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Beyond Youth Nihilism; Philosophy and the Empowerment of Young People “Not in Education, Employment or Training”

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ABSTRACT

The growing phenomenon of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) represents a significant challenge for society and, even more so, for the world of education itself, even more so for the world of work. According to many educators and philosophers, the reasons why so many young people in various countries are giving up both on continuing their studies and actively seeking employment can often be traced back to a broader sense of mistrust, a profound mistrust that many young people feel towards the future and, indeed, the world as a whole. Yet, human beings do not simply experience the world: they live a vision of the world. From this vision arises their perception of existence, of their capacity to change life and society for the better, and therefore of the possibility that the future may once again appear as a promise rather than a threat. In the face of youthful nihilism, philosophy could offer meaningful paths that lead to a renewed and positive way of being in the world and imagining the future. Education through philosophy can therefore potentially contribute to addressing the widespread phenomena of youth distress and educational impoverishment of our time. In this article, the author presents a case study of a philosophical practices workshop for young NEETs, designed to address participants' self- and worldview, helping to boost their self-esteem and confidence in themselves and their future. This educational experience is framed within a theoretical framework that highlights the transformative and emancipatory potential of philosophy as a radical educational dimension.

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Intruduction

NEET: *Not in Education, Employment or Training*. This is how current literature defines young people who are excluded from both educational and occupational pathways, and who, in growing numbers, eventually give up seeking opportunities for personal development or employment percentages that closely mirror the economic trends of each country. The impact of inactivity differs significantly by gender: young women are far more vulnerable than their male peers to processes of social exclusion. At the European level, for instance, 20.9% of women aged 20 to 34 are NEET, compared to only 12.2% of men. The reasons for this disparity are both cultural and structural, relating to the social organization of work. According to Eurostat, the causes include: (1) social conventions and pressures that diminish the perceived role of women in the labor market; (2) educational and professional orientations that narrow the range of occupations open to women; and (3) labor market dynamics, such as employers' greater willingness to hire men, difficulties women face in returning to work after maternity leave, lower average pay, and higher levels of job insecurity (Eurostat, 2019).

To understand the roots of the NEET phenomenon, it is necessary to take a critical distance from the prevailing economic narrative, which risks trapping young people within a self-perpetuating and inescapable spiral in which the economic sphere simply *is*, immune to critical reflection (Benasayag-Schimt, 2003). The problem many young people face lies further upstream. Access to professional experiences, constructive investment in one's own educational or formative path, and the acquisition of skills and competences—whether through formal or non-formal experiences such as volunteering—are not opportunities equally available to all.

What explains this difficulty? The causes are multiple and intertwined, encompassing socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions, as well as questions of education, gender, and national traditions. Increasingly, young people express a deep mistrust toward institutions and an anxious outlook on working life. Yet this mistrust can be understood more radically—as a form of distrust toward the future itself, which presents itself less as a promise and more as a threat (Benasayag-Schimt, 2003).

The Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti has interpreted this widespread youth malaise as a cultural crisis (Galimberti, 2007), in which the future no longer functions as a source of *motivation* (Galimberti, 2018). Human beings, he argues, do not inhabit the world but rather the *description* of the world—a description elaborated through philosophy, religion, myth, and science (Galimberti, 2007, 15).

The article reports on a case study conducted with a group of 20 young NEETs in Southern Italy, through a workshop in philosophical practices embedded within a non-formal education pathway, designed to help participants regain confidence in their own abilities and rediscover their capacity to envision, plan, and actively shape their future. The participants, aged between

18 and 29, were recruited via a local youth empowerment project. The programme lasted two weeks on a full-time basis and took place in a non-school setting (a civic laboratory). The workshop combined concrete activities, philosophical dialogue, cooperative learning and existential reflection, with the aim of fostering key competences (social, civic, critical thinking and initiative-taking) and, more fundamentally, of engaging with participants' "worldviews," understood as an integral dimension of their *being-in-the-world*. The paper aims, first, to document a practice that is potentially replicable and tailored to a vulnerable target group and, second, to offer some qualitative and descriptive indications of the possible relevance of a philosophical approach in contexts of social inclusion. A limitation of the intervention lies in the absence of a control group and of long-term longitudinal measures. Nonetheless, despite the small cohort, the case study remains a well-established epistemic instrument for investigating complex processes and, in this specific instance, provides some potentially significant evidence regarding the feasibility and strength of an integrated philosophical approach for a NEET target group.

Our study offers an empirical case study that applies an integrated methodological framework (experience, cooperation, philosophical reflection) to a NEET population, with the intention of providing educators and philosophical practitioners with some operational insights. It suggests that philosophical practices can contribute to strengthening deeper dimensions—such as self-efficacy, self-concept, and worldview—that are not always adequately captured by traditional forms of assessment. Furthermore, case studies as such enrich knowledge with epistemically relevant elements whose value is now widely recognised in scientific research. As Bent Flyvbjerg has argued, it is a persistent misunderstanding to assume that case studies do not allow for any form of generalisation, do not contribute to the development of robust theories, or merely serve to confirm the researcher's pre-existing hypotheses. In this sense, the experience with 20 young NEETs can be understood as a *critical case*, allowing us to test the applicability of philosophical practices in a challenging context—marked by socio-economic vulnerability, low institutional trust and disrupted educational trajectories. From the perspective of *situated knowledge* (Haraway 1988), such a case can therefore indicate whether a given model, under limiting conditions, is plausibly viable or not (Flyvbjerg 2006).

