

DIDACTIC AND ARTISTIC INNOVATION IN THE *MEDIA DANCE* PROJECT: A RESEARCH APPROACH¹

INNOVAZIONE DIDATTICA E ARTISTICA NEL PROGETTO *MEDIA DANCE*: UN APPROCCIO DI RICERCA

Rita Maria Fabris

University of Turin, Italy
ritamaria.fabris@unito.it

Nicoletta Ferri

University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy
nicoletta.ferri@unimib.it

Giulia Schiavone

University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy
giulia.schiavone@unimib.it

Abstract

This contribution observes and analyses a research-training project directed at second-grade Secondary School students and teachers in the suburbs of Turin. *Media Dance* started from the scientific cooperation between the University of Turin, the University of Milano-Bicocca and the Piemonte dal Vivo Foundation and aimed at exploring and promoting innovative reflections between the school system and the performative languages, through choreographic residencies.

Into an historical-artistic view, we present the results of the research that we've developed starting from the theoretical framework of the *Una scuola* Manifesto (Antonacci and Guerra, 2018) in its application to the assessment on the scholastic community, in terms of didactic innovation. In this regard, we designed research tools to highlight the multiple voices of the actors involved: questionnaires (pre- and post- actions), focus groups and research-training activities addressed to students and teachers. The data enhance how the encounter with the performative languages offered the participants the possibility to approach the transformative potential of the embodied, aesthetic dimension, as an experience of mutual connection and recognition.

Abstract

Il contributo testimonia e analizza un progetto di ricerca-formazione rivolto a studenti e insegnanti di scuole secondarie di secondo grado della periferia torinese. *Media Dance*, nato dalla collaborazione scientifica tra l'Università di Torino, l'Università di Milano-Bicocca e la Fondazione Piemonte dal Vivo, ha mirato a sperimentare e promuovere riflessioni e pratiche innovative, nell'incontro tra mondo della scuola e linguaggi performativi, attraverso Residenze d'artista di stampo coreutico.

Dopo aver contestualizzato in una cornice storico-artistica il progetto, vengono presentati i risultati della ricerca sviluppata a partire dal framework teorico del Manifesto *Una scuola* (Antonacci e Guerra, 2018) nella sua applicazione alla valutazione d'impatto delle arti performative sulla comunità scolastica, in termini di innovazione didattica. A riguardo, sono stati elaborati strumenti di rilevazione volti a restituire le plurime voci degli attori coinvolti: questionari (pre e post intervento) e focus group, rivolti sia a studenti sia a docenti, e attività di ricerca-formazione con gli insegnanti. I dati mettono in luce come l'incontro con i linguaggi performativi abbia offerto ai partecipanti la possibilità di avvicinarsi, attraverso il corpo, al potenziale trasformativo della dimensione estetica, intesa come esperienza di connessione e riconoscimento reciproco.

Key words: didactic innovation, performative languages, educational research, secondary School, teacher Training

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Parole chiave: innovazione didattica, linguaggi performativi, ricerca educativa, scuola secondaria, formazione insegnanti

1. *Media Dance between history and contemporaneity*

There are historical cycles in which questions about school and theatre come up again and again. In the 1970s the pedagogical phase of Theatre Animation experimented with the relations between free expression and curricular school activities, between horizontal didactics and group inventions (Rostagno and Pellegrini 1979, p. 223), thanks to the encounter between artists and teachers. Alongside the subsequent training of theatre operators and educational-dance-teachers®, there was research on the impact of theatrical processes in schools in Lombardy (Di Rago 2001) and Marche (Associazione Teatro Giovani 2004) and, more timidly, the first experiments of professional companies in the school system in Ravenna, with the *Tastes of author's dance at school* (Francia and Carlone 2007, p. 35).

With the *Artist Residencies* in high schools implemented by the Piemonte dal Vivo Foundation's *Media Dance* project, we perhaps reached the performative turning point (Fischer-Lichte 2014) of didactics, because in addition to promoting a systematic focus on the formation of tomorrow's *homo performans* (Cuminetti 1998), it imagined and studied the impact of the performative on the entire educating community in terms of human transformations over the long period of the ritual process of residency, where experience was constructed together with the various social agents. From the capillary experiences of professionals in school contexts, there was a leap in scale in the institutionalisation of performing arts at school with the didactic innovation system *Media Dance*.

