

The Theatre in the Design of Embodied *Performative Didactics*: Educating for Relationality in Emerging Educational Contexts

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Abstract: In the contemporary context—where virtual relationships mediated by digital communication are increasingly prevalent, particularly among younger generations—there emerges a growing need to rethink the teaching-learning process through the lens of an experiential pedagogical approach, one centered on authentic relationality (Matteucci, G. 2019). Within this framework, drawing connections between different disciplinary domains and grounded in the principles of embodied cognition theory (Maturana, & Varela, 2012), the role of the body, empathetic relationships, and interaction was explored in the educational pathways of the Master's programs in *Performing Arts* and *Theatre, Pedagogy and Didactics: Methods, Techniques, and Practices of the Performing Arts* at Suor Orsola Benincasa University. The research adopted an embodied epistemological paradigm, relational in nature (Gallese, & Morelli, 2024), and employed an *Art-Based Research* methodology, using mixed methods for data analysis. The findings highlight the educational value of the performing arts through a model of *performative didactics* structured around embodied theatrical practices, which enhance experiential, body-based learning and support the development of meaningful learning experiences (Ausubel, 2004).

Keywords: Theatre; *Performative Didactics*; Relationship; Experiential Learning; Embodied Cognition



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Introduction

The new pedagogical scenarios, increasingly marked by the pervasive presence of digital technologies, call for a critical reflection on the educational practices best suited to fostering an authentic relationship (Matteucci, G. 2019) aimed at promoting meaningful learning (Ausubel, 2004). In this context, a dialogue among multiple disciplinary domains is encouraged in order to address the current educational and formative emergency. At the heart of this response lies an experiential teaching ap-

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proach - based on the interaction of bodies - designed to emphasize relational and emotional dimensions.

In particular, attention has been given to the dialogue between art and science, neuroscience, pedagogy, and the performing arts in the construction of a training path that supports the relational body-based epistemological paradigm [3]. Recent neuroscientific evidence (Maturana, & Varela, 2012; Caruana, & Borghi, 2016; Berthoz, 2009) confirms that cognition is not a disembodied process confined to the brain, but rather emerges from the dynamic interaction between body, mind, and environment, underlining the centrality of bodily experience in teaching and learning processes (Carlomagno, 2020). This view, in contrast to the traditional cognitivist paradigm, highlights how *embodied experience* is fundamental to the construction of knowledge (Barsalou, 2008).

Within this framework, theatre emerges as “an art of relationships that manifests itself in dialogue, with or without words” (Barba, & Savarese, 2011), relying on the central role of *bodily experience* and *action*, in a communion of perception and life (Grotowski, 1967). It is an art form rooted in the physical presence of the body, shaped through the constant co-evolution between actor and spectator, enhancing lateral thinking and the divergent exercise of cognition. This pilot study investigated experiential training within *performative didactics* through the theatrical methods, techniques, and practices employed in the first-level Master's program in *Theatre, Pedagogy, and Didactics. Methods, Techniques, and Practices of the Performing Arts*, and the Second-Level Master's Program in *Performing Arts* at the University of Suor Orsola Benincasa. These programs enabled a learning experience centered on the performative and participatory dimension of the body, through *non-linear languages* (Sibilio, 2012).

By incorporating theatrical practices into education, through an *embodied* model of *performative didactics* (Carlomagno, 2022; Carlomagno, Ciasullo, Orefice, & Frauenfelder, 2013) focused on the body in action and characterized by immersive and active experiences, space was given to relationships among participants, and the multiple pathways through which the language of art may operate within the educational relationship were explored. The integration of theatrical practices *into teaching*, also understood as *scenic action*, makes it possible to create “a space of shared experience, where the meaning of being together can be built, the communal sense inherent in every theatrical formation... a place to engage with the other in the construction of a living learning experience, attempting to ignite and spread the spark capable of making the classroom resonate through ‘the crackle of the class’ (Rosa, 2016), in order to realize an experience of a ‘relationship with the world through transformative appropriation’” (Carlomagno, 2023).

