

PROCEEDINGS

Cultures, Practices,
and Change 02



third international conference
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

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and/
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Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

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Vol. 2

**Cultures,
Practices,
and Change**

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NON-HUMANS AT SCHOOL. BLACK-BOARDS, ROBOTS, PLATFORMS...

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Educational spaces are relational and material environments, characterized by unstable sociomaterial configurations, where humans and non-humans continuously interact. A posthumanist approach analyzes humans as entities interconnected with resources and material forces, expanding the boundaries of social analysis. Material and digital objects, such as blackboards and technologies, do not replace humans, but influence education and its practices. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS), this analysis explores how objects co-construct social and moral orders, with a focus on traditional technologies, robots, and digital platforms.

Education, STS, materiality, robots, digital platforms

PREMISE

Educational spaces are relational and material environments characterized by unstable and constantly changing sociomaterial configurations, shaped by the interaction between humans and non-humans (Nespor, 2012; Roehl, 2012; Fenwick & Landri, 2014; Landri & Viteritti, 2016; Orlikowski, 2007; Decuyper, 2019). This complexity requires an approach that transcends the humanist perspective by analyzing humans as relational entities interconnected with resources, material forces, and possible worlds. The boundaries of social analysis are thus expanded by including the often-overlooked contribution of non-human, inviting a shift towards a posthumanist perspective (Braidotti, 2014), where humans are part of heterogeneous networks. Materiality, often marginalized, is thus placed at the core of the educational discourse. Far from replacing humans, material and digital objects are considered allies that influence educational action and its consequences. Objects such as blackboards, desks, digital technologies, and platforms contribute to transforming educational spaces, curricula, practices, and policies, making visible the everyday work and relationships between materiality and humanity. Drawing on the approaches of Science and Technology Studies (STS), the analysis thus focuses on objects as co-constructors of social life, establishing and prescribing moral, social, and political orders. The aim is to foster a vision of the educational field that integrates both social and material aspects.

The following sections of this manuscript will explore: (1) traditional objects such as blackboards and registers and their digitalization, (2) robots as new sociotechnical tools that introduce innovative methods and challenges, and (3) digital platforms that are redefining educational environments in a neoliberal sense, particularly within the university context. The conclusions will provide cross-sectional reflections on the objects analyzed.

1. BLACKBOARDS AND REGISTERS IN SCHOOLS

The blackboard and the school register represent two emblematic objects of the educational space, whose evolution—from tradition to digital—reflects profound changes in educational practices and relationships.

The blackboard, originally a static and physical device, embodied a means of unidirectional knowledge transmission, a tool of moral and cognitive order. In Suchman's (1988) studies, the blackboard is seen as a relational space for visualization that mediates interaction between teacher and students, organizing signs and knowledge systematically. It thus becomes a cognitive territory and a space for collective confrontation, where the inscribed signs transform into tasks and future projects. With the introduction of the interactive whiteboard (IWB), its role undergoes a redefinition, from a static tool to a fluid and participatory device. The IWB enables the connection to external knowledge networks, opening up broader and more dynamic learning spaces. According to Sørensen (2009), it transforms into a platform for collective design, a place for confrontation and co-creation, fostering more horizontal and participatory practices. Far from being a simple tool, the IWB emerges as an active infrastructure that organizes interactions and shared standards, transcending the boundaries of the traditional classroom.

The school register, on the other hand, has undergone a transition from a private, paper-based, discretionary object to a public, standardized electronic register. Traditionally, the register was a moral device employed to monitor students' behaviors and performance, used with some discretion by teachers. Digitalized electronic register, on the other hand, stands as an informational infrastructure that redefines the relationship between school, families, and students. According to Albanese (2023), this object not only dematerializes its use but also becomes more invasive and present in daily school life. From a personal tool, the electronic register transforms into an official accountability device, influencing evaluation practices and teachers' time organization.

