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Turtles, fairy tales and pen-friends

Enhancing socialisation, self-reliance and creativity in an Italian primary school

The following is the story of a journey undertaken in the first months of 1997 in a small primary school in the village of Panico, 20 kilometres south of Bologna, in Italy. It is a very modern story, with a beginning, and with an open end. The story stops when the traveller has to abandon her journey, so that she can tell others the story of her journey. Actually, the story is not even a story, but an impressionistic journal seeking to capture the ever-changing movements of a complex universe. Its subjectivity may even make it resemble to fiction more than to a scientific report. But that is a matter of conventions. The story is true. And like in most fictions telling a true story, there is a postface. A postface usually aims at reassuring the audience that the story ended the way it should: the good lived happily ever after and the evil was defeated. Or, in more social awareness raising stories, it may aim at reinforcing the general feeling induced by the narration, be it positive or negative. Neither is the case in this story. You will see why.

The characters¹:

Patrizia	<i>The teacher of mathematics and science</i>
Roberta	<i>The teacher of English</i>
Annamaria	<i>The teacher of history, geography and education to artistic expression</i>
Astra, Caterina C., Caterina S, Davide, Debora F., Debora Z., Denis, Giulia, Ilaria, Lorenza B., Lorenza R., Matteo, Mara, Pietro, Rosaria, Tommaso.	<i>The fourth grade children</i>
Annalisa, Claudia, Filippo, Francesco, Gianluca, Giorgio, Irene, Marcello, Marina, Silvia.	<i>The fifth grade children</i>
Rossella	<i>The researcher</i>

My first day in Panico

¹ Contrary to usual practices, I decided to leave the real names of the different characters, partly on their demand and partly to honour their work. Only the names of the children have been changed, in order to respect the anonymity of the infant.

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Waking up

6:30 a.m.: the alarm clock cries out its rooster song. Why do schools start so early? Especially in winter, when it is still so dark, and cold. Is it to educate children to severe discipline? To initiate them through sufferance to their ascent to socialisation? To convey obedience, even when orders appear illogical? Or was it just an insomniac civil servant, envious of all those who can sleep? In Italy, the initial question must have been formulated like one of those mathematical problems you ask to young children to test their competence in computing: "Given that we have lunch at 1 o'clock p.m. (and that it is a sacred moment of family reunion), at what time shall we start school in order to have the daily five hours of classes, established by the law?". I doubt 8 o'clock was decided to allow parents to see their children to school before going to work. Mothers in Italy began to work relatively massively much later than the starting time for school was "ministerially" decided. Actually, each school has some autonomy to establish it between 8 o'clock and 8:45. The primary school "Mario Musolesi" in the village of Panico starts at 8:30 a.m. That means for me: taking the train at 8:17 and be only ten minutes late. Acceptable. The alternative: be fifty minutes early and wait outside. In February, it is not advised.

The journey

The train leaves on time (it still surprises me any time it happens in my home country, but I would not allow any foreigner to express the same remark). First stop: the once village of Borgo Panigale, a working class area in the Northwest of Bologna, in the plane, now a prolongation of the city. Industries (Ducati motorcycles), the Cemetery, hosting all the citizens of Bologna who cannot access the central and more ancient Certosa, for reasons of "overpopulation". And semi-tall square buildings, in the impersonal (and criminal) style of the sixties, next to what were once small one floor family houses of farmers, now urbanised. It is foggy, the thick fog of the plane in winter time. I can describe the landscape by heart, because I've seen it hundreds of times. Then, Casalecchio di Reno, on the West of Bologna. The train turns South, towards the beginning of the Apennine mountains, the landscape becomes less depressing. The fog dissolves and the sun comes out, quite glorious... Pontecchio and Sasso Marconi (where Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the radio, was born, lived and experimented in his patrician villa). The hills becoming sharper and sharper, looking almost like mountains. The railway track becoming a single one... The big paper industry on the right: we must be arriving at Lama di Reno. Yes, but which side does one get off? I can't see the station, nor the sidewalk. While trying to force the left hand door, I happen to see Patrizia, outside her car at the railroad level crossing, obviously waiting for me, making signs in my direction and trying to tell me... I guess I should get off from the other side. I jump on my right, hold the handle, turn it. The door opens... and immediately closes again, the whistle having already signalled the immediate train departure. I squeeze myself in between, I twist my arm in the effort, I safely (but clumsily) touch the ground. The adventure has started.

Patrizia

Patrizia came to pick me up to spare me the 5 minutes of steep road leading to the school, at the entrance of the very small and narrow village of Panico. "At least the first day!" — she smiles at me. I have met her only once before, at a voluntary training session for the teachers involved in the Kidslink project.

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The Kidslink project

Launched in 1990 by two researchers in astrophysics in the National Council for Research (CNR) based in Bologna, on a pure voluntary basis, Kidslink original aim was to link some of the schools of the city and province of Bologna, through the server of the CNR, to allow the children to exchange messages on themes that particularly interested them, with children all over the world.

The success of the experience and the enthusiasm shown by a lot of teachers (and by the children) made it possible to overcome the numerous financial and structural problems: the experience is growing in number of spontaneously participating schools and richness of activities.

For further information, see the kidslink web site at: <http://kidslink.bo.cnr.it>.

Patrizia arrived in this school fifteen years ago, fresh of her "Diploma magistrale". She started working with computers in 1992, found some initial perplexity from her colleagues, when not resistance (computers = computer games). But then she managed to involve some of them and actually gained their enthusiasm. They all then joined the Kidslink project two years later. She teaches mathematics and sciences in the fourth and the fifth grade. She also teaches a seminar on sexual education, in the framework of a wider project on identity formation, developed by the school.

I liked her energy and her modesty, I guess. She is a fighter, she has ideas, I said to myself. I also liked the thought of going to a small rural school. A sort of war front against bureaucracy (which plays with numbers and sub-divides the day by drawing lines on a piece of paper: school from 8:00 a.m. to 1 p.m., lunch from 1:00 to 3:00, homework from...). A place which risks to be suppressed for having too few children and not being classified as a mountain area by ministerial criteria ("where the pine trees grow" — textual definition of the project of law for the areas above 600 metres from sea level). Not 600 metres, only 250. A place in which purchasing pens, erasers and colours may turn out as an epic enterprise. Usually a self-financed one. Not to mention computers. "We are very poorly equipped" – she said to me. "But we try our best with what we have". She said it without pride, but with that ironic smile that only the peoples that have long lived in penury can have. The sort of irony that only the peoples used to baffling institutional authorities, perceived so distant from them, can have. That irony so frequent in Italy.

That's why I chose her school. I knew it would be interesting to match this experience against the slogans of the public discourse makers. It would at last allow me to make some sense, one of the many possible, out of the hollow formulas filling the marketing campaign for the advent of the Information Society (capital letters, of course, like the Age of Bronze): accessibility, democracy, cost-effectiveness... Virtues attributed by the technocratic discourse to New Communication Technologies, as their constitutive qualities. No matter the context, the experience, the philosophy underpinning... Let's go as far as possible – I said to myself – from the dominant discourse that bureaucrats and lazy journalists produce, in exchange for more or less high salaries, popularity, or simply survival.

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Patrizia was happy that day, when I told her that I would like to choose her school as one of the Italian Mailbox fieldwork. She was surprised: "Oh, but it is certainly not the most advanced experience... even the walls are crumbling down there...". "That is why!" – I answered.

Patrizia parks the car in front of the school. She had left the children alone in the classroom (the fifth grade, that morning: five boys and five girls aged 10). Without introducing me to them (but everybody happily is greeting me, as if they knew who I am), she advises me to go to the fourth grade, where they are receiving the e-mails from Manchester in that very moment, during the class of English. "Patti", as the children calls her, then takes back her class of mathematics.

Finding my place in the fourth grade

It is difficult to trespass the classroom door, not knowing what it will be like to interfere, in one way or another, in the lesson. Roberta, the English teacher, is sitting on the teacher's table, legs floating in the air. She greets me with one hand and smiles (I had also previously met her the same afternoon when I met Patrizia). She does not interrupt what she is explaining: why e-mail addresses are so long and what each part means. All the children turn simultaneously their heads as I walk in (they are sitting in the traditional way, by two rows of double desks, all facing the teacher's position). They look at me, smile, exchange comments with their neighbour. The majority of girls is striking: eleven against three boys. (I will find out later that boys are actually five and two of them are ill that day). Roberta indicates with a glance an empty seat in the last row at the extreme right. I sit, next to a little girl, who seems somewhat proud and honoured. My knees do not quite fit in the space between the chair and the little table. A giant in Lilliput Land.