The underlying hypothesis was that one's worldview and self-conception are reciprocally and dialectically co-determined, and that philosophical practices can intervene in the descriptions of the world that young people inhabit—strengthening both their individual and collective ability to engage meaningfully with the social processes around them.

Through this program—combined with non-formal educational activities aimed at developing and enriching soft skills—the project sought to restore self-confidence, cultivate more complex capacities for rational argumentation, and foster cooperative and participatory solidarity within communities of dialogue, inquiry, and *co-philosophizing*.

The program, portions of which are described in detail below, also aimed to reclaim the value of inner peace and quiet (Achenbach, 2000), rethink gender relations, infuse the present with renewed meaning, and restore potential to waiting and hope to existential planning. As Galimberti writes:

“When waiting is emptied of hope, boredom takes hold of the young, the future loses its thrust, and the present expands into an opaque thickness where objective time—the ticking of the clock—sets its rhythm upon lived time, which has become inert, sunken, arrested. In boredom, every expectation is swallowed, every hope extinguished; there are no more projects, no more history, and everything drowns in the vortex of a present in which every horizon of meaning dries up and dies out. [...] Without waiting and without hope, time becomes a desert and, in the absence of a future, that disturbing guest we call nihilism reappears” (Galimberti, 2007, 147).

The outcomes of this educational-philosophical workshop suggest that philosophical practice constitutes a crucial tool for cultivating critical, argumentative, creative, and complex thinking—a kind of thinking capable of dwelling comfortably within questioning, resistant to the impatient search for definitive answers, and oriented instead toward an inquiring and critical mode of being in the world.

Philosophical practices have also proven effective in developing subjective and social potentialities aligned with the soft skills promoted at the European level, yet without being confined to a technocratic notion of *competence* defined narrowly in terms of efficiency and performance.

In particular, philosophical practice enables participants to overcome what might be called reflective impotence—a widespread worldview among young people who, as Mark Fisher noted, “know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it. But that ‘knowledge’, that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Fisher, 2009, 21).

Within the educational program, several philosophical methods were employed, including 1922 Leonard Nelson’s *Socratic Dialogue* (Nelson, 1996) and Henk van Luijk’s *Dilemma Training* (Luijk, 1996), which will be presented in the following section.

The overall objective was to energize thought (Achenbach, 1984)—to foster in NEETs the philosophical capacity to live well (Achenbach, 2009).

Ultimately, this means cultivating a conscious and reflective way of being in the world, offering participants the opportunity to experience their own existential agency, to acquire the resources and dispositions necessary for re-entering educational or occupational contexts, and above all, to engage in a lifelong search for meaning—one that continually and intrinsically exceeds the conventional boundaries of personal success and individualistic self-interest (Galimberti, 2009).

1. Methodology

This article presents a programme of philosophical practices for young people classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), developed within the methodological framework of non-formal education (NFE). NFE places persons at the centre, understood in their constitutive relationality and in their transformative personal resources. It focuses on what people do, how they relate to one another, and how they make sense of what they experience. Education, understood in this way, prioritises concrete experience, active participation, group relationships, and shared reflection. Established tools within this approach include, in particular, learning by doing, cooperative learning, and group-building activities. Non-formal education can enter into a potentially fruitful and promising dialogue with philosophical practices (Socratic dialogue, dilemma discussions, ethical workshops).

According to the European Commission ([European Commission, 2015](#)), non-formal education can be particularly effective in complementing the educational pathways of citizens, both young and adult. For young people experiencing marginalisation—NEETs, the long-term unemployed, early school leavers—such settings can provide a space that is less judgmental and more flexible, one in which they are not constantly evaluated through grades, exams, or formal certifications.

Built around three core axes—lived experience, relationality, and structured reflection on the educational impact of shared experience—NFE is designed to promote the development of transversal competences such as communication skills, problem solving, conflict management, and collaboration, while at the same time seeking to widen social networks and strengthen the sense of belonging ([Bessant-Webster, 2018](#)). John Dewey had already underscored that what makes an experience educational is the possibility of returning to it, rethinking it, posing questions about it, reorganising it, and drawing from it practical orientations for the future ([Dewey, 1997](#)). This, in turn, supports the experimentation of new forms of behaviour, grounded in what has been learned through previous educational experiences ([Kolb, 1984](#)), within a close dialectic between doing and thinking.

A non-formal context can be especially valuable for those who have experienced formal education and training pathways as judgmental environments, sources of frustration, and occasions for discouragement regarding their own potential. Within such a context, one can reasonably expect positive outcomes from working together, supported by a facilitator who encourages collaboration, expressive freedom without fear of judgement, and peer-to-peer dialogue. The facilitator's task is to foster a communicative space that welcomes everyone's ideas and guides reflection on them without prejudice. A context of this kind can help reduce, and in some cases overcome, the fear of speaking up, of being ridiculed, or of "making mistakes" in front of others.