This work aims to highlight the value of embodied, experiential, and performative practices, which substantiate the educational relationship within the theatrical one, promoting a mode of learning that is truly embodied and situated (Ferri, 2022).

1. Theoretical framework

The *Embodied Cognition* paradigm (Gomez Paloma, 2020) has brought about a significant shift in the field of cognitive sciences and education by proposing a conception of the mind as an embodied and situated tool (Ferri, 2022), emerging from the dynamic and recursive interaction between brain, body, and environment (Pennisi, 2023). In this context, cognition is no longer regarded as merely a symbolic or computational processing of abstract representations, but rather as an activity that

arises from bodily and affective processes that connect the organism to its environment through the body.

This perspective finds its foundation in the theory of the *Embodied Mind* (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991), developed within the framework of the biology of cognition, which no longer sees the mind as separate from the body, but as a complex system that processes information through the body and its interaction with the surrounding environment (Pennisi, 2023). Consequently, the mind-body distinction inherited from Cartesian dualism (Damasio, 1994) is rendered inadequate for describing cognitive processes.

Knowledge is achieved through the structural co-determination between the organism and its environment, in a continuous process of adaptation and co-evolution that gives rise to a form of enactive knowledge (Maturana, & Varela, 2012; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991), implying the direct and transformative involvement of the body in the cognitive act (Sibilio, & Galdieri, 2022). Knowledge is thus not the representation of a pre-existing world, but a continuous attribution of meaning that living beings generate within the world they inhabit (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991).

The educational implications of this paradigm, have led to the development of the *Embodied Education* model (Rathunde, 2009), which regards corporeality as both an epistemic and ontological condition of learning. Learning is not the result of a purely cognitive, abstract, and disembodied process, but rather the outcome of an interaction between mind, body, and environment (Gomez Paloma, 2020). The body, playing a central role in the construction of knowledge, acts as the primary mediator between the individual and the surrounding world.

In this regard, neuroscientific studies (Maturana, & Varela, 2012; Caruana, & Borghi, 2016; Carlomagno, 2020) have contributed to highlighting the crucial role of the body in learning processes through the discovery of the mirror neuron system (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, & Fogassi, 1996). This neural system has shown that the observation of an action activates the same cortical areas involved in performing it, thus creating a sensorimotor resonance that enables a form of simulation of others' actions (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, & Fogassi, 1996). This mechanism suggests an intrinsic link between perception, action, and cognitive processes (Carlomagno, Ciasullo, Orefice, & Frauenfelder, 2013), underscoring the fundamental role of bodily interaction in the construction of knowledge.

The body, therefore, assumes a generative role in educational processes, and from this perspective, through the use of *non-linear languages* (Carlomagno, 2023), it enables the activation of innovative learning methods (Carlomagno, 2023) based on experience. These languages, rooted in corporeality and the complexity of interaction (Sibilio, 2020), stand in opposition to the linearity of transmissive and static teaching, promoting new forms of educational expression that regard the body as a constitutive condition of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, Landes, Carman, & Lefort, 2013).

Embodied Education thus emerges as an innovative pedagogical model, based on the integration of corporeality into formative processes and oriented toward experiential, contextualized, and embodied knowledge (Rathunde, 2009). Through lived experience, relational engagement, and embodied action, meaningful (Ausubel, 2004) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003) takes place, leading to knowledge that is genuinely acquired (Chevallard, & Johsua, 1985), while recognizing the importance of the individual's uniqueness within the context of interpersonal relationships.

1.1 *Experiential learning through theatrical practices*

Experiential learning is based on the idea that knowledge takes shape as a process involving action, allowing individuals to construct meaning through their bodily, emotional, relational, and experiential engagement (Kolb, 2014; Dewey, 1986).

In this context, theatrical practices, in their workshop-based and experiential dimension, become a participatory learning space where the learner gains knowledge by acting, interacting, listening, observing, and interpreting, thus becoming the protagonist of their own learning process.