As I sit, one girl from the left, comes right up to me: "My name is Lorenza. You know, today it is my birthday!". I almost do not dare answer. I want to stay external, and I do not want to distract them from the lesson. Roberta does not pay any attention on Lorenza's wanderings. And Lorenza returns spontaneously to her seat. Then, a funny procession starts to the trash basket next to me. Children come to sharpen their pencils, or to throw away pieces of paper. When they do not go to the basket, they go to their backpacks, lying on the floor against the right wall of the room, just next to where I am. They take out something from their bags, or they simply look inside, or pretend to look for something. And then, they pass very close to me... Maybe they just want to "smell" me. Certainly, they are trying to guess something about who on earth I am, and what I am writing without stopping since I came in.

And in fact, I am taking notes furiously on all I see. The sense of duty, of course, but also the sense of surprise: I had not set a foot in a primary school since my last day in the fifth grade, that was sometime in June 1972. Although nothing seems to have changed in the classical disposition of desks and teachers (but I will see later that the geometry in this school is extremely variable, according to the activities), the atmosphere is completely different. All the children are talking at the same time, either to their neighbour, or to Roberta, calling her "Robbi", and not "Madam". They move freely in the classroom. Only when the chaos becomes unbearable, Roberta joins her hands in the sporty sign of "time-out", without pronouncing a word, but fixing with her big green eyes the throbbing crowd, and by miracle, the "order" is reconstituted... until the next "time out".

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The children progressively stop seeking for pretexts to come up to me. They just come. Roberta lets them do it, still continuing explaining what is going to happen in the next hour: she will go to the "computer room", the one in which the computer linked to the Net is, fetch the messages arrived from Manchester, and distribute them in each one's mailbox. Then, they will try to understand them, alone, with the help of the dictionary (only one for the whole classroom), or with her help, when they can't make it otherwise. When they are finished, they will go three by three (because there are three computers) to the fifth grade classroom and they will write their answers directly at the computers...

The position of the "invisible" observer becomes more and more uncomfortable and surrealistic. I now dare smile them back, answer their questions about my notes, I even make jokes at my obsessive writing. A game of mutual seduction has started. Until the last day of my observation, on the 18 of April, girls will secretly invite me to improvised dancing shows in a corner of the garden, only for me. They will make up, with the excuse of Carnival, like I make up. They will write embarrassing declarations of admiration on the blackboard during the breaks. The boys, more discrete, will not stop to "spy" my movements and conceal their interest with a manly nonchalance. Styles are different.

As to myself, totally seduced by their energy, their *joie de vivre* and their seduction game, I will try not to deceive them until the end. Finally abandoned the mask of the imperturbable researcher, I will play the card of affectivity with great satisfaction and a strong sense of liberation.

The school

The steep road leading to the school allows a breath-taking view of the valley, becoming narrower and narrower southward, towards Tuscany: several paper industries, farms, the river, and the railway crossing the fields and leading to Porretta thermal baths, in the Apennine mountains. On the opposite side of the valley from where the school is, there stands the castle of the Counts of Panico. Panico belongs to the municipality of Marzabotto, a town which is one of the martyr symbol of the Nazi oppression, since the large massacre of the civil population and partisans during World War II. Marzabotto is also known for its Etruscan necropolis.

After a dramatic curve, the school appears. The building is small, a one-floor construction, shabby yellow walls outside, peeling off, a peeled off courtyard and a very steep slope, with grass. Inside, five classrooms for 6 to 10 years old children. Children are not numerous, ranging from a minimum of 4 (!) to a maximum of 18 pupils per class. Grey walls, rather cracking. "Take a photo of the wall, before it falls down!" – Giorgio, 10 years, once "advised" me.

The shorter arm of the corridor, in the form of an "L", has been set up as the "Library". Full of books in Italian and English, which the children can take freely, on condition of bringing them back. On the shelves, also lots of drawings, cardboard colourful characters and posters made by the children. These illustrate different historical periods (the Romans, The Middle Ages...), a road

crossing for the seminar on "civic education - traffic rules", the adventures of Wilko the rabbit², who has been hiding messages here and there in the whole area of the village and down at the river. These messages were to reveal the children his secrets and teach them important things. Wilko the rabbit has now left them to go to another school, where they needed his help. (It was of course the teachers who were actually hiding those messages for the children so that they could find them in periodically organised "treasure hunts"). The children know it, and that enrages Annamaria, the teacher of history, geography and education to artistic expression: "This is not a fairy tale. Wilko the rabbit has really been here! And has now left us because we do not need him anymore!" — I once saw her literally shouting at the children. And turning to me, overplaying her despair: "There is no more poetry in this world!". A big rectangular table lies in the centre of the Library.

Next to the more "traditional" pedagogical activities (Italian, history, geography, mathematics, English, sciences, education to artistic expression) some special projects are developed and integrated in the curriculum. They include identity formation and sexual education, civic education and all the activities related to the use of e-mail and computers. These activities are organised in mixed sub-groups, gathering children from different grades. For lack of space, some of these activities end up taking place in the Library.

Seen through external eyes, the Library corner has nothing very special from the architectural point of view. But through the children's eyes, things are different. They are all extremely proud of it and many of them, in their interviews, told me that "it is the most beautiful place after the garden!". "E' bellissima!". And I can understand that: it is their achievement, a victory of colours and creativity over an anonymous and grey space. Their colonisation of an invisible beauty. A space of freedom, in which classes take place around the large table from which anybody can freely take the word and cross each other's eyes... I would not be surprised to find out that "how to make a Library" was one of the secrets delivered by Wilko the rabbit.

The school has chosen to prolong the traditional half day of classes imposed by the Ministry regulation. Four days a week, children can stay in school in the afternoon, to take part to the special projects. All the children, with no exception, do it. A canteen is organised in the neighbouring kindergarten. Teachers and children sit around big tables organised mainly by classes. Two of them volunteer each time to serve to their classmates the food prepared by two big "mamas", who are a tribute to the perpetuation of Italian stereotypes. Food is simple and delicious, I can confirm. And the level of noise rather high.

With the pretext of "tempo pieno" (full time), the teachers can spare children the traditional enormous quantity of homework afflicting the Italian school. As Annamaria explains with her usual passionate tone: "School must also make up for the possible weaknesses of parents... Children go back home, they have a research to do. Some parents may not even have an encyclopaedia. Children of professionals, doctors, architects are usually privileged... It is my task, as a teacher, to provide them with the tools to do certain tasks. I do not see why children should do it at home. I

² A character of a fairy tale.
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am not saying that parents should not care, but not all have an adequate preparation. Children need tools to understand meanings, to grasp contexts, put them in perspective... It is a task for teachers, not for the children alone, nor their parents: these have already their problems to go to work and manage the whole house...".

What is interesting is that children are happy to stay in school the afternoon. They are happy to be in this school. They think that it is a special school "because teachers are cute, nice and less rigid than in other schools". "Because, when we do not understand, they do not get angry and they explain it again until we do understand it". Their only concern is about the aesthetics of the school. They are almost obsessive with the precarious state of the building. They would like to fix the walls ("one of these days they will fall down over our heads!"), make the toilets nicer, repaint the external walls... have a big football court, "like our friends in Manchester!". On this last point, they are unanimous, boys and girls. By ministerial decree, they would not even be allowed to play football in the school courtyard... but they do. Of course they do.

The Constitution

When Wilko the rabbit left, someone else had to provide the guiding lines for life in the school (and outside). It was time for the children themselves to take this responsibility. With the help of Annamaria, "Annina", as the children call her, they elaborated the Constitution of the school.

THE CONSTITUTION

Fundamental Principle

Be a friend to a child even if s/he is not of the same sex, race, religion, physical and financial condition; it is a child like you.

Art. 1

Everybody has the right to learn, remembering that also his/her schoolmate has the same right.

Art. 2

Do not make fun at the teacher when s/he turns her/his back, nor at your classmates.

Art. 3

Walk calmly in all school rooms, remembering not to disturb.

Art. 4

Respect one's own and others' possessions.

Art. 5

Do not make heavy jokes, nor use heavy words because they certainly harm friendship.

Art. 6

Remember to leave the school clean. When you come back, you will find it clean.

Art. 7

When you are in the courtyard, play with your schoolmates and do not hide, do not stay alone.

Art. 8

Every child has the right to respect the order of the raised hand.

Art. 9

Do not be arrogant if you do not like your school mate opinion: respect it, talk about it with her/him and find an agreement.

