

## DISTANCE TEACHING AS A PERFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

### DIDATTICA A DISTANZA COME ESPERIENZA PERFORMATIVA

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#### Abstract

*The elements of theatrical representation constitute a non-linear experience embodied in a complex subject of studies on action and relationship, whose analogies reverberate in other human activities, including teaching (Carlomagno, 2020) which, as a science of design, (Laurillard, 2014), had to reshape its constituent elements in the health emergency.*

Of all the dimensions object of rethinking, one on all has endured an inevitable involution: that of the feedback and its ability to constitute itself like *self-poietic loop* (Fischer-Lichte, 2014), implicit to the performative praxis, able to significantly affect the *process of intentional consonance and interpersonal tuning* (Gallese, 2007) characterizing reciprocity in teaching. The present contribution aims to reflect on how the presence can be pursued even in the distance, in a *third space* (Potter & McDougall, 2017) that assumes the emotional coordinates of the processes of empathic tuning, resonance, participation and restitution.

*Gli elementi della rappresentazione teatrale costituiscono un'esperienza non lineare che si incarna in un complesso oggetto di studi sull'azione e sulla relazione, le cui analogie si riverberano in altre attività umane, compresa l'attività didattica (Carlomagno, 2020), che, come scienza della progettazione (Laurillard, 2014), ha dovuto rimodulare i suoi elementi costitutivi nell'emergenza sanitaria.*

Di tutte le dimensioni oggetto di ripensamento, una su tutte ha subito una inevitabile involuzione: quella del feedback e della sua capacità di costituirsi come *loop autopoietico* (Fischer-Lichte, 2014), implicito alle prassi performative, in grado di incidere significativamente sul *processo di consonanza intenzionale e sintonizzazione interpersonale* (Gallese, 2007) caratterizzanti la reciprocità in didattica. Il presente contributo intende riflettere su come la presenza sia perseguibile pur nella distanza, in uno *spazio terzo* (Potter & McDougall, 2017) che assume le coordinate emozionali dei processi di sintonizzazione empatica, risonanza, partecipazione e restituzione.

#### Keywords

performative didactics, embodied cognition, interaction, feedback, theatre  
didattica performativa, embodied cognition, interazione, feedback, teatro

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«La mente non è altro che corpo in movimento»  
«Mind is nothing but a body in motion»  
(Francisco Varela)

## Introduction

Didactics, as a *science of design* (Laurillard, 2014), conceived as a *performance experience* (Carlomagno, 2020a), as part of the “*Laboratory of didactic dramaturgy*” of the Degree Course in Primary Education Sciences of the University of Study Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan and of the Master in “*Theatre, pedagogy and didactics, technical methods and practices of the performing arts*” of the University Suor Orsola Benincasa of Naples, in the health emergency that imposed the distance, had to reshape its constituent elements, using the simplistic principle of the *deviation* (Berthoz, 2011; Sibilio, 2014), as a creative tool that allows the decipherment and the coping of complexity, an alternative path usable by the teacher and the learner.

In an analogy already debated between theatre and teaching (Carlomagno, 2020a; 2020b; Rivoltella, 2017), in the changing dialectic that supports the relationship between the role of the teacher/director/actor and that of the student/actor/spectator, postulating the intersubjective reversibility of experiences based on shared participation of one and the same configuration of experience (Gallese & Morelli, 2011) that Gallese defines as *empathy* (2006a), therefore the thesis confirms that «in the interaction experiences the ‘mirror system’ is neuro-physiologically activated, which allows the grafting of a direct link between the different actors of the relationship, in which the body in action and its alphabets can become the pivot around which to activate that ‘intentional consonance or interpersonal attunement’ that characterizes the relationships of reciprocity in teaching» (Carlomagno, 2020, p. 350).

In this perspective, the teaching, understood as art and *science of design* (Laurillard, 2014) combines a vision of knowledge as an active process, rooted in the body, in the biological structure of the individual (Maturana & Varela, 2001, Trad.it.) and located in the interaction individual-environment (Frauenfelder, 2001; Frauenfelder & Santoianni, 2002), *hic et nunc*.

An environment that is translated/transposed into distance education necessarily brings into play a re-design and a re-orientation of the concept of student education that passes through the change of the interaction space.

In redefining, in fact, the design in Dad, teaching requires a necessary widening of epistemological boundaries, making use of a transdisciplinary approach that can bring together “theoretical-practical” constructs from other disciplines, and in particular the theatrical one, in meaningful experiences able to stimulate interaction on which the teaching-learning process is based, supporting the subjective experience of reality, from which it is necessary to design new scenarios.

