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Orientation as an educational-formative lever: Vygotskij and the training of the generative student through the teacher's educational and planning action from a UDL inclusive perspective

L'orientamento come leva formativa: Vygotskij e la formazione dello studente generativo attraverso l'azione educativa e progettuale del docente nella prospettiva inclusiva dell'UDL

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ABSTRACT

Today, schools and universities must ensure that all students receive an education and training that fosters active citizenship (Commissione Europea, 2022; Tino, 2024). To achieve this goal, they must adopt a truly inclusive mindset that prevents inequalities and transforms them into growth opportunities for all (Marchisio, Curto, 2022). Starting from these assumptions, this paper explores the role of orientation as a generative function for the student (Mannese, 2019) and does so through Lev S. Vygotskij's thoughts (1934/2012), enhancing his historical-cultural approach. This perspective offers a solid theoretical framework for rethinking inclusive teaching practices aimed at enhancing the generative potential of students through their guidance skills, enabling to impact their professional and personal futures through concrete and responsible actions. In particular, it finds a concrete application in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) design model (CAST, 2024), which proposes the use of flexible didactics aimed at realizing the generative potential of students so that they can successfully self-orient themselves in their life project (Mangiatordi, 2021).

ABSTRACT

Oggi le istituzioni scolastiche e universitarie devono garantire a tutti gli studenti un'educazione e una formazione atte a favorire l'esercizio della cittadinanza attiva (Commissione Europea, 2022; Tino, 2024). Per raggiungere questo obiettivo è necessario che adottino una mentalità inclusiva che prevenga le diseguaglianze e le trasformi in opportunità di crescita per tutti (Marchisio, Curto, 2022). A partire da questi assunti il contributo esplora il ruolo dell'orientamento in funzione generativa per lo studente (Mannese, 2019) e lo fa attraverso il pensiero di Lev S. Vygotskij (1934/2012), valorizzandone l'approccio storico-culturale. Questa prospettiva offre una solida cornice teorica per ripensare l'azione docente in chiave inclusiva volta ad implementare il potenziale generativo degli studenti attraverso la loro capacitazione orientativa per impattare con azioni concrete e responsabili sulla gestione del proprio futuro professionale e personale. In particolare, essa trova una concreta applicazione nel modello progettuale dell'Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2024), che propone ai docenti l'uso della didattica flessibile atta alla realizzazione del potenziale generativo dei formandi affinché possano auto-orientarsi con successo nel proprio progetto di vita (Mangiatordi, 2021).

KEYWORDS/ PAROLE CHIAVE

Generative student; Orientation; Teacher action; Inclusion; Universal Design for Learning

Studente generativo; Orientamento; Azione docente; Inclusione; Universal Design for Learning

INTRODUCTION

In today's context, schools and universities are faced with a crucial challenge: ensuring that every student receives an education and training that fosters active citizenship (Stoer, 2008). This involves the acquisition of a broad range of knowledge, skills, and competencies, including critical and reflective thinking, metacognition, and creativity, as outlined in the 2030 Education Agenda.
This acquisition must be oriented towards the autonomy and empowerment of individuals, so that they can consciously manage the essential services for their lives: from education to work, from health to housing, up to legal protection of one's rights (Commissione Europea, 2022; Marchisio & Curto, 2022).
To achieve this goal, a authentically inclusive approach is needed, one that not only compensates for inequalities but also prevent them and transform them into growth opportunities for all. Inclusion, from this perspective, is not an accessory action but is realized through processes that promote the learning of new skills (reskilling) and the improvement of existing ones (upskilling) (PNRR, 2021).
This vision, on the one hand, directly involves teachers, who must play an active role in promoting educational experiences capable of enhancing the teaching-learning process as a means of guiding the student in realizing their generative potential (Mannese et al., 2023). This requires, on their part, an intentional investment in active and inclusive teaching practices (Fedeli & Frison, 2018), which are made explicit in the founding principles of inclusive educational design (CAST, 2011-2015).
On the other hand, students are interested, being generative individuals, because they have to face means facing change not as a threat, but as an opportunity, allowing one to orient one's needs, and interact proactively with the context, contributing to the transformation of one's self and surrounding reality (Mannese et al., 2023; Ricciardi, 2024).
In this context, orientation takes on an augmentative meaning compared to mere professional choice: it is a continuous process of identity construction and existential planning, strictly connected to the realisation of the person in his or her entirety (Mannese et al., 2023).
To this end, the article analyzes the role of orientation in the generating function for the student, exploring it through the lens of Lev S's thought. Vygotsky (1934/2012), enhancing his historical-cultural approach. In light of this purpose, starting from the conceptualization of inclusion, it aims to answer two fundamental questions:
1) Is Vygotsky's historical-cultural approach still valid today to support students' orientation skills by promoting their generative potential through teaching carried out with inclusive teaching practices?
2) Are there design models that effectively integrate this perspective into formal training?
The arguments presented offer a valid perspective to rethink the teaching action in design in an inclusive key. In particular, it finds a concrete application in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) design model (CAST, 2024), which offers teachers a flexible, accessible teaching method aimed at realizing the generative potential of students so that they can self-orient themselves in their life project.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INCLUSION TO SUPPORT ALL LEARNERS AS INDIVIDUALS WITH GENERATIVE POTENTIAL