Art. 10

When we vote, let's do it with objectivity: the result, approved by majority, must be accepted by all without question.

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Art. 11

The above law articles can be modified and enlarged upon decision of the majority.

Art. 12

Not to respect the above articles is punishable by law:

- be sent out of classroom
- write several times the same sentence
- not to go out during the break
- write a self reprimand.

President: Denis

Vice-President: Lorenza R.

What is interesting about the Constitution is, first and foremost, the genuine language employed (which is certainly somehow lost in this self-made translation). It is a language coming from the "base". I can visualise the collective discussions leading to the formulation of the articles: Annamaria questioning the children, leading their reasoning, but finally leaving them to find the final phrasing. Annamaria playing with them and with the importance of the issue, with irony ... arguing with them, alert them against their laziness and lack of imagination, mumbling and provoking. And the children amused, taking the issue seriously precisely because it is a game...

The technological equipment available and its localisation in space

When I first arrived in Panico, the technological equipment was rather poor. There were only four computers for the whole school. Two of them had been purchased with money raised through the organisation of school parties by teachers and children. The computer and the modem for the connection had been purchased through a donation of the municipality of Marzabotto.

The three computers without connection were located in the fifth grade class, for lack of space, while the "special" computer stood alone in a "special" room (1m50 x 1m50, windowless). The access to that room was usually allowed by the teacher to the group of children in charge of sending the messages via e-mail and all the written works to the partner schools, on Thursday afternoons. But when one of the three computers in the fifth grade classroom began having serious problems even to get started, the access to that room was allowed to children also in normal school hours, accompanied or not by the teacher. Needless to say, it was considered a special honour by the children to get the keys of the 1,50m x 1,50m room.

Towards the end of the school year, there was a donation of three additional computers, following the annual exhibition of schools showing their works developed on or around computers³. Four computers have been located in the fifth grade classroom and three in the "special" room. This has been made accessible to all pupils during normal school hours⁴.

³ "Scuola 3.0", since this was the third year of the exhibition.

⁴ The situation has changed once more since I wrote this journal (see Postface).

The presence of the computers in the fifth grade means that, from time to time (i.e. almost every day), the teacher and the children in the fifth grade "allow the visit" of the children from other classes to let them answer to their correspondents, while the fifth grade pupils continue their regular activities. This also implies a complicate rotation by groups per week, denominated by colours (the green week, the red week, the blue...). The complex articulation between regular classes and sub-group activities is illustrated on colourful posters made by the children and hanging on the walls of the fourth and the fifth grade classrooms. In this complicate organisation, the children seem to be more in control than the teachers. It is not rare to see one of the teachers entering a classroom, looking rather lost and mumbling to herself: "Where am I supposed to be now?". And the children promptly answering with amusement, without even looking up the chart...

Some sketches of activities

Without computers...

During my stay in Panico, I did not concentrate my observations only on the activities involving or connected to the use of e-mail and computers in general. I wanted to breathe the "air" of the school and felt the variations of its density. I was haunted by the easiness of operating equations between the use of computers and the rise of a new learning paradigm.

I do not believe in cause-effect relationships between the simple introduction of a computer in a class and changes in the organisation towards more flexibility (accessibility, democracy, individualisation, etc.). I feel that some circumspection is due. The observations carried out in different contexts (primary and secondary schools, Italy and Belgium) makes me believe that technology and its uses seem rather to reflect the potential allowed by the system (the educational system and that of the specific school), than to be an automatic factor of change of the system itself.

I believe that the ways in which teachers and children "invent" their uses of information and communication technologies, the ways in which they make them their own, reflect the ways the political culture of a society, mediated by the school system, is maintained and changed. They do contribute to constitute it, as well. But not independently from the extent allowed by the system.

The introduction of ICT in school practices is not in itself a causal factor of change, but it may stimulate a re-thinking of pedagogical activities, organisational modes and roles within a classroom. It can be, in a way, a perturbing factor of well-established and almost unquestionable practices. It can even be a factor of destabilisation of the whole architecture of the school system. Or it can be an effective stimulant for teachers and children to take positive actions for change. Sometimes it simply may turn out to be a change in the classroom décor.

The appropriation of innovation by people is a very complex process: formulas such as IT = democracy, IT = transparency, IT = access can only belong to the marketing campaign. One should not confuse products: ICT are not the magic powder you dissolve into still water to make it

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bubble. It is no chemical reaction. The integration of ICT in school is a matter of cuisine, where no recipe book is available. It needs time and devotion. Passion and pleasure. It certainly needs faith, to stand the inevitable failures. It is a creative act, and as such, it opens a breach to observe the organisational patterns within a determined school setting. Indirectly, within a determined educational system... and within a determined cultural context. It is a breach through which one can observe new dynamics of relationship among the actors involved: children and teachers, children among themselves, and teachers among themselves. This belief, expressed in a polemic tone after 10 years of attendance of Community programmes, led me to focus my observation also on the "normal" activities in the school, those not involving the use of computers. Here are some little stories.

Silvia's lecture of history

Silvia is 10 years old. She is polite, lively, friendly to everybody, responsible and mature. Scrupulous, but not pedantic. Only child, her mother works at the paper factory in Lama di Reno, while her father sells acoustic devices in Bologna. Outside school time, she dances (classical), and play sports, especially volley ball. She is a very good pupil, in all subjects, and she likes them all, "especially English and Maths... and all the works at the computer, of course". She enjoys coming to school very much, "because it is amusing". She speaks extremely fast (she is slightly ashamed of it), with an appropriate choice of words, a rich vocabulary, a very good syntax (a rare quality for Italians, even when they are adults).

That day, I return to Panico in the afternoon, after having visited the secondary school in the morning. At 2:00 p.m., the door of the fifth grade is open: I go in. Silvia is sitting at the teacher's desk, "lecturing" her classmates in history: the French Revolution. Annamaria is sitting in one of the "Lilliput" desks at the bottom of the classroom. She invites me to sit with a gesture of her head in one of the free mini-chairs.

Silvia is speaking fluently and fast. She looks perfectly assured. An outstanding performance. She even allows herself some jokes and some laughs at her own "erudition", to de-dramatise it. Annamaria interrupts her every once in a while to ask her a question, to make sure Silvia understands what she is talking about, and maybe also to slow down the pace and keep the class interested. The rest of the class is listening carefully, a part from Francesco, in the first row. He is a "difficult" child, going from very apathetic behaviours, to frantic ones, like banging his head against the desk, moving his arms up in the air... Sometimes he behaves absolutely normally. The class ignores his agitated performance.

Then, it is Silvia herself who interrupts her vertiginous flow of words, to ask a question: "You know, Annamaria, this is not very clear to me...". Annamaria invites the others to help Silvia to understand. Two or three interpretations come from her classmates. Whenever Silvia employs a "difficult word", Annamaria invites the others to look it up in the big dictionary on the teacher's desk. It is obvious that she is trying to avoid the trap of "notionism". She solicits discussion and tries to transmit a pleasure in dialogue. She encourages the children to make parallels with the present social situation in Italy. She asks: "What is politics?". Several answers: "to manage well", "those ones we see on television"... None of the answers is sanctioned negatively. Francesco

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continues his frantic movements, imitating the gestures of Annamaria. Nobody is paying him any attention. In a moment of general distraction, he puts his pen in Silvia's ear. "Ahi!". Annamaria does not react shouting (quite surprisingly to me). She simply asks Francesco, very calmly, whether he thinks it is a great gesture to put his pen in Silvia's ear. Francesco gives no answer. Annamaria goes on asking him whether he sees it as a sign of respect towards one of his classmates. Francesco whispers a "no" without looking up. "Well, then I think you should apologise to her". He shyly turns to Silvia: "I am sorry". Silvia answers politely: "It is OK". Francesco calms down.

The lesson continues. Silvia finishes her lecture, in the general approval of the class. Now Annamaria, on the basis of what has just been discussed, talks of the Italian institutional system, from the President, down to the school system. Filippo intervenes with a smile: "... and we are the Third State!". General laughs. Annamaria asks the class whether anybody would like to ask questions to Silvia. Silence. Then... Francesco raises his hand: "What was the character of Napoleon like?". Silvia answers, showing also a good sense of humour. Then, all the following questions from the class will be about Napoleon.

