

THE ART-EXPRESSIVE WORKSHOP IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BETWEEN EXPERIENTIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING. A CASE STUDY

IL LABORATORIO ARTISTICO-ESPRESSIVO NELLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA TRA APPRENDIMENTO ESPERIENZIALE E EDUCAZIONE EMOTIVA. UN CASO DI STUDIO

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Abstract

With their playful and artistically-expressive forms, laboratory activities in elementary school always have a high transformative potential. Opportunities for experiential and situated learning (Wenger, 2006) that are also useful for facilitating symbolization processes and experiencing relationships. Although "simplified," these dynamics are readily apparent in real-world situations (Wulf, 2014). From these premises, the paper focuses on the workshop activities of expressive reading and dramatisation of a theatrical-musical text conducted in a primary school in the Province of Pesaro-Urbino, Italy, during the second quarter of the 2021 school year. The main purpose is to show how such activities – particularly during pandemics, whose impact was initially "cognitive, and then transferred to the affective and social dimensions [and], therefore, to the entire personality structure of the individuals involved" (Corsi, 2020, p. 30) – served as educational and didactic tools for emulation, fostering vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977), allowing the emergence of emotional experiences and recovering the emancipatory value that characterises all performing arts, particularly theatre and music.

Le attività laboratoriali nella Scuola Primaria, nella specificità delle loro forme ludiche e artistico-espressive, racchiudono sempre un grande potenziale trasformativo. Oltre ad essere occasioni di apprendimento esperienziale e situato (Wenger, 2006), infatti, facilitano processi di simbolizzazione e consentono di sperimentare dinamiche relazionali che, sebbene "semplificate", trovano facilmente un riscontro nelle esperienze di vita quotidiana (Wulf, 2014). A partire da queste premesse, il presente contributo intende focalizzarsi sulle attività laboratoriali di lettura espressiva e drammatizzazione di un testo teatral-musicale co-condotte nel secondo quadrimestre dell'anno scolastico 2021 in una scuola primaria della Provincia di Pesaro-Urbino. L'obiettivo è mettere in evidenza come tali attività – specialmente in un momento storico complesso come quello della pandemia, il cui impatto è stato dapprima "[...] cognitivo, per trasferirsi poi alle dimensioni affettiva e sociale [e], dunque, all'intera struttura di personalità degli individui coinvolti" (Corsi, 2020, p. 30) – abbiano rappresentato strumenti educativi e didattici in grado di stimolare l'emulazione, favorire l'apprendimento vicariante (Bandura, 1977), consentire l'emersione di vissuti emotivi e recuperare il valore emancipativo che caratterizza tutte le arti performative, in particolare il teatro e la musica.

Keywords

Experiential learning, Laboratory activities, Education, School, Art.
Apprendimento esperienziale, Attività laboratoriali, Educazione, Scuola, Arte.

Introduction

“Art is not enjoyed just once, but again; it already possesses the disposition to stimulate mankind repeatedly and to bring him joy in a consistent and immediate manner.”
(Rudolf Steiner)

Between January 15, 2021 and June 5, 2021, the author had the opportunity to design and implement an educational intervention centred on the concept of performativity, documenting, through an idiographic approach, the *trans* formative value of *performance* in the specificity of its playful and artistic-expressive forms, within the framework of workshop activities conducted in the Primary School. Thanks to a fruitful collaboration with the "A. Manzi" school, part of the Istituto Comprensivo Statale "A. Olivieri" in Pesaro (PU), this "in the field" phase of research provided a valuable opportunity to co-lead musical and theatrical workshops with a group of teachers (subjects: Italian Language, Musical Education, Art/Physical Education). The educational and didactic activities, agreed upon with the school principal and the group of teachers, involved two second classes (sections A and B), each consists of approximately 20 children aged 7, for a total of 30 hours, including 25 in presence and 5 in DAD, with a focus on some possible nuances of artistic expression, with the intent of:

- stimulating students' experiential learning through the recovery of the anthropological and educational significance of artistic performance, particularly musical and theatrical performance;
- valorising the local artistic and cultural heritage as a useful resource for the design of educational interventions in the school environment;
- reflecting on the transformative and "restorative" value of artistic expression, with particular reference to the impact of pandemic events on the emotional sphere of the youngest sections of the population;
- developing some key competences of the curricular subjects (in particular, Italian language and music education).

