, in a building, from a fenced-off fact contained within four walls into a public heritage of knowledge (Rinaldi, 2001).

The experience carried out by the school has thus been analysed from a socio-cultural perspective: the products created are not regarded as mere formal outcomes of a project, as "little crafts" ("lavoretti"), but are considered genuine pedagogical artefacts. The postcards for Toritto project and the book of the Alta Murgia, as material traces, make it possible to reconstruct retrospectively the methodological and didactic dimensions that were called upon and to observe how the competences set out in the rubric of the vertical Civic Education curriculum were realised in an authentic task of high social value. The content, the narrative forms and the thematic choices of the book allow the research to reconstruct retrospectively (reverse engineering) the learning processes, the growth of civic awareness and students' agency (student agency).

The paper adopts a qualitative and descriptive case-study design (Yin, 2018). During the implementation of the project no systematic data on learning were collected (questionnaires, rubrics, observation sheets): the study therefore does not intend to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, but to describe and analyse the design and the products, considering that authentic assessment acquires greater value when it is based on activities that respond to the challenges posed by reality, when knowledge and skills are used to create products or performances that take on social value (Wiggins, 1998).

The authors of the UDA (interdisciplinary learning unit) are the teachers who designed it; the works that went into the map and the volume were produced by the pupils.

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2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study design and sources

This is a single-case study, conducted through document analysis and a retrospective reconstruction of the design process. There are three sources: (a) the design documents, namely the UDA sheet, the breakdown by class and discipline, and the timetable; (b) the products created, namely the interactive map and the volume; (c) the documentation relating to the Nibbio Reale Award, the presentation at the Turin Book Fair, and the presentation at "Biodiversa. L'Italia dei parchi si racconta" ("Biodiversa. Italy's Parks Tell Their Story"). The documents were read analytically, taking as interpretive categories those of the theoretical framework: task authenticity, mediation through tools and models, and the role of documentation. Since data from the students are lacking, the analysis concerns the design of the project and its products, not learning outcomes.

2.2 Context

The project took place in Toritto (BA), in the territory of the Alta Murgia, which has been a National Park since 2004. It involved pupils, teachers and families of the "Bosco-Manzoni" Comprehensive School and, in the second phase, also local stakeholders: the GAL "Terre di Murgia" (Local Action Group), the Pro Loco, the Municipal Department for Culture and Public Education, and local experts on the Alta Murgia.

2.3 First phase: "Una cartolina per Toritto" (school years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021)

The project, addressed not only to pupils of every school level but also to parents and teachers, aimed to explore the term "landscape" as a complex semantic network (Jakob, 2009; Turri, 2018[7]), taken by the teachers as a thematic core to be explored from the standpoint of the individual disciplines. Starting from the analysis of Article 9 of the Constitution, it fitted into the discourse of citizenship and constitution by inviting participants to focus on the "nearby landscape" and to develop a sense of belonging to the place where one lives. Those landscapes were the ones habitually crossed, often distractedly; the invitation was to rest one's gaze on a corner or a glimpse (a balcony, a tree, a bench, a flight of steps, a courtyard), sometimes linked to a smell, a sound, a memory. The postcard is to be understood as a didactic device, a symbolic mediator, a tool for observing the territory, rediscovering heritage and distilling a message of citizenship; it also marked the start of a first networked effort among teachers at the different school levels.

The teachers prepared a postcard template: at the top right the emblem of the Municipality in place of the stamp, at the bottom right the space for the address, on the left the space for the photograph and, below it, the one for the text. To make the work easier, a short course on how to fill in the postcard template was arranged for a group of pupils, taught by a teacher and a parent. The participating pupils were given the task of passing on what they had learned to their classmates, in a peer-tutoring perspective.

The task of the project consisted in photographing the chosen place in the town, thinking of a recipient, real or imaginary, and writing a message on the meaning of the place for the sender, for the recipient, or for both. The postcard was

chosen because in the past it was the means by which images of the landscape circulated around the world, and because it allows brief and lively communication. The pupils engaged with a specific type of text, with translation into English and French (the postcards could be written in foreign languages), and with photography and the digital production of the finished product.

2.4 Second phase: "Il grande libro dell'Alta Murgia" (school year 2021–2022)

The interdisciplinary learning unit involved the three classes of the lower secondary school, joined by some fifth-grade primary classes, which took care of the puzzle games (rebus, hidden words, crosswords, anagrams, word searches, etc.) collected in the chapter "La Murgia enigmistica" ("Murgia Puzzles").

