

CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES IN ITALY

Erasmus+ KA2 project: “REACT - Creation of a Collaborative Environment in e-classrooms”

Intellectual Output 2 “Creation of a set of innovative activities, tools and educational collaborative methods adapted to a virtual classroom curriculum”

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Art to engage children with learning difficulties Case Study n.2

INTRODUCTION

Art is a universal language, and it can produce unexpected results even in distance learning. Alessandra Poggi, the head of special needs students support at the Cavalieri Professional Institute in Milan, exemplifies this. During the Coronavirus outbreak, Ms Poggi devised a novel method of involving children with intellectual disabilities. "The works of art allow us to interact with students who would not normally interact with us; they win them over, interest them, involve them, and make them want to participate," says the teacher, who was among the first in Italy to be certified in special needs student support.

OVERVIEW

The Cavalieri vocational institute in Milan has taken on the following mission over the years:

- Pay close attention to the student's personal development.
- Support in times of permanent or temporary adversity
- remedial activities and study assistance
- Collaboration on an educational project by teachers, students, and families
- Teachers' commitment to collaborate to innovate teaching
- IT tools and technologies are used in all classes.

Within this framework, and during the period of mandatory online education mandated by the Covid 19 emergency, the institute did everything possible to provide engaging and stimulating alternatives to engage all its students, particularly the most vulnerable.

APPROACH

Because to school closures and remote learning, the teacher has had to adapt his way of teaching and helping kids with cognitive disabilities, or devise a new one that appears to work. "I choose works with an important communicative capacity, such as Van Gogh's Starry Night or Arcimboldo's portraits, and I show them on the screen via videoconference," Poggi says. "The work must act as a reminder, and from there I start activities, such as providing a white board with the outlines of the work that the children can then color in or, depending on the level, I ask them to recreate it themselves." Poggi also includes linguistic tasks in addition to the aesthetic portion. "I ask the children to write something like a theme or, more simply, a series of words inspired by the painting. For example, in Van Gogh, the focal point is

the dream, and the teacher asks them to write words related to this concept, whereas in Arcimboldo, the table involves telling one's own reality." Given the deep symbolism of his paintings, I encouraged the students to locate other images of the Second World War that came to mind." Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte by Georges Seurat is a last piece. "His intense pointillism immediately struck a chord with the children, and I encouraged them to see their life in dots, to make what they didn't like disappear from their reality; I also realized that many then focus on the small monkey that emerges at the bottom, to which they are particularly attracted."

The average class lasts an hour and a half, and up until now, Van Gogh has been the most popular artist. When I told them that he was deemed mentally ill and had been in an asylum, Poggi remembers, "He immediately won them over. This also led to some inquiry into the psychiatric hospital in Provence where he had been imprisoned. The youngsters may watch the teacher in a small window and the artwork in large format on the screen. Students had access to computers and tablets thanks to the school. On the other hand, families assisted in connecting these gadgets because many kids are unable to do so on their own. Simply said, cooperation toward a single objective: making sure nobody falls behind.

RESULTS

The teacher admits confidently, "At first it was all uphill, but with dedication I achieved and this indicates that this very easy approach can be copied by all teachers, in fact I think they could do it even better. Then she offers some advice to her coworkers: "In technological transposition, I saw that we required more beautiful, more engaging works. When you are at a distance, the important thing is to have a strong, impactful work, stronger than those we use in the classroom. I changed my approach because the students themselves wanted me to show them something amazing. Previously, in the classroom, I would display two to three pieces, but online, you just need one.

Poggi has no qualms about the pupils' artistic ability: "These kids have tremendous expressive abilities, especially with the use of colors. They produce incredibly intriguing works, she claims. For the time being, we are compiling them into a book; but the show that was planned to feature them has been postponed. We anticipate it for the following year.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of a pedagogy that aspires to teach, to express oneself, to envision, to project into the future, to think differently, to accept the individuality of each individual and, as a result, to appreciate their differences, converges creativity and creative expression. Thus, the realization of creative or artistic initiatives becomes a justification for carrying out instructional measures that can close the gap between the educator and the immature subjects being educated. Teachers from all disciplines become involved in developing and proposing projects to bring out their students out of a desire to get to know the human material with which they deal in schools. In contrast to traditional didactics, an alternative communication channel is being tried to give students and teachers the chance to express

themselves differently, free from expectations, prejudices, and assumptions because their social roles are not being interpreted. Here, choosing to teach via educating has the effect of fostering creativity. The teacher who wishes to impart knowledge and be effective must be imaginative and use his or her own worldview and set of moral principles on the students. Since he is aware of his students' needs, the creative teacher will continue to learn while he is in the classroom. Teaching is the process of establishing a cognitive path, inspiring an experience, and supporting it. Those who teach must be skilled at recognising the unique characteristics of the group of young students they are working with, paying attention to their needs, and suggesting ad hoc routes intended to stimulate new thoughts in them that may be strange and unexpected but nonetheless worthy of acceptance. Finally, in order to be realised and concretized, abstract ideas need to locate appropriate settings and appropriate application pathways. The teacher serves as a role model by exemplifying a method in a usable way through an experiential practise of art, such as the workshop form might be. After learning a technique, even a simple one, the student should feel free to experiment and establish his or her own path. The element of personal acceptance is implicit in narrative or self-expression; this awareness can be attained by working directly on the students' self-esteem and appreciating the significance of error as a crucial tool for efficient learning. It is crucial to have areas and circumstances in schools where this might occur, where students can feel free to venture outside of their comfort zones and make mistakes. Because only through this can one climb higher up the learning ladder, mistakes must be seen as an essential element of the creative process. Art teaches us that everything can be done with little, think of the three primary colours with which every form of pictorial art has been created, art that has been created through experiments, trial and error.