All of a sudden, the classroom is invaded by Patrizia and a group of children from the fourth grade. Annamaria invites Silvia to regain her seat. "Brava! It was a very interesting lesson. Ah, could the others be inspired by you!" — she laughs. Silvia laughs too, as everybody else does. A moment of general confusion follows. The teachers need to reconstitute the different sub-groups and allocate them to the different activities and classrooms. The children make jokes at the teachers, who look puzzled and lost, as usual, and who maybe overplay it to amuse the children. Roberta, who has also joined the crowd in the meantime, smiles at me: "At least, these children will find their marks in the chaos of life!".

What is a cell?

The seminar on identity and sexual education: a mixed subgroup. Eight children: four from the fourth grade and four from the fifth. The former session had been on "The seeds of life: spermatozoids and ovules", explained with the help of a video cartoon. Patrizia proposes the children a research on "what is a cell?". She divides them in two groups and asks them to arrange the furniture accordingly. The children autonomously decide to arrange four desks contiguously in each group, so as to form a bigger table, and they sit around it. When they are ready, Patrizia tells them that, of course, it would not be difficult to take a book and read it loudly. But it is not what she wants. She wants them to make a research. And to make a research, they need to consult different sources, and then confront their opinions on what they read. She gives them several school texts on sciences for the upper secondary level. "I know they are difficult. But that will make you work more on the meaning of what you read and you will not take things for granted. Here is a dictionary, if you do not understand. And here is me, I am here to help... Now, get organised: each group has to choose the way it is going to work!".

The children get excited. They look up in the books to find the chapters on the cell. They immediately start writing down the "funny" names they find: "NU-CLEO-LO", "CI-TO-PLA-SMA"... They make jokes, *contrespetries*...

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Patrizia approaches the group formed by Giulia and Ilaria (4th grade), Marina and Claudia (5th grade). She asks them what they have found out. Giulia reads out loud. Patrizia asks them with a smile: "And what does it mean?". They all laugh. "Oh, it is easy" — says Ilaria. And she reads the text again... The four girls laugh. "We do not know!" — Giulia admits. Patrizia laughs also. "I know, it would help you to see a cell, a real one, but we are not rich enough to buy a powerful microscope... But there is a solution. There is a cell we can see with our eyes. Do you know what?". Silence and perplexity. Suspense. "The egg!" — Patrizia exclaims. "The egg!?" — they all repeat, incredulous. "Think and try to find the correspondences for each of those difficult funny names with each part of the egg. And then write and draw on your piece of paper". Then, Patrizia moves to the other group.

The children work and discuss with enthusiasm. They continue to make jokes, they explain complicated passages in the texts to each other, they attribute their tasks, they write, write and draw... It is 12:25: Patrizia asks them to get ready because it is time for them to go home (on Wednesday there is no school in the afternoon). A general choir erupts: "Nooo!". "We want to continue". The bell rings. They are still writing. "Come on, we will finish next time". Definitely, times have changed!

Cells & identity

The "lesson" on the cell is part of the seminar on sexual education and identity formation. Here are the chapters that each child is collecting in a single booklet, with texts, drawings and photos, either developed in group works or individually:

- My identity
- I am like...
- I am different...
- Our considerations
- Being males, being females
- Sex and words
- Female organs
- Male organs
- Paper by Giulia and Ilaria
- Paper by Lorenza B. and Lorenza R.
- Paper by Marina and Claudia
- Paper by Denis and Annalisa (when it comes!)
- The seeds of life

Hello, my name is... how are you from?

One of the obsessions in language courses, we all know, is the famous question on one's geographical origin. Together with age, time, weather and food. The children are sitting in circle on the floor and Roberta hangs her legs from the teacher's table, as usual. All the desks have been pushed on the sides of the classroom, to allow the children to make a spacious circle. They are playing a game, in English. Each child introduces him/herself and asks his/her neighbour the

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famous question: "where are you from?". "Please invent, think of Spotty's video" — Roberta encourages them half in Italian and half in English. "Should it be a country or a city?" — questions one child, rigorously in Italian. They decide for a city. Roberta joins the circle on the ground. The rule is: to speak when it is one's turn, or if they cannot really retain themselves, they should limit their interventions to necessary ones. Whoever breaks the rule, will have to sit back at his/her desk.

"Hello, my name is Lorenza. Where are you from?". "My name is Lorenza (giggling, because the name is the same). I'm from... I'm from... I'm from Sidney". Roberta interrupts: "Where is Sidney?". An animated debate starts among the children. "Is it in Europe?". "Nooo!" — they say in choir. "Is it in Asia?". "Nooo!". "Is it in America?". There, you can see some hesitation on some faces. Others nod. Others shakes their head. Roberta stands up and gets out of the classroom. She comes back two minutes later with a world map. The children stand up and rush to the map. "It is in Australia!" — Mara says triumphantly... The circle is reconstituted. "Hello. My name is...". The game continues. The children express all their disappointment whenever a classmate says the name of the city they also had thought about.

"Hello. My name is Ilaria. *How* are you from?". General laughs. "WHERE! NOT: how!" — the children shout in choir. Ilaria laughs, taps her head and repeats the question, correctly this time. "My name is Caterina. I'm from Notre Dame". General perplexity. "But, is it a city?" — Davide asks. Roberta is laughing. "Nooo, it is a place in Paris!" — Matteo proudly announces. "I have been in Paris!" — Mara informs the class with a joyous exclamation... It is Denis' turn. His neighbour is Roberta. "Shall I ask it to you?", meaning: "you, the teacher!?". And Roberta: "Why, am I so different from you?". Everybody laughs, Denis asks his question, overplaying contrition and embarrassment. "If an Australian comes here, he would be sleepy, *poverino*⁵..." — Astra considers pensively, but loudly. Something must have been turning over and over in her head since the beginning of the game.

That gives Roberta a good pretext to pass to the next exercise. They put back the desks in the traditional position and sit back. They have to draw two clocks on their exercise book, indicating the time they want. Ilaria says to Roberta she will put the time of the morning break. She laughs at her cleverness. When they finish, Roberta asks them to stand up and "choose two different friends to whom they will ask "what is the time?" and who will have to answer on the basis of the drawings they have done". A crazy rush starts in the classroom. Everybody going to his/her best friends and "reserving" them as partners for the exercise, before others could do it. These are important circumstances to show one's own faithfulness, I guess. It is interesting: nobody is excluded from the excited "market". Also Rosaria, who arrived from the South of Italy only three months before, is well demanded. Denis comes to me and asks me to be one of his partners. I refuse with a smile. Roberta strolls in the classroom, from little group to little group, to pick up what they are saying. When the noise is really too loud, she stops and starts looking with her "terrible glance". Children cannot really see her, but apparently they can feel her. She joins her

⁵ Poor thing!
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hands in the sign of "time out", and by miracle, it does not take more than ten seconds to restore a relative peace.

Third exercise: match pictures with sentences on the text-book. They can work in pair, if they wish, or alone. "But sit down properly, please. It looks as if you were sitting at a wine bar!". Denis cries out: "Huh! I like this exercise. It is written like in the computer!". I do not know what he means exactly... but I know the moment to receive their e-mails from Manchester is approaching. Maybe, it was just a way to make an association... you know, like the story of the sleepy Australian.

... and with computers

Computers arrived in Panico in 1992. They have been massively integrated in the normal school activities since 1995. The fourth and the fifth grade are therefore the first two classes working systematically with them. At the very beginning, they were mainly used to acquire and exercise logical-mathematical abilities. The big hit was Logowriter. Then, since the beginning of the experience within Kidslink, the activities linked to correspondence have taken the lead. And even Logowriter is now part of a process sometimes involving the use of e-mail.

Description of the activities involving the use of e-mail

- Correspondence with the schools in Manchester (UK) and Udine (It): A correspondence is organised with a class in Manchester, in which Donato, a former teacher of the school in Panico is now teaching Italian. Children are free to write in Italian to their own pen pal on whatever subject they wish. The letters they receive are in English. Only if they feel confident enough, they can write back in English, with the help of the teacher and/or the dictionary. A correspondence is also undergoing with a school in Udine. The e-mail address is collective for the whole school, but the correspondence is individual.
- The Turtle: the children read together with the English teacher some stories in English, some of which are received via e-mail from their correspondents in the UK. They decipher them, discuss them and then re-write them in Italian, with the help of the teacher of Italian. In parallel, they also prepare a realisation of the story, building up a small "theatre" maquette, with the main characters of the story, in cardboard paper. Then, they perform the story in front of the teacher of "scientific subjects", animating the theatre characters, with the help of a narrator, designated among themselves. Finally, the teacher asks them to draw the main characters on a millimetre paper, before transferring the drawing the computer, using Logowriter.
- The exchange of fairy tales with a high school in Bologna: a technical high school in Bologna sends via e-mail some fairy tales written by 15-16 years old students to the school in Panico. The children read the stories with the Italian teacher and then illustrate them, by hand or on computer, using Logowriter.