Tables 1–3[1] summarise the salient features of the UDA for the secondary school classes. The references to competences are those of the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union of 22 May 2018; those to the Sustainable Development Goals are taken from the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015).

Table 1. Summary sheet of the learning unit

Element	Description
Title	Il grande libro dell'Alta Murgia (The Great Book of the Alta Murgia)
Recipients	Lower secondary school, first, second and third years, "Bosco-Manzoni" Comprehensive School
Area	Civic education: sustainability, protection of the environment and of the heritage of the territory
2030 Agenda	Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities); Goal 15 (terrestrial ecosystems, soil degradation, biodiversity)
Focus competence	Competence in citizenship; related: literacy, multilingual, mathematical-science-technology, digital, personal-social and learning to learn, entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression
Problem situation	Do pupils experience the landscape consciously, know its peculiarities, perceive its degradation and understand why the National Park was established?
Real-life task	To produce, for the volume "Il grande libro dell'Alta Murgia", descriptive plates on flora, fauna, and the environmental, architectural and gastronomic heritage, accompanied by illustrations and laid out with Canva. To collaborate in the public presentation of the product
Duration	33 hours overall across the two terms

Table 2. Structure of the project by class

Class	Thematic focus	Reference disciplines	Product
First year	Wild flora of the Murgia	Science (classification, herbarium); Italian (descriptive text); Art (botanical plates)	Layout with Canva

[1] The Tables are drawn from the Vertical Curriculum Rubric for Civic Education of the "Bosco-Manzoni" Comprehensive School in Toritto, modified and reorganised with the support of the generative AI Claude (Anthropic, version 3.5 Sonnet).

Class	Thematic focus	Reference disciplines	Product
Second year	Wild fauna, resident and migratory	Science (vertebrates and invertebrates, adaptation); Italian (descriptive text); Art (faunal plates)	Layout with Canva
Third year	Environmental heritage (sinkholes, woods, lame, sheep tracks, etc.), architectural heritage (lamie, trulli, masserie, jazzi, snow houses, etc.), local products and typical dishes.	History; Geography (human-environment interaction); Italian (descriptive text); Art (illustrated plates)	Layout with Canva

Note. The work of the three classes converges in the volume; the layout is handled within Technology.

Table 3. Phases, disciplines, activities and timetable

Phase	Discipline (competence)	Main activities	Hours	Period
First term (15 hours): knowledge of the Murgia ecosystem and of the National Park				
1	Geography (citizenship)	Explanation of the task, survey of interests and prior knowledge; 2030 Agenda; the landscape of the Alta Murgia; protection bodies	3	October
2	History (citizenship)	Transformations of the territory, from degradation to the establishment of the Park; use of sources	3	November
3	Science; Art	Biodiversity, threats and conservation; flora, fauna, heritage; testimonies of parents and grandparents; meetings with experts	5	Nov.–Dec.
4	Music; Religion	Folk repertoire with an interview with a witness; festivals and traditions (Madonna degli Angeli of Quasano)	4	Dec.–Jan.
Second term (18 hours): carrying out the real-life task and public presentation				
5	Italian	Collection of images and sources; descriptive text (planning, drafting, revision); word processing	4	February
6	Art	From photographs to illustrated plates	3	Feb.–Mar.
7	English; French	Species vocabulary; short promotional texts about the territory	3	March
8	Technology (digital)	Layout of texts and illustrations using a Canva template	4	Mar.–Apr.

Phase	Discipline (competence)	Main activities	Hours	Period
9	Physical Education	Guided excursions, recovery of traditional games fallen into disuse	2	April
10	All disciplines	Presentation to parents and citizens	2	May

Note. The personal-social and entrepreneurial competences are transversal to all disciplines.

3. Results

The project "Una cartolina per Toritto", which was meant to be a stand-alone experience, became the first part of a broader design device, founded on the authenticity of tasks and extended over time, which aimed to sustain pupils' engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), their agency and their persistence in learning. The project developed over three school years (2019–2020, 2020–2021, 2021–2022) and produced a) an interactive map, available on the school's website, and b) a volume, "Il grande libro dell'Alta Murgia", structured in six sections and about two hundred entries.

