

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.

third international conference  
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# education and/for social justice

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# PROCEEDINGS

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02

Cultures, Practices, and Change



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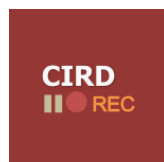
# PROCEEDINGS

Vol. 2

**Cultures,  
Practices,  
and Change**

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# EDUCATING FOR SYMMETRICAL RELATIONALITIES: SOCIO-MATERIALISM AND ECOLOGICAL POST-HUMANISM

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Considering the current fragile state of the planet in which human and non-human beings have to coexist, this essay aims to investigate some of the possible lines of continuity between two different perspectives that define the need to rescale the role of humanity: socio-materialism and post-humanism from the educational point of view. The analysis and identification of the points of contact between socio-materialism and post-humanism in education have led to the proposed design of educational practices and relational learning environments that can foster the connection between human beings and the rest of the world through the primacy of this relationship and interdependence. In particular, the essay defines the contribution that the *ecodidactic* perspective can make to the methodological and didactic shift from *function* to transactional and symmetrical *relationality*.

socio-materialism; ecological post-humanism; eco-didactics; democratic education.

## INTRODUCTION

Today's historical, social and cultural context reveals our failure to grasp the extent of the exaggerated anthropocentrism that has resulted in the fact that we now are living in the so-called 'age of humans'. However, it is very different from the one envisioned by the cultural movement of humanism, for we are in the *anthropocene*, that is, an age in which human actions are playing a crucial role in the unfolding ecological disaster of the planet and life forms (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). As philosopher and ethologist Roberto Marchesini states, what we are experiencing is the main consequence of when *anthropos* claims the right to transform the entire planet into a "house-shell" built on the negative cast of its own body and believes that its main task is to domesticate forms of otherness, that is, to convert and mutate their characteristics into anthropomorphic projections that are limited in their diversity (Marchesini, 2018). In this sense, the anthropocentric perspective implements a misrecognition on three levels: minimizing the value of differences among non-human living beings; emphasizing the differences between human and non-human; and erasing the presence of the non-human within the human, who is regarded as a pure and uncontaminated fruit.

To try to curb this arrogance of humans, a significant number of academic studies have aimed to outline epistemological frameworks and everyday practices regarding humans and their relationships with other living beings in a complex and nuanced way.

In particular, it is possible to identify many lines of continuity between the perspectives of socio-materialism (Gamble et al., 2019; Fenwick et al., 2015) and those of post-humanism (Braidotti, 2013; Marchesini, 2022) that contribute to blurring not only the differences between human and non-human, but also the internal differences within the categories that humans have given themselves and that they have held for centuries to define them precisely as such, i.e. man-woman, black-white, dead-alive and human-animal. The literature presents the many possible consequences and declinations in education that require careful examination and scientific research.

## **1. SOCIO-MATERIALISM AND POST-HUMANISM**

From an epistemological perspective, socio-materialism recognizes material elements and the physical environment as an integral part of social practices and human relationships; therefore, it is the interconnection between the cultural and material aspects of everyday life that is fundamental (Fenwick et al., 2015). From an educational perspective, socio-materialism focuses on materiality, which is understood as a set of documents, objects, tools, technologies, spaces, and furnishings; the aims are to investigate the dynamics between human and non-human material aspects that occur within educational contexts and to explore the ways in which knowledge and learning are rooted in action (Ferrante, 2016; Ferrante et al., 2022). In this sense, educational materiality should be understood on at least two levels: it is both an interpretive category – a key concept for decoding educational reality and its relationship with the living worlds – and a constant reference to the concreteness of education in a historically situated sense (Massa, 1992; Barone, 1997).

This set of reflections has implications for educational research and practice as it determines a relativization of the roles of the teacher and the student because, within a socio-materialist perspective, in order to understand and explain the educational process it is not enough to resort to the purposes of human education, but it is also necessary to consider the materiality of things and their interactions with the human. Thus, the focal point from which education begins lies in the syntax of space, time, body and symbol in which education is an individual experience as much as a relational one because it is experienced corporately and symbolically. Therefore, in the socio-materialist perspective in education, it becomes evident that the concept of relationships plays a crucial role in investigating and changing modes of action.

The significance of the category of the relationship also emerges in the contribution of post-humanism especially with reference to the transition from the verticalization of the human, which emerges by purging all otherness, to a perspective of

autopoietic horizontality that arises from a process of hybridization and, therefore, rejects purity (Marchesini, 2018). In this scenario, otherness is outside and inside the human subject; therefore, otherness does not refer to an entity that is distinct from oneself, but to an “other with oneself” (Marchesini, 2014), which represents the basis of being only because humans are “in relation”, i.e. connected to everything that surrounds them. Every subjectivity is characterized by a structural relational capacity and a specific degree of potency as an embodied and situated entity, that is, by its openness and closeness to otherness; in this sense, thinking about otherness means reflecting on relationships in order to focus on the educational care of the other. This relational capacity and the various degrees of power comprise a subjectivity that is not centralized and does not have a family tree (Braidotti, 2013). No subjectivity is structured as a tree, but rather every subjectivity is rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980).

