

1 II - For an inclusive and welcoming digital *setting*

When changes happen all of a sudden, when the landscape modifies continuously, when the sense of community falls apart and the world seems just too complex and fragmented, feeling close to people you trust and having someone significant in your life as a reference can really make a difference. Beyond our mandate of educators, science teachers or theatre facilitators, in this moment we can probably be counted among those references for kids. Our first goal is therefore simply to be there, to walk alongside at this difficult time. This might be a trivial reflection, but that becomes a complex challenge when “being there” means being in cyberspace, in a digital space already overloaded with noise, and when the kids in question are the most elusive ones, tending to escape the gaze of adults and of their peers.

1.1 A multi-channel approach to promote inclusivity

The digital is not all the same: every platform, every form of communication that can be activated in virtual space has its own characteristics, just as kids have different ways and levels of confidence in using different channels. Even the devices in their hands are different: there are those with a state-of-the-art laptop and those who only have a half-broken smartphone with an outdated operating system on which you can't even install the latest apps. It's important to be aware of this when choosing communication channels, and it's advisable to put a wide range of possibilities on the table. In order to be able to “be there” with our kids, we decided to start by deploying six (6!) different communication channels/methods:

- WhatsApp: We could not disregard the messaging application most used by youngsters, although without the use of groups.
- Email: Each WhatsApp message is also sent via email, for the kids and the parents who have the ability and skills to manage school work remotely with a computer. We quickly realized that many kids, particularly the more introverted ones, interact much more calmly and openly via email than via WhatsApp.
- Instagram chat: kids have the reference of an Instagram account to send private messages, for those who were more familiar with that tool (we were surprised that some of the first carried out homeworks came in through this platform).
- Telephone calls: With some students the classic voice call proved to be the most effective means of re-connect with them. A boy, who completely disappeared in the first two weeks, answered my phone call (on the second attempt) and spent an intense half hour telling me about his life in quarantine. From there we went on relating to each other only through phone calls, which were used to hand in homeworks, too. With another student, given the impossibility to use the videochat, the phone became the channel for adventurous individual lessons.
- Videochat: we immediately set up a weekly videochat meeting, as a convivial way of meeting and sharing experiences, not of having lessons. For the chat we have established “safety rules”, which I will talk about in a minute.
- Podcast: Radio Single Year was born. Radio as a “hot” communication channel, in which the screen leaves room for voice and music. It seemed to us that among the available digital media this was the closest to the characteristics of our *setting*.

We didn't expect kids to follow up on every proposal, that they would be present on every channel, but it was essential to open communication channels with the largest number of them. The task we had given ourselves was to appreciate and value any type of interaction with them, trying to develop it, with delicacy, in a dialogue. Fortunately, this change took place halfway through the school year, so from October to February there had been enough time to build ties with the kids, developing trust and non-superficial relationships. In fact, in an educational *setting*, one thing is to build relationships from scratch in a digital environment and one thing is to continue online with the ones that solidly exist already (this will have to be taken into account at the beginning of next year in the unfortunate case that a situation like this would arise again — we hope not).

1.2 Taking care of the *setting* in digital platforms

A delicate issue is that of the *setting*, even though in schooling environments it seems little thought through. Digital platforms are not neutral, they create environments with their own specificities, they encourage certain types of relationships and make others more difficult, they have their own pedagogical dimension (which can also be an “obscure pedagogy”...). Traditional school platforms are mainly built for cognitive work; social networks privilege noise and immediate emotionality excluding depth and reflection; instant messaging apps require 24 hour attention, our continuous presence. Group chats are spaces where it is necessary to reiterate that we are there, possibly proving to be brilliant, and where silence is generally not well received. Moving from this awareness, from an approach of “digital self-defense” (Ippolita, 2017) and realizing the impossibility, at least in this first phase, to abandon some of these tools, we decided to:

- **Avoid as much as possible the communication channels that give any form of rating**

Therefore avoiding to build our relationship in a gamified space, where likes and little hearts spoil the communication turning it into a narcissistic game of points accumulation (there are platforms that schools and universities have adopted as their standards that include similar features!).