In an ecological vision of the performing arts, the specificity of the encounter between theatre and school in Piedmont today takes the form of a complex proposal where no hierarchy is recognisable, because in the rapport between the various bodies each has the same right to count (Butler 2017), whether it is the artistic body, the teaching body or the student body. Two matrices can be recognised at the origins of the project: firstly, the ministerial directives for Residency Centres and audience education (Pontremoli and Ventura 2019, p. 33), which the Piemonte dal Vivo Foundation translates through a revolutionary rethinking of Children's Theatre for high schools, a process-type theatre-dance festival (practical workshop with philosophical dialogue, viewing of the performance, multimedia restitution) through the choice of socially relevant themes and the use of new media. The second matrix is the research by Mira Andriolo and Doriana Crema, trainers of trainers who, with the aim of "Educating to beauty", set up the eponymous periodic programme of meetings with teachers, artists and operators to approach the performing arts and the mutual understanding of needs, resources and values. The intervention framework is completed by the establishment of an interdisciplinary scientific committee with the Department of Human Sciences for Education Riccardo Massa (University of Milan-Bicocca), the Department of Humanities (University of Turin), ASLTo3 and Dors Piemonte - Regional Documentation Centre for Health Promotion and the Turin Territorial School Office.

The system of artistic residencies in schools was generated by the gradual experimentation of a group of artists and philosophers, first in the form of workshops on bodily and dialogical practices; then, with the pandemic in 2020-2021, the process of pedagogical and digital reworking required led director Barbara Altissimo to construct a long-distance dramaturgy on gender violence and filmmaker Alain El Sakhawi to propose a video dance experience, while Daniele Ninarello managed to conduct his artistic research on bullying with the students and Salvo Lombardo produced an online experiential process, open to the questions that emerged among the students on the decolonisation of bodies and resulting in a form of "public listening" through the creation of podcasts.

Despite the pandemic, it was possible to develop multimedia experiences in assembly mode with students and teachers, as well as to implement a multidimensional impact assessment process with 94 students and 52 teachers, thanks to the interdisciplinary approach of the qualitative-quantitative research designed by the scientific committee, which takes a further step in the direction of "considering theatre in schools and educational institutions not only an intervention [...] to increase the psycho-physical wellbeing of children and young people [...]; it is instead appropriate to analyse the school and the educational agency in the complex background of the subjects and relationships that make up the life of the community and, within them, the theatre activity as an element that can radically transform individuals, groups and networks of coexistence" (Carpani 2006, p. 28).

This paper therefore intends to present the first results of the research developed on *Media Dance* from the theoretical framework of the *Una scuola* Manifesto in its specific application to the evaluation of the impact of performing arts in 4 high schools in Turin, in terms of didactic and artistic innovation and health promotion.

2. The *Una scuola* Manifesto. A theoretical framework for re-thinking the educational relationship

We intend here to consider the school system in its complexity, sustaining a pedagogical view rooted in the materiality of education (Massa, 2000) and that embraced the possibility of looking at didactics and socio-educational actions from new perspectives. In this direction, we recognised the urgency of re-constructing and re-thinking the relationships *about* bodies, *in* bodies and *among* bodies in educational and social spaces (Balduzzi, 2002; Cunti, 2015; Gamelli and Mirabelli, 2019; Antonacci and Schiavone, 2021). To do this, during the various experiences proposed within the *Media Dance* didactic innovation project, we used the *Una scuola* Manifesto, (Antonacci and Guerra, 2018) as a theoretical framework and device for the pedagogical analysis of the school-format based on five fundamental axes: *Encounters, Styles, Languages, Contexts, Possibilities*.

We believe that rethinking the school system can be of pivotal importance to establish and support projects aimed at a constructive dialogue between "science and art" (Bruzzone, 2016; Zuccoli, 2020), as projects capable of enhancing the multiple languages of the human (Gardner, 2013), through innovative methodologies and practices. It is a matter of recognising how the arts, within school and educational contexts, can become a vehicle and language of learning, and not a mere ornament of conceptual and abstract knowledge (Caputo and Pinelli, 2019).