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- The "Fantasia" conference (or: the story "by several hands"): this is an inter-schools activity. A school starts a contest asking the other schools on the Kidslink network to make up acrostics from the word "Fantasia". Then, one is chosen as the winner and on its basis, all the schools develop a story. The best one is chosen by the school which started the process. When the contest is finished, another school takes the lead and starts a new story. A variation to this exercise is the collective writing of a longer story, in which each school participating writes at least a chapter.
- The Journal: Seven groups in seven different schools participate to this project. Each group is in charge of one page of the journal, with a different theme, exchanged via e-mail. One group is in charge of the final layout of the journal. Concerning this responsibility, there is a rotation issue by issue.

Some of these activities have been thought out in the school itself, mainly by Patrizia, and proposed to other schools through the Kidslink network: these are the "Fantasia" conference and the "Journal". Others, like the exchange of fairy tales, have been proposed by another school in the network.

Corresponding with Manchester

Roberta enters the fourth grade classroom waving a fan of pieces of paper in her hands. The children are finishing their exercise; I am sitting on the usual desk at the bottom right of the classroom. As Roberta comes forward, the excitement grows. "Continue your exercise" — she says while filling the children's mailboxes in the poster on the wall, in the back of the classroom (a colourful poster on which each child has stuck a piece of rectangular paper on three sides, decorated and with the name on it). The children obey, but cannot help turning their heads to "spy" whether they have received a message or not. "Are you finished with your exercise?" — Roberta asks. "Siiii!!!!". "Go to your mailbox, then. Check if you have received a letter from your friend, get it, stick it in your exercise book and try to understand it". Uncontrolled expressions of joy. Jumps. Rushes. Disappointment on the faces of those who have not received a letter, slow pace when returning to their seats. Exultation for those who did receive a letter, running and jumping back to their seats. Not many letters actually did arrive: Donato in Manchester works in a different way from Roberta. He translates by writing each message received in Italian to his British children. That means he is not able to translate them all in time for his children to keep up with the rhythm of production by the children in Panico.

A dictionary is on the teacher's table. The children who have received a letter go to look it up every once in a while. When they cannot make it with the meaning, they ask Roberta to help them. She does not translate literally but guides them to get the general meaning of the message. Roberta assigns different exercises to those who have not received a letter. Denis is asked to make a poster with the new e-mail address of the school in Manchester. "Use all the colours you like!". Debora, sitting next to me, laughs because in the message she received, her name has been spelt with an "h". Pietro goes to Roberta and asks, with a half-impatient half-desperate expression, when his letter will arrive.

Giulia is the first to finish to decipher her letter. "Can I go to the computer now?" — she asks and then she immediately jumps out of the classroom. I follow her. She knocks at the door of the

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fifth grade. Patrizia let us in and continues her lesson of mathematics, ignoring us. "Her" children do not pay any particular attention either: it must be a very common event.

The computer does not work. It cannot get started. Giulia turns towards Patrizia. "Patti????!!". "Have you done all is necessary?" — Patrizia asks. Giulia wrinkles her eyebrows and then taps her head. "The plug!". She plugs the computer in, turn it on and starts a series of operations. Nothing much happen. "If you have problems, you can interrupt my lesson" — Patrizia says. Giulia prefers to give herself a last try: she takes the instructions (written in colourful characters by the children themselves), reads them, repeats a series of operations... She is in the system!... She is in the programme! She then starts writing. In the address, she leaves a space between the letters. Patrizia who has come close to her in the meantime says: "I think there is a problem in the address". Giulia looks puzzled. "The space, you left a blank space" — Patrizia points out in the screen. "These computers are really stupid" — Giulia laughs.

"Dear Deborah,
io sto bene..."

Debora arrives in the fifth grade. She turns on her computer. She forgets to turn on the screen. Giulia laughs at her. They make jokes at each other and continue writing. Debora spies Giulia's letter to get the inspiration for what to write to her pal. Giulia is completely absorbed by her text. She writes a lot, well and correctly. She writes that today there is a researcher from the University of Liège, but who speaks Italian "abbastanza bene". "E' molto carina e abbastanza simpatica". Then, Giulia writes about the beautiful gift that her boyfriend from the fifth grade has offered her for St. Valentine. "I give you my telephone number, so you can call me." (from Manchester!). Mara arrives in the fifth grade as well. "Patti, why is my letter so short?" she protests. She has to wait, because the third computer does not want to turn on today. Giulia is finished with her message, but she does not remember how to save it. Debora helps her spontaneously. After having checked if she has spelt the address well, Giulia registers her file on the diskette and writes the references in the "Expedition book". Then, she leaves the computer to Mara. "Yuppie! The white computer!" — Mara exults, well aware of the hierarchy of the machines. All the computers are white, of course, but each of them is characterised with a small coloured circle: white, red and blue. This is because they have different operational systems: now I understand why the instructions are so colourful.

Mara is asking her correspondent to tell her about the Carnival tradition in England. "How do you dress up? Do you go somewhere to have a party?". Then she tells all the games she is going to play with her friends... Denis arrives in the fifth grade, proudly showing his poster. The two electricians who are in the school by chance that day are immediately co-opted by Patrizia and Roberta to hang up the poster very high on the wall. A very loud Black and Decker noise starts, but the lesson of maths does not stop. It continues regardless of the noise and of the procession of the children from the fourth grade to the computer, until the bell rings announcing the mid-morning break. Some of the children rush out to the courtyard. Around the computers, there are now about ten children. On one computer, a game. On the other, Lorenza is writing a letter to her pal. Claudia, of the fifth grade, is helping her with the procedure.

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After the break, the correspondence activity continues. To Udine, for some of the children in the fourth grade and to Manchester, for some of the children in the fifth grade. This time Patrizia is in charge of supervising, while having her seminar on "Identity and sexual education". Roberta pops in and out. Denis is at the computer, monopolising it for over half an hour. "How do you spell *Maicol Giordan?*". Nobody knows. Patrizia repeatedly asks him to consider that he is preventing the others to write their messages and that maybe he should speed up a bit. She is treating him with irony. Denis says he's finished, almost finished. Patrizia teases him in front of the class. "Well, since you are blocking the whole class, and not everybody will be able to write his/her message today, you will be the last one to go to the computer next time!". "We could record our messages with on an audiotape and send them. It would be quicker!" — Giorgio suggests. Claudia spontaneously goes up to Denis and tries to help him speed up the process. She corrects him a spelling mistake. "Do not bother, Claudia" — says Patrizia ironically. "His mistakes will be travelling on Internet and be visible by the whole planet!", implying that next time he will pay more attention and he will avoid them, because he can, if he wants.

Silvia, the "brilliant historian" is at the computer, writing her message. She starts in English. Write a word and cancel it. She takes her book, gets the inspiration and writes: "Dear..., how are you?". Not satisfied with her sentence, she cancels it. Then, she writes it again, adding: "I am fine". Then she cancels the whole sentence one more time. She re-starts in Italian. This time, it comes more fluently. She modifies the structure of the sentences, cuts and pastes (helped by classmate Claudia, upon her invitation), changes the words, until she is satisfied of the result. She makes me think of the episode reported by Sherry Turkle on the girl who systematically refused to write anything on her exercise book, because she was ashamed of her writing. And when she was allowed to use a computer, she started writing beautiful poems, because there were no tracks of her mistakes any longer. Silvia is a perfectionist, and the computer offers her the possibility of experimenting on her text, without the embarrassment of a messed up piece of paper.

Today Francesco has received a mail. His British correspondent has asked him whether he has a girlfriend. He does not know what this means. Roberta asks: "who knows?". Perplexity among the boys, while the girls, very malicious, mime kisses in the air. Everybody starts laughing. "Ah, une fidanzata!". Francesco scratches his head and, turning to the class and overplaying a scandalised reaction, he exclaims: "These are not questions one should ask!". The class teases him: "You, a girlfriend!". "I actually have two, but this is a secret and you cannot understand!" — he mumbles theatrically. He then goes to the computer, invited by Roberta. He generally refuses, but this time he goes (is it my presence?). "Why do you have that big blue on your forehead?". "It is a secret" — Francesco answers. Claudia, as she usually does, spontaneously goes to help him with the procedures. "Caro..., these are not questions one asks, eh!", and then turning to Roberta: "How do I say "EH!" on a computer?", accompanying his "EH!" with the very Italian gesture of putting his hands on his hips (like Sophia Loren in De Sica's movies). Roberta and Patrizia laugh. He then starts asking a lot of very indiscreet questions to his pal ("Do you have a girlfriend? Is she good-looking? What is her name?...". Marcello also goes to help him. "But, are you stupid? You wrote it half in English and half in Italian!". They start hitting each other. Claudia immediately intervenes (not the teacher) and Marcello goes back to his seat. Francesco takes his English

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exercise book to find the sentences he would like to write in English. He writes, cancel, re-writes... After 20 minutes, he will have kept only three lines of his message. Silvia joins Claudia to help Francesco with the saving procedures.

