

# Esercitare l'unità mente-corpo

## *Un modello educativo*

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### Sommario

Le riflessioni qui proposte si rifanno alla realizzazione di un laboratorio di formazione professionale (3 CFU) strutturato sulle pratiche corporeo-meditative, dall'a.a. 2010 ad oggi, presso l'Università di Bologna. La ricerca in cui esso si situa esplora la portata trasformativa di una educazione attraverso il gesto, nella considerazione dell'unità mente-corpo. Dalla prospettiva di uno sguardo olistico ed ecologico l'attività di ricerca mira a rivitalizzare paradigmi e modelli della tradizione filosofico-pedagogica di matrice occidentale nel confronto con la tradizione filosofico-pedagogico-esperienziale di matrice estremo orientale. Misurarsi con «latitudini scientifiche» differenti consente un'espansione dei campi di significato, di senso e di azione, incoraggiando la ricerca verso le istanze di innovazione e trasformazione. Metodo, principi e tecniche derivano dalle discipline filosofico-esperienziali estremo-orientali (Qi Gong e Meditazione) in considerazione di una stretta aderenza ai modelli pedagogici volti a promuovere processi educativi trasformativi ed efficaci rispetto alle sfide attuali, come anche indicato nell'Agenda Unesco 2030. Il metodo coinvolge la persona nella sua globalità, contribuendo significativamente al ben-essere psico-fisico, facilitando l'accesso alle risorse interne, in chiave motivazionale e decisionale. L'esercizio congiunto del corpo e della mente affina campo percettivo e qualità dell'attenzione — quali consapevolezza e meta-consapevolezza — promuovendo competenze trasversali di decodifica e gestione della dimensione emotivo-affettiva, fondamentali nell'ambito delle life skills, come la relazione e l'autorealizzazione.

### Parole chiave

Corporeità, Laboratorio, Educazione, Trasformazione, Unità mente-corpo.

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# Exercising the mind-body unity

## *An educational model*

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### Abstract

This essay moves from the actualization of a professional training workshop (3cf) structured on corporeal-meditative practices, from the a.y. 2010 to date, at the University of Bologna. The research activity within which it is situated explores the transformative reach of an education through gesture, in consideration of the mind-body unity. From the perspective of a holistic and ecological viewpoint, the research activity aims to revitalise paradigms and models of the Western philosophical-pedagogical tradition in comparison with the Far Eastern philosophical-pedagogical-experiential tradition. Dialoguing with different «scientific latitudes» allows for an expansion of the fields of meaning, sense and action, encouraging research towards a commitment to innovation and transformation. Method, principles and techniques come from Far Eastern philosophical-experiential disciplines (Qi Gong and Meditation) in close consideration of a strict adherence to pedagogical models designed to promote transformative and effective educational processes, with regard to current challenges as also stated in the Unesco 2030 Agenda. Method involves the person in his/her entirety, contributing significantly to psycho-physical wellbeing, facilitating access to internal resources, in terms of motivation and decision-making. The joint exercise of body and mind refines the field of perception and quality of attention — such as awareness and meta-awareness — promoting transversal skills of decoding and managing the emotional-affective dimension, which are crucial within life skills, such as relationship and self-actualization.

### Keywords

Corporeity, Laboratory, Education, Transformation, Mind-Body Unity.

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## Why an educational laboratory through corporeity?

As human beings we are required to develop and make real our humanity (Montessori, 2018), and this requires knowledge from which to derive an educational-design to generate discernment, sensitivity and appropriate conduct. Body is the first reality of our existence (Heidegger, 1976), it is our resource to exercise, to make real what we feel and think (Merleau Ponty, 1979). This contribution intends to investigate about the need for setting up practical training resources: intellectual understanding alone is not able to produce competence or ability, without its corresponding empirical moment of experimentation and internalisation has weak significance (Frabboni e Pinto Minerva, 2000). Education through gesture is a kind of model to train those involved in education to acquire knowledge in terms of a complex and profound investigation (rekindling the desire to question the meaning of Life), training to do and to do it well (being reliable witness of knowledge), training to support others in their process of investigation and training for competences. Education is challenged to develop skills, provide opportunities for growth, acquire virtues, support self-actualization, encourage sensitivity, nurture inquiry and curiosity. The research work — from which the project described here has been realised — acknowledges as a methodological urgency the need to provide experiences able to get learning transformative on close reciprocal relationship between mental, emotional and corporeal dimension. It is important to provide laboratory in which to experience realisation, i.e. making change real, through experiences that concretely engage attention, understanding and comprehension taken as follows: *knowledge, knowing how to do* and (fundamental in the educational professions) *knowing how to get done*. Making real means achieving — through learning practices — a transformation that is meaningful within the wider frame of life-long, life-deep and life-wide education (Dozza, 2018). Education should move beyond specialised knowledge accumulation towards the mastery of learning tools and the application of knowledge in a variety of contexts (Frabboni, 2004), supporting complete development for each individual — intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic sense, personal responsibility and spiritual values. In an ever-changing world, the demand for new skills and abilities to meet a variety of demands is increasing (UNESCO, 2017), and knowledge acquired by the intellect and description alone is not enough to promote deep comprehension, as well as the know-how and the know-how to support people do — for which educational professions should be fully trained (Cavana e Casadei, 2016). The project aims to serve as a model for re-establishing the value of the laboratory as an educational device and as a training method, starting from direct involvement of the body, in strict consideration of its language and need of knowledge and expression (Gamelli, 2006). Bodiliness is the first reality of «being here»,

