

# Theatre as Metaphor and Performative Learning

Francesco Cappa<sup>1</sup>  
(University of Milan Bicocca, Italy)

## ABSTRACT

The theatre in education does not only act as an instrument. A strong analogy may be drawn between the experience offered by education and that offered by theatre. Viewing theatre as a metaphor for education implies drawing attention to an ambivalent relationship and a crucial element of pedagogical experience. A theatre workshop enables us to acquire a new familiarity, an art, a mindful presence and the ability to reflect competently about ambivalent structure of educational experience. A group of academic students, guided by a research in adult education and a colleague who is a dancer and a choreographer, produced a “pedagogical” interpretation of the story moving from a text from the historical tradition of western drama, re-writing it, composing a new text that emerged from the peculiar perspective of what that text communicate nowadays to their sensibility. Therefore, this ‘polyphony of voices’ constructs a dialogical Self that interprets the text and begins to reflect about the educational “resonances” that its peculiar collective re-writing produces at the intersection with the lives and the learning biographies of the students. The theatre workshop becomes an experience of performative learning.g.

**Key words:** adult education, theatre, biographies, embodied narratives, performative learning

## 1 Introduction

How may we even imagine an educator, trainer or teacher if their physical presence is missing? The body is indisputably the first scene of every educational event, but for an encounter to take place between the bodies of educator and educated, the educator’s body must become a theatre by activating a specific quality of presence. Is this special type of presence that “part” of experience which, as a general rule, marks the difference between what we still commonly refer to as theatre on the one hand and cinema, telecommunications (virtual to varying degrees) and television on the other? In part, we may answer in the negative, given, amongst other reasons, the complexity and diversity of the experiences of presence “created” by the new technologies. Nonetheless, this particular area of experience bears special meaning for education and training. A meaning that reminds us of the fact that even in the current era of social networks, there is a tendency to overlook a key aspect of educational situations, namely the quality of the educator’s presence. Theatre is not the only form of experience that points up the need for a certain type of presence in the relationship between two people, or between one and many, but

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<sup>1</sup> E-mail : francesco.cappa@unimib.it

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it is without doubt that which metaphorically sheds the greatest light on structural aspects of the educational situation that might otherwise be overlooked or undervalued.

There is a vast body of literature on the relationship between theatre and education (Mangham-Overington, 1987; Massa, 2001; Ackroyd, 2006; Taylor, 1996; Garoian, 1999) indeed, in a certain sense education was born of the more archaic forms of theatre, as reflected first in the latter's ritual origins and later in Aristotle's enshrining of the transformational and "pedagogical" value of Greek tragedy in the *Poetics*. It is less common to come across discourses framing theatre as a metaphor for education and training, as I do here by arguing that the elements making up theatre and those making up the educational situation are not identical but rather shed mutual light on one another, with the potential to enrich reflection and practice in both spheres. There is an essential but implicit side to educational practice that the metaphor of theatre can make explicit and accessible, leading educators in the first instance to develop an enhanced awareness of their own actions, and subsequently to acquire authentic competence. Theatre has its roots in ritual and sacredness, and through theatre, human beings have ritualized the moments in life that hold particular meaning for them at the social and individual levels. Education, like theatre, allows us to experience a liminal space (Turner, 1982) that also acts as a double space, in which both our doing and our being is "duplicated". Furthermore, both education and theatre enable us to suspend our unconscious ritualisation of life, bringing us to a greater awareness of existential meanings and of the behaviours and scripts characterizing our "educational life". Education also implies attempting not to conform to this ritualisation of life, which often appears to be inexorable. Finally, theatre seems to offer education a means of emancipating itself from the ritual inflexibility in which it too sometimes becomes bogged down.

## 2 The Metaphor of Theatre and The Pedagogical "Dispositif"

The metaphor of theatre in education does not only act as an instrument. Educational, training or teaching experiences and theatrical experience share a key part of their nature that has to do with how they are structured (Taylor, 1995). A strong analogy may be drawn between the experience offered by education and that offered by theatre. Viewing theatre as a metaphor for education implies drawing attention to an ambivalent relationship and a crucial element of pedagogical experience. However the metaphoric dimension is also directly related to critical aspects of designing a theatre workshop with educational, as opposed to exclusively performative, aims. Underlying this position is an interpretation of education and training that differs from the mainstream conception. Specifically, the idea that education is a *dispositif*. In this view, education is not an experience that has primarily to do with values or morals, or with somebody's intentions or motivation. Of course these aspects are important, but what actually structures and generates educational experience is a *dispositif*. How may we define a pedagogical *dispositif*? Before answering this question, we need to ask another. How may we distinguish between an educational situation and any other type of situation? What basic assumptions, following the logical and scientific criteria of the human sciences, lead us to define a given situation as educational? If we do not wish to fall back on the kind of ethical or normative assumptions that have discredited pedagogy for centuries, we are obliged to say that we consider educational, independently of intentions or outcomes, any situation – even those in which pedagogical intention is totally absent