The artistic-creative dimension is, in this sense, evocative of the power of ideational, co-evolutionary, hermeneutic, poietic teaching, able to determine «knowledge processes based on significant and lived experiences capable of manifesting themselves in different ways, according to the multiple interpretative orientations and to the number of alternative microcosms activated in each creative situation» (Varela, 1992, Trad.it., p. 21).

«The elements of the theatrical representation, moreover, constitute a non-linear experience that is embodied in a complex object of studies on action and relationship, whose analogies reverberate in other human activities, including didactics» (Carlomagno, 2020a, p. 348).

Both theatre and teaching, in fact, are areas based on the relationship between bodies (Gallese & Morelli, 2011), aimed at “training” by educating, through a performative action that makes use of feedback as a recursive act between observed/observer, able to significantly affect the process per-training.

The aim of this contribution is to stimulate reflections on how presence can be pursued and implemented, even at a distance, using a design that evolves in constant interaction with the environment, thus becoming a design in *co-evolutionary* action (Rossi, 2011) that places teaching in a *performative dimension* (Carlomagno, 2020b).

## 1. Theoretical Framework

Re-thinking teaching, during the health emergency, required the identification of new paradigms, strategies, spaces and times recalibrated with the main aim of continuing to pursue the goal of producing a significant change in all those involved in the teaching/learning process, for which understanding, and interpretation are not enough, but participation is needed. «The teacher's word is an incarnate word that produces effects, it must produce effects: it is not enough for the teacher to be understood, he wants his word to produce a change in his students» (Rivoltella, 2017, p.95).

Considering these remarks, learning does not seem reducible to a disembodied and decontextualized linear process which arises causally from teaching, but it is outlined as a situated process that is structured on the active participation of the actors co-acting in a learning environment co-evolving with the director, who regulates their performative trajectories in action (Rossi, 2011) within a framework that corroborates the same *culture in action* (Rivoltella, 2017).

After all, knowledge, is not an accomplished state «it is not the representation of a reality given a priori, it is not a calculation procedure based on the conditions of the external world» (Maturana & Varela, 2001, Trad.it., p. 58) but it is an ever-changing process that is reified during the reciprocal transformation of the actor/ spectator/ environment in the incorporated action.

«Knowledge is neither outside of us (representational approach) nor only within us (solipsist approach); it is in the emergency space where acquaintance and known meet and co-influence each other» (Proulx, 2013; Rossi & Pizzimenti, 2015, p. 343).

It is clear in this sense that the *transformative* power (Mezirow, 2003) of the relationship in training needs, even more in the distance, dialogical elements, supporting an open, participatory, *non-linear didactics* (Sibilio, 2014; Carlomagno et al., 2014) and structured through a circular process in *co-evolution* (Maturana & Varela, 2001, trad.it.) that repositions the educational relationship in an intentional action and connects interaction and interpretation, that individuals find alternative strategies to compensate for the gap of the absence of the body, while acting in the body and with the body knowledge.

The teaching-learning process is re-defined at a distance where the teacher operates by the intention of making *knowledge learned* into *knowledge taught* and then *learned* (Chevallard, 1989), through an effective didactic transposition (Damiano, 2013), starting from assumption that «culture is not transferred, it is embodied and lives» (Rivoltella, 2017, p. 95).

A process that calls into question the training and professionalism of the teacher who must know how to interpret, through listening, an active role in acting as an environmental disturber, setting triggers, stimulating opportunities, stumbling blocks to students to activate new connections and changes, thus facing the unexpected in knowing how to *re-align* systems through a process of actor/spectator/environment regulation (Rivoltella, 2017) in the digital area.

The change, in this perspective, is also interpreted by the teacher who modifies «his structures in the action, in the interaction with the students, due to the events and the unexpected questions of the students themselves» (Rossi, 2011, p. 83) thus bringing into play a performative and transformative didactics that is generated in the *structural coupling* (Maturana & Varela, 2001, Trad.it.), typical of the *enactive visions* (Rossi, 2011), which characterizes the circular space of relationship and action.

In this orientation, feedback becomes an indispensable tool for the teacher who feels the misalignment of the classroom and carries out realignment activities through regulation to keep alive that structural coupling that allows to evolve the lesson in a circular vision. This self-evaluative dimension of feedback in Dad, defines the ability of the latter to constitute itself as an *autopoietic loop* (Fischer-Lichte, 2014), understood as that process in continuous evolution, implicit in non-codified performative practices, able to significantly affect the relationship in didactics and to give back to the actor and the spectator the role of co-constructors of sense of the cognitive process.

