

The Performative Construct in Online Education: Hermeneutic Analysis of In-Depth Interviews on Rituals and Didactic Corporeality.

Eleonora Mazzotti ¹

¹ Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Italy; eleonora.mazzotti@unicatt.it

Abstract: This research is situated within the theoretical paradigm that interprets the performing arts of theatre as pedagogy, and pedagogy itself as theatre. From this perspective, the teacher's performance is seen as an integration of body and action, enabling the co-construction of the educational event through the co-presence of students in a shared educational space. The aim is to extend this construct to online teaching, through a qualitative investigation based on a series of in-depth interviews, in order to explore the performative elements employed by the teacher. This study moves within a largely unexplored area and highlights the elements that underpin and enhance online performativity, considering the online environment as an interactive and intentional third space for learning.

Keywords: Performativity, didactics, body, embodied learning.

1. Introduction

In the context of theatre studies, theatre is defined as "what happens between the spectator and the actor" (Grotowski, 1970, p. 41), highlighting the relational and alignment process that develops between the two protagonists of the event during the performance. This approach finds a strong analogy with didactics, which is also structured around a co-constitutive and immanent relational process among the various subjects involved, emphasizing both the dialogic and ritual dimensions of the educational event. Rivoltella (2012; 2021a) and Carlomagno (2020) consider performativity not merely as a tool but as a construct that enables the emergence and development of didactic action. In this process, the main actors—students and teachers—act simultaneously and interconnectedly. The theme of the performative allows for a comprehensive observation of the complexity of didactics, thanks to the multiple perspectives from which it has been studied. In the philosophical field, Austin's speech act theory reflects on how words produce actions in reality. Performer and spectator, teacher and student, co-construct the action interactively by pragmatically negotiating its unfolding, and the meaning of the practice is never entirely defined precisely because it continuously transforms. This approach allows for a better understanding of how didactic discourse manifests as a genuine "action." The performative, in fact, is a speech act that coincides with the action itself. Analyzing the teacher's language through the lens of the perlocutionary performative implies recognizing how, in the teacher's ritual and "cultic" words, the didactic moment materializes—an action brought to life through mere utterance. The pragmatic level of



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.
Submitted for possible open access
publication under the terms and
conditions of the Creative Commons
Attribution (CC BY) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

communication aims at action, change, and transformation; in pedagogical terms, we would describe it as being directed toward transformative learning, a concept not far from the "scenic bios" that Barba (1993, p. 163) develops to describe the construction of relationships and meanings through the actor's action. The approach of performing arts introduces to the theme of the performative a dimension that "destabilizes the dichotomous conceptual framework" (Fischer-Lichte, 2014, p. 56), allowing for the overcoming of rigid conceptual pairs such as subject/object or meaning/signifier, which instead take on a dynamic and oscillating character. Consequently, even in the educational field, conceptual pairs are no longer rigidly dichotomous but rather fit into a continuum that extends between the poles of efficacy and entertainment. Didactics does not deny ritual; rather, it embodies it as a ritual itself. This does not imply the absence of a "comic" or "playful" component, but rather that its purpose is not entertainment per se but a ritual efficacy. This corresponds to what is defined in didactics as participatory communication, which, in theatre, guides us toward the awareness that, once we leave the theatre, we are no longer the same. Thanks to the direct experience of the stage, our plastic brain not only allows us to witness but also makes us live the scene as if it were a ritual. This is because, like any ritual, theatre is composed of shared and repeated signs and formulas. For this reason, theatrical and educational gestures become rituals when they are correctly structured and shared as in didactics. Teaching contributes to strengthening the relationship between teacher and student, making the latter the protagonist of the educational process (Mazzotti et al., 2022). Understanding the other's gestures is based on a reciprocity between the subject's intentions and the observer's actions: in this sense, the body is not merely a means of mediation but becomes the instrument through which meanings are constructed and shared. In this paradigm, the performative action of the teacher is not simply the application of theatrical techniques designed to engage the audience but represents the very essence of performative teaching, as it facilitates the bond and relationship with the student through pragmatic modalities. This bond persists even when the interaction takes place in digital environments (Rivoltella, 2021b; Mazzotti & Messina, 2021). Research conducted on the Italian population during the pandemic (Calbi et al., 2021) highlighted that participants were able to recognize the emotional expressions of others despite the covering of the lower part of the face and the absence of physical co-presence. The spectator not only enters the same semantic area as the actor and shares its grammars but also performs an embodied simulation (Gallese, 2020): they recognize the purpose, the motivation behind the action, grasp its intention, and internalize it, thus entering the process of co-constructing knowledge, just as in the didactic world.

