Journal of Inclusive Methodology and Technology in Learning and Teaching
ISSN 2785-5104
Anno 6 n. 4 (2026)

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

Powerful Words: Learning, Knowledge, and Media Formation through the Lens of an 'Engaging Pedagogy'

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Abstract: This paper examines several guiding questions and the fundamental perspectives of a pedagogy that can be considered both "engaging" and "engaged" for the human condition within the meaning-making processes of the contemporary digital era. Specifically, it questions what the ultimate meaning of educational processes might be in relation to an open and constantly evolving virtual society – one that currently offers what only yesterday seemed unthinkable. The theoretical framework is primarily grounded in hermeneutic pedagogy; however, the discussion also considers other epistemologies of knowledge and education, such as the philosophical-educational scholarship of Alberto Granese and the "connectivism" of Derrick de Kerckhove. The *Leitmotive* of this contribution, which lies at the heart of the entire theoretical-conceptual framework, consists of a critical exploration of three "powerful" concepts within pedagogical disciplines: learning (revisited within the dynamics of media ecosystems), knowledge (reconsidered in light of the theoretical-gnoseological legacy of the twentieth century), and formation (centred on the critical role of the school and a "transformative" magisterium).

Keywords: Engaging Pedagogy; Learning; Knowledge; Formation; Teaching

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1. Introduction

The proposal outlined here in its broadest terms explores the specific meaning of a pedagogy that can be regarded as both *engaging* and *engaged*: in doing what, for whom, and, above all, for what reason? These are significant questions, which I intend to address by focusing first and foremost on the connection that, within the digital ecosystems of our time, both unites and simultaneously distinguishes three *powerful words* in the human sciences, and particularly within pedagogical disciplines: learning, knowledge, and – *ça va sans dire* – formation. To be sure, these are highly significant notions within the various educational contexts (especially formal ones, though not exclusively) of our daily lives, and they are frequently deployed even by non-specialists. However, upon closer inspection, they evoke complex dimensions that are difficult to bring into focus and whose definitions are anything but self-evident or trivial. Indeed, they are linked to the status of a plural and complex science – one made all the more complex because it entails the tireless study of the history of educational thought, the interpretation of the *signa temporum sub specie educationis*, and the design of strategies for the meaning-making and semantic structuring of the human condition within the "lifeworld" [*Lebenswelt*] and its medial

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and virtual systems. I believe it can be readily agreed that, should pedagogy renounce studying the past, interpreting the present, and projecting the future, it would have no reason to exist. This threefold temporal trajectory, in fact, shapes the direction of its real "engagement" through the progressive construction of shared meanings. Engagement, in turn, represents the very condition of human action, being closely intertwined with the ideas of will, reason, and freedom: with the will, because only seriously "engaged" conduct can sustain the agent's intentionality over time; with reason, because engagement can only be adequately justified in relation to a cause deemed worthy of pursuit (rightly or wrongly), and thus "good" and "right" based on specific criteria; with freedom, because engaging in a task is a deliberate choice that demands consistency, resilience, and responsibility.

Such being the case, an "Engaged Pedagogy" would be, first and foremost, a pedagogy of and for the human being, but one that is also capable of narrating the human condition through unprecedented formulations and within potentially challenging scenarios. It is an educational "posture" that is fully present in its own time, that wishes to be part of the game, and that refuses to adopt roles of uncritical antagonism or, conversely, purely ancillary positions regarding new technologies and contemporary multimedia. The essential aim of this contribution, therefore, is not to "take a stand" against or in favour of technology or the digital realm (which would be a poorly posed and sterile problem), but rather to consider under what conditions we can possibly speak of learning, knowledge, and formation within the digital environments of the present – conditions that I shall now attempt to outline in greater detail, albeit without any claim to comprehensiveness.