As regards the project "Una cartolina per Toritto", over time, given the interest it had aroused not only within the school but among the whole citizenry, a widespread exhibition of the postcards in the corners of the town had been planned; unfortunately, it could not be carried out because of the pandemic. To compensate, the postcards produced were placed on a map available on the website of the "Bosco-Manzoni" Comprehensive School.[2] The map is interactive in the sense that by clicking on any of the numerous red hearts placed on the plan of the municipality of Toritto (including the hamlet of Quasano), a pop-up of the corresponding postcard appears on the screen. As already mentioned, the initiative met with such interest that it involved citizens who were neither of school age nor parents of pupils.

The project on the Alta Murgia, for its part, produced a volume entitled, precisely, "Il grande libro dell'Alta Murgia", organised in six sections. The first, devoted to flora, consists of 63 pages, the second (fauna) of 64 pages, the third (environmental and architectural heritage) of 35 pages, the fourth (the delicacies of the Murgia) of 15 pages; the fifth is a selection of 9 gastronomic placemats, devoted to the products of the land and of livestock farming that become delicious dishes (the gastronomic placemats are inspired by those created by the artist Yochiko Noda for the publisher Corraini, who was informed of the project and granted permission to use her placemat model); finally, the sixth, edited by the children of the fifth primary classes, is devoted to Murgia puzzles and consists of 13 pages. The volume closes with a bibliography and an extensive webliography.

The printing was funded by the Department of Education and the Right to Study of the Puglia Region. In 2023 the volume received the Nibbio Reale Award, conferred by the Alta Murgia National Park Authority on works that distinguish themselves in the protection and promotion of the territory, and in 2024 it was presented by the head teacher and a delegation of pupils and teachers at the 36th edition of the International Book Fair of Turin with the support of the Puglia Region. On 10 and 11 May 2025, fifty pupils, representing all the classes of the

[2] The interactive map of the postcards can be viewed on the school's website at: https://www.comprensivotoritto.edu.it/

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school, were leading actors in the 2nd edition of "Biodiversa. L'Italia dei parchi si racconta" at the exhibition centre in Gravina in Puglia: they presented the book on stage and ran a stand.

4. Discussion

4.1 From the postcard to the book: continuity and change of scale

Read in sequence, the two moments show continuity of approach and a change of scale. In both, the task is one of production and culminates in an artefact addressed to recipients outside the classroom: a postcard, with a real or imaginary recipient, and then a book and an interactive map intended for the community. What changes is the object (from a place chosen for emotional ties to an entire ecosystem and its heritage), the subjects (from the individual pupil, with parents and teachers, to the classes and their disciplines) and the commitment required (from a short text to about two hundred entries and 33 hours of activity). One didactic device remains unchanged: the template prepared by the teachers, which in the first phase is the postcard format, with defined spaces for image, text and address, and in the second the template page built with Canva.

From a Vygotskian perspective the template is to be read as an instrument of semiotic mediation: it fixes the form and leaves to the pupils the choice and elaboration of the content, making the contributions of different classes and disciplines comparable and composable into a single volume. The multilingual character, already present in the postcards and taken up again in the promotional texts in English and French, also indicates continuity between the two phases.

A second aspect concerns the textual genre. The postcard is a short, personal text addressed to a recipient; the descriptive entry in the volume is an informative, impersonal text, intended for an undifferentiated public. The shift from one to the other implies for the pupils a change of register and of communicative function, from the narration of an emotional bond with a place to the description of species, structures and products, and involves different competences (literacy, multilingual, digital). The sequence can be read as a path that moves from personal experience towards a shareable knowledge of the territory, while keeping the thread of the real recipient. The pupils also learned to use word-processing software (Word) and graphic design platforms (Canva) to create digital products, working collaboratively.

It would remain to be verified, with adequate tools, whether and how this transition was experienced by the pupils.

4.2 Reading in the light of the standards of authentic instruction

Table 4 relates the design of the UDA to the five standards of Newmann and Wehlage (1993). The reading is interpretive: each entry indicates an element of the project design that responds, on paper, to the standard, and not an outcome observed in the students.

Table 4. Elements of the UDA and standards of authentic instruction

Standard	Elements of the project design
Higher-order thinking	Classification of species, selection of sources, transformation of photographs into plates and of knowledge into descriptive texts

Standard	Elements of the project design
Depth of knowledge	In-depth study of a circumscribed core for each class (flora, fauna, rural settlements) with links among science, history, geography and art
Connection to the world beyond the classroom	Real problem of the territory; relationship with the Park, GAL, Pro Loco and Municipality; public presentation of the product
Substantive conversation	Testimonies of parents and grandparents, interview with a privileged witness, meetings with experts, presentation to parents and citizens
Social support	Class work converging in a single product; involvement of primary school classes, families and teachers of several disciplines

Note. Authors' elaboration from Newmann and Wehlage (1993) and from the UDA documents.