Considering reflections that emerged, the embodied lesson is constituted, from a performa-

tive and theatrical point of view, as an *event* (Fischer-Lichte, 2014) that is born here and now, and that proceeds in the interaction and alignment between the actor and the audience, between the teacher and the learners and which is regenerated according to who produces it and who participates in it, in which all are co-protagonists in continuous evolution.

Aware that the theatrical event, as well as the didactic one «ne peut pas exister sans la relation acteur/spectateur, sans la communion de perception directe, vivante» (Grotowski, 1965, p. 17), it is necessary to reflect on the elements capable of fostering that “*vivante*”, embodied perception, living, even at a distance, without which the relationship cannot exist.

In placing perception as the foundation of the relationship as an essential condition of didactic and theatrical action, the supported vision is «the perception does not represent the world but constitutes it as Umwelt. The action does not just react to the event, she preceded it with simulation or emulation» (Berthoz & Petit, 2006).

Moreover action «does not exhaust the wealth of experience involved in interpersonal relations. Every interpersonal relationship implies the sharing of a multiplicity of states such as, for example, the experience of emotions and sensations» (Gallese, 2013, pp. 5-6).

The *mirroring mechanisms*, in fact, thanks to the process of *intentional consonance and interpersonal attunement* (Gallese, 2007a; 2007b), make possible the intersubjective experiences that are the foundation of our ability to empathize with others, allowing us to implicitly understand others and recognize them similar to us. Understanding the actions and intentions of others come through «a process of motor equivalence between what is acted and what is perceived [...] and make possible a form of direct understanding of the action of others [...] to perceive an action or the intention that determined it - and understand its meaning - is equivalent to simulate it internally» (Gallese, 2007b, p. 21). «This allows the observer to use his own resources to penetrate the world of the other through a modelling «process that has the characteristics of an unconscious, automatic and pre-linguistic motor simulation mechanism» (Gallese, 2007b, p. 21).

The constructs of the mirror system (Gallese et al., 1996; Rizzolatti et al., 1996) so that «seeing someone performing a given action evokes the activation not only of the visual part of the brain, but also of the motor part that would be activated if the observer were the actor [...]» call into play, therefore, «not only the visual brain, but also the motor and tactile brain and that which maps our emotions and our affectivity» (Gallese & Morelli, 2011, p. 3).

## 2. The dialogic-relational space in Dad as *third space*

Confirming therefore the concept that cognition takes place in the relational dialogical space where the body assumes a fundamental value, it is necessary to re-connote, in distance teaching, a *third space* (Potter & McDougall, 2017), *vicariant* (Berthoz, 2015) that assumes relational coordinates and structures itself as coevolutionary interaction space, conversation space, strongly emotional dialogue where emotions are modified by virtue of our words and words are modified as a result of the change in our emotions that inhabit our body (Maturana & Dávila, 2006).

The power of words lies in the idea that linguistic action retroactively on corporeality, triggering structural changes that transform the physiological background: «with the change of the body, linguistic action changes, and with the change of linguistic action changes the body» (Maturana, 1990; 1993).

By structuring didactic actions based on the actor-spectator dialogic relationship, the text structured in dialogue and in the performative action of exploration and discovery of the self, a perceptive, communicative and relational self, is born in the space-time of the encounter, exploring verbal and non-verbal language, voice, body and gesture.

«Through language we can crystallize and relive fragments of experiences that are not current, that is to say are not *my* experiences *now*, but become a paradigm, a model, for understanding ourselves and others » (Gallese & Cuccio, 2015, p. 13).

In this sense the performing text is generated, an act of creation, not linear, flexible, which makes use of here and now, embodied in words and in the emotional body.

«Seeing someone performing an action, like grabbing an object, and listening to or reading

the linguistic description of that action lead to a similar motor simulation that activates some of the same regions of our cortical motor system, including those with mirror properties, normally activated when we actually perform that action» (Gallese & Cuccio, 2015, p. 13).

In the workshop in Dad the dialogue repositions the relationship actor/spectator, teacher/learner in a circular vision determined by the awareness about the embodied simulation (Gallese, 2003; 2009), by virtue of which it grafts, in the educational relationship, an empathetic process of co-evolution between the actors involved (Gallese, 2006b). The latter is declined, even at a distance, by a conscious use of the feedback tool as an essential element to constitute the relationship and interaction in the process of teaching/learning.

