

Researching schools vs. researching with schools. An urban research laboratory experience in an Italian high school

Francesco Aliberti¹, Elisa Avellini²

¹*Sapienza University of Rome, francesco.aliberti91@gmail.com*

²*Sapienza University of Rome, elisa.avellini@uniroma1.it*

Abstract: We have tried to develop an innovative way to approach educational practice to promote synergies between school teaching, academic research and society. Through a transdisciplinary approach we have tried to prepare high school students to the challenges of researching, thinking and therefore planning about their own territory. This experience was conducted with a group of 23 teenagers from a high school in the periphery of Rome, elaborating an original project of work-based learning inside the school. As tutors of their work, we tried to guide the students divided in five research groups, each one with a specific focus related to the territory where their school is located to the creation of a research project. Students were introduced to different tools with the aim of creating an interdisciplinary methodology, like interviews, focus groups, production of emic maps. Besides the nonetheless interesting results of all the research projects carried on by the five groups, what the participants learned has been a more complex way to reflect and argue upon urban territory, trying to manage change. In our view, this approach to deuterio-learning can be seen as a way to give future citizens the tools to imagine and design the future of cities.

Keywords: educational practices, work-based learning, interdisciplinary methodology, deuterio-learning

Introduction

In this paper we will describe our attempt to develop an innovative way to approach educational practice, not only to give specific notions to students, but also to promote synergies between school teaching, academic research and society.

This work envisaged several objectives. From the point of view of "pure" research, we wanted to increase our knowledge about the relationships of the School with the surrounding territory, trying to observe it not as a place or an institution, but as a subject present within a specific territory, with which it must necessarily confront, with the aim of opening a new strand of research in the field of urban studies and urban planning through the study of this report carried out in an interdisciplinary way. The attempt is therefore to address such a large issue through a "micro" approach, focused on a small case study, thus allowing the beginning of a discussion on the topic. In particular, we wanted to do this through the observation of the relationship that students from secondary school have interwoven with the territory where their institute is situated. This would also be helpful in understanding how the new generations confront the urban space, in what ways they think about it, represent it and act on it.

On the other hand, we wanted to provide the students with tools necessary to learn to think reflexively about themselves, their city and their role as citizens. The goal was to get them to figure out how to imagine the future as a cultural fact (Appadurai, 2013) and how to design it, thus imagining also the future of the territory where they live. These instruments, in particular, are the methods of qualitative research, particularly in the field of urban anthropology, urban studies and architecture.

In fact, we started from the conviction that the future should not be simply considered as what follows the moment in which we live, but as a cultural project whose participation must be extended to as much people as possible. According to Appadurai, the openness to the practice of planning the future goes through the diffusion of the idea of research as human right.

This is why it is important to deparochialize the idea of research and make it more widely available to young people with a wide range of interests and aspirations. Research, in this sense, is not only the production of original ideas and new knowledge (as it is normally defined in academia and other knowledge-based institutions). It is also something simpler and deeper. Research is the capacity to systematically increase the horizons of one's current knowledge, in relation to some task, goal, or aspiration, (ibid.: 282).

The ability to have aspirations is also connected with that of planning, a fundamental ability to distribute in an equal way for the whole world, to allow each individual to put into practice the work of the imagination that processes the future as a cultural fact.

With this work we have also attempted to integrate more two areas of study that in recent years are conversing but still not close enough, such as social anthropology and urban studies. The work has in fact been done as a moment of research-learning, in which the ethnographic data has come to build itself in the interaction with the subjects of the research, which have at the same time learned the basic methods of the research in the city. In fact, we have built as a tool of work an urban research laboratory within which the students would be actually in charge of a piece of research and we would be only their supervisors. The results of their research and what we can deduce, not only tell us something about the relationship that the new generations of citizens have with the territory, often a not-so-good relationship due to great difficulties in planning the future, but also tell us about how much often in Italy the school can become a non-significant place or a non-place at all, except for the personal initiatives of teachers or headmasters particularly interested. The good news that results from our work is that if the researchers decide to confront more strongly within the schools, they can achieve great results by simply letting students know the research methodologies to be applied to their daily lives and to the analysis of the territory in which they live.