2. Methodological and Theoretical Framework

Adopting a theoretical-conceptual approach, this paper falls within the scope of general pedagogy as philosophy of education. It proposes a critical investigation into the meaning that learning, knowledge, and formation – taken as the *Leitmotive* of the discourse – retain even within new media ecosystems. This is grounded in the conviction that (re)starting from the fundamentals remains, now and always, the primary pathway to maintaining our bearings and interpreting, with informed judgement, the educational significance of meaning-making processes and shared experience within the virtual realm. The primary theoretical framework is that of Riccardo Pagano's hermeneutic pedagogy (2018), as I believe that this line of research – which originated, as is well known, within the continental tradition, specifically from the core of Heideggerian existentialism and in the wake of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy – has successfully captured certain crucial elements of the human condition in the world, from the "thrownness" [*Geworfenheit*] of Dasein to the historicality of understanding and the constitutiveness of language. Consequently, it represents less of a specific school of thought and more of "a sort of common heritage of contemporary philosophical consciousness, around which there is substantial agreement among trends and orientations that are otherwise very far apart" (Prini & Sacchi, 2010, p. 2193).

In this light, the contribution also engages with the significant insights – referenced at various points throughout the work – of eminent Italian scholars of the philosophy of education, such as Giuseppe Acone (1994, 2004) and Alberto Granese (1993): the former belonging to the personalist school with an ontological-

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metaphysical foundation, the latter being an exponent of late twentieth-century critical pedagogical epistemology. All translations from Italian texts without an available English or international edition have been provided by the author. Furthermore, in hypothesising the potential tasks of an Engaging Pedagogy, alongside the shared construction of educational meanings and meaning-making processes within digital ecosystems, it is essential to carefully consider certain original research approaches related to the disruptive impact of new technologies and multimedia "networks" on human dynamics; notable examples include Derrick de Kerckhove's connectivism (1997, 2011, 2024) and Luciano Floridi's philosophy of information (2026).

3. Discussion. From the "Strait Gate" to the "Virtual Portal": Aspects and Implications of Learning within Media Contexts

As early as 1993, in his celebrated essay on critical pedagogical theory, Alberto Granese highlighted the heuristic and polysemic nature of scientific research in education, which is capable of flourishing within a "labyrinth" of logics, languages, and methods (see also Gennari & Sola, 2016) from which it is exceedingly difficult to "extricate oneself": "the term does not suggest – or at least does not intend to suggest in this specific sense – the idea of an inextricable tangle, of meaningless and idle paths, or of a aimless and anchorless nomadism (almost a caricature of 'Derrideanism' and 'Foucaultianism'). In certain respects, the term 'visualises and materialises' the modes of the hermeneutic process: non-linear, discontinuous, reversible, and likewise devoid of compulsory stages and predetermined destinations. The 'positive' of the labyrinth also corresponds to the 'negative' of research. Pascal's motto 'you would not seek me if you had not found me', without detracting anything from its religious meaning, which remains fundamental, can be transcribed into a secular code: whoever finds a field of research finds something that must still, and indefinitely, be sought starting from oneself and from one's own options and motivations: 'to seek as if one were about to find, to find as if one were about to seek' had been said more than a thousand years earlier" (Granese, 1993, pp. 21-22). Education, the pedagogist continued, must inevitably pass through the "strait gate" (a phrase of evangelical origin in Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it") of individual traits and social contexts, of relations and mediations, of environments and internal or external conditioning, of potential resources and barriers to be dismantled or, at the very least, bypassed: "the two metaphors are, in a certain sense, complementary and both necessary to our discourse. We might say that pedagogy is a labyrinth insofar as education is a strait gate, or indeed invert the terms of this relationship" (Granese, 1993, p. 22).