### **3. The role of feedback in multiple declination scenarios**

The concept of *feedback* is declined in many areas and, in all its multiple “possibilities of existence”, it always underlies dimensions of perceived effectiveness and real effectiveness, participation, motivation, educational relationship. It is therefore clear how necessary it is to identify in this particular tool a transformative potential in the dynamics of learning teaching, especially at a distance.

The *feedback* allows to *generate and regulate* (Laurillard, 2014) and in its generative dimension allows a combination of evaluation and self-evaluation able to feed transversal skills and located in relation to each one’s professional field (Magnoler, 2018).

In the contest of *inclusive teaching strategies*, feedback is identified by Dario Ianes, among the *seven levers* considered to be able to drive the participation of all students (Zambotti, 2015), helping to determine the perception of *self-effectiveness* (Bandura, 1996) and to support its *motivation* (Maslow, 2010).

Always in the inclusive context, the cognitive-behavioral model implements the practice of feedback, in responding to special educational needs, through the use of different types of *rewarding enhancers* provided in response to appropriate behavior, making it likely the future issue (Celi & Fontana, 2007).

In the teaching of movement, a constant mode of interaction necessarily prevails which implies a continuous attempt of immediate verification that manifests the results of learning in an explicit form in motor action (feedback). In this sense, the education to the movement requires a teaching able to guarantee a monitoring that explains the process of co-acting between teacher and learner (Carlomagno, 2012). In motor disciplines, in fact, feedback becomes a tool to correct gesture and differs in different types: information feedback, personal reaction, judging reaction; revelation; explanation (Casolo, 2011).

Particularly suggestive is the metaphor with which Bernard Aucouturier (2005) declines the feedback in the role that the adult must assume in the psychomotor room, so this must be a *floating mirror* in front of the child able to return an image of power, that recognizes the idea that positive restitution is an instrument to foster, not only evolutionary development, but also the very constitution of the image of the bodily self of the child who feeds on that look.

In the educational field, feedback, framed in an interactional perspective, impacts on the three dimensions, disciplinary, intrapersonal and interpersonal (Fishman & Dede, 2016), assuming the connotations of a real “*social process*”, able to define the educational relationship teacher/learner, «not only in a bidirectional perspective [...]», but involving «[...]the entire class group as a system» (Rossi et al., 2018, p. 89).

Continuing in this systemic and circular logic, the teacher’s ability to derive useful information from the feedback received from the “class” to restructure the intervention assumes a central role (Rivoltella & Rossi, 2017). In reference to the teacher’s ability to “read the classroom” as a tuning ability in the educational relationship between teacher and learner (Rossi, 2011), feedback becomes a tool of self-evaluation in the observed/observer circular report able to redefine teaching.

A research that has investigated how feedback models the behavior of users within the virtual communities of university students, returns not a few references to the current Distance Teaching. The study highlights how, especially within the virtual community, the lack of feedback seems

to significantly determine the departure from the community itself, vice versa, the activation of feedback is useful to encourage student participation (Mazzoni & Bertolasi, 2005).

This last aspect serves to make to think how much the absence of restitution, of feedback, is decisive for the deactivation of the subjects: the impossibility of feeling perceived deactivates the same need to be accepted.

#### **4. The third space as a performative space: didactic design**

The reflections described so far, on the theme of feedback in the report in Distance Teaching, have been declined as part of the laboratory activities of the “*Laboratory of didactic dramaturgy*” the Degree Course in Primary Education Sciences of UniCatt in Milan and the Master in “*Pedagogical and didactic theatre, technical methods and practices of the performing arts*” of UniSOB in Naples.

In the declination of feedback, the activities have therefore redefined the *design* focusing, even at a distance, on the performance of the body, expressiveness and emotion.

In the belief that any learning experience cannot be separated from the relationship with and between the learners and between the learner and the teacher, it was intended to accept the invitation of Matteucci to engage «an experience “*with*” the world before an experience “*of*” it» (Matteucci, 2019; Iannilli & Marino, 2020, p. 599).

Distant activities of bodily exploration, bodily communication, gestural expression have allowed continuous “restitutions” of identity and intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity, as a relational and dialogical space, has been characterized by a reflexive posture and internal observation becoming self-consciousness.