2.2 The 5 axes of the *Una scuola* Manifesto for Educational Innovation

As pedagogists, promoting a vision of the school system as an educating community (Tarozzi, 2005; Salmeri, 2015), in a deep dialogue with society, we believe it is important to recognise that we cannot modify one aspect of this system without affecting all the others. It is necessary to embrace *a complex perspective*, able to read its various levels - institutional, organizational, economic, cultural, relational.

In this regard, we believe that a careful consideration of the performative could help orient policies and practices in directions that allow a positive overcoming of the school crisis (Massa, 2000), in order to fight phenomena of social unease and marginalization. For this reason, we think that a reflection on the performative can significantly cross all the five axes which compose the school system, where the change in one implicitly entails a change in the others as well.

The *first axis* is the **Relational** axis and is focused on the community sphere of the school context, in which to build ties and bonds, first as teachers with the students but also with colleagues, families and the local area. From this point of view, the group, in terms of community, is placed at the centre of the training project, and this promotes a shift in educational intervention from the individual subject to interpersonal relations.

In order to outline an education of communities who learn synergistically, we adopted a theoretical horizon and participatory and inclusive teaching strategies (Ciaffi and Mela, 2006; Overton et al. 2017). This is particularly relevant when dance is used as a language (Amans, 2008; Zagatti, 2018) and intervention tool. The *second axis* is that of educational *Styles*, and through this lens we look at the school as a context where we modify the style of learning and, consequently, of teaching. The performing arts, as languages that make use of the body as a vehicle and origin of every cognitive, sensorial, emotional and relational experience (Gamelli, 2011), make it possible to move away from a traditional transmissive model, in order to re-think educational action in an active, relational and dialogic form. In this sense, looking at the project, we believe the *heuristic, possibilitating* (Mortari, 2007; Guerra, 2019) *style in research* embodied by the performers, can contribute to significantly informing the didactic style in the school. The performative language encourages, in fact, a “proceeding by questions”, as an attitude able to trigger changing and transformation.

An *embodied question* (Varela et al., 1991), crossed and experienced with the whole body-mind, capable of informing both performative and scholastic practice. An idea of research where teacher and performer position themselves in an explorative attitude (Guerra, 2019), proceeding *by wandering*, where: “wandering also means making mistakes and clearly separates, in an educational key, a perspective aimed at adapting to the model, to the correct execution, compared to a perspective open to the experience of doing, which naturally admits doubt, rethinking and perhaps, why not? even error” (Zagatti, 2011, p. 10). We believe this hallmark, the *wandering*, can become a potential transformative driving force for the entire school system, as it allows us to experience a deconstruction of the usual posture (Schiavone, 2019), to embrace a faltering (Scardicchio, 2012) and divergent perspective.

The *third axis* – the axis of *Languages* – highlights the need to change the perspective of language within the school institution, overturning the classic hierarchy that still prevails within the school context, for enhance all human languages as equal dignity. As researchers, we position ourselves in the wake of a pedagogical tradition (Baldacci, 2008; Pinto Minerva and Villa, 2012) that emphasises the value of those languages that are still so marginalised in schools, such as *artistic, poetic, expressive* and *corporeal languages*. Languages that, as witnessed by the voices of students and teachers, are those closest to them, because they know how to speak *about* their bodies, *in* their *bodies* and *among* their *bodies*.

It is by using dance, as a *medium* and as a *language*, that we intend to implement an innovative teaching model: a school model that, thanks to performance languages and *embodied education* processes (Zambaldi, 2016; Ferri, 2022), reaffirms the vital dimensions of experience.

The *fourth axis* – the axis of *Contexts* – looks at the possibility of designing learning environments (Bertolino and Guerra, 2020) by conceiving them as complex, variable and capable of speaking different languages. In this direction, the performing arts, by establishing a space and time materially and symbolically separated from ordinary school life, allow the creation of a *magic circle* (Huizinga, 2001; Antonacci 2019), which is a metaphor of elaboration and transformation of experience in representative form. The presence of a performer at school, in fact, opens up the possibility for students to get in touch with a space-time that generates imaginative tension, capable of leading towards an *elsewhere*: “towards the possibility of becoming what is not yet shown but can only be glimpsed” (Antonacci, 2019, p. 9).