The group work carried out in the philosophical practices described below was explicitly structured to foster positive interdependence among participants, personal accountability (responsibility distributed across the group), increasingly intentional and conscious use of one's own social abilities, and a shared evaluation of how the group functions. The aim is to make participants progressively more aware and explicit about how they communicate, manage conflicts, and make decisions (Johnson-Johnson, 2009), thereby promoting positive impacts on both motivation and social skills. Over time, the group can gradually come to be perceived as a "safe" context in which to test oneself, trying out roles different from the labels that are often assigned in social settings—labels that not infrequently become mental cages when individuals internalise them as sources of personal identity.

Philosophical practices can enhance the potential of NFE contexts to cultivate questioning about the meaning of the experiences lived in the workshops, about oneself, and about one's own ways of being and relating to others. They can support the effort to give considered form to initially blurred intuitions and to call into question stereotypes and fatalistic worldviews.

Leonard Nelson's Socratic dialogue, for example, starts from the concrete experiences of participants, which become the embodied basis for reflection around questions shared by the group. The facilitator does not assume the role of a teacher, but rather guides and orients the group through questions, invites the sharing of examples, asks for clarification of key terms, and prompts further reflection to examine the implications of the positions expressed. The intention was to create space for everyone, offering each participant the possibility of having their voice recognised with the same dignity as that of every other member of the group (Nelson, 1966).

The ethical dilemma pathway proposed a structured reflection on choices, on the reasons underlying those choices, and on the possibility of revising them in light of discussion with others. The methodological objective was above all to exercise moral judgement, fostering ethical and perspectival decentring so as to make more evident to participants their capacity to subject their own positions to critical scrutiny. In this way, the activity aimed to loosen rigid, stereotyped, and prejudiced patterns of judgement.

The educational value of philosophical work carried out within a small discussion group is well documented in the literature (Lipman, 1973). The goal is not to arrive at definitive notions or final solutions. Rather, the intention is to nurture greater awareness of the importance of open-ended dialogue that generates new perspectives and viewpoints; to enable participants to test, in practice and in reflection on practice, their actual resources; to recognise and welcome difference; to appreciate the value of the possibility of changing one's point of view; and to build shared, provisional, and plural meanings.

The underlying assumption is that greater awareness of the possibility of change—even when generalised from a small and circumscribed experience, yet one that has been lived first-

hand and then critically reconceptualised—can help to challenge the discouragement associated with the belief that “everything is already predetermined.” It can instead promote a form of openness to the future as a space to be planned and experimented with along a pathway that is non-linear and, above all, not pre-written. Such openness may constitute a modest, yet potentially effective, way of reactivating trust in oneself and in the future.

In this case study, particular attention was paid to the researcher’s dual position as both observer of the process and facilitator of the activities. The researcher explicitly acknowledged his epistemic presence within the educational process and the research field, aware that complete neutrality was unattainable, while nonetheless striving to distinguish between the processes co-constructed with the group and his own interpretive inferences.

To this end, several methodological strategies were adopted during the workshop to enhance the trustworthiness of the inquiry, (Lincoln-Guba, 1994): a research diary completed after each session, in which both group dynamics and the researcher’s interpretations and emotional states were recorded; verbatim protocols of the definitions produced by participants, in order to minimise the risk of over-interpretation; intersubjective discussion with a second, external reader—the project coordinator—who critically reviewed the materials and the emerging interpretations.

The experience suggests that participants developed a stronger sense of confidence in their own capacities, as indicated by their statements and self-assessments, and by the facilitator’s observations discussed with the project coordinator.

The case study presented here is a small-scale, short-term exploratory investigation. In order to assess the sustainability of the outcomes, it would have been necessary to conduct follow-up evaluations, which was not possible in this instance and thus constitutes a methodological limitation of the study’s evidential scope.

2. Worldview and *Lebenskönnerschaft*

2.1. Inhabiting a Worldview

Galimberti’s thesis—that we inhabit a *vision of the world* rather than the world itself, and that it is on the basis of this worldview that we think, act, and feel in one way rather than another (Galimberti, 2009, 155)—opens up three distinct lines of inquiry.

First, it allows us to work, as he himself writes, on *meaning* as a dimension proper to philosophy and foreign to the psychological domain (Galimberti, 2009, 155). In this respect, *Philosophische Praxis* truly represents an alternative to psychotherapy, rather than an alternative form of psychotherapy (Achenbach, 1984)—not a practice *against* but one that is radically other.

Second, a worldview is not merely an individual matter; it is inherited, becoming for each subject the decisive criterion for determining truth and falsity (Wittgenstein, 1984, § 94).

Third, its dual dimension—individual and socio-historical—requires reflection on the interrelations between worldviews and lived experience (*Erlebnis*) in the world, experiences that are always characterized by a transindividual nature. These stand in a continuous and dialectical relationship, each co-constituting the other.