- **Use social networks for 1-to-1 messaging alone, avoiding a WhatsApp group to include us and the kids.**

WhatsApp groups are by their very nature anxiogenic. At any time (day or night) a message may arrive, and you have to decide whether to respond and what words to use to be appropriate and possibly brilliant. In this space, those who are more introverted and struggle with social relations suffer from the demand to participate, to be involved all the time, through notifications, in a territory that makes them uncomfortable; those who tend to be in the spotlight are instead increasingly driven to raise the level of “noise”. So we decided to use WhatsApp either in 1-to-1 mode, or in broadcast mode, through which it is possible to send a message to all the kids at the same time but individually.

- **Establish specific “safety” rules for the videochat:**

We communicated the rules of the video chat to the kids. Everyone could choose to intervene:

1. with image and voice,
2. by voice alone, keeping the camera off,
3. keeping both camera and microphone off, using the chat alone,
4. not even using the chat, joining only as passive listeners (although a listener is never passive...).

It is important to give them explicit permission to protect themselves, to enter the digital space in the way that best suits them, in particular in a declination of digital space that strongly exposes you, such as videoconferencing (opening the doors of your house to others). Let's remember that until a few weeks ago it was forbidden for classmates to film each other or adults in schools; today exposing oneself and allowing the appropriation of one's own image has become, on the contrary, obligatory in most cases, without even discussing the related issues. It was interesting to observe how different children, faced with these options, chose their own mode of interaction, and how different groups opted for different choices. In the “Guild” videochat, the group with the most introverted kids, very few of them appeared on video, most of them interacting only through voice, and a couple only writing in the chat; in the “Crew” group instead only one person decided not to show themselves on video.

- **Use non-proprietary platforms whenever possible:**

The idea is to use F/LOSS non-proprietary applications as much as possible, discussing the choice with the kids. This decision does not necessarily affect the type of relational experience on the net but, as a strong characterization of the space where you meet, it has an important educational value. In these days our best ally is for example Jitsi, a platform for videoconferencing, developed with a community approach. It is not necessary to log in to participate in the meetings, the platform does not collect any kind of data from users. When the meeting ends, its traces also disappear. The current mass employment of digital platforms has suddenly foregrounded the role in schools and educational contexts of large multinationals that base their revenue model on the sale of user data, and that have an interest in the diffusion of their proprietary systems. When the current emergency will be over, it will be difficult to go back. A critical discourse on the choice of the digital environments to use, one that does not limit itself to how efficiently they “function”, cannot be postponed to the end of the emergency.

- **Create a webradio, a chance to recreate a “night setting”...**

The podcast, or rather Radio Single Year, is certainly not the intervention with the highest impact on the general economy of what we have put in place, but I think it has a specific value and deserves a little reflection on its own. Webradios and

podcasts are probably two of the “hottest” communication tools among the possibilities offered by the digital, and can therefore return something of the atmosphere of the educational settings that we cultivate in presence. The absence of video and therefore of visual over-stimulation, the centrality of the voice, and the presence of background music generate a more intimate, nocturnal atmosphere. I have reserved a space in the short broadcasts produced in recent weeks to expand on the most reflective assignments, also bringing in fragments of mine, or to repeat and boots some of the words written by the kids in a shared, “circular” perspective. Some of the kids said that they listened to these recordings at night “to take trips”. Radio Single Year is also conceived as a small gift, an unsolicited commitment, a “surplus”; I like to think of it as an act of beauty dedicated to the kids; maybe in this period we need it, a lot.

1.3 ...and the kids are there

Through this multi-channel and multi-option approach we were able to involve almost all the kids; everyone participates in his or her own way but the community is re-created, maintaining its bond. Emanuele appeared only once in videochat without saying anything, but we are in contact with his mother who tells us that after three years of voluntary confinement at home now tells her that he misses school. Marino, on the other hand, who had completely disappeared in the first few weeks, now answers messages with monosyllables. He explains that he has big problems at home, that he can't do his homework but he follows and listens to what we send. How can we help kids to make sense when emotions risk to overwhelm everything else and it's hard to interpret the world? This is the theme of the next chapter.