The *last axis* – that of *Possibilities* – is connected with school design and evaluation, and is addressed to an organic rethinking of the school format.

From this perspective, school design, in close synergy with the other four axes outlined in *the Manifesto*, is modelled by a fluid research matrix, made not to conform to rigid programming. Consequently, evaluation also becomes a process of organic documentation of learning: we maintain that performance and choreographic languages, focusing on the process dimension, can be

particularly appropriate for re-thinking school design and evaluation in a living work perspective: here the dimension of wandering, as well as the tension towards transformation, are not only possible but also necessary to the school structure itself.

3. Going through the research data

An engaging and participatory research methodology (Pacinelli, 2008; Arvanitakis & Hodge, 2012) permeated the entire process. Reading through the five axes became, in fact, the procedural tool shared among artists, teachers and researchers. This created the possibility for a common vocabulary, able to narrate the encounter between the performative and the scholastic from different perspectives, preserving its complexity. Impact evaluation took place through research tools able to articulate the multiple voices of the actors involved: questionnaires (pre- and post- actions), focus groups and research-training activities addressed to students and teachers (Baldacci 2001; Asquini, 2018).

Using this methodology, the researchers traced in the performative experiences of *Media Dance* some thematic nodes related to the five axes. Specifically, we intend here to briefly report some of the data found in the questionnaires (pre- and post-actions) that were addressed to students and teachers and that make it possible to highlight how artistic-performance languages can contribute to innovating the school apparatus (Margiotta, 2016; Antonacci and Guerra, 2022).

With regard to the pre-intervention questionnaires, 19 multiple-choice and/or open-ended questions were developed regarding previous experiences, expectations and reflections on the role that the performing arts can play in everyday school practice. The post-intervention questionnaires, on the other hand, consisted of 26 questions aimed at investigating any processes of change generated by the performing languages, both in the relationship between the teacher and the class group, and in the relationship between the teacher and his or her own teaching subject.

In particular, the research template made it possible to trace, in the materiality of performative practices, the development of certain thematic nodes referring to the axis of Encounters and Styles. In this direction, with reference to the first axis, 42.9% of the teachers believed that the course was "an opportunity to renew pedagogical aspects in the relationship with their pupils", 28.6% that it promoted "a new approach to teaching with respect to the discipline taught and to the group/class relationship" and, finally, 22.9% that it stimulated "a rethinking of thematic approaches in order to experiment a new teaching approach".

The data highlighted how the encounter with the performative dimension simultaneously offered students and teachers the opportunity to get closer to their personal and emotional spheres, developing insights that are difficult to find in daily classroom relationships and activities: "This experience will allow me to be closer to the needs of my students and stimulate their creativity", "making the teaching moment alive and meaningful through active involvement". The teachers emphasized how, through the activities they had experienced, they had been able to devote "greater attention to relational and communicative aspects", rather than to the purely content-related aspects, contributing "to improving the climate of sharing and understanding of the teacher/learner dynamics".

With particular reference to the *Encounters* axis, it emerged that the immersive dimension of the performative allows teachers as well as students to trigger a deep dialogue "before and beyond words" (Gamelli and Mirabelli, 2019), becoming an opportunity to refine a body sensitivity to relationships.

With reference, in particular, to the axis of the *Styles*, which invites us to reflect on the *educational posture*, that is the way of being and crossing the school scene. The data showed how, through the performative dimension, teachers acquired awareness of an embodied thinking, in connection with the emancipating aspect of the educational relationship. Several teachers, in fact,

highlighted how they became aware, "above all, of the quality of their own presence", and they emphasized "how as we become aware of ourselves, we evolve".

Through activations and psychophysical exercises, teachers experienced "greater awareness of their own actions" and appreciated the opportunity to "take time for themselves, to face teaching activities with greater serenity" through "a different way of looking and listening".