– that is structured around particular key dimensions of experience. What dimensions do we have in mind? Whether all at once or in various combinations, these may be dimensions of – for example – space, time, body, symbolism, fiction, transition, ritual, initiation, prescription, evaluation. Such dimensions, as argued by Riccardo Massa, must be identified in order to define the particular *dispositif* generating educational experience as an area of proximal development.

“This *dispositif* may be defined as a pedagogical object insofar as - aside from the specific methods, activities, media and materials, or the broader methodological strategies and modes, use to organize and implement a given educational action - it allows us to identify the presence (and therefore also the absence) of certain structural dimensions [...] It is only on the basis of the empirical knowability of the *dispositif* and its invariant structural properties – using clinical or phenomenological-observational approaches – that a theory of educational action and design may be developed”(Massa, 1997: 39).

The generative *dispositif*, which is latent and associated with a specific pedagogical code, acts above as a generator of experience. Gilles Deleuze was the first to build a transversal interpretation of the thinking of Michel Foucault around the notion of *dispositif*. I do not believe it essential to reconstruct here when and why this notion first appeared in the writings and “sayings” of Foucault; rather it is critical to point out, as Riccardo Massa was the first to do in Italy, the extent to which the canonical definition of *dispositif* fulfils specifically pedagogical requirements (Foucault, 1977: 299).

Foucault defines a *dispositif* as displaying three key characteristics: 1. the network that may be established between a set of heterogeneous elements (discourses, institutions, architectures, forces); 2. the type of link, extremely variable, connecting the elements; 3. the ability to cater effectively for urgent historical needs. The notion of *dispositif* is particularly relevant to the idea that theatre is a powerful metaphor for education. Why? Because theatre is first and foremost a practice and so is education.

### 3 Theatrical Experience and Educational Workshop

In implementing a pedagogically-oriented theatre workshop with educational aims, the structure and effects of workshop practice will inevitably transform both those who design and conduct the workshop and the elements of form and content that are brought into play in the special space created by the workshop outside of “normal” educational space. Bookshops are full of texts and manuals on the different ways of designing and conducting a theatre workshop. However the key aspect to be taken into account is what it means for trainers, teachers or educators to be part of the workshop *dispositif*. All too often the workshop is thought of as concerning the trainees, students or users; all too rarely is thought devoted to how educators’ ways of implementing, designing and pacing their educational action may be modified, deformed, confirmed or inhibited by the workshop mechanism. For example in the school context, the theatre workshop is not a matter of shining the spotlight on what does not normally emerge or cannot be seen “in class”, nor of finding out about the dynamics within certain groups of students, or about what happens so close to and yet at times so far away from the teacher’s desk. Nor is it a question of shaking up what is ordinarily kept under restraint among the ranks of the school desks, of allowing emotional overflow within a controlled space with a high

capacity to contain. Rather the workshop should be viewed as a place in which to experience the ambivalence and specularity of educational experience.

The theatre workshop can be problematic for educators if they do not include themselves in the “game” set in motion by the workshop teaching method. The first step in this game is to move away from one’s usual positions, that is to say, to reposition one’s educational role and way of interpreting it. The workshop may be useful for teaching purposes, but also “useless”. Viewing it from the perspective of uselessness can give rise to stimulating changes in the practitioner’s approach to educational design at both the micro- and macro-levels. Using the theatre workshop as a teaching instrument is only one aspect of its potential, which however tends to swallow up all the other aspects. Nonetheless, there is a uselessness about theatrical experience in education, a wastefulness, an opportunity to have a different type of experience that can be of great pedagogical value. The educator often loses contact with this key aspect and intrinsic value of the workshop method, which on the one hand shares some of the traits of action-research and on the other harks back to the early pioneering laboratories in the history of scientific experimentation. This contact is lost all the more easily because the educator is preoccupied with ongoing assessment, the relevance of the workshop to the overall curriculum, and the appeal of the activities proposed to, and at times imposed on, the student group. The workshop, in particular the theatre workshop, offers a further educational opportunity to those in the teaching and educational professions: the opportunity to spend time in a space other than that of their usual teaching and educational practice. Taking part in the workshop game may lead to enhanced awareness, for example with regard to evaluating subjects who in standard teaching spaces and times do not manage to be seen for what they really are or for what they have to offer to the group from which they are excluded in a range of ways. However, the core focus here is another.