The Turtle

The group of the Turtle takes the seats in the fifth grade, led by Patrizia. Claudia and Marina (fifth grade); Ilaria, Giulia, Rosaria, Lorenza B. and Lorenza R. (fourth grade). Denis and Annalisa (fifth grade) are absent today. They have already read the story in English (with Roberta), re-written it in Italian (with Paola), and prepared the characters and the theatre in cardboard paper (with Annamaria). They have now to work with Patrizia on the graphical realisation at the computer.

"Do we keep the groups as last time?" — Giulia asks full of hope, holding the hand of her best friend Ilaria. "Do you think we are immediately starting at the computer? You are two impatient. First comes the project!" — says Patrizia. She continues explaining that now she would like to hear the story, to see it played with the help of the cardboard paper character. Then, they will have to choose three sketches and divide the work in three groups to draw the scenes on the special millimetre paper. Only then, they will be ready to draw on computer and will work in group. She adds ironically: "Anyway, don't you think it would be nice to try new experiences? I think you should try to change the groups, today!".

The children get organised: Giulia will be the narrator, while Ilaria and Claudia will animate the theatre. The theatre and the characters are very skilfully made and beautiful. "Elmer the elephant is walking in the forest" (*Elmer walks*) "He hears a cat crying ("Miao, miao" — Ilaria moans), but the grass is too high, then he builds up a lawn mower, cuts the grass and saves the cat (*the grass disappears, and the cat comes out*). Then they all have a party together" (*Elmer, the cat and the lawn mower all dancing together*, while Ilaria and Claudia sings, and laugh). Applause.

Patrizia asks them now to divide the sequence in three scenes. A long discussion follows among the children. Patrizia helps them to identify the three essential sequences in the story. They finally decide as following:

- first scene: Elmer, cat and high grass;
- second scene: Elmer and lawn mower cutting the grass;
- third scene: Elmer, lawn mower, and cat having a party.

Then, Patrizia proposes them to form new groups: three groups of three people each (including those who are absent today). After some discussion the groups are now created and settle around the desks: Ilaria, Giulia (both exulting for being together) and Marina; Lorenza B., Lorenza R. and Claudia; Rosaria, Denis and Annalisa. Since these last two are not present, Rosaria ends up starting the work alone. She looks disappointed but does not protest. Claudia volunteers to change the group, but both Patrizia and Rosaria say it is not very important. "The work is still long, you should not worry. Today we are only starting the drawing on the paper. It will take some time

to transfer it on the computer" — Patrizia adds. "Nooo! We want to go to the computers." — the children shout. "One has to learn to be patient in this world" — Patrizia teases them.

There is a problem now, Patrizia points out: being it a group work, how will we be able to recognise Elmer if each group takes care of a scene and draws the elephant differently from the others? A long discussion follows. Each child proposes a solution in front of the unexpected problem. Finally, Claudia proposes something which seems very clever: each group will draw one character. And then, each group will choose a scene and use all the characters it needs. The proposal is unanimously approved. Preferences are decidedly either for Elmer or for the cat. Nobody wants to draw the lawn mower. It is the "group" of Rosaria who gets it. She looks more and more depressed. Not only she is alone today, but she also has to draw the lawn mower. Giulia, Ilaria and Marina get Elmer, while Claudia, Lorenza B. and Lorenza R. get the cat.

They start drawing. They are told they have to avoid any round form, because the computer would not be able to reproduce it. Drawing on that millimetre paper is like solving geometrical problems. In the groups, they discuss a lot, seeking for the best solution. Patrizia help them sometimes. Rosaria is working very quiet and concentrated on her drawing. Finally, the lawn mower is the first character to be finished. "Brava!" — says Patrizia. "Now, as a reward for having finished before the others, you will choose the scene you would like to work on at the computer". With no hesitation, Rosaria opts for the last scene of the party with all the characters. "Oh, we would have liked to do it" — the whole group 2 moans. But they are not really angry, as if they were thinking, after all, that there is some justice in this world (just as Rosaria might also be doing). Patrizia, to even better balance this justice, adds that the group who did the cat, will do also the grass and the group who did Elmer will choose the computer on which to work. Everybody seems very happy.

The first computer to be chosen will be, of course, the one in the "special" room, that with the connection. The hierarchy of computers is definitively clear in the children's mind: first comes the computer with the connection, second comes the "white" computer, third comes the "red" one and fourth is the "blue" computer, which every once in a while does not want to get started, like today, for instance.

Since they all have worked very well and quickly, Patrizia decides they should start working with Logowriter today. She explains again the X and Y axes and the procedures. They have only done it once before today. The children are still not very confident with it. But with no timidity, they try and retry, make terrible mistakes, lose all the work done, restart again... "let's try and see" seems to be their motto. Patrizia does not practically intervene. Rosaria has more problems with the work. She only arrived last November and she had never seen a computer before then. "Poor Rosaria, all alone" — Lorenza R. says — "Let's give her a hand!". The solidarity among the children seems very strong, in front of the mysteries of the computer. Patrizia encourages them: "Coraggio! You are very good!". "But she (*the Turtle*) goes down when we tell her to go up!" — Giulia protests, half jokingly. "She goes where you tell her to go!" — Patrizia reassures her smiling.

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It will take about half an hour for the children to understand the procedure. When I went back to Panico two months later to spend a few days and interview them all, they had become, with no exception, "experts" at the Turtle game. As 90% of them told me in the interviews, that was their favourite school activity.

Computer as a human being

The humanisation of computer is not only a children's prerogative. How many times any of us adults have addressed "him" remarks, curses, love declaration in front of "his" performances... But in the children's behaviours and declarations the attribution of animate qualities to computers is more than an accidental occurrence⁶. In the observations and the interviews conducted, children expressed the human nature of the computer through the attribution of human faculties and patterns to the machine. That makes me think that "he" is a more appropriate pronoun than "it", and as such it has been translated in the following examples.

"He is so stupid! He does not respond to my commands. He does not understand anything!". (Mara, 9 years old)

"But she (the Turtle) goes down when we tell her to go up!" (Giulia, 9 years old)

"Writing at computer is better, because it is not us writing by hand, it is him writing with his keys". (Lorenza, 9 years old)

Int.: Do you prefer to write at the computer or by hand?

C.: At the computer.

Int.: Why?

C.: Ehm... I learn many things and then, it seems that the computer speaks to me.

Int.: ? As if there is someone inside?

C.: Yes, since I was a baby I have always thought there was someone inside(laughing)

Int.: And now, what do you think?

C.: Nobody has ever told me if there is...

Int.: You do not know, then?

C.: No

Int.: Could there be somebody?

C.: I wish so (laughing)

Int.: A living being, you mean? Would you like that?

C.: Yes" (Interview to Caterina, fourth grade)

The attribution of a human (or at least living) nature to the computer is only mitigated by the children through some laughing here and there. The following examples illustrate a more ambiguous attitude: here children oscillate between attributing computer human faculties and the faculties of an artefact "executing" human commands. The two dimensions seem to coexist.

Int.: And when you say that you like to play with the "Turtle", what is the reason?

A.: Because one, one can order the Turtle to do something and she does it without arguing. You just need to give her the right orders!

Int.: Why do you think the "Turtle" always does what you say?

A.: I think the Turtle does what I tell her to do, because the diskette is organised in that way. If she disobeys, it means that there is a problem. . . or that a virus is in the computer". (Interview with Astra, 9 years old, whose father sells computers)

⁶ See the brilliant analysis of Sherry Turkle in her book: *The second self. Computers and the human spirit*, Granada Publishing, London 1984

Int.: *"What do you find so fun in working with computers?"*
I: *Because. . . I feel. . . I don't know how to say it, but I like it.*
Int.: *. . . ?*
I: *I think it is easier. . . because he does everything himself.*
Int.: *Why do you think he can "do everything himself"?*
I: *Because (laughing). . . Oh dear!. . . Boh? Because he is intelligent!. . . Because one just needs to give him commands and then he. . .*
Int.: *He never makes mistakes?*
I: *Sometimes, most of the time.*
Int.: *And when he makes mistakes, why does he do it?*
I: *Sometimes he makes mistakes because we give him the wrong commands. " (Interview with Ilaria. , 9 years old).*

It is interesting to note that children are somewhat aware that the work of human beings is behind the performance of the computer, and yet they are under the spell of its magic virtues. The two registers can coexist in children's representations and be convoked alternatively.