Despite the affirmation of the principles of inclusive education, individual diversity often continues to generate stigma. Paradoxically, this trend ends up excluding trainees from educational programs and access to essential services to meet their personal and professional needs (Arconzo & Bissaro, 2024).

Inclusive education, however, must be understood in a deeper sense: it requires that training professionals adopt a wide range of strategies capable of responding promptly and appropriately to differences among learners, supporting them in resolving problematic situations by activating their own generative potential.

The Law of 22 December 2021 laid the foundations for these principles already enshrined in the United Nations Convention (2006), ratified in Italy in 2009, protecting the rights of individuals to self-representation, according to the norm of self-determination which presupposes the capacity of every individual to make an informed choice.

These principles are grounded in the tenets of Generative Pedagogy. It conceives of human beings as active protagonists of their own existence, capable of acting and transforming the world, despite the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary life (Mannese et al., 2023).

The generative individual is not a passive subject, but an agent who, through their experiences, culture, and relationships, influences and is influenced by the context.

«Generativity represents the essence of training as it transforms, contributes the realization of subject[s] is not limited to the generation of new ones knowledge but is concerned with promoting man, with providing him with possibilities for the life. It represents the emergence of the new with a value orientation» (Dario, 2014; p.92).

Their actions, ideas, and choices have a transformative impact on reality, generating new possibilities and, at the same time, being influenced by the world around them.

In this context, education and training play a crucial role in enabling this transformation, with the following tasks:

- supporting the authenticity of the individual, preserving their identity;
- guaranteeing freedom of choice and self-determination;
- promoting individual creativity;
- enhancing natural abilities and talents;
- recognizing and respecting personal aspirations and desires.

As Mannese reports, «generativity inevitably requires an educational-formative-institutional process that recognizes the educational value of orientation actions as the first and fundamental levers of every single talent» (Mannese et al., 2023, p. 105).

However, formal institutions dealing with education and training, despite declaring such intentions in official documents (Fedeli & Munaro, 2022), struggle to translate these principles into concrete practices

The central issue concerns the sustainability of inclusive education, which requires a redefinition of pedagogical practices, curricula and school regulations, which are often still oriented towards the mere reproduction of standardised models (Tino, 2024).

It is necessary to embrace the new mentality that allows teachers and trainees to co-govern the teaching-learning process, adopting teaching approaches capable of generating a transformative impact and enhancing students' guidance capacity due to their intrinsic generative gift that can be transformed into guidance skills useful for the conscious self-management of decision-making processes (Mannese, 2019; Rossi, 2013).

VYGOTSKY AND THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL APPROACH: THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN GENERATIVE LEARNERS

At this point we intend to propose the thought of Lev Vygotskij (1935/1974) through the lens of the historical-cultural approach, as a theoretical foundation to support the generative capacity inherent in every individual and to implement the orientation ability in learning management.
This paradigm recognizes that human action is not a simple reaction to environmental stimuli but is profoundly mediated by culture.
The individual, made up of body and mind, is born and develops within a specific historical-cultural context, characterized by economic, social and political constraints that shape culture and social relations (Mecacci, 2022).
Biology confirms that, in the human species, brain development is closely linked to learning processes. However, genetic endowment is not sufficient to guarantee survival: it is the interaction between genotype and environment that triggers development, which is nourished by stimuli from the natural and cultural context (Siegel & Sapru, 2019).
In our relationship with reality, humans develop signs and symbols to which they attribute meaning, using them to solve problems and build knowledge, skills, and competencies. In Thought and Language Vygotsky (1934/2019) defines these signs as stimuli-media, tools that mediate the relationship between the individual and the physical world, fostering the development of higher intellectual functions.
Language, in particular, is the cultural tool par excellence, capable of transforming collective activity into internalized individual activity, thus contributing to the construction of knowledge (Leont'ev & Lurija, 2010; Ruggiero, 2023).
Higher psychological functions emerge in the context of collective activity. More recent developments in the theory (Caprin & Zudini, 2015; Engeström, 2001) highlight that learning occurs within activity systems, in which the tensions generated by contextual changes activate transformative processes.
Human beings, therefore, do not undergo the context, but modify it through their own activities, which in turn transform their nature: they are active subjects at the centre of the learning process (Di Masi & Miolli, 2019).
Activity systems produces artifacts – material or conceptual – that mediate relationships between subject and environment, but also between subject and self, contributing to the construction of the environment and of thought (Magakian, 2011; Cole, 1996/2004)
The mental activities that generate artifacts develop on two levels (Ligorio & Cacciamani, 2013):
a concrete one, linked to the practical use of artifacts; a psychological one, in which the mediation action becomes symbolic and internalized.
These tools become essential mental means for interacting with reality, representing a distinctive property of the human mind, which goes beyond the simple sociality shared with other species (Mecacci, 2022).
Metacognition, or awareness of one's own mental functioning, develops gradually and allows the activation of competent attitudes through the impact of educational and didactic actions shared by teachers with their students.
Subsequent studies (Venet, Correa Molina & Saussez, 2016; Dionne, Saussez & Bourdon, 2017) have highlighted how this process also characterizes the learning of adults who increase their psychic functions, in the ZSP, from a qualitative point of view.
Even in adults, knowledge is constructed through similar processes: there are not structural changes in higher psychic functions, but qualitative transformations that enhance skills and competences (Poletti, 2021).
Vygotskij highlights the crucial role of didactic intervention, which acts in the Zone of Proximal Development through mediating tools (Yvon & Zinchenko, 2012) that promote the learner's generative capacity and self-orientation in solving problems.