the expression of one's own «existential posture» (Iori, 2006); it is an educational resource that is not inert but participatory, therefore it is necessary to recognize bodily intelligence and to know how to discern, promote and use it. The project I'm describing was conceived and then implemented as a curricular laboratory — from 2010 to date — for students enrolled in the degree course in «Social and Cultural Educator» at the Department of Sciences of Education «G.M. Bertin», University of Bologna. It is based on the conviction of the need for a more effective training in reflexivity and self-knowledge for the educational and care profession (Schoen, 1993); it is to be read as a preparatory training for those processes of self efficacy and empowerment towards which care professionals are called to guide others. The laboratory has been tested on a sample of 35 students (maximum number allowed for enrolment, with compulsory attendance), each year, for a total of 420 formally enrolled and attending. The activity is expected to take place over a period of 24 hours, with a twice-weekly frequency of about 6 hours per module; thus providing the opportunity for an intensive experience: time factor — if it is intended for bodily learning — takes on a different meaning. The time needed to memorise a gesture and reproduce it correctly certainly differs from that needed for intellectual memorisation. In this respect, qualities necessary for learning such as attention, observation and patience are also taken into account, as well as the fatigue and effort management (Le Boulch, 2017). In the time of practice one is enabled to experience one's own awareness of these aspects, and how one is equipped to deal with them. The proposed activities can be sorted into three types: posture regulation, attention regulation, breath regulation; each considered and trained, statically or in movement, in four different situations: standing, sitting, lying down, walking. As a tool to evaluate the satisfaction and the relevance of this educational offer — in addition to the direct observation — a short final report is used, by which participants are asked to return reflections on the experience carried out in relation to their life experiences and their curricular study course. Feedback showed full satisfaction, with regard of the the experience's relevance; Students realize that the experience helps becoming aware of the unavoidable need of knowing oneself as an essential professional skill for being an experienced educator (Riva, 2005).

## Methodology

The project is of an experiential-transformative nature and aims to give substance to the epistemological instance of theory-practice reciprocity. The specificity of this project lies in education through corporeity. The exercise of the body is simultaneously the exercise of: declarative knowledge, procedural

knowledge and reflective and integrated knowledge (comprehensive knowledge). The lines of enquiry are formulated in the following questions: why not think of pedagogical training — and also of the educational proposal — in terms of a proportionate relationship between discourse and exercise? What conceptual and empirical device can prove to be a significant driver of renewal in research and training, in being both study and practice? The project design is based on the scientific re-accreditation of: a) *laboratory*: as a device to experience what one learns, to reflect on what one does; b) *corporeity*: as the first reality of human complexity in its being a mind-body-spirit unity. The feasibility of this model takes into account three basic requirements for educational professions: knowledge, know-how, know-how to get done. The theoretical-practical anchorages are mainly to the far eastern philosophical tradition. Method, principles and techniques are expression of existential conceptions-practices, which can be experienced and experimented in the interdisciplinary and intercultural training intervention (McMahan e Braun 2017). In particular, for its logic of a non-dualistic nature, in the foundational recognition of the unity of mind-body-spirit (Yamasaki, 2015); for the reference to the formative-transformative potential of gesture (Tulku, 1978) and to the power of the practice of silence (Katagiri, 1989). Together with this, the references are also to the literature relating to Embodied Cognition (Maturana e Varela, 1992) for the scientific approaches that have contributed to the re-accreditation of the body, even within the pedagogical discourse and educational practice. In the specification of an embodiment of a perceptual matrix and one of a motor matrix it is possible to observe the characterisation of cognitive processes that concern the relationship with the external world (representation of space and objects, understanding of language and of the intentions of others, imagination) and that with the inner world (emotional experience, decision-making processes, representation of one's own body, consciousness). Consideration is also given to holistic approach to education, within which the corporeal dimension and well-being are highly valued; in particular it legitimises a conception of human complexity in terms of unity (body-mind-spirit), of relationality and interdependence between every existing form: Human being, Nature, Cosmos (Tulku, 2002; Mancini, 2017). This perspective warns against the risk of a triple reductionism: of Being to the sole dimension of the human, of the human to the sole dimension of the intellectual and of the intellectual to the sole dimension of reason (Panikkar, 1993). From this perspective, the need to abandon any hermeneutics in an oppositional key emerges, because it is limited and inadequate. At the heart of the method is the gesture encoded in form. The form represents, ideally and concretely, the nucleus of a learning that requires the activation of a high register of competences, which gradually refine as they are engaged; simultaneously the awareness is also consolidated. The reference is not only to the motor scheme