Engaging in the workshop activity gives access to a different level of experience that is typical of theatre. The experience of theatre brings participants to a level at which on the one hand theatre represents life, and at the same time and in the same space, it duplicates life. Within the space-time of the workshop, we have access to an experience that is not reproducible in any other context, an experience that, for example, cannot be had in the classroom. During the educational workshop as in theatre, while an event is being “acted out” or staged, it simultaneously draws us to a different level of awareness of what we are doing, of how we usually (or never) act, as students or teachers. This level of experience, which is duplicated in the very gesture enacting it, cannot be had during routine (school) life, just as it is not possible to thematise and actively use this level for pedagogical purposes if we limit ourselves to the awareness - in the line of Pirandello - that “tells us” that in reality we are all always acting. This is not the point in any case. The point here – and by the same token the measure used to evaluate the pedagogical richness of the workshop experience – cannot be summed up in the dialectics between the authenticity versus inauthenticity of life, or of the self. The theatre workshop enables us to acquire a new familiarity, an art, a mindful presence and the ability to reflect competently about the double nature of experience and about its ambivalent structure: it gives access to a second level of experience that does not judge what is happening but tries to make it meaningful by valuing experience based on difference, the formation and transformation of masks, the alteration of time periods, and the layering of the spaces – including the symbolic spaces – that host and are organized by our practices.

Like theatre, education brings about a watershed in experience: thus the theatre workshop marks a discontinuity with daily life. The workshop provides a protected space, as has always

been the case within the scientific tradition. It is the place for experimentation, where the chain of consequences of a test or experiment may be kept under control. The other vital aspect is that in the workshop the fundamental elements of experiences may be observed “in the pure state”, or rather, the fundamental elements attain maximum visibility. And the opportunities for them to interact are also maximised. We may therefore observe under ideal workshop conditions what happens in external reality at both the micro- and macro-levels. Thus the workshop is a special space that nevertheless is clearly itself part of reality. Just as the workshop (not only the theatrical kind) is part of the “reality” of school teaching methods. Thus the specific practice involved in the workshop experience is of paramount importance. How may we define this practice which is typical of the workshop in general and of educational theatre workshops in particular? Practice is something that is beyond our power to fully grasp. There is an imaginary ground, activated by the work of the workshop, against which the practices of each individual enter in contact with those of others. The combination of ways in which individual subjects interpret what they are doing through their practice constitutes an interindividual level of experience. Subsequently, the joint outcome of imaginary and practices also becomes a prefiguring of the actions that the actors have yet to carry out, as well as shedding exceptionally revealing light on individuals’ prior experience of the gestures and scripts characterizing their own lives as educators and recipients of education. A theatre workshop that constructs this level of shared action gives rise to an experience that does not originate from the intentions, motivation or abilities of one individual, but concerns a group of multiple subjects who carry out actions and at the same time are “led” by their practices.

The resulting group is a group of peers, a work group. The group leader must not focus on interpreting group dynamics but on pursuing an educational aim. This is the essential difference: there is something inherent in workshop activity per se that is expressed as a group effect. And in order to more effectively observe these group effects, their peculiar characteristics, their potential and consequences for individuals and group activity, the group leader must take a step back, or rather to one side. The group work does not have a psychological but an educational aim (for example the staging of a play), that is to say something that has to do with the quality of the experience enjoyed by each subject through the medium of the group and through the practices and actions making up the joint experimental work. Therefore from their side position, educators must observe the process that the workshop sets off and develops. From this position they are not called on to provide direct solutions for problems arising in the process, nor to evaluate proposals about how to continue the work that may be put forward as the lab proceeds. Furthermore, by stepping to one side, the creator and moderator of the lab may view it from a longitudinal rather than a face-on perspective: a perspective that casts a different light not only on students’ experience, but especially, on the object that is being constructed, which has pedagogical features and “speaks” above all else of how the experience is being conducted and of the educator’s own position and style. This side position is analogous to the *duplication* of theatrical experience. Herein lies the profound analogy between theatre and education, which the workshop teaching method illustrates very clearly.