Both objects, analyzed through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), reveal how the interaction between humans and materiality produces distributed effects. While they confirm traditional knowledge transmission practices, they also introduce new forms of participation, inclusion, and sharing. These objects are not closed entities but components of heterogeneous networks undergoing phases of change, generating ambivalences and tensions. Their activation creates innovative learning spaces, yet uncertain and contradictory, where relational and material dynamics intertwine. The blackboard and register, both in their traditional and digital

forms, demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between technology and educational practices. Their evolution is not a mere technical adaptation but a socio-material process that should be observed for its ability to transform pedagogical practices and social relationships. These objects illuminate the need to view the educational field as a dynamic ecosystem, where materiality plays a crucial role in shaping experience and innovation.

2. ROBOTS IN SCHOOLS

A new complex object has recently entered educational practice: robots. Nao, a humanoid robot developed in 2006 by the French company Aldebaran, stands 58 cm tall and is equipped with cameras, touch sensors, microphones, and speakers that enable it to interact with its environment. This humanoid robot was introduced into schools in response to pressures from the EdTech market and national policies promoting the development of computational skills (Bers, 2020; Zeide, 2020). In this paragraph, we shall explore its use in educational practices, providing examples of how robots are translated into schools.

In the first case, we observe Nao being presented at a school fair, “Didacta” in Florence, in which schools entwine with the technology market. The company Campus Store, a leader in the event, displays various educational tools, including robots. The company’s engineer presents Nao as a highly programmable robot, emphasizing ease of use and its educational potential, particularly in teaching computational skills. Campus Store sold around 300 Nao robots between 2020 and 2022, supporting schools in their purchase and training on robot usage. Educational policies push for the adoption of these technologies as tools for digital skill development, creating alliances between the market, schools, and policies to support educational innovation.

In the second case, we see how Nao is concretely used in the classroom. In a workshop organized by a network of schools in the province of Rome, Flavio, a 10-year-old student, shares his experience of using the robot. However, Nao refuses to function during the demonstration. Flavio explains that the malfunction is due to connectivity issues, such as an unstable Wi-Fi connection. Despite the failure, he enthusiastically describes how Nao helped them in lessons, such as telling the story of the Pharaohs in history and testing their multiplication tables in math. Additionally, Flavio learned to program Nao using an application called Choregraphe, similar to games like Minecraft, which helped him understand programming concepts. This situation highlights how Nao is adapted to school practices and how students and teachers find solutions to malfunctions, raising awareness about the use of technology. Nao fits into an educational context that requires spatial and infrastructural adjustments, considering the limitations of schools. Despite this, new, often interdisciplinary practices emerge, where robots and technologies are used creatively.

Fairs, school events, and experiments show how the robot becomes visible and accessible to schools. Technologies, supported by educational policies, foster the

micro-privatization of school life, with the introduction of technological objects into classrooms. Ongoing research suggests a complex framework where objects like Nao, with their materiality, influence sociotechnical networks, creating tangible effects in the educational sphere. The sociomaterial approach allows exploration of how these objects become non-human actors in educational practices, with significant effects on how schools evolve.

3. DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN UNIVERSITIES

Digital objects have become central elements in universities, profoundly influencing their practices. These technological artifacts mediate all academic activities, creating connections between human and non-human actors such as multimedia whiteboards, EdTech platforms, software, and academic rankings. This complex landscape comprises visible objects, such as computers and projectors, and hidden ones, like cables and servers, interacting in an environment where the boundaries between digital and analog often blur (Jandrić et al., 2018). This entanglement involves heterogeneous actors, contributing to the formation of a complex university ecosystem.

The STS approach provides a fruitful lens to explore the relationship between universities and digital objects. Scholarship focusing on data studies and artificial intelligence highlight how digital technologies may strongly influence higher education, fueling platformization, standardization, and datafication processes (Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). The posthuman perspective sees the university as an entanglement of relationships, rather than a system of rigid boundaries (Taylor, 2018). From this viewpoint, technological materialities within the university are not neutral but form complex ecologies that act as actors capable of producing significant effects on educational practices (Piromalli, 2023).