The field of engagement when working with NEET youth is inevitably shaped by these two dimensions. Life trajectories unfold within specific socio-economic and cultural contexts, which generate particular worldviews that, in turn, act upon those same contexts. Thus, *the art of living* becomes both a fragile and central capacity—one of profound philosophical significance (Lahav-Tillmanns, eds, 1995).

As noted earlier in the introduction, it is essential to develop awareness of the implicit worldview that characterizes contemporary society, a worldview that deprives the future of any transformative or positive charge, extinguishing desire, motivation, and the very sense of purpose.

By working on *logos*, it becomes possible to cultivate awareness of one's own worldview—understanding it as a hermeneutical prism through which reality is perceived and interpreted, one rich in philosophical implications.

2.2 Emancipation and the Art of Living

Starting from this understanding of worldview, participants in philosophical practice have opportunities not only for clarification but, crucially, for emancipation. Through philosophical work, they can rediscover the coordinates of an existential path oriented toward self-redemption—reinterpreting life priorities, awakening from the spiritual lethargy typical of the dominated, and pursuing genuinely emancipatory options.

As Goya warned, "*The sleep of reason produces monsters.*" Work on thought thus becomes a pathway that offers new possibilities against the monsters of distrust and youth nihilism. The habit of hedonistic yet unfulfilling everyday life leads many young people into a state of "twitchy, agitated interpassivity, an inability to concentrate or focus. Students' incapacity to connect current lack of focus with future failure, their inability to synthesize time into any coherent narrative, is symptomatic of more than mere demotivation" (Fisher, 2009, 24).

The initial aim of the workshop was therefore to facilitate meaningful experiences of thinking—to move beyond the clichés sedimented within each individual, to recover or discover a greater capacity for reflection, to pose ethical and existential questions, to argue, to engage openly with the thought of others, and to rediscover the possibility of envisioning and tracing viable futures.

The impact of this reflective work on lived experience is a natural consequence: the relationship between individuals and the world is always mediated by *logos*, and it is philosophy's responsibility to care for this mediation—so that the space of *gnōthi seautón*

(“know thyself”) may become the very dimension from which redemption from social marginalization and existential emptiness can begin.

The workshop sought to interrupt the meaningless flow of NEETs’ everyday lives—lives that perpetuate exclusion, reduce personal opportunities, and reinforce nihilism—in order to offer “at the very least, the opportunity for a specific space and time in which the immanence of the everyday and the routine are suspended, allowing reflection, the care of thought, and philosophical dialogue with otherness, with values, with ideas, to take their place” (Volpone, 2000).

The project thus initiated a journey toward cultivating *Lebenskönnerschaft*—the capacity to live well—according to the apt neologism coined by Achenbach. The goal was to help participants develop the ability to orient themselves in life, not according to predefined models or in pursuit of success, but with exemplarity: through a non-methodical search for truth that makes one not merely happy, but worthy of happiness (Achenbach, 2009). In so doing, participants could also regain renewed confidence in themselves and in the future.

The workshops, described in the following section, were designed primarily to help participants recognize their own worldviews—to become aware of how rigid and unconscious their ethical references and perspectives had become, and how invisible the question of meaning had grown. Yet, while in *Philosophische Praxis* the consultant’s need for meaning may serve as the spark that ignites the dialogue, in a workshop with NEET youth this is not the case. For many of them, meaning can neither be sought nor perceived in their current experience of existence—except as the mute repetition of the everyday.

The philosopher-practitioner’s task, therefore, becomes one of awakening this search for meaning—through the progressive problematization of the obvious, the taken-for-granted, the rigidified. The workshops moved precisely in this direction.

3. Pathways of Philosophical Practice

3.1 The Case of Abigail and Ethics

To stimulate reflection and challenge the illusion of the absolute validity of one’s own ethical viewpoints, the following passage was used:

“Abigail loves Tom, who lives on the other side of the river. A flood has destroyed all the bridges across the river, leaving only one boat. Abigail asks Sinbad, the owner of the boat, to take her across. Sinbad agrees, but only on condition that she sleep with him first. Unsure of what to do, Abigail runs to her mother for advice, but her mother replies that she does not wish to become involved in her daughter’s affairs. In despair, Abigail accepts Sinbad’s condition, and he ferries her across the river. Abigail rushes to find Tom, throws her arms around him, and tells him everything that has happened. Tom rejects her harshly, and she leaves him. Not far from Tom’s house, Abigail meets John, Tom’s best friend. She tells him the whole story as well. John slaps Tom in the face and walks away with Abigail.” (CCIVS, 2006, 58).

The exercise began with a collective reading of the story in English, followed by the division of participants into four subgroups. Within each subgroup, the passage was reread, translated into Italian (the participants' common language), drawing on the group's shared linguistic competences, and reflected upon collectively.

Each subgroup was then asked to rank the story's characters in order of ethical correctness—from the most morally upright to the most reprehensible. Creating this ethically oriented list required every participant to express and then relativize their own position through dialogue, and to negotiate with others toward a shared consensus.