The nexus that places the concept of relationship at the centre between socio-materialist and post-human perspectives in education implies a move away from the hypothesis of human exceptionalism and leads towards a rejection of the existence of innate and universal moral values, opening to a recognition of the pivotal role of the educational process. Indeed, daily educational practice is connoted in an extremely significant way by the educational relationships that are established between teachers and students, between students, and between students and contexts. It is educational research that must take on the task of constructing and designing multifaceted educational scenarios that start from situated dimensions to enable direct experimentation with social materiality and progressively broaden the gaze in planetary and ecological terms in a symmetrical sense. Deconstructing normative certainties requires the counterbalance of constructing contexts in which it is possible to experience the symmetrical relationality of subjectivity with all non-human beings.

## **2. SYMMETRICAL RELATIONALITY AND INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN**

One element that can support the framework that is being defined is that one of the main categories that post-human materialism brings into the meshes of pedagogical reflection and practice is the recognition of educational processes as constitutions of human and non-human energies that exhibit symmetrical agentivity (Callon & Latour, 1992), since they mutually modify each other by defining relationships and determining the idea of subjectivities no longer as products but as historically situated or established conditions. This aspect leads to the idea that the symmetrical character of relationships makes the spaces allocated to education one of the variables that define the quality of educational experience.

Spaces dedicated to education are a fundamental variable in educational experiences; they are able to significantly increase the involvement of subjects especially in an ecological sense. In particular, within the framework of scientific research conducted in recent years, relational learning environments (Strongoli, 2023) have

been devised in an ecodidactic perspective (2021), the distinctive characteristic of which is that of making the many levels of relationality didactically feasible. In order to be defined as such, relational learning environments must be rich in stimuli in a qualitative sense, that is, they must not only merely enable learners to do many things, but to think in many ways; moreover, in relational learning environments, it is necessary to understand the environment as a practice of situated knowledge. Indeed, in a socio-materialist perspective, the environment is not the gateway to knowledge, nor the mediator but, simultaneously and in a relational sense, the object and subject never stated in already set prescriptions.

The principles of pluralism and transactivity with an ecological and systemic imprint inspire the design of relational learning environments with regard to the realization of *legitimized peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which the most knowledgeable – and therefore central – members have the same decision-making involvement as the less knowledgeable and, therefore, peripheral members. Hence, the relevant teaching practices must in no way feed on control and power but on decentralization, sharing and, once again, on relationality.

The implicit curriculum of such an instructional design takes all forms of shared co-design among all subjects and, moreover, the related collateral learning activated is linked to the recognition of the social practice of learning, which is generated through involvement and membership in a community (Wenger, 1998). In addition, in order for learners to be co-constructors of ecological knowledge, it is necessary to activate a process of deep sharing and recognition of their heuristic and scientific possibilities through the design of the learning communities (Brown, 1997) in which they act: multiple zones of proximal development; legitimized peripheral participation; distributed expertise, which legitimizes differences; reciprocal teaching and peer tutoring; flexibility and interchangeability of roles; variety of scaffolding; cognitive apprenticeship; reflective thinking and orientation toward autonomy (Varisco, 2002); procedurally and purpose challenging pathways; and practices of testing ideas through encountering alternative viewpoints.

In these environments, relationality is not expressed in a linear form of one-to-one communication, i.e. of the human subject with the rest of the living, but by its very nature it encompasses multiple forms precisely because proximity, i.e. exposure to multifaceted environments and problematic situations – which do not provide a single solution, but require creative efforts to restructure and question one's own lenses of observation – encourages the decentralization of the individual in favour of the shared construction of a complex point of view. Moreover, in the socio-materialist sense, such a point of view is no longer intersubjective, since it removes the objectifying logics of knowledge from the human subject who “discovers” nature and, in addition, it makes what we might call a “species leap” from humanism to posthumanism and is therefore plural.

Therefore, the defining aspects of these environments are relationality, action and cooperativism. They require that educational action cannot be dogmatic or even prescriptive; ecodidactic design must be *adhocratic-inspired* (Lipari, 2009), that is,

situational and contingent. The appeal is to that of the community through the sharing of material and personal resources; due to its organic nature, the idea of community accommodates the ecodidactic proposal for subjects to act in a constructive, ethical, civic engagement, and change direction in a generative sense. In this sense, *relational* learning environments are proposed to be emancipatory in nature in order to break free from the constraints of the notion of a single truth, through the expression of the relationship as the main form of participatory knowledge that is transmitted in terms of community and ecologically oriented cooperative practices. Designing learning environments that can enable people to experience the relational symmetry between all that is human and non-human means opening up to educational practices that are extremely complex because they aim to deconstruct the very idea of educational asymmetry and the teaching practice inspired by it, seen as an exercise of power that leads to imparting changes from the outside, without considering the active engagement of the subjects in training.

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