to be reproduced, but to the qualities of the psycho-motor dynamics through which it is performed: fine observation, attention, coordination skills of observation and reproduction, perception, awareness of one's gesture, physical and emotional sensation in response to the gesture produced and the condition of the mind. From the educational perspective, the codified gesture represents a fundamental value: it evokes the image of an ideal form to be reproduced and its implicit exercise of perfection, therefore the possibility of a development and a change in the person. The person is aware of this thanks to the form with which he or she «measures up». With regard to this, an interesting factor is also the possibility of observing not only oneself but also others in their practice of measuring themselves with the gesture, with the commitment dedicated and above all with the transformation of the gesture and attitude even after only a few repetitions. A significant feature of the work lies in the stabilisation of the ability to be patient: to allow oneself time to apply oneself.

### **Learning goals**

Attention, care, balance and listening are just some of the key-concepts in the training of care professions that structure their effectiveness in relationships. My proposal aims at re-accrediting corporeity and laboratory experience to better enhance and develop the reflexive component, as self-knowledge, which is bodily and emotional intelligence, discernment and relational sensitivity. Understanding the meaning of things also means experiencing them; this is why it is considered important to propose exercises that directly allow to observe, represent and reproduce, such as adjusting one's posture and balance, listening to oneself and to others, getting aware of the quality of one's attention in relation to time, space, immobility, movement. The fundamental question is the following: why in the pedagogical field, in the face of an epistemological system based on the reciprocity of theory and practice, is training still unbalanced in favour of theoretical dimension? A crucial point is identified in two key words: laboratory and corporeity; these two keywords allow access to transformation and innovation to be envisioned and generated. In the educational sphere, the instrument capable of representing the theory-practice reciprocity is the laboratory; in the existential sphere, the effectiveness of the interdependence between thought-action is embodied in corporeity. Therefore, the motivation underlying the research project is expressed in the need for training models that give greater legitimacy to the laboratory device and to corporeal effectiveness. With reference to training — intended as research activity aimed at competences, through a process of self-education — the project's design is outlined starting from three essential requirements: knowing, knowing how to

do, knowing how to get people do, which will be discussed later. My work can be placed in the strand of research that sees psychokinetics, philosophy of mind, neuroscience and pedagogy intertwined. Most of the time this intertwining is referred to as Mindfulness, which does not, however, explain the real heart of the research, which is the method offered by the philosophical practices and body disciplines of the far eastern tradition. My work draws on this very rich philosophical-experiential repertoire, its investigative and training methods, through a selection of exercises and themes that are functional to the explicit aims: to avoid the theory-practice disconnect and the mind-body separate (Pagliaro e Martino, 2010). The medical and neuroscientific spheres (Kabat-Zinn, Davidson e Dalai Lama, 2011; Olson, 2014; Mace, 2018) demonstrate that the unity of mind and body is the basis for the quality of life of each individual. The commitment is to demonstrate this relevance with reference to the educational design (Block-Lerner e Cardaciotto, 2016). In the following I will explain how my work proposes, on the one hand, to contribute to the investigation of the quality of the theory-praxis relationship that characterises the epistemological framework of pedagogy (Baldacci, 2012), and on the other hand, to design the educational intervention so that it can realise this relationship. If the laboratory can correspond to the device that best witnesses and realises the theory-praxis relationship (Frabboni, 2004), corporeity can correspond to the «device» that first witnesses and realises our existential effectiveness, therefore also the quality of our educational-existential project (Todd, 2017). As suggested, among others, by the works of Jean Le Boulch (1991), behaviour, in its being thought that is expressed in gesture, is a revelation of the attitude towards existence and therefore also of the intra and inter-subjective relationship. Research on how the ultimate goals and horizons of pedagogical thought can be transformed into concrete reality is a commitment. Pedagogical science must regain the specific weight it deserves within the current scientific debates on cultural, social and environmental emergencies: education is a core driver for effective action to help transform and improve the quality of life. In the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice, the applicability of theory is not the only point to guide the hypothesis of meaningful laboratory experiences. Meaningfulness concerns the potentiality of a project (method, principles and techniques) to open up the possibility of directly experiencing different types of knowledge: intellectual or declarative knowledge, bodily or procedural knowledge, then integrated and comprehensive knowledge. Needless to say, for a long time the first form of knowledge was credited with an absolute value, while the second was credited with almost no value at all (hence the possibility for the third compromised). The former is made explicit through verbal language, while the latter is made explicit by the language of action (Ikuta, 2011). Both reveal intelligence, i.e. understanding, discernment, sensitivity. Educational and existential