2. Materials and Methods

A semi-structured interview (Bichi, 2011) was designed to investigate the performative elements enacted in the practice of an online lesson. Organized into four main thematic areas, the interview framework explores the added values and critical issues that emerged in the management of online teaching, placing particular emphasis on aspects of co-construction within the event. The questions were designed to collect qualitative data on how teachers managed the scenic and dramaturgical elements of the lesson, adapted didactic rituals to the online mode, and addressed the challenges related to feedback (Rossi P. G., Pentucci, Fedeli, & Pennazio, 2018), which remains one of the most critical aspects of online education as it does not emerge

autopoietically (Rivoltella P. C., 2021a). The interviews were conducted with 19 teachers from the Lombardy region of Italy, selected for their proven expertise and experience in performative and theatrical fields. The sample comprises 10 women and 9 men from different school levels¹, varying in age and subject disciplines. The transcribed narratives were first analyzed vertically to consider the logical and chronological discourse of the interviewees based on the introduced stimuli. Subsequently, the texts underwent a comparative thematic analysis, following the interpretative framework of the interview structure itself, designed to conceptually delve into performative elements traceable in online teaching. Within each extracted interview text, sections of the corpus corresponding to the thematic categories and sub-categories present in the interview framework were identified. Once grouped, they were analyzed transversally by making comparisons and connections to synthesize the collected information, always adhering to the perspective of Grounded Theory (Tarozzi, 2008). It is important to highlight that, in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the participants' responses, the employed categories interact with those used by the selected sample subjects. During the presentation of results, both the words of the interviewees and the interpretative categories will be reported. In the first case, selected verbatim excerpts will be cited in their original state, with modifications only for readability improvement. Each excerpt will be assigned a code to anonymize the interviewed teachers; the code will consider the teacher's school level, gender, and age. To provide a comprehensive re-interpretation, we will analyze the data based on both a custom-built coding grid identifying themes emerging from the interviews to map the constructed sample and a hermeneutic reading approach to highlight emergent themes and categories.

3. Results

The performative process analyzed and explored through interviews does not involve only two actors—teacher and students—but, in the context of online teaching, the medium itself becomes an integral part of the directorial framework through which both teacher and student engage in the didactic activity. The technology used to deliver the lesson is not a neutral element but constitutes the third pole of the discourse, intersecting with the broader issue of social disparity and the digital divide (Pischetola, 2011). A fundamental level of digital divide still persists, reinforcing a binary distinction between those who have access to technological tools—where performance levels of devices may also vary—and those who lack personal access to such devices. The topic of feedback, on the other hand, is a very complex one. Having cameras on has facilitated feedback management, as it allowed for greater connection with students by enabling teachers to observe them and adjust their teaching based on the stimuli they provided. This approach seems to be more effective in lower school grades. In higher grades, however, the issue of cameras becomes more problematic, as students often find it difficult to participate in lessons while keeping their cameras on. Feedback is harder to detect because, in addition to the lack of visual cues, students sometimes do not actively engage in the lesson. An-

¹ Here is the translated classification of school levels: 1 = Nursery; 2 = Preschool; 3 = Primary School; 4 = Lower Secondary School; 5 = Upper Secondary School; 6 = University.