#### 4 The Position of the Educator

The diaphanous position assumed by educators not only makes theatre a search for the ever-changing and precarious balance between what they are and what they are not – a situation paradigmatically expressed by Hamlet in the opening of his monologue. Still more, their position means that it is while they are doing something, and only thanks to the act of doing it, that they make contact with a space in which to further elaborate – and master – what they are doing: this is the specific space of the educational experience generated by the practice of theatre. Such knowledge may only be accessed through concrete gestures, which must be accompanied by the awareness of doing - and simultaneously of being influenced by doing - them: only this diaphanous presence *in action* allows them to attain what is legitimately referred to as educational knowledge. This is why theatrical practice is important from a pedagogical perspective: because it facilitates second-level experience; in other words it allows us to metaphorise experience. In this sense, the metaphor of theatre has an even greater pedagogical value than the mere analogy between theatre and education. Acceding to second-level experience offers the same dimension of *making a leap* that distinguishes metaphor from analogy: a leap in discourse from one significant to another significant which would normally be viewed as unrelated to the first, thereby opening up a new space of attribution of meaning for both the significant in question, and facilitating the modification of traditional acquired knowledge. But this second-level experience does not take place in the “before or after”: only the time actually spent in practice helps us to systemize and become aware of what we do and of what we are when we educate or teach. It is during practice, in the presence demanded by practice, that educators can access this specific type of knowledge: because this presence brings together their experience of what is happening and of what is happening to them. In this joining together they are able to reconfigure the framework previously used to understand themselves, and within which they had brought to bear the theories and behavioural codes that generally guided their actions and their thinking. Practice organizes knowledge, carrying within itself a knowledge that is partly implicit. Without this knowledge even the slightest variation in practice would be impossible; transformation would never take place. Thus the theatre workshop allows us to establish a different and formative relationship with our own practice.

#### 5 An Affective Practice

The space of theatre is a space within which we suspend our engagement in everyday life, thereby setting off a process of reflection that is played out through material and concrete action. Educational experience is lived primarily in the materiality of space and educators’ bodies: through their own presence – which solicits a different level of attention to that paid in other contexts, environments or relationships – educators create a space of awareness of self and of “psychic development” in which a web of practices are enacted: this is the space that allows learning to take place. Theatre thematises this presence of the body as a bridge towards critical and mindful education. But what kind of theatre do we have in mind? What kind of theatrical experience is provided by this type of workshop? The preeminent status of practice in theatre was emphasized above. If it is wished to exploit the potential of theatre as a metaphor for education, then we believe that a “poor” theatre is required. In other words, theatre, like

education, that strives to create authentic experience, must be able to do without all but the bare essentials. Amongst the great figures of Western theatre in the second half of the twentieth century, Jerzy Grotowski stands out for the educational value that he attributed to the theatrical event and for the radical nature of his poetics. Grotowski was wont to describe theatre as an “encounter” (Grotowski, 1968): poor theatre, stated in somewhat over-simple terms, is the belief that to make theatre, all that is required is the encounter between an actor’s body and an audience. And, as Grotowski himself would add: “Although we cannot train the audience – at least not systematically – we *can* however train the actor.” (Grotowski, 1968: 71)

The space of formation of the Self and that of resistance to learning – the latter typical of the educational encounter – are seen by Grotowski as two complementary aspects of theatrical experience.

Grotowski is a particularly interesting figure because from the theme of the body he worked back to the heart of the educational question, as it pertains to the experience of theatre (Cappa, 2001): this is the sense of poverty that characterizes his theatre, founded on the pure and sacred encounter between an audience and the body of an actor who makes a total gift of himself. Actors’ training and their relationship with the character that they are playing can provide – from the perspective of this paper – useful indications for the training of education professionals. A critical part of this training concerns “physical actions”. Grotowski believes the work on physical actions to be a tool for finding *something*, a tool that can enhance the actor’s capacity for discovery. (Grotowski, 1968) In his view, it is the small, minimalist and poor truth of physical actions that generates encounter, and this surely holds true for the theatre workshop described here. This truth, which is first and foremost concrete reality, can come to the fore if the space of practice is experienced as a place in which self-expression may come into contact with an affective rather than an emotional dimension. The workshop therefore is not aimed at carrying out a psychological exploration of the participants, but has quite another purpose. The work on physical actions, performed in the “pedagogical” space guaranteed by a work group of peers, provides an experience that is out of the ordinary, and in which the affective dimension counterbalances the professional, and the professional – that is to say, rigour in maintaining the focus on physical actions and not on psychological dynamics – counterbalances affective overflows, projections and incursions of the affective into the professional sphere.