The foundational framework adopted by Granese, *inter alia*, reflects the concrete commitment demanded of pedagogy as an "effort" of thought and action *sub specie educationis*. These reflections, even today, in the face of the advancements of the digital cognitive revolution, provide a remarkable stimulus for rethinking the apparent contradiction between "scientism" and "theoreticism", between a "scientific" pedagogy and a "critical" one. This is further evidenced by the

concluding remarks of the cited essay: "Paradoxically, it may be today's technological scenario that enables a meaningful rethinking and a productive reconsideration of the relationship between these two orders of truth, thereby fostering – alongside a radical-critical reflection such as the one whose minimal itineraries are outlined here – the overcoming of unjustified antinomies" (p. 392). Certainly, the "strait gate" evoked by the Sardinian scholar has by now assumed the appearance of a fully-fledged *virtual portal* of incredible generative power, increasingly integrated within the diverse forms of contemporary existence and life experiences (with all the attendant consequences in terms of anthropological-educational opportunities and problematisation). In this regard, for instance, since 1994 (the year following the publication of Granese's *Il labirinto e la porta stretta*), Derrick de Kerckhove has delineated the contours of a "connective" intelligence. This is based on the "translation" of the procedural operations typical of the web (interactive and hypertextual) into the domain of psychological relations, which constitute the living fabric of our experience of reality. While Pierre Lévy, a theorist of the internet's impact on society, primarily highlighted the cognitive implications of a distributed "collective intelligence" capable of exponentially enhancing human communication, de Kerckhove's research insisted on the link with technology (Rivoltella, 2003) and on the combinative value of the information-relationship dynamic within an increasingly pervasive Web Society. The approach of the Belgian-Canadian scholar is undoubtedly well-suited to a fruitful dialogue with the primary epistemological paradigms linked to learning as a stable and autonomous psycho-attitudinal transformation of the individual over time. One might consider, for example, the socio-constructivist perspective broadly conceived, and the concept of learning as a progressive adjustment of cognitive scaffolding to the diverse situations of reality. In this direction, contemporary virtual contexts (such as social media and the multiple interactive platforms of the web) can easily be interpreted as universal scaffolding for relationship and interaction (and thus for potential learning) among individuals-users. The integration between connectionist models of the mind, or those oriented towards distributed cognitivism, and the reflections advanced by de Kerckhove around psychotechnology and brainframes appears even more pronounced. Furthermore, additional attention should be paid to the affordances of digital environments, namely interactivity, process personalisation, and potential educational value. These features were visionary reflections, well ahead of their time, within twentieth-century progressive education (from Dewey to Decroly, from Freinet to Montessori), and have recently found validation in the neuroscientific research (such as the works of Paul Howard-Jones, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, and Stanislas Dehaene, or Daniela Lucangeli and Maria Ranieri within the Italian context). It is precisely neuroscience that has suggested the potential positive impacts of digital ecosystems on the integrated processes of student learning and (self-)assessment: from reinforcement through the delivery of immediate feedback to the maximisation of adaptive neuroplasticity, and from multisensory engagement to the development of executive functions and embodied cognition. To this, one must add the specific experiential characteristics of these environments for user-subjects: virtually limitless or infinite digital "spaces" (such as online encyclopedias, but also open-source communities, discussion forums, and social media pages and profiles); the reconfiguration of times traditionally dedicated to learning (connections can be made during "expanded" hours and, hypothetically, at any time

of the day or night); the possibility of updating an amount of content and information in real time that would have been unthinkable until a few decades ago (across various multimedia platforms); the full availability of sources that were otherwise difficult to find or consult (for instance, through digital libraries); and so forth.

4. Discussion. An "Engaging Pedagogy" as a Pedagogy of Knowledge (and of Knowledges)

Alongside these aspects, however, research has forcefully highlighted the manifold risks associated with an excessive or uncritical exposure to the digital environment. These risks stem both from the dynamics of virtual contexts (such as the potential proliferation of fake news, which is not always adequately controllable, or the impact of the "echo chambers" on the meaning-making processes of adolescents) and from the quality of learners' online experiences (one might consider, in particular, so-called "cognitive delegation" – namely the abuse of AI devices, with the consequent inhibition of critical sense and creative thinking; "digital somnambulism", or the passive "consumption" of online content; the fragmentation of attention; the progressive diminution of human contact; and, not least, algorithmic polarisation, which tends to simplify and radicalise the complexity of reality and, consequently, our ideas about it). Such risks are particularly significant for minors and school-age adolescents; not by chance, on 17 September 2026, the European Commission presented a proposal for a regulation – the EU Kids Act – aimed at delaying very young people's access to social media and assigning greater responsibility to online platform providers.