other major issue related to feedback appears to be the perceived ambiguity, which several teachers have reported as a disturbing factor. Working with small groups of students not only improves teaching and relationships but also makes it easier to detect feedback because there is a greater opportunity for interaction with the students themselves—a view shared by teachers across different school levels. Alongside the issue of feedback, the theme of time repeatedly emerges in various ways in teachers' reflections. It seems that both the time spent on lesson planning and the time needed to produce teaching materials have increased. The issue of assessment was not explicitly included in the interview guidelines, but some teachers linked it to feedback, stating that it is a particularly complex matter. To ensure a shared educational experience, the organization of shared space appears to be of fundamental importance. It has allowed teachers to perceive a sense of shared experience, as they had to organize not only the cognitive and didactic aspects but also the spatial dimension. Organizing space and the setting helps make the learning environment more dynamic and engaging. Using video communication platforms creatively encourages movement and physical interaction during lessons. This was especially effective with younger students, as an organized setting enabled them to move and participate actively from home instead of being glued to the screen, engaging with the lesson through pre-planned stimuli set by the teacher. At the same time, if the goal is performativity rather than performance, a widely shared view is that the focus should be on the shared learning experience, leaving theoretical explanations for other spaces and moments. This approach facilitated participation and reinforced the perception of creating and experiencing a shared event. A recurring theme that challenges common narratives about distance learning is the assertion that there is no direct correlation between the lack of physical contact and the absence of relationships. This aspect was also highlighted in the quantitative questionnaire (Mazzotti et al., 2022), but here we find a qualitative perspective from teachers in the field who affirm that they did not experience a disconnect. In fact, in some cases, the two concepts were not even semantically associated. Beyond the technical aspects that make an event performative, two elements highlighted by teachers are the sacredness of the lesson and the importance of creating rituals so that the lesson is experienced rather than merely attended. Once again, it becomes evident that specific training in online teaching helps teachers manage the performative mode effectively, allowing them to adapt to new tools and pedagogical approaches. A well-organized virtual space, with pre-set stimuli and accessible materials, helps maintain students' attention and facilitates interaction during online lessons. Using video communication platforms and other technologies creatively can encourage student movement and interaction even at a distance, fostering a shared learning event. Additionally, maintaining a positive and authentic relationship between teachers and students, as well as attributing a sacred character to the lesson, contributes to making online teaching a meaningful and engaging experience. Implementing rituals during online lessons can also help create a sense of community and shared participation, enhancing student engagement. Continuing with the analysis, feedback remains a central theme: providing regular and targeted feedback to students during online lessons and using formative assessments promotes active and conscious learning. Careful planning of online lessons, focused on objectives and active student engagement, is essential for successful performative teaching. It is interesting to note that even in an online setting, albeit to a lesser extent and only under certain conditions—such as a limited number of students—teachers

can still adjust their lesson plans based on real-time classroom feedback. The teacher remains a performer even online and is not merely bound by rigid lesson planning. At the same time, this qualitative analysis suggests that teaching remains performative even in an online environment. If it were purely organizational and excluded any form of adaptive improvisation, it would lose its event-like nature and, therefore, its performative character.