1. Project phases

During the five phases of the project's development, qualitative research methods such as the free or non-structured interview (Demazier & Dubar, 2000), experiential observation (Michellini, 2017), *focus-group* (Zammuner, 2003), and *circle-time* were favoured (Francescato et al., 2001). The phases lasted the entire second four-month period of the 2020/2021 school year and were constituted of the following:

1. initial *focus-groups* with the teachers and *circle-time* with the students to identify the educational and didactic needs upon which the activities will be modelled;
2. implementation of workshop experiences (music, theatre, drawing, expressive reading, kinesthetic activities) and pedagogical supervision of the same
3. interpretation and production of a musical-theater text;
4. final *focus-groups* with the teachers and *circle-time* with the students;
5. verification of the obtained results and drafting the research report.

The working group developed a further pilot project in relation to the different phases, which were oriented, on the one hand, toward the connection between the expressive sphere

and learning and, on the other hand, toward the valorisation of the artistic-cultural heritage as "living matter" and a place, both physical and symbolic of encounter with one's feelings and emotions (Grappin, 2006). It relates to the topics of discussion during the workshop activities, which were oriented toward the experimentation of digital technologies to enable students to learn online (Pignalberi, 2013) and the strengthening of the ICT skills of the teaching staff (Farina, 2022c).

2. Educational and teaching impact of workshop activities

The project was titled "La gazza ladra" (The Thieving Magpie) because Gioachino Rossini's opera of the same name was chosen for the interpretation and staging of a musical-theatre text. The project was part of the integrative teaching activities aimed at enhancing *non-cognitive skills* (Chiosso et al., 2021), envisioned in the Three-Year Plan of Educational Offerings (PTOF) of the Comprehensive State Institute "A. Olivieri" in Pesaro (PU). The goal, as agreed upon with the school principal and the working group, was to facilitate the transition from a *per*-formative conception of personal action, based on the verification of cognitive learning, to a *trans*-formative conception of the same action, based on the valorisation of the relational, existential, and evolutionary dimension of the students. Access to learning through artistic experience has, in fact, placed the creative process at the centre of educational and didactic action as a cognitive and enactive device (Maturana & Varela, 1992) capable of orienting in the selection and interpretation of reality (Lusardi, 2019). In the other hand, the opportunity to develop some of the core competencies of curricular subjects such as Italian Language and Music Education through playful, artistically expressive, and motor-based experiential learning made it possible to:

- stimulate solidarity, prosociality (Caprara et al., 2014) and greater integration among students;
- activate psychological processes that facilitated the transformation of drives into 'emotional resonances' (Galimberti, 1999), so that students were able to name their feelings and sensations, also with reference to the 'back-to-school' experience after the lockdowns that occurred during the pandemic.

Concerning the development of key competences in curricular subjects, it is also important to note that with Ministerial Order no. 172 of 4 December 2020 and, at the same time, the document containing the *Guidelines* (Ministry of Education, 2020) for the formulation of judgements, descriptive judgements for the periodic and final assessment of learning in Primary School have been reintroduced, beginning with the school year 2020/2021.

Thus, moving in the direction of enhancing students' learning progress and overcoming numerical grades on a decimal scale, with an eye toward *assessment for learning* (Black et al, 2003). In this way, the goals for the development of new competencies and learning objectives for the curriculum subjects involved in the project - such as those for Music Education, which are briefly outlined in the table below - have acquired significant educational significance. In fact, the information gathered during the workshop activities aided in adapting the teaching to the concrete educational needs of the students and their diverse learning styles, by modifying the activities themselves based on the observations made and the needs identified (Farina, 2022b):

Goals for the development of competences	Learning objectives
Mastering instrumental (deciphering) reading in the aloud mode, taking care of the expression.	Apply silent reading and expressive reading aloud techniques.