The teacher assumes the role of a facilitator, functioning as both director and guide (Martinelli, 2015). Their primary task is to create the conditions for authentic and meaningful learning (Ausubel, 2004), in which learners are free to explore, experiment, fail, and reflect within a learning environment that fosters a sense of safety and trust. In this new role, the teacher-director is called upon to welcome, contain, and transform the feedback of the learners, generated through constant stimulation to “bring out” their creative, emotional, critical, and cognitive dimensions (Santos, Demozzi, & Tolomelli, 2018; Boccacci, 2024). The process typically begins with body *training* and *improvisation* exercises, which can be likened to verbal *brainstorming*, allowing learners to physically embody abstract concepts (Carlomagno, 2022).

Within the workshop experience, didactic transposition (Chevallard, & Johsua, 1985) occurs through a process of interpretation, reworking, and selection, in constant interaction with others (Sibilio, M. 2020). Through group dynamics, participants develop socio-relational and empathic skills, which are essential for fostering authentic relationships.

Another distinguishing element of experiential learning, compared to traditional methods, is the possibility of using *non-linear languages* such as dance, music, gesture, and sound within the performing arts. These modalities operate at a deep experiential level, engaging perceptual, affective, and symbolic dimensions that transcend purely rational logic (Carlomagno, 2023). Their integration into educational pathways allows for expanded access to knowledge by valuing diverse cognitive styles and intelligences (Gardner, 2011; Carlomagno, 2023). For instance, dance enables exploration of space and relationship through the moving body, encouraging bodily and emotional awareness (Sieni, Stella, 2022). Music activates rhythmic and mnemonic components, promoting emotional regulation and group cohesion. Gesture, with its immediate expressiveness, conveys profound content that cannot always be verbalized, providing a privileged entry point for self-narration (Sieni, Stella, 2022).

The integration of these non-verbal languages within theatre-based educational experiences contributes to constructing a multidimensional embodied learning that engages the whole person - body, mind, emotions and relationships - and promotes a form of knowledge that is both personal and collective. These practices prove particularly effective in educational contexts as they foster inclusive dynamics and respond to the diverse learning needs of individuals with varying characteristics, backgrounds, and potentials.

Experiential learning through theatrical practices therefore presents itself as an innovative and transformative educational model (Mezirow, 2003) that places at its center the complexity of the person, the teacher as an experiential guide, and the value of experience as an authentic source of both relationship and knowledge (Carlomagno, 2022).

During the various Masterclasses, and especially in the workshop sessions of the Master's programs, participants were able to enhance their relational skills and artistic creativity, discover the language of their own bodies, and experience body-mediated learning. Students explored *non-linear languages* through *training*, rhythm, movement, music and dance, dramaturgy, directing, and vocal techniques.

2. Materials and Methods

The research falls within the framework of *Art-Based Research* methodology, which encompasses practices that employ artistic processes as primary forms of inquiry. The various forms of art have a positive impact on learning processes; Brenner defines *Arts-Based Learning* (ABL) (Brenner, 2010) as a strategy that fosters student engagement on cognitive, socio-relational, and aesthetic-affective levels, using the arts (visual, musical, performative) as mediums through which imagination, creativity, and innovation find expression, giving rise to transformative learning processes (Carlo-magno, 2022).

In the study presented here, theatre becomes a means of meaning-making, as it explores human experience, giving voice to lived experiences, emotions, and relationships. It serves as a data collection tool, as it allows for the observation of behaviors, reactions, non-verbal languages, and the gathering of narratives. Moreover, through theatrical performances based on interviews, life stories, or observations, theatre also becomes a mode of data representation (Saldaña, 2003).

Within the landscape of educational research, performative practices are recognized as meaningful art forms integrated into teaching and learning processes (Oser, & Baeriswyl, 2001).

The decision to adopt this methodology in the present study stems from the intent to investigate phenomena as they appear through the lens of performative arts, offering a way to expand the perspectives of researchers. Art can be used to extend the paradigm of qualitative research by challenging many assumptions about what constitutes true knowledge (Leavy, 2020). In this regard, Leavy suggests that using art in qualitative research means broadening legitimate forms of knowing, including alternative and equally valuable languages that allow for more embodied and creative ways of understanding the world.