4. Discussion

The performative process analyzed and explored through interviews does not involve only two actors—teacher and students—but, in the context of online teaching, the medium itself becomes an integral part of the directorial framework through which both teacher and student engage in the didactic activity. The technology used to deliver the lesson is not a neutral element but constitutes the third pole of the discourse, intersecting with the broader issue of social disparity and the digital divide (Pischetola, 2011). A fundamental level of digital divide still persists, reinforcing a binary distinction between those who have access to technological tools—where performance levels of devices may also vary—and those who lack personal access to such devices. The topic of feedback, on the other hand, is a very complex one. Having cameras on has facilitated feedback management, as it allowed for greater connection with students by enabling teachers to observe them and adjust their teaching based on the stimuli they provided. This approach seems to be more effective in lower school grades. In higher grades, however, the issue of cameras becomes more problematic, as students often find it difficult to participate in lessons while keeping their cameras on. Feedback is harder to detect because, in addition to the lack of visual cues, students sometimes do not actively engage in the lesson. Another major issue related to feedback appears to be the perceived ambiguity, which several teachers have reported as a disturbing factor. Working with small groups of students not only improves teaching and relationships but also makes it easier to detect feedback because there is a greater opportunity for interaction with the students themselves—a view shared by teachers across different school levels. Alongside the issue of feedback, the theme of time repeatedly emerges in various ways in teachers' reflections. It seems that both the time spent on lesson planning and the time needed to produce teaching materials have increased. The issue of assessment was not explicitly included in the interview guidelines, but some teachers linked it to feedback, stating that it is a particularly complex matter. To ensure a shared educational experience, the organization of shared space appears to be of fundamental importance. It has allowed teachers to perceive a sense of shared experience, as they had to organize not only the cognitive and didactic aspects but also the spatial dimension. Organizing space and the setting helps make the learning environment more dynamic and engaging. Using video communication platforms creatively encourages movement and physical interaction during lessons. This was especially effective with younger students, as an organized setting enabled them to move and participate actively from home instead of being glued to the screen, engaging with the lesson through pre-planned stimuli set by the teacher. At the same time, if the goal is performativity rather than performance, a widely shared view is that the focus should be on the shared learning experience, leaving theoretical explanations for other spaces and moments. This approach facilitated participation and reinforced the perception of creating and experiencing a shared event. A recurring theme that challenges

common narratives about distance learning is the assertion that there is no direct correlation between the lack of physical contact and the absence of relationships. This aspect was also highlighted in the quantitative questionnaire (Mazzotti et al., 2022), but here we find a qualitative perspective from teachers in the field who affirm that they did not experience a disconnect. In fact, in some cases, the two concepts were not even semantically associated. Beyond the technical aspects that make an event performative, two elements highlighted by teachers are the sacredness of the lesson and the importance of creating rituals so that the lesson is experienced rather than merely attended. Once again, it becomes evident that specific training in online teaching helps teachers manage the performative mode effectively, allowing them to adapt to new tools and pedagogical approaches. A well-organized virtual space, with pre-set stimuli and accessible materials, helps maintain students' attention and facilitates interaction during online lessons. Using video communication platforms and other technologies creatively can encourage student movement and interaction even at a distance, fostering a shared learning event. Additionally, maintaining a positive and authentic relationship between teachers and students, as well as attributing a sacred character to the lesson, contributes to making online teaching a meaningful and engaging experience. Implementing rituals during online lessons can also help create a sense of community and shared participation, enhancing student engagement. Continuing with the analysis, feedback remains a central theme: providing regular and targeted feedback to students during online lessons and using formative assessments promotes active and conscious learning. Careful planning of online lessons, focused on objectives and active student engagement, is essential for successful performative teaching. It is interesting to note that even in an online setting, albeit to a lesser extent and only under certain conditions—such as a limited number of students—teachers can still adjust their lesson plans based on real-time classroom feedback. The teacher remains a performer even online and is not merely bound by rigid lesson planning. At the same time, this qualitative analysis suggests that teaching remains performative even in an online environment. If it were purely organizational and excluded any form of adaptive improvisation, it would lose its event-like nature and, therefore, its performative character.