This exercise revealed diverse worldviews, particularly concerning gender relations and, more broadly, sexual morality. After each subgroup had completed its own shared ranking, the participants reconvened in plenary session.

Each group presented its list to the others, explaining the ethical reasoning behind its choices. The full assembly then discussed all the lists, comparing them and questioning the ethical principles underpinning them, which were ultimately found to be overly rigid.

An interesting aspect emerged regarding two participants: one displayed limited cooperative skill and less willingness to engage in group work, while another showed little flexibility in ethical reasoning, due to strong adherence to a highly structured religious denomination explicitly closed to ecumenical dialogue on spiritually significant issues.

Both maintained their personal stances, which resurfaced during the plenary discussion. Yet, their presence contributed to a broader reflection on the assumptions and backgrounds underlying ethical positions—often mistakenly perceived as immutable and, depending on perspective, either purely subjective or perfectly objective. These two cases are particularly revealing. In both trajectories, the workshop seemed to encounter a threshold beyond which its philosophical and cooperative methods were only partially effective. In the first case, limited willingness to collaborate may indicate that the very conditions the practice presupposes—trust in the group, readiness to expose one's views to critique, openness to co-construction of meaning—were not yet in place. In the second, strong adherence to a closed doctrinal framework appears to have functioned as a protective structure, within which ethical questions could be addressed only if they did not call that framework itself into question. From this perspective, their resistance is not simply a failure of the intervention, but a reminder that dialogical and reflective tools do not operate in a vacuum: they interact with deep-seated identity needs, biographical vulnerabilities, and, in the religious case, with powerful mechanisms of belonging and authority. Analysing these limits forces us to refine our claims: the workshop does not automatically foster ethical flexibility or cooperative dispositions in all participants, but does so under specific relational and existential conditions. At the same time, the visible re-emergence of their initial positions in the plenary discussion suggests a different kind of effect: their steadfastness made explicit the tensions between pluralism and certainty,

between shared inquiry and non-negotiable convictions, and thus helped the group as a whole to interrogate what it means, in practice, to encounter another whose ethical world cannot easily be accommodated within one's own.

The group as a whole eventually reached the conclusion that ethics is socially constructed—shaped by social, cultural, religious, and value-based constraints, all of which are themselves fluid and constantly evolving.

The exercise was conducted in English for two reasons.

First, to open participants to the philosophical dimension inherent in approaching a new language. As Wilhelm von Humboldt observed in 1836, every language embodies a worldview; thus, acquiring linguistic competence offers the opportunity to broaden one's own perspective through exposure to new ways of seeing the world (Humboldt, 1968).

Second, to emphasize that linguistic competence—like any other personal capacity—should not be regarded as an individual possession, but rather as a social construct that emerges as a collective resource through cooperative engagement.

In the subgroups, which were highly heterogeneous in terms of socio-cultural background and educational level, different degrees of English proficiency were shared as part of the group's collective "toolbox."

Each participant was able to enhance their linguistic skills relative to their starting point, while the process itself affirmed a methodology of sharing that participants could carry forward throughout their lives.

3.2 Dilemma Training

The group also engaged in a dilemma training activity, based on the well-known example of *The Violinist* by Judith Jarvis Thomson:

"You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist—a famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to suffer from a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all available medical records and discovered that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. [If he is unplugged now, he will die; but in nine months he will have recovered from his ailment and can safely be unplugged from you.]" (Thomson, 1971, 48-49).

Faced with the question of how they would act in the place of the kidnapped person, participants initially polarized around two opposing positions. One side rejected any idea of surrendering personal freedom, however temporarily, particularly in light of the coercive circumstances that imposed responsibility for another's life. The other side accepted without reservation the idea of remaining connected to the violinist, upholding the supreme value of life itself.

The initial spontaneous reactions revealed little nuance between these rigid and opposing stances.

The group then proceeded through the seven steps of *Dilemma Training* as systematized by Henk van Luijk (Luijk, 1996), which allows ethical problems to be examined with greater critical depth.

As Lou Marinoff observes, while analyzing a problem does not automatically solve it, only by confronting it can one even begin to envision its possible resolution (Marinoff, 2002, 165).

The philosophical practice unfolds through the following steps:

1. Formulate the ethical problem;
2. Identify the individuals involved and explore their motivations and claims;
3. Recognize the essential and relevant information related to the issue;
4. Determine the responsibilities of the parties involved and identify who faces the ethical dilemma;
5. List all possible arguments for and against each potential solution;
6. Evaluate which arguments are the most significant and understand why;
7. Articulate the final decision based on the preceding steps (Marinoff, 2002, 167).

This practice enabled many participants to shift their initial perspectives. Almost all began to question their starting assumptions and to experiment with the rational argumentation of evolving ideas, recognizing the validity of others' arguments as meaningful. Even those whose positions had been rigidified by religious or ideological convictions found their concept of "value" challenged by philosophical reflection capable of disrupting apparent certainties.

A noteworthy case involved a young man of modest educational and cultural background who, in the first session, had declared himself utterly incapable and unwilling to speak. By mid-course—particularly through this activity—he was able to recognize, with visible satisfaction, previously undiscovered personal resources in rational argumentation and meaningful dialogue.