This research adopted a *mixed methods* approach, integrating quantitative data with qualitative findings.

At the beginning of the first-level Master's program in "Theatre, Pedagogy, and Teaching: Methods, Techniques, and Practices of the Performing Arts" and the second-level Master's in "Performing Arts: Methods, Techniques, and Practices of the Performing Arts", an entry questionnaire was administered. It included questions regarding the students' educational and professional background, their expectations for the year-long program, and a self-assessment section evaluating their initial skill levels.

At the end of the program, students were asked to complete an exit questionnaire, where they were invited to self-evaluate the emotional, cognitive, and relational competencies they had acquired up to that point.

Both questionnaires included closed-ended and open-ended questions. A comparative analysis was conducted at the end of the course, allowing for a comparison between the initial and final responses to assess the impact of the entire training path on each individual student. The validity of the data is supported by the consistent

participation of students throughout the various phases of the program, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the experience.

Additionally, students were asked to keep a learning journal throughout the duration of the Master's programs, to be completed at the end of each session. This practice proved especially valuable for the data collection phase. As a low-structured tool, the journal enabled participants to narratively describe their learning experiences, allowing for a qualitative, longitudinal analysis of their perceptions over time. The journal allows the narrator to act both as the observer and as the complex material being observed (Cambi, 2014), thus encouraging reflection on their own behaviors in specific circumstances, leading to a recursive process of self-awareness, which may initiate a journey of personal observation and listening. This tool supports the exploration of one's narrative identity, which emerges from the mediated interplay, through storytelling, between *idem* (the set of a person's enduring traits) and *ipse* (their capacity for becoming and transformation) (Ricoeur, 1997).

3. Results

This study explored the initial perceptions of teaching and learning among students enrolled in the Master's programs through a quantitative analysis based on an entry questionnaire administered at the beginning of the training courses, and an exit questionnaire given at the end of the same. Simultaneously, through a qualitative analysis of the learning journals, the role of the body, relationships, and interaction within educational contexts was investigated.

The reference sample consisted of 30 participants, including 10 males, 19 females, and 1 participant who chose not to disclose their gender identity. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 41 years, with the following distribution: 20% were 27 years old; 13.3% were between 27 and 30; 33.3% were aged between 33 and 40; and the remaining 33.3% were over 41 years old.

In terms of profession, 60% of the participants were education professionals (teachers/educators), 20% were artists (singers/actors), 10% were healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, rehabilitation therapists), 8.6% were students, and 1% was a babysitter. Geographically, 63.3% of participants were from the Campania region, while the remaining 36.7% came from other Italian regions.

The responses were analyzed using a qualitative-quantitative approach, aiming to identify any changes in the perceptions and considerations expressed by participants before the start of the Master's program in January 2023 and at its conclusion in November 2023.

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaires revealed a significant shift in participants' perceptions of teaching. At the beginning of the course, students were asked to reflect on their vision of teaching. 50% described it as static, minimally interactive, and tied to traditional methods; 34% viewed teaching as "relationship"; and the remaining 16% perceived teaching as a form of art/laboratory.

By the end of the program, the same question was posed, and the responses showed a marked change: 66% of students now saw teaching as "relationship"; 17% still perceived it as static and traditional; and 17% viewed it as a form of art/laboratory.

To collect qualitative data, the students' learning journals, written throughout the duration of the Master's program, were analyzed.

This analysis revealed that the lessons played a decisive role in the development of the participants' empathic and relational skills.

The analysis of the learning journals further reveals that experiential learning, mediated by body-centered theatrical practices, fostered greater emotional and interpersonal awareness.

The analysis of the learning journals further demonstrated that experiential learning, mediated by theatre practices centered on the body, fostered greater emotional and interpersonal awareness. The bodily dimension allowed participants to directly experience both their own emotional states and those of others, facilitating the recognition and regulation of their own and others' emotions. Physical engagement in dynamic and interactive activities enabled a deeper understanding of others' subjective experiences, thereby enhancing relational and empathic abilities.