5. Conclusions

The telephone, radio, and television have had a profound impact on the nature of human experience. These technologies have led to the emergence of mediated forms of presence, in which the body is engaged at a distance, generating what can be described as "mediatized forms of presence, meaning forms of *hic et nunc* in which the body is involved at a distance, producing externalized forms of embodiment" (Del Gaudio, 2021, p. 36). The experience of live events has been complemented by that of listening to or viewing recorded or mediatized performances. These two experiences are not in opposition but are interconnected and constantly redefine one another. The concept of *digital liveness* (Auslander, 2012) refers to mediatized performances, particularly those broadcast live or made available on digital platforms, which seek to provide an experience distinct from that of live performance while establishing a new form of engagement with the audience (Pernice, 2021). Liveness is not merely an objective characteristic or an effect caused by a specific aspect of an object or its medium; rather, it is an interaction between the spectator and the performance, wherein the audience consents to perceive the event as a live experience. Funda-

mentally, liveness depends on the active participation of the audience and their willingness to experience the event as an authentic and connected moment, even within a digital synchronous environment.

References

- Auslander, P. (2012). Digital liveness: a historico-philosophical perspective. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 3, 3-11.
- Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Barba, E. (1993). *La canoa di carta. Trattato di antropologia teatrale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Bichi, R. (2011). *La conduzione delle interviste nella ricerca sociale*. Roma: Carocci.
- Carlomagno, N. (2020). La complessità della progettazione di un percorso formativo fondato sulla relazione tra arti sceniche e didattica in chiave inclusiva. *Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion*.
- Del Gaudio, V. (2021). Archeologie della presenza: Digital liveness, vanish liveness e la mediatizzazione della presenza. *Connessioni remote*(3), p. 30-56.
- Dobbins, C., & Denton, P. (2017). MyWallMate: An Investigation into the Use of Mobile Technology in Enhancing Student Engagement. *TechTrends*, 61(6), 541–549.
- Ferri, N. (2021). Corpo, rito e Com-munus: per una formazione più sostenibile. *Formazione & Insegnamento*, 19(2), p. 394-402.
- Fischer-Lichte, E. (2014). *Estetica del performativo. Una teoria del teatro e dell'arte*. Roma: Carocci Editore.
- Gallese, V. (2020). *Estetica dell'intersoggettività: Sé e relazioni nell'era digitale*. Psiche(2).
- Han, B.C. (2009). *Il profumo del tempo. L'arte di indugiare sulle cose*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Grotowski, J. (1970). *Per un teatro povero*. Roma: Bulzoni Editore.
- Mazzotti, E., & Messina, S. (2022). Teaching Performative Scale (TPS): uno strumento per rilevare la performatività del docente. *Scholè. Rivista di educazione e studi culturali*, 2.
- Mazzotti, E., Messina, S., Rondonotti, M., & Raviolo, P. (2022). Performativity and the teaching relationship between presence and distance: an exploratory investigation. *Giornale Italiano di Educazione alla Salute, Sport e Didattica Inclusiva*, 6(3).
- Pernice, L. (2021). Streammare l'opera lirica. Gli esperimenti di digital liveness del teatro musicale contemporaneo. *Connessioni remote*(3), p. 77-100.
- Pasta, S. (2022). La famiglia onlife: tra usi condivisi, DAD e occasioni educative. In *Famiglia&Digitale. Costi e opportunità*. CISF Family Report 2022 (p. 71-103). Cinisello Balsamo (MI): Edizioni San Paolo.
- Pischetola, M. (2011). *Educazione e divario digitale. Idee per il capacity building*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Potter, J., & McDougall, J. (2017). *Digital Media, Culture and Education: Theorising Third Space Literacies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rivoltella, P. C. (2012). *Neurodidattica. Insegnare al cervello ad apprendere*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Rivoltella, P. C. (2021a). *Drammaturgia didattica. Corpo, Pedagogia, Teatro*. Brescia: Orso Blu Scholè.
- Rivoltella, P. C. (2021b). *Apprendere a distanza. Teorie e metodi*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Rodriguez, V. (2012). The Teaching Brain and the End of the Empty Vessel. *Mind, Brain and Education*, 6(4), p. 177-185.
- Rossi, P. G., Pentucci, M., Fedeli, L., & Pennazio, L. G. (2018). From the informative feedback to the generative feedback. *Education Sciences & Society - Open Access*, 9(9).