## **6 Affectivity must be Practiced before Being Interpreted**

There is an unconscious space in the training of the actor/educator that must be explored: this space may only be traversed by those searching for their own educational phantoms. The body and experience may act as bridges towards discovery of one’s own “psychic blocks” – to use Grotowski’s terminology – and towards an experience of self-formation, so that in the encounter with the audience true and authentic theatre or education may take place. The actor or educator in formation must learn to recognize the space of resistance – first their own, and then that of the other – through reflective practice and group experience. There is a level of psychological, symbolic and material resistance that needs to be experienced, because is it at this very level that the availability of the other may come into being. This availability of the other is inextricably bound up with a structural paradox of education that may be expressed as follows: in order to make another person free, I must also make him/her passive. This is different to the coercion

that makes both parties passive in an education situation. It is also distinct from the opposite attitude that thinks and acts as though relating to others is always good in itself. Relations are not always good in themselves, nor alone are they a sufficient condition for an educational event to take place. A space and time must be established in which the other does something voluntarily, not any random action, but a voluntary setting in motion of an active *partitura* (for him/herself) on the basis of a passive availability – which is the outcome of the educational work.

“The essence of theatre is encounter. The individual who undertakes an act of self-penetration engages in a particular type of contact with himself: that is to say, an extreme confrontation, sincere, disciplined, precise and total – not merely a confrontation with his thoughts, but one involving his whole being, from his instincts and unconscious right up to his most conscious state”. (Grotowski, 1968: 67)

The practice of this encounter is what makes the difference, including in terms of outcomes. This perspective almost seems to go beyond the analogy between theatre and education and to speak to pedagogical experience *tout court*.

Through the implementation of specific practices, such as those involved in the theatre workshop, the conditions in which the educational encounter may take place become visible and recognizable. The practice of theatre workshop also draws out the different potentials of the subjects involved and the potential represented by the subjects themselves: ‘emergences’, as Varela might put it. The image of this emergence is displayed on the reflective surface created by the *dispositif*.

## 7 Endowing Time with Rhythm

What do we mean by saying that the affective must be practised before being interpreted? A short contribution of Artaud’s can shed light on this, if read in educational terms. According to Artaud:

“It must be acknowledged that the actor possesses a sort of affective musculature that corresponds to the physical location of feelings. [...] This means that in theatre more than elsewhere, the actor needs to be aware of the affective world, though being careful to attribute it with virtues that are not those of an image but that bear material meaning. [...] Being familiar with the rhythm of one’s passions, of this sort of musical tempo that regulates its harmonic beat, is an aspect of theatre that our modern psychological theatre has surely stopped thinking about.” (Artaud, 1938: 242)

This implies that the special place created by theatre also alters the temporal dimension of the experience made available by the theatrical *dispositif*. In education, affectivity cannot be acted out in “real time”, but is subject to a mediation that takes into account the specific qualities of the educational space and time required by the setting and the relationship. Rhythm, Artaud seems to suggest, is the secret heart-beat of the educational (theatrical) event. The rhythm is always given by difference, in both time and space: as in music, signs and notes describe the rhythm of the educational event and the educator must interpret the notes in terms of a rhythmic pattern of time and space that will be unique for each educational situation. At another level, this rhythm also concerns the difference between the professional and the affective dimensions (Alhadef, 2017). Artaud’s affective athletics may also be interpreted from this point of view: just as for the actor affective athletics create a space for affect, the actor-educator can step



outside of his or her role, but this does not flood the educational space thanks to the theatrical structure of the pedagogical *dispositif*, which permits and contains the affective overflow, allowing it to be elaborated at a level that is different to the immediate level of life and of the educator's involvement in the web of relations created by pedagogical space. The theatrical metaphor in education helps to unite the cognitive with the affective spheres at the level of educational materiality, making the educator's "present" body the crucial element in this unity. However, as we have seen in reference to Grotowski's thinking, this presence must be striven for, it is not necessarily a given. The presence of this "educating body" must mindfully make available an experience that follows the rhythm of passion without neglecting the material and symbolic requirements of the educational situation. Thus, through the work of the theatre laboratory the educator must construct a veritable *partitura*.