Four critical issues emerge in the relationship between universities and educational objects. First, digital technologies tend to rationalize education. As Neil Selwyn observes, digital systems act as “systems of social rationality”, creating an “institutional order” that limits available options. In many cases, digital technologies do not simply “disrupt” educational practice but rather tend to consolidate traditional models and grammars such as rigid platforms for instructional design that restrict innovation. Second, the use of digital systems in universities is strongly tied to issues of power and control. Technologies fuel “neoliberal anxiety” (Espeland & Sauder, 2016) and the logics of new public management, as evidenced by rankings among researchers and universities, performance indices, and global metrics. These may become governance tools, fostering organizing processes and practice in higher education based on performance and comparison. This process might distort university culture fabricating a vision of education that emphasizes measurability and comparability, often at the expense of more inclusive and diversified approaches. A third issue concerns the emergence of continuous surveillance practices through the use of digital objects (i.e., “dataveillance”). Technologies are sometimes used in (higher) education to monitor, order, and control the activities

of students and faculty by analyzing data related to performance, behaviors, and progress. Algorithms are used to predict and segment students' futures, such as predictive algorithms that identify "at-risk" students to apply specific intervention strategies (Williamson et al., 2023). Finally, another critical aspect concerns the extraction of profit from user data by EdTech companies. These companies exploit student data for economic and political purposes, as highlighted by the concept of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017); for example, during the pandemic, many Italian universities accepted free use of EdTech software, allowing "big tech" companies to gain economic and political advantages. This "soft privatization" phenomenon has led universities to rely on private software that generates revenue through data usage.

The use of digital technologies in universities thus establishes a contested space in which technological interconnectedness accelerates marketization processes, leading to a seemingly irresistible exacerbation of neoliberal and neo-managerial logics in educational and academic practices and logics. However, it remains important to remember that digital systems are inherently vulnerable and subject to constant negotiation – despite the apparent stability of their constituents and the discourses they incorporate. Therefore, rather than viewing these objects as fixed and unchanging, we should act upon them as "epistemic objects" (Knorr-Cetina, 2001), that is, as actors always subject to change and reinterpretation through different or alternative points of view (Lumino & Landri, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

The educational field is characterized by interconnected analog and digital objects that are not neutral and interact daily in the formation of practices, values, and cultures within heterogeneous networks of human and non-human actors. These artifacts link education to complex external social networks, such as businesses, institutions, technology markets, and policies, with significant implications for pedagogical practices. Sociomaterial analysis highlights how the materiality of objects influences the educational field, creating tensions between politics, the labor market, and the EdTech market, blurring the boundaries between digital surveillance and the use of data for student empowerment (van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018; Landri, 2018). Technical objects exert transformative power both in the visions they help to construct and in the everyday practice of students and teachers.

This implies the need for continuous training for educators and practitioners, providing them with a cultural understanding of the central role of objects in school life. This reflection must actively involve all actors in the educational system to anticipate the scenarios of interconnections created by technology. Moreover, there is a strong link between the introduction of technological objects, educational policies, and the technology market, all of which are transforming the educational arena. The pressure from technology markets on educational imaginaries is increasing, and objects are becoming mandatory steps for building the education of the future. Educational policies and institutions must be aware of the growing

dependence on the technology market. The adoption of educational technologies involves significant economic commitments and presents risks, such as fueling technological inequalities or underutilizing technologies due to insufficient teacher competencies. Technical objects must be introduced in a user-friendly and negotiated manner, avoiding impositions from the market or policies. Finally, an approach focusing on the materiality of educational objects helps to overcome transmissive conceptions of learning, instead promoting social processes centered around a relational view of learning. This approach requires the critical and reflective participation of educational communities.

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