Understanding texts of different types, continuous and non-continuous, for practical, entertainment and leisure purposes. Expanding the lexical heritage through school and extracurricular experiences and oral interaction and reading activities.	Reading narrative literary texts, in contemporary Italian, and simple poetic texts, grasping their meaning and most obvious formal characteristics.
Exploring different expressive possibilities of the voice, sound objects and musical instruments, learning to listen to oneself and others. Articulating timbre, rhythmic and melodic combinations, applying elementary patterns of vocal, bodily and instrumental performance.	Performing, according to the expressive possibilities of the voice, collectively and individually, pieces of different genres and styles.
Performing, alone and in groups, simple vocal or instrumental pieces, belonging to different genres and cultures, also using didactic and self-made instruments.	Collectively and individually performing vocal/instrumental pieces, also polyphonic, taking care of intonation, expressiveness and interpretation.

Table 1: Indicators for the formulation of descriptive judgements in the Music Education subject.

3. Methodological approach

In a transdisciplinary perspective between the curricular subjects, and of integration and complementarity with the educational and didactic strategies implemented in the different phases of the project, the following detection, analysis and documentation methods were adopted:

Methodology adopted	Phase of use/objective
Focus-group	First organisational-preliminary meeting:: – Stimulating discussion and an initial in-depth investigation into the issue of performativity in the school environment. – Identifying the needs of the pupils and the ways in which to involve them in specific workshop activities. Final meeting: – Stimulate the emergence of experiences and perceptions of the experience. – Reflect on the results and replicability of the project.
Circle-time	At the start of each meeting with the students of both sections: – Facilitating communication and mutual understanding, working on the socio-emotional dimension of the workshop experience. – Facilitating the identification of the areas of <i>empowerment</i> as well as the intrinsic motivations for participation in the activities (with particular attention to those manifested by the most fragile subjects).
Free or semi-structured interview	In itinere, aimed at the whole class or small groups: – Stimulating the spontaneous emergence of experiential experiences during artistic-expressive workshop activities. – Dealing with personal and sensitive issues on the subject of performativity (e.g., how one approaches home study and preparation for exams or assignments; what the parents' expectations are, how they are expressed, etc.).

Experiential observation and meeting reports	In itinere, during and after each meeting: – Monitoring the activities by participating in them. – Collecting, documenting, and summarizing significant impressions and evidence after monitoring the activities.
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Table 2: qualitative research methodologies used during the execution of the project.

The workshop activities, divided into 20 appointments - 10 with section A and 10 with section B - each lasting 1'30", concerned, as previously mentioned, an encounter with the historical figure of Marche composer Gioachino Rossini and an in-depth examination of one of his most well-known works: "La gazza ladra." The selection of this author corresponded to a specific project goal, which was to increase students' awareness of the local artistic and cultural heritage through a narrative capable of highlighting the territory (specifically Pesaro region), its history, and its protagonists, even by interpreting the extracurricular environment - the streets of the city and the symbolic places of Rossini's artistic and cultural production, each with its individual and collective history (Regni, 2009) - as a privileged means of knowledge transmission and 'pedagogical object in all its inexhaustible cognitive availability' (Massa, 1977, p. 13)..

The exploratory and interpretive phase of "La gazza ladra" theatrical-musical text, with the goal of enhancing the "experiential-existential" school dimension more than the "cognitive-learning" dimension, evolved progressively through:

- meeting the characters of the opera and the expressive reading of the monologues and dialogues within it;
- the integral listening of the opera's *overture* and its sound and rhythmic interpretation through the *body percussion* technique (Carretero-Martinez et al., 2014);
- free drawing¹ of the opera's main characters and scenes;
- the preparation of costumes and the staging of the opera.