Although this practice is sometimes—non-philosophically—interpreted as a form of *problem solving*, both the approach adopted and the outcomes of the workshop demonstrated, on the contrary, the fecundity of sustained problematization.

As Gerd Achenbach maintains, *Philosophische Praxis* should not be conceived as serving the problems presented to it, but as a path for critically examining them (Achenbach, 1984).

Within this framework, philosophical practices stand as the very opposite of problem solving, since philosophy, at best, multiplies problems (Pollastri, 2007, 42).

By adding new questions, philosophy dismantles narrow worldviews and distinguishes itself radically from coaching or counseling techniques aimed at pacifying existential unrest through mere adaptation to the given.

Yet unrest, when interpreted as an opportunity to transcend preconstituted certainties, can be cultivated as a vital moment of openness to what lies beyond (Lamendola, 2007).

3.3 A Socratic Dialogue on Hope

Through the Socratic Dialogue, participants engaged in a form of communal philosophical practice that was particularly appreciated for its outcomes.

The structure followed the most authoritative methodological indications developed by philosophers experienced in this practice (Saran-Neisser, edds., 2004), later adapted to the workshop's specific context.

The modern Socratic Dialogue, as conceived by Leonard Nelson, unfolds in four stages:

1. Formulation of a general question;
2. Presentation by each participant of examples from their own life experiences related to the question;
3. Selection of one example to be examined collectively (this step was modified in the workshop);
4. Collection of participants' definitions in response to the initial question.

The group sat in a circle, and a flip chart was used to record the discussion.

The guiding question was: "*What is hope?*"

Hope fades when the future becomes threatening; this eclipse shapes the individual's entire existential project, daily experience, and relationships with others and the world. Without hope, the meaning of one's presence in the world—and indeed of everything—collapses.

The workshop therefore sought to confront this question *vis-à-vis*: to make it explicit, to problematize it, and to subject it to collective philosophical inquiry.

Participants were asked to write on a post-it note an episode from their past connected with hope.

It was specified that the episode should concern something concluded—without unresolved emotional entanglements in the present—to avoid psychological complications. The facilitator carefully ensured that the discussion remained within the domain of *logos*, the proper sphere of philosophical practice.

After sharing their examples, participants wrote on a post-it a single word summarizing their story.

These post-its were arranged around the word "*hope*" on a poster.

Rather than focusing the discussion on a single example, the group engaged in a broader exchange across all the examples represented, followed by a *Socratic brainstorming* (Nave, 2012, 109-122) session to identify additional key words associated with hope.

The next step involved dividing participants into subgroups and asking each to craft a definition of *hope* broad enough to encompass all the shared examples and to possess a degree of universality.

The groups produced the following definitions:

- a. Hope is a universal motivation for commitment and trust in change that begins with ourselves;
- b. Hope is the will to struggle, to overcome differences, and to reach the universal;
- c. Hope is yielding to a universal equilibrium;
- d. Hope is the desire to live;
- e. Hope is the desire to survive amid present changes.

These formulations reflect the participants' effort to arrive at universal definitions, even at the cost of some expressive tension.

Nevertheless, the process itself—rather than the precision of the definitions—was the true achievement of the activity, marked by full participation and a shared commitment to reconciling differing views.

After group work, the participants reconvened in plenary session.

A spokesperson from each group read out their definition, after which the various propositions were discussed collectively.

The sheets containing the definitions were laid out side by side on the floor, allowing everyone to gather around and view them together.

A new collective effort then began to formulate a single shared definition of hope, drawing on the insights of all the subgroups.

From this long discussion, the following final definition emerged:

Hope is the individual and universal search for something positive that may come to pass.

The five initial definitions trace a gradual deepening of reflexivity: they move from the most immediate level of subjective experience (“desire to live”) towards an ethical horizon of universal scope (“trust in change that begins with ourselves”). This trajectory expresses the movement towards the universalisation of meaning that characterises Nelson’s Socratic method: starting from the concrete articulation of lived experience, the group proceeds—through a process of collective clarification—to the formulation of shared concepts.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this dynamic corresponds to a process of transformative learning (Mezirow 1991): what changes is not simply the stock of information participants possess, but the very structure of the meaning frames through which they interpret themselves, others, and the world. “Hope” no longer appears merely as an individual emotional state; it is reconfigured as a regulative principle of action.

Viewed from an educational perspective, hope understood as “trust in change that begins with oneself” points to an emerging recognition of one’s capacity to affect, at least to some extent, the reality one inhabits. This, in turn, mobilises resources of responsibility, the courage to speak out, and social participation.

The more elementary formulations—desire to live, surviving the changes of the present—seem to echo a felt sense of fear in the face of a changing world and a changing life for which no clear strategies of response are yet available. At the same time, on this plane of resilience there is already a first glimmer of projective capacity, implicit both in desire and in the idea of “surviving,” that is, of withstanding events within the flux of reality’s becoming.