A *partitura* that does not transfer the predefined knowledge of an author or director (educator? trainer? teacher?) from one subject to another, but makes fluid the symbols, meanings and signs already present in the experiential field of the educational relationship and whose key elements "the actor" must be able to recognize and activate. Thus this *partitura* has the power to become a "third party", which initially shocks and later allows recognition of the (theatrical-educational) effect of the gestures enacted by the various parties within the theatre laboratory group and forming the bones of the *partitura* itself. The *partitura* is therefore a new object, both cognitive and affective in nature, which stands in relation to the members of the work group as an object that is shared and at the same time concerns the group's interpretation of the text, the existential plot and the process leading from the text to the fully developed *partitura*.

Another of the *partitura's* functions is to help decentre the actor-educator from an idea of theatre dominated by self-expression or an idea of education too close to his or her own objectives and personal motivations. The value of the *partitura* is also reflected in a double gain. On the one hand it allows for recognition of individual progress in terms of performance, technique and learning. On the other hand, it binds personal experience to the interindividual level, that at which the pedagogical object is manifested, shared and thought of as the object of a relationship and communication with the other, the audience in the case of theatre. Thus the *partitura* prefigures the nature of the objects that usually occupy the field of pedagogical experience. It also fulfils a function of counteridentification in relation to these objects: that is to say it helps educators to identify their own legitimate position within this force field of experience and may also be the place in which they can concretely assess the efficacy of their own actions within a web of practices that inevitably transcends them.

## **8 Aesthetic Conditions for an Educational Theatre Workshop**

Viewing theatre as a metaphor for education implies drawing attention to an ambivalent relationship and a crucial element of pedagogical experience and performative educational methodologies (Denzin, 2013). The theatre workshop enables us to acquire a new familiarity, an art, a mindful presence and the ability to reflect competently about the double nature of experience and about its ambivalent structure: it gives access to a second level of experience that does not judge what is happening but tries to make it meaningful by valuing experience based on difference, the formation and transformation of masks, the alteration of time periods, and the layering of the spaces – including the symbolic spaces – that host and are organized by our practices. It is not possible to understand what happens in a theatre workshop without

engaging in one. In theatre, it is our concrete gestures that allow us to enter into contact with what we are doing, with the motivations behind our action, with the meanings that it takes on when it modifies the context in which it was made, and with the representations that underlie and orient it. This opportunity afforded to us by theatrical experience is pedagogically valuable (Csòrdas, 1994) because frequently all too little attention is devoted to the quality of educators' presence within the time and space of their teaching activities. An educational theatre workshop of this kind immediately poses an challenge in relation to time and space. The type of project whose key dimensions we are about to describe, demands by its nature a versatile space and a long period of time; two characteristics that are not always compatible with the current functionalization of teaching activities.

Space is of fundamental importance. The workshop requires a habitable space that is not inhabited by desks: that is to say, a space that may be constructed and deconstructed in keeping with the specific activity to be conducted. An adaptable setting that may be laid out in the way most conducive to the achieving the objectives of the planned activity. The first step therefore is to provide a space that can adequately contain the needs of a sizeable group of people who continuously alternate "blackboard" exercises with floor exercises, in which chalk is more frequently used to mark out on the floor the starting positions and points of encounter among the students' bodies. One of the key purposes of this educational practice, a purpose that is also served by the workshop's long duration, is that of reclaiming a "living space" that is used almost exclusively as a container, in a way that is often hostile to higher education experiences. If spaces invariably have a story, and this story is closely bound up with their function, then we need to violate the rules governing the normal and normative functionality of academic spaces. This implies encouraging the entire work group to put into practice what Genette, in a completely different context, referred to as "re-use" (Genette, 1982). There are many illustrious historical examples of this within the theatre tradition, ranging from street theatre to *The Living Theatre*. Feeling oneself to be part of a transgressive intention, particularly in a highly formalized context such as the university, can fulfil a strongly education function, especially if the transgression in question is not ultimately unrealistic and is underpinned by a profound ethical and political need, corresponding to educational needs that the group can own because it shares them. (In this regard, the chosen architectural and functional characteristics of recently renovated Italian university campuses prompt serious reflection).