The bodily experience stimulated neurophysiological processes involved in empathy, such as the mirror neuron system, promoting immediate identification with the other. This led to an increase in social sensitivity and the ability to respond appropriately to others' emotions—essential aspects in relational contexts.

From the qualitative analysis of the learning journals, three main thematic areas emerged: relationship, empathy, and experiential learning (Table 1). These areas represent the key learning outcomes of the educational activities conducted through embodied practice.

The following table presents the qualitative analysis of reflections collected at the end of the Master's learning experience. Participants' statements were examined through a thematic coding process aimed at identifying recurring semantic fields and their pedagogical relevance.

The resulting matrix is structured into three columns: the first lists the main semantic fields that emerged from the analysis; the second contains selected significant quotes from the individual reflections recorded in the students' learning journals, exemplifying each semantic field; and the third includes pedagogical considerations that support and validate these reflections.

Table 1. Emerging categories from the analysis of the logbooks

Semantic Field	Recurring Reflections and Considerations	Pedagogical Relevance
Relationship	"In my profession, I bring the concept of interconnectedness with others. We are not alone; in fact, even though we are distant, we are strongly connected to each other." "In all activities, each student would have the opportunity to express and share their energy through their voice and body, thus creating an absolutely positive connection with the rest of the group." "On this day, we students socialized a lot. And I smile on the way back. Among the	Physical activity stimulated inclusive group dynamics and cooperation among participants, fostering relational dynamics and the co-construction of meaning, also through non-verbal communication.

	positive things, it feels like I made peace with a part of myself." "Here, everyone has their own methods but from today, beyond my work on stage, on set, in the classroom with the class, I believe I can bring awareness into my profession, whatever it may be. We are one with the Universe. Today, even more, it seems clear to me that we live together and alone there is the desert - arid, rocky, sunny" "Theater is relationship, and relationship is theater." "We managed to communicate even without speaking." "I carry with me trust in myself and in others, love for movement, the importance of dedicating a part of one's time to this self-exploration, as an initial moment of meeting with ourselves and as an integral and active part of a work that aims to operate in a delicate field like the educational and artistic one." "I really enjoyed feeling part of such a harmonious group. I felt extremely happy to be in such a diverse setting, and I hope to grow a lot on this journey that we will all undertake together."	
Empathy	"Through the practical execution of breathing exercises, we perceived every single part of the body in its fullness, where the emotional and relational aspect of confronting the large group laid its foundations. The emotion I felt from the beginning to the end of the lesson was a full sense of adrenaline-fueled sharing and gratitude." "The lesson allowed me to learn how to distinguish the emotions I experience." "I put myself in the other person's shoes." "I could feel what my partner was experiencing."	The bodily approach facilitated emotional identification and empathic listening, promoting processes of recognition and awareness of the other.

	riencing as we moved." "The experience fully involves us through the senses, it excites us and opens us to a new look on ourselves and life". "The importance of expressed emotions. The other as a resource. I as a resource." "I really enjoyed expressing my deepest hidden emotions."	
Experiential learning focused on the body in action	"Through my body, I understood better what it feels like in certain situations." "I felt fully engaged with all of myself." "Body awareness. The need to bring the body and the actions connected to it back to the center." "I believe that awareness and the ability to distinguish the emotions we experience, to sense, know, and recognize our body and what it constantly communicates to us, are essential for every type of profession." "The Master's program represents an active journey of awareness towards one's own body and its connection with the world/material." "I understood how much our well-being is based on a balance between body and mind, and how essential it is to work on both aspects, both for actors and educators, professions I consider equally educational. Education must start from both mind and body, and we cannot work separately on two such important parts of the individual." "The lesson undoubtedly helped me feel free to experiment with new things and express my personality better with others."	The experience has enhanced the body as a mediator of knowledge, making for a meaningful and embodied learning based on action, relationship and active participation.