To this end it was essential to create a protected learning environment, based on a dialogic embodied didactic, where to experience the relationship with oneself and with others, in which the restitution through *recursive feedback*, takes on that *social connotation* (Rossi et al., 2018), far from judgements of value (Rogers), instead capable of triggering a generative and co-evolutionary dynamic. «Dialogue is this encounter of men, through the mediation of the world, to give it a name, and therefore it does not end in the *ego-tu* relationship» (Freire, 2002, p. 78), but assumes a function of «patterns which connect» (Bateson, 1972), declined individual construction and collective co-construction.

The actions, performative in the laboratories, have been experimented in the course of the months, through strategies of enhancement of the body, understood as “*living body*”, the phenomenal *Leib Sein*, in overcoming the tension between *being a body* and *having a body* (*Körper-Haben*) (Husserl, 1973; Gallese & Cuccio, 2015), a *dilated body* (Barba & Savarese, 2011) that could be perceived and expressed in the relationship with others.

A body, therefore, that has placed itself in open attitudes of listening to internal and external solicitations, able to activate a deep relationship between the perceptive, motor, emotional and cognitive systems, in the sense of Caruana and Borghi (2013), that active body which is at the basis of an actor’s theatrical formation, but which is, for the didactic action, the «main device through which, realizing experiences, we develop learning and we produce knowledge» (Rivoltella, 2012, p. 12).

In this context, it has become necessary to work on stage presence in the sense that «the spectator does not perceive only the flesh and blood body that comes before him, but he perceives the intensification of that presence, its exceptional nature that manifests itself and what then happens» (Nancy, 2010). A possible formative declination of the presence in Dad was declined in the presence as a scenic bios (Barba, 1993), designed to recreate a specific training environment, where the body in space exists through interactions with the environment on which it depends and in which it is possible to determine macrophysical encounters, through the activation of an empathic climate (Maturana & Varela, 1992).

On these premises, through the laboratory methodology, the research work aimed at experimenting the activation of a *situated learning* (Rivoltella, 2013), explored through the practice that makes use of meaningful feedback and review of the action was carried out (Laurillard, 2014, p.218); workshops focused on the performance of the body, expressiveness, and emotion.

It was therefore a question of:



- redefining the design of the laboratory, re-modulating the different activities planned at Dad;
- adapting the feedback to the distance-induced condition;
- providing tools and methods capable of involving emotionally, including through distance.

The design has therefore provided in a preliminary form activity, already adopted in the presence, of body exploration, body communication, mimic-gestural expression.

In particular, to encourage interaction and stimulate returns, the design of the activities has provided for the inclusion of some variables such as body exploration, in the main classroom shared with all, including through the use of musical language; individual and paired experiences within virtual subclasses, organized on the UniCatt *Blackboard* and UNISOB *Meet* platforms.

In didactic design, the body has been chosen following two expressive and communicative trajectories: the first, typical of a body that uses a part to mark meanings; the second of a body that as a whole embodies form and meaning.

The distance has allowed, in this sense, the construction of bodily-expressive and/or communicative products preceded by shared moments of exploration of the body (Fig. 1).