The reclaiming of university spaces by their true owners is not easy to put into practice, given that institutional inflexibility makes itself felt even for something as simple as a rehearsal, concert or play lasting only a few hours. It is almost as though forcibly reclaiming spaces that may be neutral, or purely aesthetic, and assigning them with a function that is new and eccentric vis-à-vis the norms designed to maintain the educational and institutional status quo, exposes in a certain sense, a lack of attention to the real needs of those who literally give life to the institution and who in this act of "reclaiming" are seeking channels of expression. The time required is a long time. The total time frame for an educational theatre workshop overrides the logic of semesters, and even though the workshop is still tied to ordinary types of logic by virtue of being worth a certain number of credits, it is intrinsically different to other educational experiences.

The space-time required to complete this kind of workshop necessarily includes intervals during which to assimilate the ongoing experience. These periods must be viewed as part of the teaching activity itself, rather than, as often happens, leaving the students to engage in solitary and unshared reflection on the experience at a later date. What kind of time do students experience when for a whole year they spend at least three hours a week at the university with

the same group of people, discussing clashing or concordant ideas of how to interpret a single line about love, power, law, or the force of memory from a play by Camus, Artaud, Beckett, Kafka, Ionesco, Shakespeare, Brecht, or Savinio? A long time is required. A dilated time frame, to be gone through as one might approach a snow drift, that is to say, as something out of the common, markedly different from the rest of the student's daily existence, so that which is learned may become experience, and so that the time devoted may become an extended, translatable and communicable memory. Group experiences of this kind bear signs of a temporality, which, it should be noted, is still experienced within the ordinary flow of university life, for example, but reflects needs that have been reconnected to the workings of educating the whole person and developing the self.

### **9 Theatre Workshop, Embodied Narratives and Learning Biographies**

The opportunities for learning provided by a theatre workshop may be illustrated by the workshop that I myself conducted last year at the Department of Human Sciences for Education, here in Milano-Bicocca University, with twenty-five students. We worked on the play by Alberto Savinio, *Captain Ulysses*, which presents a Pirandellian version of key scenes from Homer's *Odyssey*. The group of students, guided by myself and a colleague who is a dancer and a choreographer, Cristina Negro, produced a "pedagogical" interpretation of the story, taking Savinio's script as a starting point, re-writing it, and composing a new text that emerged from the peculiar perspective of what the text communicated to group with its present day sensibilities. Thus, the polyphony of voices (Bachtin, 1981) present in the group, constructed a dialogical Self (Hermans, 1996) that interpreted the text and began to reflect on its educational "resonances".

"The voices function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each of them has a story to tell about his or her own experiences from his or her own stance. As different voices, these characters exchange information about their respective Mes, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self". (Hermans, 1996)

This peculiar collective re-writing produced at the intersection with the students' own lives and learning biographies (Merrill, 2009). In this learning scenario every student can express and act his/her own "interpretation" of the main relationships between the characters of the play by Savinio – Ulysses, Telemaco, Penelope, Mentore – playing with what these epical and archetypical figures tell to their specific analogical existential and learning relationships "acted" during their life histories and biographies.

This field of reflexivity was amplified by the parallel "embodied" experience (Varela, 1985) that the group went through during the theatre workshop: a learning process that built on exercises for developing bodily self-perception, the relationship between bodies and space, movement and awareness of the body, gestures and rhythm. Therefore, this embodied reflection a biographical interpretation of Savinio's dramatic text, yielding new "forms of vitality" (Stern, 2010) of "embodied narratives" (Formenti, 2014). Through the interplay among contrasting but coexisting interpretations and performances of the text, the students' collectively re-negotiated the original script and re-wrote it. A space of (possible) transformation of the academic setting was generated. The initial and traditional academic space turned into a specific "space of play of learning" in which knowing, sharing and interpreting evolved into a collective "theatrical

expression” (Goffman, 1959). Furthermore, this “learning scenario” required the whole group to take responsibility for and to care for the process, “re-using” (Genette, 1982) the spaces of the University as a “new educational setting” (Massa, 1985) on which students were able to act out and communicate via a “transindividual embodied experience” (Balibar-Morfino, 2014) something meaningful about the relationship between their own personal strategies of knowledge acquisition and their biographic resonances (Barthes, 1971).