Field and methods

Our workshop was held inside the Liceo Orazio, a high school focused on humanities of Montesacro, a neighbourhood in the northeast outskirts of Rome. Before we started our work, we confronted with some of the teachers. These preliminary meetings brought out two main problems concerning the possibility of having students undertake different paths aimed at stimulating their active participation: the distance of the university and the poor quality of the paths of *Alternanza Scuola Lavoro -ASL-* (school-work alternation, moments of recent introduction in Italian schools, in which student are made acquainted with public or private working environments in the context of training placements).

On the one hand, in fact, in high schools, in particular in such high schools as Liceo Orazio that imagine the student as "of course" destined to continue his studies, since it is already gaining access to an education deemed of excellence, the university is perceived as a distant institution, that does not give the right importance to the work of the high school teachers, as if this was a lesser value, and not interested in being seen in schools, if not

when obliged. This sensation is renewed with the inauguration of the ASL routes. If, in fact, teachers and administrative managers of schools can understand that the paths of ASL within companies are more aimed at practical activities, or otherwise do not expect some great commitment on their part, many are disappointed by the scarce commitment of universities that offer very few projects compared to the actual possibilities and only rarely able to confront the student with a “university mentality”.

All this relates then to a third and much more serious problem identified by the teachers: the lack of moments and spaces in which the children, rather than simply having to assimilate notions, could put to work moments of self-reflection, reflecting about themselves and the context where they live.

So, we decided to create an urban research laboratory that, beyond its objectives of research and teaching, was based on a precise methodology, that of deuterio-learning (Bateson, 1972)

Rather than "to teach" the participants of the project how to do research through frontal lectures, we decided first of all to bring out key topics of social research from the reasonings made by the students in their everyday life experiences. This is not an easy task, because the pupils were interested in talking mainly about big topics and they could hardly find themselves in their closest contexts. The methodology used can be defined as a method of research-learning, because the ethnographic data comes to build not so much and not only according to the observations that we could accomplish once inside the school, but mainly originates from the reflections made by the students themselves once they have been engaged in research paths. The attempt, in short, was to identify a communicative strategy to try not to rebuild the “teacher-student” dynamic, as a dynamic that would have obliged them to perform the tasks assigned to us and nothing more, but to set moments of deuterio-learning instead. This neologism proposed by Bateson (1972) refers to a type of collateral learning, whereby in the moment of learning something one learns to learn, to build in one way or another the plan of the real and the flow of the events; it is according to Bateson a process of learning not dissimilar to the ways in which we acquire the mental habits that constitute our daily attitudes. In this sense, the proposal of our work was not so much to teach the method of social research, but above all to make the students know and assimilate a self-reflective attitude, which seems to us not dissimilar from what is proposed by Appadurai with the concept of research as human right.

We tried to achieve this result with communicative strategies through which we tried to propose ourselves as intermediate figures, positioning ourselves halfway between students and professors. While remaining their tutors and then invested with a certain authority, as well as the task of expressing a judgement on their work at the end of the project, we still tried to make ourselves accessible, with stratagems that might appear insignificant, but that were instead functional in their presenting themselves as "opposites" compared to the rituals that build the "time" of a school lesson. We therefore asked the students to call us by name and not by surname; we would often tell anecdotes of our lives to let us know and emphasize how we are generationally closer to them than to teachers; rather than position ourselves in front of the kids we preferred to sit with them and spread out in the classroom. Finally, we created a group on WhatsApp in which we can chat together, where to provide service communications but also joke.

All of this clearly involved a certain challenge in managing the work of students who, once understood our "lack of firmness", try to exploit it more than once to get out of their homework or take long breaks. It was a behaviour legitimate to expect, absolutely consistent with their role as students. But the more our figure moved away from that of a teacher and the work they have to do was different from those of the "task", the more we noticed that the willingness to cooperate increased.

In addition to these communicative tricks, we also worked with some classical instruments, replacing or at least masking our explanations with moments of focus group and brainstorming. So we tried to get to the concepts that we are interested in transmitting always passing through the interpretation of the pupils, trying to

understand what according to them meant to do research in a general sense and then what according to them would have been interesting to investigate, helping them to articulate their observations.

Development of the project

Between November of 2017 and April of 2018, for a total of 70 hours, we held the workshop "the job of the researcher: Doing research in the city", which involved a group of 23 teenagers between 15 and 18 years.