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT (ZPD) AND ACTIVE LEARNING

Vygotskij (1934/2012) tells us that learning is socialized in the Zone of Proximal Development and is strongly linked to the situation in which it occurs, presenting an interactional and dialogic dimension.
The ZPD in the learner is the distance between the learning stage at the moment of proposing a new problem-task and the level of potential development he owns solving it (his generative capacity).
Learning precedes development, therefore teaching intervention must have a proactive value; the teacher must be able to co-position his educational-didactic action in the proximal area to allow all students to generate new cognitive tools (Vygotskij, 1934/2012; Venet et al., 2016; Poletti, 2021).
The teaching-learning process, in the context of formal education, requires the active involvement of all students (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2018).
According to Vygotskij 1935/1974), learning occurs through the mediation of cultural artifacts—that is, methodologies, techniques, strategies, and tools—which play a crucial role in teaching management. These must be diversified and modulated so that educational interventions have a proactive value and generate strategic skills (Maccario, 2019).
He argues that awareness can be enhanced through a compensation process activated in the ZSP, leveraging creative modalities linked to emotions, perceptions, and relationships with reality. The perception of a need—internal or environmental—stimulates the individual to think creatively, activating adaptive cognitive processes (Mecacci, 2022).
Although all humans possess this ability, the degree of intensity can vary (De Giorgi, 2013).
Neuroscientific evidence supports these assumptions and, by supporting the importance of the integration between cognitive, emotional, motor and metacognitive processes, confirms the effectiveness of teaching methods that encourage active learning which effectively impacts the generative potential of trainees (Gola, 2020; Peluso Cassese, 2017).
Recent studies have analyzed the design of inclusive teaching methodologies and tools, such as workshops, gamification, discussions, problem-based learning, cooperative learning, flipped classrooms, and game-based activities (Yang, Luo & Sun, 2020).
These approaches stimulate the person's generative capacity and therefore self-orientation in the form of metacognition, promoting cooperation, timely feedback, commitment to the task, and personal valorization (Bracci & Romano, 2018).

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

In literature, a theoretical model that can help teachers in organise inclusive didactic actions, to implement the orientation capacity of trainees by leveraging their generative capacity, is represented by UDL (Universal Design for Learning) (CAST, 2011–2015).
The approach, also inspired by Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective, aims to reduce barriers related to inequality by promoting an educational environment accessible to all in order to ensure true inclusion, which excludes no one from the opportunity to consciously develop competent attitudes.
UDL was created to address the challenges that hinder the development of skilled students in educational contexts characterized by standardized curricula, often designed for a single student profile. In this sense, UDL does not consider disadvantage as a disadvantageous characteristic of the individual, but rather as a consequence of rigid curricula structured around non-inclusive objectives, methods, materials, and assessments (Buccini, 2024).
Supported by neuroscientific evidence, UDL proposes a flexible and intentional design approach, capable of harnessing the generative potential of all learners, even with diverse educational and learning needs. Its goal is not just mastery of content or the use of technology, but mastery of the learning process itself.
UDL is based on three fundamental principles:

1)Multiplicity of representational tools: Students learn in different ways (visual, auditory, textual, etc.).
2)Diversifying means of action and expression: students must be able to demonstrate what they know through different methods, taking into account their specific needs.
3)Variety of engagement methods: Motivation to learn varies based on individual factors such as interests, emotions, and prior knowledge; it is therefore essential to offer motivating and personalized learning paths.
UDL clarifies the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZSP) as a space that allows the objectification of the potential generative capacity of students in a practical orientation of learning (De Giorgi, 2013), amplifying the concept of scaffolding found in guided social interactions; in the cultural tools that support the teaching-learning process such as language, signs, diagrams, guiding questions, concept maps, and forms; and active methodologies such as laboratory lessons, work groups, and cooperative learning.
UDL promotes self-regulation and metacognition; through these, students consciously direct their learning according to their own needs.
UDL enables teachers and educators to share a common path, in which objectives, methods, materials, and assessments are designed flexibly and adaptably. Its principles are transferable to any educational context, proving valid for all learning experiences and compatible with different teaching styles and in the various segments of formal training (Basham et al., 2020).