## 10 Educational Process “Through” Group Experience and Performative Learning

The resulting group is a group of peers, a work group. The group leader must not focus on interpreting group dynamics but on pursuing an educational aim. This is the essential difference: there is something inherent in workshop activity per se that is expressed as a group effect. And in order to more effectively observe these group effects, their peculiar characteristics, their potential and consequences for individuals and group activity, the group leader must take a step back, or rather to one side. The key theoretical aspect of this shift, which by analogy with theatre may also take place in education, is a paradox: through material action, the educator creates a space of reflection, awareness, interpretation (Norris, 2000). The bodily and material nature of educational work, well expressed in the metaphor of theatre, has the potential to promote awareness and critical rethinking. We define the educational experience fostered by the theatre workshop as an active, bodily, material experience, an experience that is acted out and lived with the body, but which at the same time enables us to explore and critically reflect on its contents: such is the potential learning space of the “educational setting”. Experimental theatre (such as that of Artaud or Grotowski) produces an acting out which involves a thinking and learning process that takes place at the group level. In theatre, the group of actors produces, creates and acts out a psycho-bodily *partitura* (Grotowski, 1968).

Implementing and organizing a theatre workshop within a university teaching programme, means attempting to construct a space in which a group of students encounter a dramatic script, and interpret and deconstruct it in terms of both content and form, giving rise to a collective production process, to an interpretation that constructs a virtuous circle going from educational biographies, or the lived experience of individual group members, towards a “writing” of the educational process undergone by the group in the course of the workshop and of producing their group creation. The workshop is designed to give participants the opportunity within a university context to bring a deeper perspective to bear on lived experience and educational rituals as well as to thematise fictional and creative aspects of education, both with and through a peer group. This collective mode of theatrical production, which poses multiple challenges at the methodological level, is also an exercise in counter-manipulation that will be valuable to the students-educators-trainers in the course of their future professional activity. It exposes and explains in a direct manner, the dynamics, often suppressed, which are invariably present in the internal relations of any group of students, as well as between students and teachers, and which are often similar to the dynamics that educators encounter on professional teams. The space-time of education is also a performance, which engages in one and the same scene teachers and students, trainers and trainees alike, allowing all parties to value previously tacit competences and to shake off the bonds of overly stereotypical roles. Theatre thematises this *presence* – not

only of the body – as a bridge towards critical and mindful education via the interplay of reciprocal interpretations.

“The purposes that most strongly characterize a person are those that, in one way or another, connect him/her with other people: such purposes, once they have acquired a certain degree of importance and definiteness, give rise to a struggle. In the conflict, people’s personalities and the general element binding them together via the object of their contention, are expressed. This consists of argumentations, and ideas, philosophical, socio-political or psychological thoughts, which theatre takes up and is called upon to enrich through its dramatic art” (Ersov, 1993: 45)

In this sense, an educational theatre workshop in the university context may be seen as the place in which we encounter the play of freedom. Freedom and autonomy that are generated and experienced not by means of controlled actions typical of rational calculation, but as the outcome of the play of relations and relationships, a playing off that is only visible in the field created by the presence/action and practices of the subjects being educated. A set that is not detached from the broader life context, that engages with and reacts to, resists if necessary, the forces constructing and constraining reality: the learning stage thus emerges as a field in which the educational and the political may meet in the materiality of a shared process. Only the collectively staging of a scene within this field and within this play of relations can potentially represent an educational practice that creates the conditions for a space and a time in which to present and represent alternative existences, or an “aesthetics of existence” (Foucault, 1984).

Transforming elements of existence into experience by means of a theatre laboratory means transforming them into teaching and learning projects based on learning from experience. The primary outcome of this shift, in the concrete form of the laboratory work, is a direct gain in the relationship with the students, who are assessed in a new context, in which they enact and experience different languages and codes to those “brought into play” by classical teaching methods. As a secondary outcome, such a shift generates a different kind of experience for the educators themselves, providing them with a place in which to elaborate from a new perspective their own challenges and strengths at both the professional and non-professional levels. The space-time of education is also a performance, which engages in one and the same scene teachers and students, trainers and trainees alike, allowing all parties to value previously tacit competences and to shake off the bonds of overly stereotypical roles. Theatre thematises this *presence* – not only of the body – as a bridge towards critical and mindful education via the interplay of reciprocal interpretations (Fischer, 2004). The pedagogical richness of the metaphor of theatre is not only an outcome of the relationship between theatre and “forms” of education, educational tools and didactics. The pedagogical relevance of theatrical practice is more structural: it concerns the relationship between a fictional and material situation, present in every educational scenario (Cappa, 2016), and an expressive situation that generates affective knowledge.

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