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Narrative environments for educating on the beauty of living together

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Abstract: Within the framework of a phenomenologically-grounded pedagogy - and in light of the ongoing international debate on sustainable development, with particular reference to the 2022 European *GreenComp* framework on sustainability competencies - this contribution explores how direct, experiential engagement with a territory's natural and cultural assets can foster a harmonious relationship between human beings and their living environments, with the ultimate goal of building inclusive and supportive communities. Furthermore, the text examines the significant potential that digital technologies - including those used within museum settings - can unlock for educational experiences aimed at cultivating an empathetic, ethical, and aesthetic sensibility toward places.

Keywords: Environmental pedagogy; phenomenology of sensory experience; narrative environments

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine some crucial issues in the field of educational research with the goal of exploring the connections between human development and various life contexts, within today's global scenarios - which are heavily permeated by the virtual world - and in light of the increasingly urgent need to forge a renewed alliance between humanity and the environment, in line with a perspective of *Environmental Pedagogy* that combines the theme of sustainability with *human development* and *social responsibility* (Malavasi, 2017; Birbes, 2017)[1].

By defining the scope of the analysis, as Malavasi (2017) states, "experiencing natural resources [that is] learning from and within the environment" and contributing "to the building of the human community" (p. 10) represent heuristic domains of pedagogical discourse, within the plurality of cultures and educational practices in which they have taken shape over time and continue to evolve in the current discourse.

A key issue, therefore, concerns the ways in which *direct, experiential encounter* with a region's natural and cultural heritage - in its various forms and through various initiatives - can help foster actions that are in full harmony with the

[1] These two volumes, which are both foundational and forward-looking, contribute to the ongoing international debate from a multidisciplinary perspective, with the aim of exploring the heuristic field of "Environmental Pedagogy" through the diverse themes found within it, themes that have been the subject of reflection by many scholars using a variety of research approaches and methods.

environment and, at the same time, contribute to the building of inclusive and supportive communities.

In fact, there is a growing call from many quarters today for clear values to strive toward, an expressed need that calls for a return to communal forms of living together, not understood as forms of identity-based isolation or as a means of escaping today's increasingly anonymous and depersonalized contexts, but as communities that seek to promote the full expressive potential of human life and the active participation of all their members in living together through shared projects.

This issue raises a further question: namely, what fundamental pedagogical principles can serve as a guide for implementing such educational initiatives?

In this regard, it is argued that an educational priority is to direct human actions toward fostering greater awareness of global human interdependence and of natural phenomena, and to enhance *shared responsibility* for the general well-being of the entire human family, both today and in the future.

This also calls for reflection on some of the foundational assumptions of contemporary thought regarding the varied and manifold interdependencies between humankind and the world's vital web. In particular, it is precisely the dominant anthropological conception - which views humanity as the master of nature and all things - that needs to be reevaluated in favor of a way of thinking that allows us to rediscover the full beauty of the world in which we live, to value diversity and respect for others, and to rediscover the value of sharing and being together.

In other words, the goal is to educate people so that they develop an awareness of the need to safeguard and care for both the natural and human environments. The educational purpose that shapes our engagement with natural and cultural resources actually fosters, through interaction among people, mutual recognition and new inspiration for personal growth, characterized as much by a commitment to nurturing relationships with others and with the world as by the desire to build supportive and inclusive cities.

2. Methods and International documents

In reexamining the relationship between humans and the environment from a *phenomenological perspective*, guided by the framework of Bertolini's (1988) thought, the aim is to combine a fresh perspective on the world - understood in both its social and natural dimensions - with the *responsibility* inherent in the educational relationship, which seeks *meaning* in the *possibility of change* and follows a clearly defined *intentional direction*.

Within the framework of a "phenomenologically grounded" pedagogy that aims to "point the way toward a form of scientificity suited to the human" (Iori, 2016, p. 19), and after positing that "the rigor of phenomenology never disregards the lifeworld (Lebenswelt), as lived and experienced by the subject, unlike the world of traditional scientific objectivity" (ibid., p. 25), this critical examination, from a methodological standpoint, is based on two primary epistemological tools: the *epoché* and the *Erlebnis*, that is, *lived subjective experience*.

While the epoché allows us to set aside widespread clichés about education and all knowledge concerning it, lived subjective experience - involving the body, time, and space - opens up the possibility of seeing education in its very concrete essence.