The dramatisation activities did not include the final *performance* in front of an audience (parents, the teaching staff, students from other classes, etc.) because the emphasis was on the meaning of the experience, cultural deepening, and practical activity in education as a reworking of experiences (Dewey, 1999) as tools for problematising and reflecting on the narratives that emerged from the workshop activities themselves. Sharing the experience of the music and theatre workshop represented a growth trajectory resulting from participation in an associative experience in which the students "decided to engage their subjectivity through doing and community membership" (Mazzoni, 2008, p. 117). In this sense, artistic expression and performance represented significant moments of sharing (linguistic, cultural, spatial, and temporal) inner, shared, and historical experiences, transmitted through the ritual of dramatisation (Turner, 1986). The drafting of narrative *reports* after each meeting aided in the analysis and comprehension of workshop-generated questions, critical issues, answers, and resources. To facilitate the interpretation of the narrative text and identification with the characters of Rossini's opera, a playful-didactic and poetic-aesthetic approach has been adopted, which, in their pedagogical and educational significance, are configured as true exercises of freedom and conscious reorganisation of one's daily horizon (d'Aniello, 2009). One thinks of expressive reading as a tool for connoting the roles and functions of characters, through which the teacher has the opportunity to explore with the student the emotional-affective complexity of a story's protagonists, reflecting on how one might have acted in the same situation (Bleza Picherle, 2015). Experimenting with expressive reading provided the

¹ Here intended in its meaning as a tool for representation and free interpretation, as well as for symbolisation and better understanding of the world.

opportunity to work on learning processes and *meta*-cognition by observing the strategies that students employed to reach a particular conclusion, expressing their own, unique perspective on the message they had gleaned from the reading (Farina, 2022a). In other words, the reworking and dramatisation of the theatrical text of "La gazza ladra" allowed students to transition from reading and analysing the narrative text to recognising the characters' moods, identifying their emotions, and mirroring their own. Simultaneously, the mimic-kinesthetic dimension, part of the expressive activity, and the ritual-ludic dimension, experienced during the preparation of costumes and disguises, led to the emergence of a "cultural performance" (Turner, 1986) capable of broadening "the horizon of one's own cognitive experience through the historical-social experience of others" (Rossi & Travaglini, 1997).

Conclusion: the emancipatory value of the performing arts

The experience with the students of the 'A. Manzi' primary school demonstrates how artistic-expressive workshop activities can play a crucial role in the processes of *trans*-formation and enhancement of the human person, insofar as they move along the line of demarcation between external and internal narration, i.e., between the inner world and the environment, roles assumed and experiences lived, pillars on which the most authentic learning processes rely (Fabbri, 2019). From this perspective, an open type of didactics, which places the student in a position to learn, through self-defined individualised methodologies, self-determining contents and skills (Demo, 2016), permits the full expression of the emancipatory value of artistic languages and, in particular, of theatre and music. In this regard, Maurizio Fabbri emphasises once more that only the identification of learning contents and methodologies close to the learner's needs permits the real emergence of "latent roles, figures, and characters that are the real protagonists of the training event and that, in the absence of a script to dramatised, would remain hidden, always lurking, and ready to interfere in the events of the training, without the others being able to recognise their intentions and their interferences and interpret their expectations and meanings" (Fabbri, 2019, p. 33).

The inherent pedagogical value of the dramatisation experience in educational theatre is tied to the transformative potential inherent in the student's ability to stage that aspect of himself that he is not free to exhibit in his everyday life (Pivetti, 2001). In other words, educational theatre is a tool for self-affirmation and identity recognition, and it contributes to the formation of "relational boundaries" to the extent that one plays a role according to a particular axiological orientation based on respect for the character and generosity towards the audience (Stramaglia, 2021). And if for the student, as we have seen, the emancipatory value of artistic expressiveness has to do with relational and identity-building dynamics, then for the teacher, it concerns above all the artistic potential of a didactics capable of expressing itself in the performative dimensions of its action, that is, characterised by actions that are repeatable daily but occur in the "here and now" of the school routine, where it is possible to implement a pedagogy of artistic expression (Carlomagno, 2020).

In this way, the cognitive, emotional, relational, social, and cultural experiences acquired at school, during artistic-expressive workshop activities, strengthen the link between imagination and reality not only through words but also through gesture (Farina, 2022c), in a reciprocal effort of understanding-learning in which the body remains our primary and unavoidable "anchor in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1965).

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