After a first introductory meeting in which we introduced ourselves to the students and told them our research work to give an idea of the variety of topics that can be tackled in urban research, we organized different meetings in the form of brainstorming, circle time and focus group to get together with them to define what it means to do research (the most interesting answer was: "To have a purpose"), on what can be the technical and methodological tools in the hands of a researcher and what it means to do research in the city.

To familiarize the children with these issues, we also ask them to make some emic maps (Micciché, 2009) of the neighbourhood where the school is located, also as an exercise to understand the ways in which everyone perceives the space around them differently, then to propose themes that they would have wanted to face during the research, so that we could orient ourselves in the drafting of "calls for research" that we would then have written for them.

If in the drawings there was no relationship between the school as an institute and the territory lived by the pupils, with the latter that sometimes disappears, or with the school itself that often remains relegated to a corner, point of departure or arrival of the paths traced by the students, but never filled with particular connections with the rest of the neighbourhood, the research proposals seemed to aim to explore the possibility of an opening of the school boundary to what is their everyday life out of school spaces.

«Why students do not use the common spaces offered by the school»

«Why are there no beautiful murals in Montesacro? »

«Why are there so many fascist posters in the neighbourhood? »

«Why do some barbers in the neighbourhood don't want to cut girls' hair, even if they have short hair? »

Starting from these cues and from others born during the first meetings, we divided the students into five groups and assigned each of them a "call for project" invented by us, which they were required to participate responding consistently to our requests, as if they were actually getting funds for their research.

1. The first group should have presented us with a proposal for projects on the subject: "The other, the professor. The uses of the school space by the teachers", imagining having to make a real ethnographic survey of teachers of the school. The goal was obviously to put students to the test with the need to reason their relationships against individuals very different from them;
2. A second group would have to answer the call called: "In my days... The generational prejudices on the uses of space "thus dealing with comparing the use of the space of the neighbourhood for leisure purposes between their experience and those of adults who they could interview;
3. The third group was asked instead to respond to the call entitled "To dwell in Montesacro, an approach between history and biography.", thus asking to gather the life stories of the neighbourhood and to tell its story through the experiences of the people that they would interview;

4. The fourth group would instead focus on the production of stereotypes in a work titled "Ways of Being. Distinguishing themselves through the body and through space", which asked students to think about how through the management of their own bodies and the choice to attend certain places people try to adhere to certain styles and tastes;
5. The fifth and last group had to think about the characteristics of space that are not immediately visible or tangible in the call "The invisible space", in which we asked them to reason about those symbolic characteristics that provide certain places determined meanings, stigmas, atmospheres, etc.

Although always through examples taken from their everyday life, in the calls the students were asked to face anything but simple concepts.

So, on returning from winter holidays they brought us their proposals in response to our calls. Each project proposed by them, which we will now see in detail, would have then be developed in the following months. This also meant taking the pupils on the field, where it was necessary, to make them do interviews, photographs, "walks" to notice the spaces of the neighborhood, etc. Back in the classroom we then elaborated all the data obtained in real research, which the students then presented to Sapienza University in front of a public composed of PhD student and professors.

1. The first group proposed a work entitled: "The Other: the Professor. The relationship between student and professor after the new technologies", in which they reflected on how the relationship between teachers and students has changed after the arrival of digital technologies in school spaces. The students conducted several interviews with both their companions and some teachers, coming from the definition of two categories of technologies present in the classrooms: the official ones, those that were introduced on ministerial decision, as the class computers or interactive whiteboards; the unofficial ones, i.e. the various smartphones that students and professors always carry with them and which are sometimes used also for educational purposes but often as recreation;
2. The second group built a research entitled "The use of space in the free time: a generational confrontation", both through various interviews with inhabitants of the neighbourhood, and the drafting of a personal diary drawn up by each member of the group and on which they have reasoned all together. Their work led them to conclude that the ways of using the public space of the neighbourhood in their spare time have only changed relatively over the years, showing how it distorted the idea that current generations would spend less time out of their homes than their parents;
3. The third group interpreted the task of collecting life stories of the neighborhood by focusing in particular on their school, investigating through special "stories of school life" how uses of school spaces in the years has changed, in a search entitled "To dwell in the Orazio. The use of school spaces between yesterday and today ".
4. "Are we just what we show? The stereotypes between prejudice and orientation", is the survey proposed by the fourth group. Methodologically, this group used both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, based on photos that were shown to the interviewed. In their conclusions, they highlight that, as well as people, even places can undergo stereotypes that change the ways in which everyone can use them. These stereotypes, even if sometimes negative, would serve people in order to be able to orient themselves more easily in the space dividing it into, sometimes too rigid, categories;
5. The fifth group finally focused on the ways in which the area where they are located is contested by various political parties through the use of posters and writings on the walls, which they go to create what the student have called a "written landscape". In the research entitled "metonymy or Synecdoche? The lettering on the walls and the image of the neighbourhood.", the pupils observed how the visual