It is in the intentionality of educational action - in a continuous move toward ever-new possibilities - that the vision for the future takes shape (Ibid., 2016) by reshaping the alliance between people and their living environments, within a renewed balance of more cohesive and inclusive cities.

Furthermore, within the broad international debate on environmental sustainability that emerged in the early 1970s - sparked by the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment - Target 4.7 of the 2015 UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights essential educational goals: "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" (ONU, 2015, p. 17).

Furthermore, when designing educational programs aimed at fostering change in this direction, it is considered important to refer - among other resources - to the *GreenComp* document, the 2022 European Framework for Sustainability Competencies. The twelve competencies outlined in this document break down sustainability into four interconnected areas ("incorporating sustainability values," "embracing complexity in sustainability," "envisioning sustainable futures," and "acting for sustainability") and aim, within a framework of *lifelong* and *lifewide learning*, to foster critical and systemic thinking that leads to attitudes and actions in harmony with the environment and respectful of its limits.

3. Educating People to Develop Empathy for Places

The promotion of natural and cultural heritage is a fundamental aspect of human development and, therefore, one of the possible educational pathways aimed at devising new ways of experiencing our living environments. *Educating people to develop an empathetic understanding of places* - including the natural and cultural assets found within them and in all their diversity - also supports their active participation in social and community life and in governance decisions at both the local and global levels.

In an effort to clarify possible approaches to education, it is also emphasized that these proposals should not be understood merely as the transmission of information - however necessary that may be - and that, in our encounter with others or with the environment itself - whether represented or even merely evoked - a personal capacity is required to set aside or push into the background all mental habits or common prejudices that might constrict the vital space of emotions and feelings, of intuition and imagination. Only in this way can one move beyond prejudice or clichés and engage in authentic listening to life stories and narratives, as well as observe a human artifact without relying on pre-established or predefined frameworks. Through educational experiences involving the exploration of landscapes, participation in exhibitions, and museum visits - within the historical and artistic context - it is possible to stimulate a new perspective in the viewer, one that gives rise to experiences of exploration and experimentation, as well as the shared construction of new meanings, knowledge, and understanding.

When exploring natural or cultural heritage through a phenomenological attitude of *epoché* - that is, "setting aside everything one already knows or presumes

to know [in order] to uncover the authentic experience of something or someone" (Bruzzone, 2016, p. 44) - one does not remain a passive spectator but rather enters into a relationship with the artifact itself, triggering processes of probing questions and the unveiling of authentic meanings, within a systemic framework that takes into account the empirical and practical dimension of experience, which is never separated from its theoretical-symbolic dimension (Dallari, 2021). Through dialogic exchanges of memories and diverse perspectives, opportunities arise for new, shared interpretive readings.

Within this framework, it is possible to aim to foster an ethical and aesthetic sensibility. This does not, however, mean proposing an education that rediscovers the meaning of aesthetic values in purely aesthetic forms or those aimed at personal gratification; rather, it calls for a profound exploration - within the relationship between ethics and aesthetics - of the questions that are essential to humanity (Musaio, 2013). An aesthetic education in this sense encompasses experiential, cognitive, ethical, and spiritual dimensions and proves fundamental to a complete human formation in all its dimensions, beginning primarily with the shared recognition of universal aesthetic criteria oriented toward a personal and relational lifestyle in harmony with oneself, with others, and with the environment. It is, therefore, a matter of educating the whole person and not limiting oneself to a partial aesthetic education that draws on generic aesthetic or artistic attitudes, but rather, as Schiller (1971) would say, a search for that intersection between morality and aesthetics.

Aesthetics thus becomes a pedagogical principle that enables the concrete human being to become both an "aesthetic being" and a "moral being" and to strive toward the "perfection of human nature" (Pareyson, 1983, p. 150). In other words, aesthetic sensibility makes it possible to integrate the sensory and rational aspects within the free and autonomous moral determination that human beings apply to their own actions, and to pursue, as an end in itself, self-realization and the moral perfection of one's way of life and one's very being.

This call to strive for beauty means bringing the various personal elements into harmonious coexistence to form a "unified whole that unites within itself the sensuous and the rational, emotionalism and pragmatism, an appreciation for the aesthetic and emotional engagement, aesthetic pleasure and the ability to recognize beauty as an intrinsic component of things—one that opens the door to a harmonious and comprehensive ideal of beauty and goodness" (Musaio, 2013, p. 13). Beauty, therefore, need not serve merely as an aesthetic criterion that abstractly organizes our forms of cognition, distancing them from life experiences, but rather as a criterion that strives for and aims at a harmony of life, nourishing the experiences we undergo - both within ourselves and with others - through our aesthetic and moral sensibilities.