An Engaging Pedagogy that is theoretically grounded will, therefore, open itself up to the possibilities offered by technological mediation, but with due care and caution. Indeed, the objectives and scope of such a pedagogy should be optimally calibrated; from this perspective, the narratives and constructions of meaning "situated" within the media contexts of the present should also be investigated comprehensively in their educational import. Precisely for this reason, technology cannot fail to dialogue with the human sciences, and particularly with pedagogical disciplines. This leads us to reflect anew upon the idea of knowledge as a "construction of meaning" to be resolved into a set of cognitions, skills, and abilities that are "made one's own" by subjects, and thus accepted and shared also on a social level. As Antonio Errico wrote in the Taranto section of the *Nuovo Quotidiano di Puglia*, "it is like the fable of the three little pigs: those who try to avoid effort are saved today only thanks to the wise little pig, but in twenty years' time, when they find themselves alone before the 'big bad wolf', they will lack the tools to defend themselves." To defend oneself, it can be useful to cultivate creative thinking in correspondence with technological practice, including through logics of reciprocity; however, it remains necessary "that this correspondence and reciprocity have, as both premise and purpose, an educational, formative dimension. There is no alternative to formation, to education" (Errico, 2026, p. 20).

Reflection upon knowledge is certainly not new in the history of European, and especially Italian, culture, where it has frequently stood out for depth and originality: in this regard, some reference could be made to the critique of knowledge as intuition carried out by Gentilian Actualism, Gramsci's "pedagogy of praxis", or Catalfamo's "new logic of education". Historically, knowledge has been understood

according to three main significations: as an activity of the knowing subject (referable to the I), as a variegated and plural cognitive content (referable to the world-object), and as a relational structure of consciousness (centred on the subject-object relationship) (Prini & Sacchi, 2010, p. 2190). In this sense, the contribution of hermeneutics has proved decisive, since it has posed the problem of knowledge beyond the "myth of the given", in terms of a historicised cognition and within the circle of an inexhaustible interpretation/understanding that unfolds within the ontological horizon of language: "the process of learning the things of the world does not occur separately from the word. […] Language operates a hermeneutic mediation […] between the subject and the world; and this mediation is not limited to enunciating or describing the world, but gives meaning to the subject's being-in-the-world and, in so doing, gives meaning to the world" (Pagano, 2018, p. 79; p. 80).