The body proved to be a vehicle for authentic connection, thanks to its ability to activate non-verbal and shared communication codes. The testimonies gathered highlight how the bodily experience facilitated the realization of empathetic processes aimed at fostering a deep emotional understanding of others. The inclusive dimension of theater and art in general is also emphasized, particularly through the analysis of the diaries of a student with a disability. In his diaries, expressions that emphasize a suspension of judgment repeatedly appear, such as "the lesson undoubtedly helped

me feel free to experiment with new things and express my personality better with others," and "I really enjoyed expressing my most hidden emotions," or phrases that highlight the true inclusion of all participants and the feeling of being part of a group, such as "I really liked feeling part of such a harmonious group. I felt extremely happy to be part of such a diverse context, and I hope to grow a lot in this journey that we will all take together."

All participants thus experienced the process in a judgment-free environment, where they could express themselves freely. From the analysis of the diaries, through the active involvement of the body, the experience was perceived as meaningful and transformative, enabling students to engage in embodied and situated learning (Sibilio, & Galdieri, 2022).

At the conclusion of the Master's programs, participants rediscovered the active role of *performative didactics*, re-evaluated the figure of the student as the main actor in their own learning process, and recognized the importance of theatrical practices (Carlomagno, 2020) within teaching and learning processes.



Masterclass "The Voice of the Soul"



Masterclass "Cells" – Sound Classroom



Masterclass "Cells" – Dance Classroom

4. Discussion

The qualiquantitative analysis of the data confirmed that the activities carried out during the lessons highlighted the importance of the bodily dimension in educational contexts. The experiential practices that allowed students to recognize themselves in the gaze of others and within the group they belonged to represented an opportunity to refine skills in active listening, non-verbal communication, and the management of relational dynamics. The experimentation with situations of bodily interaction fostered greater awareness of one's own communication methods and reciprocity in relationships with others. The use of space, movement, and proxemics enabled the development of a sense of connection and mutual trust, which are key elements in building effective and authentic relationships.

A key element that emerged from the data analysis was the role of the body as a primary vector of knowledge. Moving away from a purely theoretical approach in favor of embodied and situated learning (Ferri, 2022) allowed participants to internalize concepts and skills through direct experience. This approach demonstrated that knowledge is not exclusively a product of abstract cognition, but rather the result of a continuous interaction between body and mind.

The experiential approach facilitated more effective and lasting learning as it actively involved sensory, motor, and emotional dimensions, thereby strengthening procedural and implicit memory (Damasio, 1994), aiming for authentic and meaningful learning (Ausubel, 2004).

From this perspective, the body is not merely a container of knowledge but is viewed as an active agent in its construction and transformation. The acquisition of greater bodily awareness led to an improvement in relational skills, with positive effects on managing interpersonal relationships. The qualitative analysis of the diaries demonstrated that the bodily experience is an essential element in developing empathetic, cognitive, and relational skills.

This approach allowed participants to acquire not only new skills but also a greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of their relationships with others, demonstrating that authentic knowledge emerges from lived experience in its entirety

5. Conclusions

The theatrical performative practices have been reassessed by students as a powerful educational tool, capable of better managing the expression of their emotions, fostering self-awareness, positively engaging with others, and emphasizing the involvement of the bodily element as an active part in the teaching-learning processes. The embodied experience not only facilitated the learning of specific skills but also contributed to the development of a more dynamic view of teaching, influencing a broader evolution of the individual by strengthening their relational identity and capacity for interaction with the outside world.

The proposed research aims to serve as a starting point for future empirical research that is necessary for the greater applicability of good educational and training practices drawn from the arts, with the goal of affirming the validity of theater and performing arts in general as essential pedagogical tools in educational contexts that value human relationships and embodied experience for embodied and meaningful learning (Ausubel, 2004). Recent studies on *Embodied Theatrology* support theater as an art form that generates dynamic relationships not only between actors but also between actors and audiences in a situated and embodied context (Sofia, Mager, Brunel, & Noel, 2024).

The future perspective we hope for is, therefore focused on greater and more careful promotion of new educational approaches that aim to recognize the educational and formative potential of theatrical practices and performing arts in the world of scientific research (Carlomagno, 2022).

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