Undergoing long performative workshop training (Grotowski, 1968; Alschitz, 1998) enabled teachers to develop a different way of moving, acting and reacting in the classroom context. This was aimed at a deeper knowledge and awareness of the role of one's own body in the relationship: "the fact of awakening the body and the attention to others has enabled a deeper understanding of oneself and of the environment in which one lives".

From these data we can see that the contamination of the performative in the school context highlighted the fact that even the teacher's body, similarly to the performer's, requires *training* in order to exercise what Barba (1993) defines as *luxury energy*, a quality of energy different from the one we use in everyday gestures. Exploring psycho-corporeal and performative training, teachers had the opportunity to redefine habitual patterns of behaviour and rediscover a vivid body-mind that was present, aware of its own posture, able to connect and resonate in the encounter with the other.

In this sense, the irruption of the performative in school contexts triggered in teachers a rich intellectual effort of "reconceptualisation" of the processes initiated by the artists involved (Hatcher, 2011) and enabled them to give new pedagogical sense to their way of doing school. The choreographic language allowed teachers and students to cross the aesthetic (connected with the senses) dimension and encounter the transformative potential of Beauty, understood as an experience of connection and mutual recognition in the school context. "Because aesthetic experience, even before knowledge, is origin, astonishment, encounter, which makes us realize that we exist" (Dallari, 2005, p. 13). As this teacher suggests: "To think that beauty belongs to every pupil".

It is precisely the crossing of the performative experience, in its deep, *embodied, root*, that allow us to contact, at school, the experience of beauty, conceived as the exercise of an ecological gaze: the connection of meaning between us and the world (Mortari, 2020). A perspective capable of triggering a participatory sense of a school format in dialogue with the society to which it belongs and in resonance with contemporary issues: an educating community.

4. Students' voices on *Artist Residencies*

Evaluative research in the case of the students was developed to stimulate reflexivity and self-assessment of any change processes generated, in order to test whether a multimodal process enables participants to enhance their ability to be performers of their own life story and co-constructors of society (Bernardi 2004, p. 142). The present analysis reports the most significant results for tracing what "conscious understanding" (Zagatti 2009, p. 20) of the experience the students revealed.

Almost all of them attended theatres, while as many as 67% never actively participated in an artistic project. Prior to the experience, some did not believe that "dance and theatre (especially dance) are the most appropriate means to address social issues of our time".

After the experience, 37% of the students believed that this project had given them the opportunity to develop creative thinking because, as some motivated, "I learnt to imagine many things without sticking to science and logic", "it made me realise that there are different ways of dealing with certain topics". Work on interpersonal relationships, acknowledged by 13% of respondents, also emerged from understanding "how to deal with other people I know or don't yet know".

60% of the students believed that the residency had generated processes of change in themselves and in their classmates both in language – because, as someone wrote, "we now know that in everyday use we must not use terms that we used even as a joke with our friends" – and in

self-awareness to "not make fun of and appreciate yourself and the other for who you are" or in interpersonal relationships because "we have exposed ourselves and united a lot".

If the relationship with the teachers changed for only 16% of the students, "thanks to their participation in the lessons" where they were able to see "a new side of us students", the percentage of assent (67%) regarding the change in the relationship with fellow students was higher, mainly because, "we bonded more by doing something that we would have been embarrassed to do alone", "knowing their points of view on topics not dealt with on a daily basis", and "knowing the stories that each of us has behind us".

Finally, participation in *Media Dance* helped students broaden their understanding of social issues because "you try to make people bare their emotions and tackle problems", "because together with a group there is a confrontation of ideas", "because it is a new way of looking at different issues, more creative and lighter".

The displacement of bodies in spatial and artistic terms facilitates the change of perspective on relationships and the perception of well-being, as the body is the first "cognitive geometry" for which the world makes sense and through creative imagination the different points of view are integrated into a new, more empathetic and complex vision (Pontremoli 2004, p. 40).

5. Conclusion

The experimentation process of *Artist Residencies* is in the vanguard both in the creation of a research community with artists, students and teachers and in inter-institutional work, because Italian dance institutions have not yet created a systematic alliance with both the school and health contexts, capable of initiating a multidimensional impact assessment process in terms of didactic, artistic and health promotion innovation.

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