The final definition, the individual and universal search for something positive that can happen, holds these dimensions together: the singular and the universal, the possible and the real, the tension towards the good and the recognition of limits. It is thus closely linked to the question of nihilism, insofar as it positively affirms the dimension of seeking a good that can be realised in the future.

Outcomes

The philosophical practices workshop concluded with a collective reflection session dedicated to evaluating the outcomes achieved. The self-assessment process was guided by the eight key competences for lifelong learning identified by the European Parliament (Recommendation of 22 May 2018), which provided the overall reference framework.

Conducted in dialogical form and later translated into individual written reflections, this phase enabled the young NEET participants to recognize and reinterpret their learning — not only in terms of competences acquired, but also in relation to personal and relational growth. Despite the participants’ diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, several common themes emerged.

The use of the eight European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning proved to be a valuable point of reference. It enabled participants to name, at least in part, the aims of the learning experiences they had engaged in during the workshop, offering an accessible interpretative framework and a shared way of communicating what they had lived through. The competences were not experienced as a rigid assessment grid, but rather as a map in which to situate what the workshop had allowed to emerge spontaneously: ways of learning, changes in modes of communication, and new forms of participation.

In terms of personal and social skills, participants reported a perceived improvement in their relational and cooperative abilities. Specifically, philosophical work in a group context attempted to offer an opportunity for active listening, respect for differences, and the pursuit of constructive mediation, which may have fostered a greater sense of security and a protected yet engaging space for increased personal skills. Several participants reported feeling they had progressively engaged more fully in the activities, overcoming initial shyness or mistrust and

discovering in dialogue with others a space for mutual learning and emancipation from cognitive and relational rigidity.

The experiential approach, based on learning by doing, was perceived by young NEETs as an opportunity to "learn how to learn." They reported realizing that learning can also occur outside of formal contexts, through active participation, sharing, and the exercise of critical thinking. The workshop was perceived as an opportunity to improve their transversal skills, but it was probably above all, as mentioned, a space to regain confidence in their ability to change and plan for their future. It seems particularly significant that many participants acknowledged an improvement in their communication skills, both in their native language and, in some cases, in a foreign language. Dialogical practices and moments of exchange attempted to encourage greater self-expression within the group, with greater confidence in their argumentative abilities and the adaptability of their language to the context. The experience of public speaking was often cited as an important achievement, especially by those who had initially shown hesitation or uncertainty in communicating.

In terms of initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, many participants felt they had gradually become more comfortable proposing ideas, translating them into action, and planning strategies to achieve shared goals. Personal initiative was linked not only to planning autonomy, but also to creativity and a willingness to take on responsibility within work groups.

From the perspective of civic and cultural skills, the experience of cooperation and dialogue was seen by participants as an opportunity to develop a more mature understanding of the value of active citizenship, understood as constructive participation in collective life.

Philosophical practices within the framework of non-formal education could therefore contribute to addressing contemporary challenges, integrating with other educational practices while strengthening the emancipatory and transformative dimension of education, particularly through the existential commitment of young people.

It is clear, however, that the primary aim of the programme was not to bring about specific, measurable gains in each of the eight key competences. Rather, by drawing on these competences—understood as trajectories to be followed with greater awareness in everyday life and as regulative ideals for orienting action—the intention was above all to foster a modest yet significant shift in participants' trust in themselves, in the future, and in its possibilities.

The process also invites a broader reflection on the role that experiences of this kind may play for young people whose relationship with traditional educational settings is often fragmented or discontinuous. Philosophy, proposed as a dialogical practice rather than as a school subject, emerged as a safe space in which thinking could be exercised without fear of making mistakes, where questions enjoyed the same dignity as answers, and where each person's contribution acquired value not by virtue of prior qualifications, but through its capacity to open up new possibilities of meaning.

Taken as a whole, the results show that the workshop did more than support the development of the competences anticipated in the project design. Above all, it helped participants to recognise themselves as active subjects, capable of intervening, re-elaborating, and taking a position. The most significant outcome of the process lies in this redefinition of one's stance in thinking and in being with others—a result that goes beyond competence measurement and touches what ultimately gives learning its meaning: the possibility of experiencing oneself as part of a community that thinks together, and as a person capable of change, able to shape their own life, to explore their own existential path, and to imagine and plan their future with hope.

The evaluation of the project's outcomes was conducted using the Youthpass methodology, a tool promoted by the European Commission within the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, designed to recognise and make visible young people's non-formal and informal learning. Rather than limiting itself to certifying competences, this approach takes the form of a structured reflective process that supports participants in becoming aware of, and re-elaborating, their educational experience (Silva-Markovic-Kloosterman, 2019). Drawing on this model, we sought to foster a guided self-assessment on the part of each young participant, inviting them to reflect systematically on what they had learned, on the competences they had developed, on the difficulties they had faced, and on how they intended to make use of what they had experienced.

The value of self-assessment in this context is closely tied to the workshop's focus on intervening in participants' views of self and world, on their sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, and on their understanding of the possibilities for personal change and for envisioning and pursuing a future project for themselves. In this respect, guided self-assessment was conceived as the most appropriate tool for this type of measurement. The facilitator accompanied participants throughout the reflective process, helping them to connect their concrete experiences with the descriptors of the key competences and to articulate a personal learning narrative.