A virtual meeting of correspondents

The panopticon library of the National Council for Research, second day of the exhibition⁷. A selection (about half) of the children of the fourth and fifth school are impatiently waiting for the on-line video connection with their corresponding school in Manchester. The equipment has been made available by the national telecom company. The cost of the telephone call is supported by the English school. They are one hour late (a misunderstanding due to the existence of an hour's time difference, a detail forgotten when fixing the appointment). The children (about 15) have been gathering around the computer (a normal size screen) since 11 o'clock. Nobody has left his/her place so hard won. It is noon, now. The confusion and the excitement are at their apex. The connection must now be imminent. Teachers have asked children to dispose in a line perpendicular to the screen, so that they can appear one by one in front of the camera and the microphone to introduce themselves to their English correspondents. The line looks actually more like a funnel, with about 10 children concentrated in the first two rows. Finally an image appears. A bit foggy, "Look, they move like robots!"- someone shouts. "Oh! They all wear ties and the same green pullover!". On this part of the screen, the style is less fancy. United colours. . .

They start presenting themselves, invited by the teachers. They seem paralysed by the emotion, eyes and mouth wide open. Finally, one of them has the courage to approach the microphone. You would say he is going to eat it. He says his name very quickly and rushes away, followed by a rush of all his mates. "I'm Giulia ", "I'm Denis ", "I'm Mara ", "I'm Caterina". One of them says: "Hallo. I'm. . . ". After a pause due to transmission phase, a request to repeat the presentation is forwarded by the R-O-B-O-T-T-E-A-C-H-E-R from the other side of the screen. "Can you repeat? We did not understand a name!". They repeat their procession, a bit slower this time. Upon invitation of their teachers, and following the example of Claudia, they also say "Hallo", this time. Again a bit out of phase, one can see the reaction of some of the English children when they recognise their own correspondent. Now it is their turn to introduce themselves. They do it somehow in a more organised way, but one can see their excitement from the incredible proximity

⁷ "Scuola 3.0", where schools in Bologna are invited to demonstrate the works developed with computers. septembre 15, 2006

of the microphone to their mouths. It is difficult to understand their names and a child on this side remarks: "English people have a "funny" way of pronouncing English!". Furthermore, the room in which the connection has been organised, is extremely noisy (about 100 classes are present) and has a panopticon acoustic. On this side, not everybody has identified his/her own correspondent.

Excitement climaxes, but things are spontaneously getting more organised. Each child passes in front of the camera and shows some pictures (their house, their dog, their favourite book) to the bunch of people on the other side of the screen, in which, they hope, there might be their correspondent.

The teacher of English starts showing the English books that the children in Panico have read. Their correspondents shout "YEAH!!!", each time they recognise one of them. The images arrive with a gap of few seconds, it is hard to say whether their "yeah" refers to this or to the former book.

Then, the children from the other side of the screen spontaneously decide it is time for games. An English song, accompanied by hands playing. The sound and the image do not quite match. Not only, but the sound in the terrible acoustic is far away and distorted. But the children on this side recognise the song: they know it too, only the words are in a different language! Great excitement. "Let's sing it too!". Giulia and Ilaria have a bright idea. They go to the microphone and ask their classmates to mime the song, while the two of them will be singing close to the microphone, so that their sound effects will be better than those of their English correspondents. The success is enormous on the screen. A bit out of phase, applause from Manchester irrupts like thunder. "We sing very well, better than they!". "Let's do another one!" "Yes, an English one!". Another thunder through the wires. Then the English correspondents sing a song in Italian. Exultation on this side of the screen. To answer back, the children decide to improvise a dance in front of the camera. The teachers have withdrawn and look amused and almost moved by the vitality and the organisation ability of "their" children. It is time to disconnect. No need to say, the event will be engraved in the children's memories for a long time and will always be recalled as a "miracle" over time and space.

Some information concerning the children

The following tables shows the professions of the parents of the children in the fourth and the fifth grade, the number of children in each family and computer availability at home.

Table 1 - Professions

FATHERS		MOTHERS	
Factory worker	9	Housewife	6

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Mechanical worker	3	Factory worker	5
Electrician	2	Employee (public administration)	3
Commercial agent	2	Supermarket cashier	2
Bartender	1	Unknown	2
Employee (private sector)	1	Nurse	1
Heaters cleaner	1	Taylor	1
Carpenter	1	Secretary	1
Geometra (building designer with Secondary school diploma)	1	Marketing surveys (occasional)	1
Bank employee	1	Waitress	1
Truck driver	1	Employee (private sector)	1
		School librarian and teacher assistant	1
		Teacher (primary school)	1

Table 2 - N° of children per family

N° OF CHILDREN	N° OF FAMILIES
7	1
3	2
2	16
1	7

Table 3 - Computer distribution⁸

AT HOME	AT GRANDPARENTS'	NO
17	2	7

Children have learned to use computers mainly in school. Only two children declare they have learnt before at home. It is of course difficult establishing what they mean by "learning to use computers". In many cases, computers have been purchased following the experiences in the school.

Another way of introducing the children: the fourth grade

⁸ These data have been judged credible by the teachers.

Matteo: "What I like the least... are mean friends. What I like the most are: the courtyard and...the computer".

Debora Z.: "I want to become an astronaut because I want to see whether it is true that there is iced water on the moon".

Caterina S.: "The correspondent in Manchester writes only to the other... Lorenza R. and I have the same correspondent. But at the exhibition, he was looking only for me".

Lorenza R.: "Writing at the computer is much nicer, because it is not us writing by hand, it is him writing with his keys".

Mara: "So, I am a little girl, I am 9 years old, my name is Mara, Mara N. and... I am one metre and thirtyyyyy ... and thirty-two. I have brown hair, brown eyes that sometimes change their colour... and then, I would like to become a dentist because I like teeth and then, I have a family, not very large".

Rosaria: " "And. . . now I have just written to those in. . . yes, I think, Udine. . . No, it was Manchester. . . Or, was it Udine? I do not remember. . . I think it is Manchester. . . No, no, it was Udine, Udine!. . . that we have seen our correspondents in Manchester and. . . the name of my correspondent in Udine is Jasmine, that in Manchester, Jas. . . Jas. . . Jasmine. . . No! Jennifer!. Jasmine is the one in Udine. Jennifer is the one in Manchester".

Pietro: "If we had to repeat it (the on-line video-connection with Manchester) it is us who should bring the money, because last time it was England".

Tommaso: "So, shall I start from the start?".

Debora F.: "This is a school a little more open... In schools you usually have to do everything... I mean, you must never do anything wrong, here instead we can wander around... We can also make mistakes... and we learn from mistakes...".

Astra: "Mmmhh... My greatest wish... ah, eh... it would be to repair this wall that when I am at its foot, I feel as if it was going to crumble".

Caterina C.: "If I could change something in this school, I would change the teacher of Italian... because when you show her a drawing, she is always serious".

Lorenza B.: "My parents buy me many things and then they especially buy me many Easter eggs, but I eat them immediately, I do not wait for Easter!".

Davide: "I prefer to work alone, because even when I was there writing, or drawing at the computer; we always found problems, because Astra always wanted to write, so..".

Giulia: "I would like to be an archaeologist because I like to find out new things".

Ilaria: "I prefer to work in groups because, I mean, it is not an individual work. Instead we must, everyone must express an opinion... how can I say, his idea and then exchange it with classmates".

Denis: "When I am a grown-up, I would like to be a policeman, or a doctor... otherwise, a cook. I am very good at cooking, I already know how to make pastas, meats, all... Alone, I taught it to myself".

Another way of introducing the children: the fifth grade

Annalisa: "The school activities I prefer? I like to take oral examinations because I feel... boh?... I feel that afterwards I am relaxed, I have no more weight".

Marina: "If I could change anything in this school, I would change Francesco, who should write more and study more. He does nothing, he always sleeps".

Giorgio: "When I am a grown-up, I will be a scientist... I like to mix up everything... I like messing up...".

Filippo: "When I am a grown-up, I want to be a football player. Do I have any hope? No".