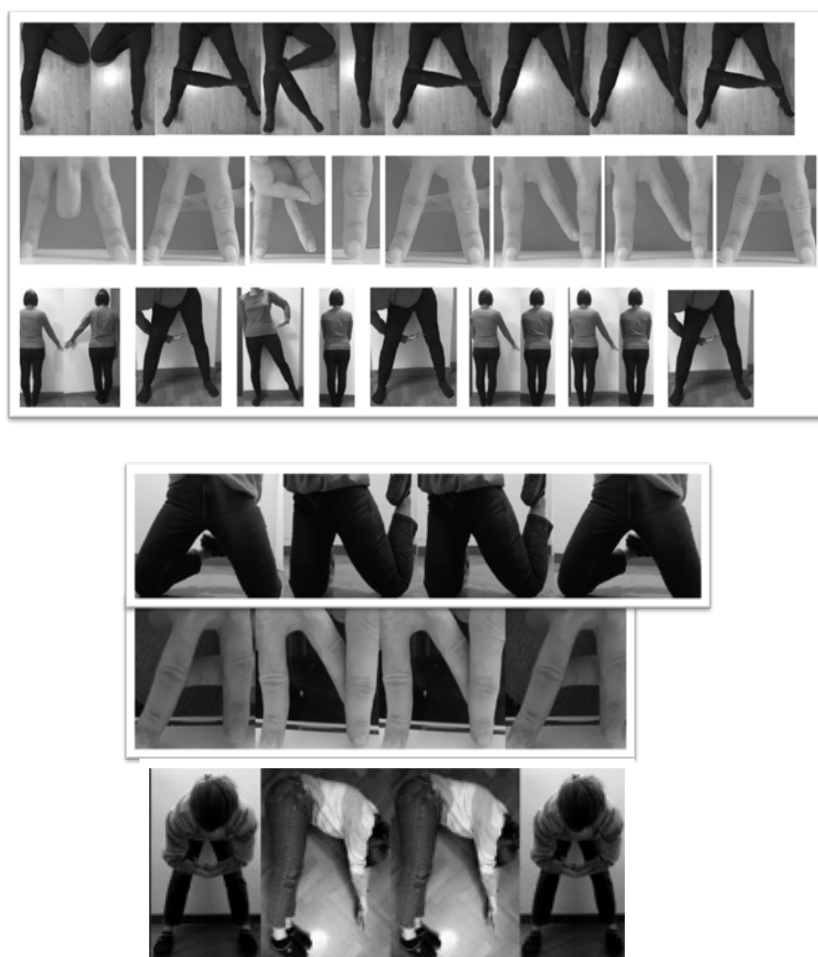




Figure 1. Body activities  
Exploring the name, using total body and a section of the body – hands/legs

On an expressive and relational level (Fig. 2), design has provided for:

- highlighting the bodily meaning and mimic-expressive discovery;
- building emotional body images;
- fixing in a frame the liberation of energies and emotions.



RABBIA



PAURA



TRISTEZZA



GIOIA

Figure 2. Body activities  
Exploring Eckman's emotions



Finally, at the end of the laboratory activities, a final collection was planned, particularly useful to trigger situations of personal and inter-objective feedback, which have been realized in recordings and photographic documentation of activities and products in terms of individual performance.

The individual photographic products, in addition to leaving a tangible trace of the experience useful to re-evaluate the same in a diachronic dimension, have highlighted:

- the construction of personal body alphabets stimulated by the need to document one's individual experience and make it visible;
- the choice of colors to be used on the body, identifying the relationship between meaning and semiotic body;
- the choice to use specific parts of the body and/or the body in its entirety as significant.

As to these last dimensions the extreme subjectivity of the products and the co-evolutionary characteristic of the learners and their productions emerged, that in the final restitutions they have newly redefined themselves through meaningful paths of sense.

The feedback, in the final products of the students, was constituted as a generative process, through which it was possible for each learner to build knowledge related to the activities, which in turn, allowed «generative self-evaluation of other knowledge and skills» (Rossi et al., 2018, p. 94).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, by reflecting on the systemic and self-evaluation dimension of feedback, traceable in the final returns of learners, in the metacognitive elaborations and works provided at the end of the laboratories, it can be said that, even at a distance, the search for the relationship has found, once again in the performative role of the body and in the consciousness suggested around it, the possibility of supporting the idea that *it is the quality of the relationship to reposition the teaching in the presence*, also at a distance, through the use of active, performative and transformative methodologies.

This experience, far from being confined to the body, has made it possible to reify that *third space* (Potter & McDougall, 2017) formed in a protected learning environment, consisting of the relationship itself, fertile ground for new expressive and performative awareness.

In this environment it was possible the performative action of a body no longer humbled by distance, but called to exist in the action, in the word, in the gesture, in the relationship, in a distance between the *personal* and the *intimate* (Hall, 1963), “telling” the importance of the presence even in the distance.

The potential for interaction at a distance was thus enhanced, highlighting through photographic products and through the return of experience with on-board diaries and questionnaires under analysis, that even at a distance it is possible to design an active training course of a theatrical nature, thus redefining the design and modeling the methods and tools to the complexity deriving from Dad.

On these experiences and on the reflections arising from them, the convictions about the necessity of a teacher's formation which cannot be separated from the emotional bodily channels and the capacity of reflection on them are even stronger, nor by the constructs of *intersubjectivity* (Gallese, 2007a; 2007b) and intentional consonance «[...] which is the basis of that typical phenomenal quality that we ourselves more or less experience, feeling with each other a relationship of identity and reciprocity» (Gallese & Morelli, 2011, p. 4).

A brief and suggestive reference to what, «some time ago Peter Brook stated in an interview that with the discovery of mirror neurons neurosciences had begun to understand what the theater had always known» (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006, p. 1). It is useful to frame the reflections on didactics, in the light of neuroscientific awareness, within the parallelism between didactics and theatre.

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