A self-assessment model inspired by Youthpass was thus employed as an instrument of formative and transformative, rather than merely summative, evaluation. It places emphasis on the process rather than solely on the outcome, in line with an emancipatory approach in which young people become active agents in their own development (Dewey 1997).

Conclusions

The outcomes observed in the implemented program can, in our view, be read as broadly resonant with Paulo Freire's perspective that education may be employed in ways that go beyond the mere maintenance of the status quo. According to Freire, education occupies a complex position, which cannot be adequately described either as simple reproduction of dominant ideology or as an instrument intrinsically and invariably destined to produce social transformation (Freire, 2009). Freire's position seems to find a particularly radical expression

in philosophical practices, whose necessarily critical horizon can be seen as consonant with the very idea of emancipation for subjects who are variously “oppressed,” in Freire’s sense.

One of Freire’s insights is particularly relevant for interpreting our work. When engaging with peasants who emerged from “silence” to develop a critical logos (thought and speech), he observed that educational practices could, in many cases, foster the parallel development of linguistic competence and critical consciousness. In his account, participants came to perceive that their imagination might anticipate and sketch a new world—a world they desired and aspired to bring into being (Freire, 1997).

In a comparable, though not identical, way, some young people from socio-culturally and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds reported that, through a program combining philosophical practices with non-formal education explicitly aimed at strengthening transversal competences, they could first and foremost begin to emerge from silence. Accustomed to having little or no space to express their worldview, thoughts, or words, many young people tend to adopt the position of the student hidden in the back row—a refuge where they are not expected to speak and where they may feel neither recognized nor at ease in a universe dominated by the words of others.

Within philosophical practices, the intention was that everyone’s voice should gain prominence. In the workshop, at least according to participants’ feedback and our observations, they discovered that their thoughts, experiences, and skills could have a recognized and meaningful space. These could be treated as part of the group’s collective resource, contributing to the development of the method itself—not rigidly predefined, but shaped iteratively and collectively. Being seriously heard implied that, within this context, no word was taken to be entirely trivial. A “non-trivial” word is here understood as an authentic word—neither constructed ad hoc, nor repeated unthinkingly, nor merely echoing what is expected.

This condition seemed sufficient, in many instances, to foster the valorization of participants’ viewpoints and ideas, and in particular to reduce the risk that the acceptance typical of counseling or philosophical guidance might slide into generalized relativism. On the contrary, the opportunity to collectively scrutinize thoughts under the rigorous lens of philosophical inquiry appeared to offer at least some participants the possibility of moving beyond a merely relativistic stance. Freire’s idea that the imagination of those exposed to marginalization and immersed in a culture of silence can harbor the conception and anticipation of a better world invites the hypothesis that such a path may allow NEET youth to recover a sense of the future as a promise rather than primarily as a threat.

The ways in which philosophical practices may facilitate these processes, as suggested by the activities described, are not identical to those of more conventional pedagogical practices, which typically involve a structural asymmetry between teacher and learner. Even when such asymmetry is mitigated or relativized, it tends to remain constitutively present. Nevertheless,

an educational dimension is clearly at stake within philosophical practice, as Peter B. Raabe has underlined (Raabe, 2000). As Molteni notes in a 2012 article, “In a good Philosophical Counseling relationship, some form of teaching certainly occurs (usually non-formal, unlike instruction in schools or universities). More importantly, while helping the consultant overcome an existential problem and achieve greater autonomy, there is a formative effect that promotes personal growth. Growth, maturation, and evolution are fundamental aspects of education that extend beyond the narrow temporal limits of early developmental psychology, which restricted learning processes to childhood, adolescence, and youth. Today, we recognize that such processes are possible throughout the entire lifespan” (Molteni, 2012, 63).

This perspective has broadly oriented the work presented here and the a-methodical methodology adopted. It is understood as a process of personal growth which, as Stefania Capogna observes, “presents itself as a tool of freedom and self-esteem promotion, enabling individuals to develop their abilities, cultivate a broader dimension of being, acquire greater autonomy, and refine deliberative processes. In this sense, philosophical counseling appears to guarantee the empowerment of individuals through the enhancement and/or reactivation of intrapersonal dialogue with the ‘inner referent,’ an indispensable resource for recognizing the ‘discordances’ that can disrupt the rhythm of thought, heart, soul, or action, altering the sense and perception of our being-in-the-world” (Capogna, 2012, 78).

Our approach, however, placed particular emphasis on relationality rather than on the inner referent alone, recognizing relationality as a fundamental dimension of existence, even for individual subjectivity. In this sense, “Know Thyself” should not be interpreted as introspection in isolation, but, following the Greek lesson, as the ability to recognize oneself in relation to others (Vernant, 1993). Community and group philosophical practices, such as those explored in the program presented here, may contribute to enabling participants to move more consciously in this direction, and the evidence gathered so far suggests that they can offer a potentially valuable and significant complement to wider interventions aimed at supporting NEET youth.

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