issues are certainly not the exclusive prerogative of the intellect, so it seems unproductive to insist on investigative and operational methods that privilege it, to the exclusion of other dimensions, including the body.

### **Analysis of learning needs: knowledge, know how to do, know how to get done**

Education through gesture is a sort of model to train whoever involved with education to acquire knowledge in terms of inquiry, to train how to do and to do it properly, to train how to support others in their process of inquiry, training and proficiency. Knowledge requires also practice such as experimentation-development of a confident psycho-physical attitude triggering internal healing resources, self efficacy, self empowerment. The activity, here discussed, is designed for adherence to urgent topics such as health, deep ecology, sustainability: a channel of information, a training repertoire, a promotion of proactive attitude. Psycho-physical well-being promotes trust, clarity, stability, thoughtfulness, initiative: qualities necessary for effective relationships and the ability to work with others. From this perspective, the legitimacy of making use of the contribution of the oriental disciplines — being ways of self-knowledge-experimentation and expression of existential conceptions-praxes committed to personal growth — has been taken. The model aims at providing guidelines, realizing opportunities to experience the potential of each type of knowledge, but above all the transformative potential implicit in the possibility of combining them (Tokitsu, 2004). The reference to the eastern traditions — which share a complex and phenomenological approach — stems from a personal path of study and training that has given me the opportunity to verify a seamless coexistence between the theoretical-philosophical description of a specific aspect of existence and the development of practice, made explicit in a clear and practicable method. The key points on which the research project is built are: knowing, knowing how to do and knowing how to make people do. The workshop experience calls for a shift from description to action, thus involving disciplinary, cultural, communicative, emotional-affective, behavioural and social skills. The workshop includes the learner, the guide (who also learns how best to do it), and the object of the experience. The actors are: the learner, the contents (methods and techniques), the guide. In the figure of the guide the critical nodes of the model unfold: a) guide knows the contents and knows how to describe them; b) guide knows how to do i.e. demonstrates through action, puts himself/herself at stake showing that he/she knows how to do what has described); c) guide knows how to make people do (he/she increases the potential of each piece of knowledge by placing himself/herself at the lintel point: an arc of conjunction between the knowledge

acquired and the meaning of that knowledge — by developing for one's expertise a deep competence of reflexivity, in which praxis is not confined to technicality but is a device for growth and transformation.

*How to make the concept of existential posture real: educating oneself through mind-body unity*

The body is visible in its being the first existential reality for the subject, but it is invisible when it expresses a need for knowledge and expression that does not, in fact, find an interlocutor sufficiently ready to accept the request. Reflexivity is relevant as a preparatory training for those processes of self efficacy and empowerment towards which care professionals are called to guide others (Mortari, 2004). Method applied for the activities draws on paths of knowledge and experimentation of one's own body, mind and breath unity, within the tradition of oriental disciplines (Duerckheim, 1980). The goodness of this approach lies in the appreciation of the centrality of being a unity of several equally important dimensions: body, mind and breath. It cannot be denied that these three realities are equally important for existence and that existence depends on their harmonious interconnection (Duerckheim, 2003). It is crucial the search for a method of training the know how to apply bodily and mental resources (Casadei, 2018). Probing the perception of one's own corporeity means, in the first instance, recognising oneself physically: what supports, makes move, act, live. Learning to find root and extension, learning to breathe, freeing the rhythm from tensions and resistances are the steps to take a position in existence and say «I am here, present!». This path starts with adjusting one's posture, in different situations (standing, walking, lying down, sitting). The aim is to know, experience and respect one's own corporeity and express following abilities: a) being able to settling correctly in space; b) being able to direct attention and keep it focused on the gesture (static or dynamic) that is performed; c) being able to listen to one's breath, to the more intimate and subtle movements till those further away. The references for doing this are precise, codified in a form: this satisfies the criterion of intelligence and effectiveness of the gesture. Through the form it is possible to find a model of information and inspiration while practicing; then to build a system of authentic learning that is transformation. Through repetition one internalises not only the gesture, but also a sensation of it. The body reveals how we live, how we feel, how we are. In conclusion, the work proposed here is aimed at sharing the need to create investigative devices that do not neglect rigorous scientific methodology (Mortari, 2017), on the one hand, and the actors (those who guide and those who follow) in their human wholeness, on the other. Above all, the work stems from the urgent need to create repertoires of viable and experimentable actions, transformative method (Formenti, 2017).