Marcello: "Yes. And then? I do not know what to say anymore".

Gianluca: "Well, I have a hamster whose name is Pedro, and a little bird whose name is Chico. Then, at my grandmother's I have a boxer dog whose name is Gonzo and another dog whose name is Camillo".

Claudia: "I like group work, but I am unlucky: I am never with Filippo. I love him, I do. Only that he does not love me... actually, not at all".

Silvia: "At the exhibition, the things I preferred were: seeing the works made by others and also working with the computer, and then setting up the stand. What I liked less, was to explain all the "lullaby" to others. Why? Because I speak very fast, right!".

Irene: "History? No, it is too boring, things of the past, ancient. Instead, what I like the most is Italian, because it talks... it talks... practically, it is the basis of life".

Francesco: "I USED to like history. I liked it when there were the dinosaurs. Shall I tell you what happened once to my father while he was at work... it is rather disgusting".

Pedagogical issues

The explicit objectives set

There are obvious and explicit pedagogical objectives underpinning the activities developed using computers and e-mail.

Corresponding with Manchester and Udine aims encouraging the autonomous production of texts, in Italian. Corresponding with Manchester, in addition, has the advantage of motivating the children to improve the reading and understanding of the foreign language. Roberta insists on the pleasure dimension, and the affectivity, as essential components of their motivation. This correspondence contributes also to help the children put in perspective their own reality, by comparing it with that of another culture.

The Turtle also aims at improving the foreign language reading and understanding. It encourages the production of texts. Furthermore, it aims at improving literary abilities and contributes to the pleasure of reading. The acquisition of logical and mathematical abilities intervenes only in the conclusive stage of the process.

The Fantasia Conference and the exchange of Fairy tales with the High School in Bologna, finally, aim at improving literary abilities and contribute to the pleasure of reading.

Fostering an "active" learning approach

But not only that. All those activities contribute to a primary objective: fostering an "active" learning approach. A learning approach "by project". They aim at encouraging the autonomous initiative of children and the collaborative learning processes between children and their peers, children and their teachers and finally teachers among themselves, through the setting up of interdisciplinary activities.

They allow to emphasise learning methods as opposed to the subministration of information and notions. They put an emphasis on the process, rather on contents. As both Annamaria and Patrizia pointed out in our interviews, this aspect is sometimes misunderstood by parents, who are more eager of contents and notions, who would like their children to devour (and produce) pages and pages. "It is sometimes so difficult to make parents understand that what we want to give their children, is the curiosity and the pleasure of learning, and then some tools they will carry with them

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all along their lives" — Patrizia once told me. And Annamaria adds: "Children are not hollow containers in which to pour everything, and then you shake and we wait and see if it makes bubbles or not".

Reducing the anxiety of performance

Patrizia, Roberta and Annamaria believe that the activities developed at computer and with e-mail also contribute to reduce the children' anxiety on their performances, their fear of mistakes and red pen marks on their exercise book and examination sheets. Computers seem to have for children a reassuring function. The fact of not keeping the tracks of their mistakes, of being able to modify the text as much as they want before printing it, is extremely important for them. And so is the neat quality of the output. This can improve their self-confidence. At the end of the day, it facilitates the expression of their creativity.

These activities, blurring the border between work and play, might also stimulate the children's motivation and pleasure to learn. These activities seem to stimulate a "positive anxiety" rather than a self-destructive one.

Claudia

Claudia is ten years old fifth grade pupil. She is very calm and mature for her age. She wears a big pair of glasses and has no particular appeal for her boys-schoolmates. She is very generous, always available to help, but visibly shy and insecure. "It is a child who is immediately blocked in front of mistakes on her exercise-book, for example," — Patrizia says — "because it is there, visible, and that is a problem for her. Her self-esteem is deeply affected. So, she feels blocked... But in front of mistakes done at the computer, which can be cancelled, swept away, she has done incredible works, showing much more self-assurance".

I saw her very much at ease in front of the computer: she is very sure in her gestures and in the way of operating the machine. It is to her that schoolmates turn for help, or it is she who spontaneously takes the initiative to help them, when she feels they are stuck. She does it lightly, with grace, sometimes sweetly teasing them, but never with boast.

Claudia was not very popular inside her class in her first school years. But since her outstanding competencies at the computer have been acknowledged by her schoolmates, the relationship has deeply changed. Her status in class have increased and she has become very popular and fully integrated in the community activities.

My "last" day in Panico

It is another beautiful day in April. Some of the children are still running wildly, playing mysterious games or the more classical and "forbidden" game of football, after 45 minutes of morning break... Others are already inside, waiting for their teachers to come. Annamaria, Patrizia, Roberta and I are standing against the crumbling wall, almost blinded by the sun. We are chatting calmly, while the recorder is on.

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"... We have been experimenting since before the law. It is about 5 or 6 years that we base our activities on a modular approach. The fourth and the fifth grade have done it with continuity... I am sure they will have a lot of problems when they go to secondary school. The secondary school where most of them will be going is a very traditional one. It will take some time for them to adapt. They are used to being very independent. You have seen how they are. Children in secondary school are used to other ways, much more traditional. They are used to studying pages and pages. They are used to tons of homework. We never give any. And we would be supposed to do it "so then, at secondary school...". But I refuse to think this way, I am NOT, primary school is NOT at the service of secondary school. Primary school children do things appropriate to their age. It is not primary school which should be revised, it is secondary schools!". (*Marina interrupts us, offering us a piece of her birthday and inviting us to follow her*). "Come on, turn off that thing" — Annamaria urges me, pointing at my recorder — "Let's have a party!"

Chaos and creation

When I first entered the school of Panico for the first time, I was very surprised by the volume of noise pervading the building, the freedom of movement of which the pupils disposed, and the ease with which teachers were living in this universe. My memory of lined up desks, crossed arms and punishments was still very vivid. I knew that primary school has very much evolved in the two last decades, certainly in Italy, where the Montessori approach has a great influence. I also knew that teachers in Italy are often real militants — otherwise they would have already left this job, so poorly paid and socially recognised. But what I saw nevertheless surprised me a lot and I was led to ask myself a lot of questions: is this school unique in its gender? which generalising statements could I draw from the observation? To what extent, the introduction of ICT has transformed this school, in its organisation and in its pedagogical approach? To what extent has it contributed to a redefinition of activities, statutes and space?

Something have happened in a school where 9 and 10 year old children freely circulate from one classroom to the other (but after having asked for permission and knocked at the door), where they feel at ease not only to call their teacher by name (a rather common practice in Italian primary schools nowadays) and even by nickname, but also to interrupt her during a class in another classroom, where they stay in front of their computer during the break, making visible the disappearance of the fundamental distinction between time for work and time for play. Not that ICT provoked this revolution — nothing can really prove such a causal relationship —, but they have certainly reinforced it and legitimated it. Teachers are young and qualified; they want to make things change, in spite of the poor means of which they dispose. Computers become a tool which they are going to use to open the classroom, launch interdisciplinary activities, enhance the pupils' self-reliance. The price they have to pay to change school is a "heavy" one: permanent "agitation", multi-focused attention, management of time and space without precise delimitation... But results are extraordinary. These pupils might not be virtuosos of the keyboard; but they are first of all children, happy and proud of being in school, in THIS small school of Panico.

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Postface

December 1997. During my Christmas holidays I went back to Panico to greet "my" teachers and "my" children (only those belonging to what was once the fourth grade, since the once fifth grade has now gone to secondary school). The school of Panico, in the meantime, had been selected as a pilot school in the new Action Plan launched by the Italian Ministry of Education: "Programma di sviluppo Tecnologie Didattiche 1997-2000". Some 1000 billions liras will be invested at national level, over the period. The schools in the city of Bologna have already received 1 billion liras to start the experience. The "Circolo didattico" in Vergato, from which the school of Panico depends, have received 42 million liras. A quota of this was used by the school to purchase three new computers, a new modem, set up a computer lab in the school, link computers in a network and provide a connection to the Internet.

I told you that the school is small. I did not tell you that the electrical circuit is very weak. The school applied to the municipality of Marzabotto for getting the permission to reinforce its electrical circuit. The permission was refused, with the motivation that the school will anyhow be soon dismantled. Too few children, too old a school, no cost-effectiveness... The old story again. It was not over, just fallen asleep.

A new school will be built: big, modern, it will collect all the children in the valley. It is a matter of days, maybe months, at the most, just a few years. They just have to wait. Keep computers in a box. Useless to say, my role of observer is over. Now starts the citizen.