DISCUSSION

The arguments presented above allow us to answer the first question in the affirmative: Is Vygotsky's historical-cultural approach still valid today to support students' orientation skills by promoting their generative potential through teaching carried out with inclusive teaching practices?
According to Vygotsky (1935-1974), cognitive development is not an individual and isolated process, but is profoundly mediated by culture and the symbolic tools it provides and marked by relational factors.
Human beings, thanks to their generative capacity, create cultural artifacts – language, communication and relationships, technologies – that act as mediators in the development of thought and action. Learning, therefore, is not a passive response to stimuli, but an active and culturally situated process (Mannese et al., 2023; Ricciardi, 2024).
This perspective offers a theoretical framework for rethinking teaching practice in an inclusive way.
In particular, it finds a concrete application in the Universal Design for Learning design model (CAST, 2024), which offers teachers a flexible, accessible teaching method aimed at realizing the generative potential of students so that they can self-orient themselves in their life project.
The UDL model promotes the use of active and participatory teaching strategies that take into account the diversity of cognitive styles, motivations, and needs of all students.
It is valuable for promoting students' generative potential in an inclusive educational context. The paradigm recognizes that learning is not an isolated individual process, but is profoundly mediated by culture, language, and social relationships.
Humans build knowledge and skills through cultural artifacts and meaningful interactions, which transform collective activity into internalized individual thought.
Vygotsky highlights that learning precedes development and thanks to the support of artifact-mediators, each student can implement, using the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the generative capacity to reach higher levels of competence.
This is particularly relevant for all students, even those with disadvantages, as they can be guided towards abstract thinking with concrete learning activities and mediating tools (maps, forms, cooperative learning, etc.).

The Vygotskyan approach advocates generativity as the transformative capacity of the individual, in line with generative pedagogy, which views human beings as active protagonists of their own learning and the reality around them. Educational interventions, therefore, must enable the realization of intentional orientation, capable of activating higher psychological processes (metacognition, creativity) that are fundamental to the personal and professional growth of the learner (Mannese et al., 2023).
Regarding the second question: Are there design models that effectively integrate this perspective into formal training?,the information on UDL allows us to consider it as a design model that concretely supports teachers' work in designing inclusive educational and teaching activities that foster student orientation and foster their generative potential (
Inspired by Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective, it aims to ensure authentic inclusion, transcending the limitations of standardized and rigid curricula. UDL proposes flexible and intentional planning that enhances the generative potential of all learners, even with diverse educational needs, based on three fundamental principles:
- Multiple means of representation (visual, auditory, textual);
-Diversification of means of action and expression;
-Variety of means of engagement, to respond to interests, emotions, and prior knowledge.
According to UDL, the ZPD is activated by artifacts acting as mediators, such as scaffolding. This temporary support is provided through cultural tools and active methodologies (workshops, cooperative learning, etc.), which is gradually withdrawn as the student gains autonomy. UDL also promotes self-regulation and metacognition, making the student aware of their own learning process.
UDL is transferable to any formal training context and represents a concrete and structured response to the need for inclusive, adaptable, and centered on the student as person.

CONCLUSION

In an era in which inclusion represents an essential challenge, it is essential for teaching action to go beyond standardised teaching models and adopt design approaches capable of enhancing the orientation as a generative function for all students (Mannese, 2019).
Vygotsky's historical-cultural approach (1934/2012), offers a solid theoretical basis for rethinking the teaching-learning process in a generative way, centered on the co-relationship, on the mutual co-transformation between student, teacher and context.
Cultural mediators prove to be essential tools for guiding every student—even those with disadvantages—toward autonomy, awareness, and competence.
In this framework, Universal Design for Learning emerges as an effective and transferable design model, capable of translating the principles of inclusion into practice through flexible, intentional teaching.
For inclusion to be real and sustainable, formal education institutions must commit to a cultural and methodological transformation that places the potential of each student at the center, promoting orientational, participatory learning paths that respond to individual needs in a fair and personalized manner. Only in this way will it be possible to truly build inclusion, where every individual can learn, grow, and actively contribute to society.

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