## Monitoring/evaluation of goals from a holistic approach

As a tool for assessing the satisfaction and relevance of this educational offer, a report is foreseen in which the participants of the laboratory are asked to reflect on the experience in relation to themselves and their own study course. The feedback received shows full satisfaction and the wish to continue. In particular, it is possible to summarise the reflections that emerged from the students by identifying the following needs: a) to improve awareness regarding the gesture of the body and the movement of attention; b) to be guided, in the professional training pathway, to a greater awareness of the interdependence between body, mind and breath; c) to be taught to have access to concrete tools and practices to improve the self-reflective capacity, useful in self-training as well as in professional training; d) to make use of training resources in the form of workshops, where one can train not only in terms of applying theories, but also in terms of exploring and experimenting oneself; e) to refine one's reflective skills on what one is doing. A holistic and transformative education is action-oriented, integrates content that teaches how to read the complexity of reality — promoting individual and social responsibility — and creates interactive teaching-learning environments (Mezirow, 2003); it equally values knowledge, skills, competences and behaviour so that the person can find the way to realise his/her humanity, and express his/her full integrity and uniqueness. (Krishnamurti, 1983). Education has a catalytic impact on the well-being of individuals and the future of the entire planet. Education is crucial to form individuals who are agents of positive change, promoting knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes. Education has the task of empowering learners to make informed decisions and act responsibly for their own and the environment's integrity. Education (and self-education) is a project for Life, engaged in a profound process of care. Human being needs to regain an authentic sense of reality that puts him/her in a deep connection with the world of which he/she is a part (Kronman, 2007). The usual patterns of mind within western pedagogical paradigm, in so far has been inclined to place a hierarchical value on intellectual learning, without taking sufficient account of the close link between education and life. The tendency to give preference to intellectual understanding brings the risk of contributing to a notionistic and fragmented knowledge, rather than promoting internalised, sensitive, creative and transformative knowledge. Human existence is complex and vast that it cannot be exhausted in description and definition. It is unfruitful forgetting that the disruptive force of ideas in order to bring about genuine change must find an act that makes it real. This is where the effectiveness of training the person lies: thinking, expressing and producing change. The logic of dialectical opposition that has prevailed throughout the development of scientific philosophical thought, predominantly in the West can find an opportunity for significant expansion, in comparison with the Eastern philosophical approach.

Eastern paradigm recognize equal relevance the constituent dimensions of the human being: body-mind-spirit. In this view, experience is valued as an exercise in knowledge, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of self-discovery and self-experimentation on the part of the subject who knows. The mind in opposition to the body has generated a gradual discrediting of the latter as a resource of exploration, knowledge and understanding and a lack of ability to intercept its expressive needs (Damasio, 1995). I believe that a meaningful way of encounter and acceptance can be represented by the aesthetic paradigm, which recognises corporeality as a learning resource. Corporeity is connected to the sensory universe and therefore to the instance of the aesthetic paradigm (Bruzzzone, 2016).

### Concluding remarks

The holistic transformative approach in education provides access to a vision broad enough to produce a new life project and transformative learning that enhances self-awareness in terms of the wholeness-unity of mind and body, the interconnectedness of human beings and the Cosmos (Laslo, 2002). Education itself could be conceived in terms of proactivity towards well-being, understood as consideration and protection for health, dignity, beauty and relationship. The holistic educational approach, centred on the concept of wholeness-globality (Boehm, 1983) seeks to avoid the exclusion of any potentially significant aspect of human experience; paying attention to the richness and complexity of life, it orients the promotion of learning environments towards integration and connection, rather than towards fragmented and divisive forms of knowledge. Sensory experience support observation, feeling and understanding of one's own wholeness, as it occurs (Caruana, 2000). The model here described could be good at re-crediting its own scientific legitimacy starting from the involvement of corporeity and its needs and languages of knowledge and expression; it is intended to be a viable method of education which, through corporeity, guides the person to access the entirety of his/her cognitive, exploratory and signifying potential in the I-world relationship, suggesting studies and exercise for a proactive attitude and a healthy way of life.

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