While twentieth-century epistemological reflection – certainly with greater force and success from the second half of the century onwards – dwelt on the status of knowledge as an unstable content, always to be "negotiated" and never definitively guaranteed in its outcomes (one might also recall the various perspectives of constructivism, postmodernism, deconstructionism…), nowadays two new needs emerge, which are only apparently dichotomous: 1) *to recover the sense of being*, or rather of being-as-such (and not of being-as-becoming), an expression of the so-called "new realism" (though it should be remembered that hermeneutic pedagogy can also educate towards the search for the certain and the true, however non-dogmatically understood: Pagano, 2018, p. 81); 2) *to assess the impact of new technologies*, and particularly of AI, *on the processes of construction of new knowledges* (one might ask, for instance, to what extent algorithmic procedures depend on, and impact upon, the logical and causal principles of the traditional scientific method). In particular, faced with the consolidation of AI (or rather artificial *agency*: cf. L. Floridi, 2026), there is an undeniable sense that we are truly, in Hegelian terms, facing the fact that "something else is on the way." Whilst, throughout our history, the "cultivation" of knowledge (as a "treasure chest" or "repository") has been reserved predominantly for the *typos* of a refined and noble humanity (whether of intellect or lineage), the digital revolution has enabled its widespread dissemination, reshaping the very foundations of the formative *eidos*. Today, knowledge – dynamic and increasingly specialised – is virtually within everyone's reach: and yet, it is increasingly urgent to recognise its truth-value (an operation that is becoming less and less straightforward) and to learn to acquire it with seriousness. Then, the most important issue does not so much concern the "tools", the "availability", or the "updating" of learning content, but rather its primary purpose, which only under certain conditions can truly be described as educational and aligned with the ethical principle of personal and communal responsibility; it is on this ridge that, in my view, the profound meaning of an "Engaging Pedagogy" as a "Pedagogy of Knowledge (and Knowledges)" is staked. Furthermore, it is here that space opens up for a generic rethinking of the school and its essential role in individual and social meaning-making processes. Once again, it is a "strait gate", not easy to pass through: "the unceasing flow of data is a constantly growing reality […]. Adhering to a worldview that is unclear and never entirely explained, and entrusting data with an ever-greater source of authority over our lives, happens to be currently the easiest choice" (Benanti, 2020, p. 93).

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5. Discussion. Meaning-Making Processes in Schooling and Teacher Formation

Therefore, how can we ensure that new knowledges, "blended" with the languages of multimedia and artificial agency, become a stable *habitus* of learning within educational processes, thereby avoiding a flattening into merely "algorithmic" or procedural approaches, which are widely replicable yet ephemeral in their outcomes? What is the ultimate purpose of learning processes, of the concept of knowledge, and of the general perspective of school education in relation to an open and constantly evolving society, which is capable today of offering what seemed unthinkable yesterday? Are we content to adopt a purely receptive and passive stance? Of course not. As Giuseppe Catalfamo suggested in the not-too-distant past, we must learn to cultivate – now and always – doubt, *skepsis*, and *curiositas*, so as to carve out potential room for manoeuvre even within digital ecosystems. The value of media formation may therefore lie in its ability to safeguard a sense of *magisterial* authority that finds its true expression in the unique and irreplaceable capacity to leave a mark (*in-segnare*) on others. Indeed, given that digital ecosystems are now a cross-cutting reality in countless areas of life, and that technological progress has significantly reshaped the dynamics of knowledge acquisition, it is hardly surprising that the boundary between formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts is becoming increasingly blurred and uncertain. Schools, traditionally regarded as the primary setting *par excellence* for the cultural and civic education of future generations, can no longer confine themselves to "dispensing" knowledge as a "product" of rigidly pre-established and socially marketable contents. To do so, *inter alia*, would mean losing ground to other entities and spaces that succeed sooner and better in this task. This was already evidenced in 1994 by Giuseppe Acone, in relation to the technologies of that time: "on the less futuristic and teleological terrain of the present reality connected to pedagogy, didactics, and the school, it is difficult not to notice that the electronic-televisual dimension (mass media, self-media, virtual worlds), from being a parallel school (as was said in the 1960s within an 'enlightened' climate of enthusiasm regarding the powerful new means of social communication), has definitively transformed into the prevailing school (where the significant meaning of the term school obviously loses its specificity)" (Acone, 1994, p. 227). Nor can the school-as-institution limit itself to automatic tasks of mere digital literacy or "training" (unfortunately, in Italy, this meaning has also been conveyed at the level of public and institutional communication), since such processes, if not anchored to an educational and formative vision of the individual and of society, would result in being blind, *à la kantienne*. Instead, it can – and should – still and always form towards critical wisdom, which helps students discern the sense of limit and of opportunity, the importance of times more propitious for learning (beyond the presentism of virtual interaction), and the value of the relationship with the teacher, beyond the performativity of connecting to a lesson. On what else, otherwise, should students' meaning-making processes be based? Beyond a purely occasionalist reading (the "here and now" of digitally mediated learning) or a functionalist one (the cognitive, psychological, and social dynamics of online learning), it is evident that the construction of meaning linked to identity and alterity, to the I and the world (of the Thou, the we, the you), to the "why" and the "wherefore", unfolds through the constant interpretative play of subjects-in-formation. These subjects are called upon