The picture that emerges is that of a high-authenticity design: the problem is situated in the territory, the recipient of the product is the community, disciplinary knowledge is put at the service of a real artefact, and the participation of actors outside the school was planned from the design stage. This responds to the perspective of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), according to which learning is defined in participation in meaningful practices; the project acted as a network of connections: it linked the formal curriculum (the school's rubric) to the territory (history/local community), reaching as far as regional institutions (funding) and national showcases (the Turin Book Fair; the "Biodiversa" event organised by the Alta Murgia National Park).

4.3 Documentation as part of design

According to Perla (2013), documentation is not an appendix to didactic work but a constitutive part of it. In the case examined, three documentary levels can be distinguished. The first is the design itself: the UDA sheet spells out the problem situation, the real-life task, the competences, the resources and the timetable, and makes the project reconstructible over time. The second consists of the artefacts, the interactive map and the volume, which preserve and make public the pupils' work. The third is the institutional documentation of the recognitions (regional funding, Nibbio Reale Award, presentation at the Book Fair and at Biodiversa), which attests to the reception of the product by actors outside the school.

The project succeeded even without a measurable satisfaction index; its success lies in its generative capacity, as a stimulus for a chain of active citizenship in which the students' works receive feedback and authentic, public social recognition.

The dual form of the product, digital (interactive map on the school's website) and paper (six-section volume), seems to respond to two needs: accessibility for a wide public and the durability of an object that can circulate and be presented in venues outside the school. The chapter "La Murgia enigmistica", edited by the fifth primary classes, also shows how the section-based structure allows differentiated participation, welcoming contributions from different school levels without distorting the overall structure of the volume.

4.4 Limitations

The work has limitations that circumscribe its scope. It is a single case, reconstructed retrospectively from documents, without systematic data on learning

and without the direct voice of pupils, families and local partners. The recognitions received attest to the perceived quality of the product, not to the attainment of competences. Moreover, the pandemic prevented the widespread exhibition of the postcards, so the first phase did not have the planned public presentation. Considerations about the transferability of the model to other contexts must therefore be understood as hypotheses.

4.5 Implications for instructional design

Design should indicate in advance which evidence to collect, so that documentation and assessment proceed together with the realisation of the product. Natural developments include the use of rubrics and observation sheets, the collection of the voices of students and partners, and comparison with other place-based civic education experiences.

5. Conclusions

The research question asked which design devices and which documentation practices make it possible to transform a territorial civic education experience into a communicative artefact. The analysis of the case yields five devices: a problem situation rooted in the territory; a real-life task with real recipients, leading from the postcard to the book and the interactive map; the articulation into a knowledge phase and an operational phase, spread over the two terms; the use of templates (the postcard, the Canva page) that mediate production and guarantee its composability; and the involvement of families, experts and institutions of the territory. These are accompanied by a multi-level documentation practice, from the UDA sheet to the products, up to the institutional recognitions.

The paper has a descriptive and design value: it provides other teachers with a detailed UDA structure, with hours, disciplines and competences, and a reading of its authentic character. It does not, however, allow us to claim that the project improved learning, because the necessary data were not collected, but it positioned the students not as passive repeaters of local stories and events but as a community of heritage (“comunità di eredità”), capable of reworking and giving new meaning to the cultural heritage of their territory.

In conclusion, the project described is not an isolated episode but part of a generative ecosystem that fosters broad initiatives linked to the authenticity of tasks attributable to Civic Education. Other projects have been carried out in the same school, including the “Sacchi gentili” (“Kind Bags”) and “Il vocabolarietto delle parole e dei modi gentili” (“The Little Vocabulary of Kind Words and Ways”), publicly presented in June 2025 with the participation of academic, regional and local institutions and of pupils and former pupils. The little vocabulary and the volume on the Alta Murgia were donated to each class so that they could be consulted in the following years; the latter gave rise to an excursion in the Murgia territory with numerous pupils equipped with the volume. These elements document the continuity of the offer of authentic tasks and the re-use of the artefact. They do not measure prolonged engagement, for which data on pupils’ participation over time would be needed, but they constitute a strong indication of it.

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