experience of a place contributes to give to the latter certain meanings, through interviews and photographic reportage.

Besides the nonetheless interesting results of all the research projects carried on by the five groups, what the participants learned has been a more complex way to reflect and argue upon the urban territory, trying to manage change. In our view, this approach to deuterio-learning can be seen as a way to give future citizens the tools to imagine and design the future of cities.

But what we noticed during our work with the students, which was the initial difficulty to get involved in thinking about the neighborhood where they live and go to school, it is present on their daily background. On the one hand, this was totally out of the classical schemes of school education, which instead always led them to imagine the school space as strongly separated from that of the neighborhood, on the other, this asked them to imagine themselves as active citizens, which did not seem to have happened very often.

This has led us notice how little the school is present as an active subject within the territory, but only as an object. In a nutshell, the school does not seem to produce relations with the territory, nor stimulate the children to do so. The relationship of the children with the school itself also seems to have become increasingly less of affection (even when it was hateful) and increasingly "professional". The pupils we worked with in fact managed their relationship with the school with the same pragmatism with which a worker organizes his own holiday plan. It is necessary to manage the hours of ASL, the other laboratorial hours and the possible absences to spend at strategic moments.

But the students are the first to complain: they would like to find within the school the tools suitable to orient themselves among the possibilities of their present. As we have seen, these needs to be able to find in school what is outside is manifested even as we work together with their projects. In the last meeting, in which we asked the students to give us suggestions to improve the project for the next years, the necessity to meet the territory of Montesacro outside the Orazio boundaries was underlined several times.

Conclusion

Through the construction of an urban research laboratory within a high school of the outskirts of Rome, we have created a research project that would allow us not to investigate "the school" but to investigate "with the school", more precisely with its students.

This research-training pathway, activated through the methods of deuterio-learning and in particular by building a context in which students were required to be themselves a group of researchers supervised by us, allowed us to achieve multiple goals.

In fact, we have increased our knowledge in relation to the school's relationships with the surrounding territory, trying to observe it not as a place or institution, but as a *subject* present within a specific territory, with which it must necessarily confront, with the aim of opening a new strand of research in the field of urban studies and urban planning through the study of this report carried out in an interdisciplinary way. In the same way, we discovered something about the students' relationship with their school, coming to notice how often it refuses to let them be in contact with all that part of the world outside the school walls, leaving them without tools to imagine themselves as active citizens. All this, obviously with the necessary exceptions constituted by professors or particularly proactive principals, is not actively supported by the ministerial institutions.

At the same time, however, we have tried to fill these problems at a micro scale, providing the children with useful tools to learn to think about themselves, their city and their role as citizens. By deprovincializing research, we have tried to provide young people with the tools to manage and orient the huge range of interests

that are able to develop into more precise aspirations for the future, but also tried to build bridges between school and University.

Thinking about future developments of this research branch, we hope that researchers and in particular universities as public bodies will be more involved in school environments, trying not to look at them only as places where to collect qualitative or quantitative data but rather as places where knowledge can be produced with the children.

References

Appadurai, A., 2013, *The future as a cultural fact. Essays on the Global Condition* (New York, USA: Verso).

Bateson, G., 1972, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (University Of Chicago Press, USA).

Miccichè, C., 2009, Costruzione e memoria di uno spazio urbano, In: Scarpelli, F., ed., *Il rione incompiuto. Antropologia urbana dell'Esquilino* (Roma: CISU).