to generate meanings capable of resonating, even from a distance, with their individual, familial, and socio-cultural background (the living fabric of which Gadamerian "prejudices" are made). And it is precisely within this dimension that the role of the teacher as a "searcher of souls" ("*cercatore d'anime*" – a pregnant expression by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, unfortunately forgotten today, perhaps because it is deemed "unfashionable") should be rediscovered: a human guarantee for the resilience, even if "mediated", of the learning processes of knowledge and new knowledges. It is precisely within the relationship between the *magister/magistra* and the pupils that schools can identify their own *proprium*, certainly availing themselves of the support of adequate didactic strategies and technologies (one might think, by way of purely indicative examples, of the methodology of Media Deconstruction or the approaches of Digital Storytelling) and of artificial agency in order to support teachers in the free exercise of their functions, whilst safeguarding their professionalism and protecting them from the constraints of excessive bureaucratic procedures: an Engaging Pedagogy undoubtedly contemplates the dimension of technique, but does not resolve itself *sic et simpliciter*, as should by now be clear from the framework of my discourse, within a techno-functional perspective of educational action.

Teacher formation, as envisaged by the most recent regulatory provisions, can also move in the same direction (for instance, with particular regard to the Italian landscape, one should bear in mind Annex A of the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers of 4 August 2023, dedicated to the *Profilo conclusivo del docente abilitato* – *id est* the Final Profile of the Qualified Teacher – which encompasses minimum professional standards and competences). Indeed, the meaning-making processes referable to teachers are inextricably linked to professional deontology and to the understanding of the critical role of the social contexts within which they will operate; therefore, a formation adequate to the languages and dynamics of virtual reality and "intelligent" devices appears indispensable (for example, regarding the science of prompting, to educate students to utilise AI devices in a truly creative and non-standardised manner): the very concept of teacher agency is at stake as their authentic potentiality, namely as a "transformative" and not merely "adaptive" capacity (to borrow the phrasing of Massimo Baldacci). Teachers are called upon to be authentic protagonists of their own thinking/acting and not to interpret the indications contained in ministerial profiles in an exclusively formalistic, restrictive, or reductionist (top-down) sense. To rediscover the value of *in-segnamento* (teaching as "leaving a mark"), it is not sufficient to conceive of oneself as mere nodes of a hyperconnected Web Society, nor to allow oneself to be ensnared by the sequentiality and predictability of "rituals" of a bureaucratic (or "priestly", according to the perspective of Ivan Illich, 1971) flavour; instead, it can be useful to "engage" in further reflection upon the most appropriate modalities for demonstrating crucial disciplinary knowledge and competences, upon the conditions for effective motivation towards teaching, as well as upon the capacity to genuinely foster the participation of all in the dynamics of education/formation.

6. By Way of (Non-)Conclusion

The avenues for reflection presented in the preceding paragraphs adopt a general yet overt perspective, moving in the wake of the primary insights of hermeneutic pedagogy, whilst remaining open to dialogue with other relevant

epistemologies of knowledge and formation: research poses questions and, conversely, never offers easy or definitive answers. To be sure, it is necessary to develop further its distinctive elements, deepening the dialogue both with the "new knowledges" conveyed by technologies and with the diverse approaches assumed over time by pedagogical disciplines (especially those of an experimental orientation) and didactic methodologies (Sibilio, 2017). Nevertheless, in recalling the foundations and outlining the contours of a possible Engaging Pedagogy aimed at safeguarding the *humanitas* (including *digitalis*) of our time, we believe we have contributed, in our own small way, to not eluding the question of meaning – which constitutes the sole litmus test for one to be able to speak, concretely, of education and formation.

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