In this context, digital technologies[2] - such as augmented and/or virtual reality - can make an educational contribution to the appreciation of artistic and cultural heritage. Through the digital reconstruction of environments, it is possible to

[2] Ruocco's (2025) analysis - which also takes into account virtual reality and gamification in reconstructing the evolution of the definition of "virtual museum," though still controversial - identifies its effectiveness in the possibility of active user participation in a dynamic and immersive experience, as well as in free exploration, including through nonlinear and non-sequential narratives. A museum should be conceived as a narrative space, one that is also designed for playful approaches aimed at fostering interaction and exchange in learning processes.

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

further enhance the viewer's direct experience by fostering full immersion, engaging both the cognitive and emotional dimensions simultaneously, thereby enriching cultural knowledge, fostering the ability to reinterpret, and encouraging active participation in direct exploration. "The physical/digital space thus functions as a syncretic text, as it brings into play a plurality of languages and heterogeneous forms of expression within a unified communication strategy" (Panciroli & Macauda, 2018, p. 218). This enables users to engage in novel interpretive processes and the construction of shared meanings, allowing them to rediscover beauty and human harmony in their own living environments.

4. Narrative experiences

Furthermore, by approaching natural and cultural heritage as intended, this reflection is situated within narrative contexts, considering the plurality of human languages - with their varied and manifold influences - and, from an inclusive perspective, as an invaluable resource. Indeed, it is precisely within this union of ethical-educational tension and theoretical dimension that the narrative framework is situated; in this sense, the *aesthetic narrative experiences* of places have the capacity to unlock transformative possibilities aimed at living in harmony with oneself, with nature, and with the world.

Adopting this *perspective* and *the narrative voice* is a primary goal for education professionals who seek to carry out their work through practices of mutual care and bonds of respect for others.

In today's educational contexts, there is an increasing need to employ narrative practices through storytelling, autobiographical writing, and reading stories. In this regard, it is recognized that the narrative framework offers significant potential for guiding experience toward new interpretations, reevaluations, or the acquisition of shared values.

The narrative structure applied to the educational relationship allows for a conscious reexamination that integrates autobiographical memory, personal perceptions, and desires into organized, meaningful constructs, highlighting the very connection to the dynamic changeability of living environments and places. Narratives, in fact, infuse the spaces of communal living with lived experiences, reveal the full educational potential and possibilities of language[3], and enable the acquisition of regenerative awareness to forge new alliances between people and their living environments.

As Bruzzone (2016) argues, "the ability to see, to listen, to establish contact, to savor a moment, or to 'breathe in' the emotional tone of a place or a situation […] is part of the indispensable toolkit of every educator" (p. 15). And the educational relationship itself, within the framework of a phenomenology of sensory experience,

[3] In the analysis by Dipace and Pace (2014), the experience of digital writing - in the case described, short stories written by students from different countries (as part of the Erasmus Intensive Program) and "distributed" across emblematic locations in the city (Foggia) and following an instructional plan based on the Project-Based Learning methodology in the completion of an authentic task - demonstrates an approach whose purposes extend beyond mere instructional objectives, capable of combining multimodal productions with "socially and culturally situated" processes (p. 170).

cannot be reduced to technicalities or ideas but is rather a "phenomenon of an eminently sensory and affective nature" (ibid.).

More generally, within this interpretive framework, educational work can draw on the many stimuli that arise from the art of storytelling and self-expression, as well as from the use of diverse narrative interpretive languages, generating stories that enhance skills and motivation (Demetrio, 2012). Storytelling is part of life; it serves as a metaphor for it. To live is to tell one's own story, which is always connected to the places and spaces one has experienced. "To live, therefore, is to be shaped, embraced, or rejected by the stories of others; just as living is to seek out the roots and the possible continuation of one's own narrative" (p. 28).

Narratives in education are generative forces because they shed new light and offer new perspectives on life experiences - both present and past - that seemed forgotten, across all spheres and contexts, bringing us closer to life through the rediscovery of that intrinsic bond between humanity and nature in its many manifestations.

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