Performing Intercultural Dialogue on the Stage

Art and intercultural education

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Abstract

The present paper analyses, as a case study from an ethnographic perspective, the experience of building a performance through a participatory process during the Youth Forum on Water and Intercultural Dialogue (Turin 20-25 May 2008). The complexity of the participatory process that involved 23 young people from different countries, followed by three facilitators, is analyzed through four main axes of reflection: a) The use of art for dealing with difference and re-thinking identities; b) The role of facilitator as mediator and coordinator, where everybody was invited to share his/her skills and competences; c) The creation of a learning and productive environment, spending time on getting to know each other, on relaxing and on feeling self-confident ; d) The intensity of the experience during the five days, 24 hour per day, of living together.

Keywords: *participative practices, artistic tools, identities, theatre pedagogy*

Introduction

Educational projects that aim to deal with cultural diversity and intercultural aspects are becoming more and more common. In the European Union, which is trying to define itself not as just a common market but as a political union, a large amount of funding and resources are devoted to the implementation of educational projects that aim to promote moments of interchange between people from different countries and the knowledge about other cultures (programme *Youth in Action, Culture, Life Long Learning*).

In 2008, the promotion of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, by the same European Commission, multiplied these kind of projects. The experience I analyze in this article is one of them: the Youth Forum "Water and Intercultural Dialogue" that took place in Turin from the 20:th to the 25:th of May 2008. The Forum was organized by *the Anna Lindth Foundation for Dialogue Between Culture* (Alexandria, Egypt), a Euro-Mediterranean organization, in collaboration with *Paralleli Institute* (Turin, Italy), an association of associations from the north west region of Italy.

The Youth Forum brought together 72 participants, young people from 20 to 30 years old, from all the countries of the European Union and the Mediterranean area, who were selected through an application process. The selection considered applicants' motivations, the relation with the topic of water, and country and gender balance. The main aim of the Forum was *to raise the youth's role in building better understanding and pacific co-existence between Euro-Mediterranean peoples* and to promote inter-Mediterranean dialogue around the theme of water. Water was at the same time the central theme of ecological and political debates and the symbolical element that links and divides, physically and culturally, the European Union and North Africa.

During the six days of the Youth Forum I had the possibility to be involved in the activities and at the same time I carried on a participant observation, understood as *the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting* (Schensul, Schensul, and Lecompte:1999). Observation was followed by short interview and conversation with the participants and with a series of e-mails exchanged with the facilitators after the end of the experience.

The non formal education field

During the research for my Ph.D. thesis, on the use of video making in educational projects, I became more and more involved in the field of non-formal education, a field where it is possible to find projects that use artistic tools, my focus of interest, in education. The exploration of this field is also linked with my previous experience in the non-formal education programme developed by the EU (Youth in Action) in which I was involved for long time. Through the relationships that I conserve from that period I got involved, as a participant, in the experience of the five-day Youth Forum.

This peculiar field, non-formal education, even if on the one hand it appears quite blurred and shifting, on the other, thanks to its flexibility and rapidity in changing, it permits designing on-the-go projects, answering problems that the bureaucratic mechanism of school takes years to face.

The idea of non-formal education became popular during the Sixties, when the crisis of the formal educational system became apparent in many western countries. So when the *International Conference on the World Crisis in Education* took place in Williamsburg in 1967 the necessity of a more flexible education system was evident:

> *The conclusion [of the conference] was that formal education system had adapted too slowly to the socio-economic changes around them and that they were held back not only by their own conservatism, but also by the inertia of societies themselves. (Fordham, 1993:2)*

Nowadays the idea of non formal education is linked both to the formal education systems crisis and to the lifelong learning process, as the Council of Europe explains:

> *The assembly recognizes that formal educational systems alone cannot respond to the challenges of modern society and therefore welcomes its reinforcement by non-formal educational practices […]. The Assembly recommends that governments and appropriate authorities of member stares recognise non-formal education as a de facto partner in the lifelong process and make it accessible for all. (Council of Europe, 1999:3)*

Despite the attention that non-formal education field is gaining nowadays, a clear definition is still not commonly accepted. Maybe the main characteristics are the ones described by Coombs y Ahmed:

> *Any organized, systematic, educational activity carried outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children. (Coombs y Ahmed, 1974: 8)*

Moreover, following the Giroux's reflection (1994) about popular culture, we should consider that a big part of the education that we receive and that shape our identities takes place outside the walls of the school, and for this reason it is also important to take care of education outside the formal area. Books, films, television and experiences during free time play a big role in the definition of our identity and the imaginary we create about the rest of the world. Non-formal education projects, free from the obligation of curriculum, create the possibility for dealing with this continuous circulation of ideas, imaginaries and meanings.

Building a performance

Inside the forum three different workgroups were organized, each of them focusing on a different aspect of water: a) Water, Heritage and Intergenerational Dialogue; b) Water, Spirituality and Emotion; c) Water, Sustainable Development and Civil Society. Participants were divided into the three groups following their interests, and each group was coordinated by three mentors. Participants were asked during the Forum to develop a reflection about their theme and produce an output showing their conclusions.

The challenge represented by the realization of an output, in a so short time and without previous experience or contacts between participants, is one of the interesting aspects of the experience. Furthermore, the output had to be made public, and it was requested that it be created, organized and presented, or performed, only by the participants. The role of the mediators was to help and coordinate, but not to direct or organize, following the idea that the relations inside the Forum should be completely horizontal and equal.

In this way, even if the building process remained internal to the group, an educational process that only the participants could experience, the idea of preparing a public output avoided the creation of another dimension of "ourselves", forcing us to go out of the security we gained inside the group and share what we learned with other people, in this case with the public. Only in this way the intercultural work developed by the group became a starting point for a dialogue and not for a closure within the dimension of the friendship developed between the participants.

The output project for the group "Water, Spirituality and Emotion", in which I was involved and on which I developed a participant observation, was a public performance, using sound, music, images, and bodies, around the theme of water. This project was realized by a group of 23 young people, most of whom did not have any previous experience in art and theatre. Three professionals, two from the field of theatre and a visual artist, followed the process and gave the input necessary for the realization. The most important challenges were dealing with the cultural and linguistic diversity, the short timeframe and participants' lack of stage experience.

When we started working, we hardly believed that we could have ended up with something to show, least of all with something well done. During three days we went through a process of debate, ideas sharing, confrontations, and exercises on the stage. Every decision about what to do and how to do it was commonly discussed and each participant was invited to share his/her skills in order to create an output with aesthetic value. Both the process and the final product were part of this educational process that, on the one hand, strived to bring together different people in order to create an artistic product, and on the other, to make this product visible to others.

On May 24th, for the output of their three days of work, the group "Water, Spirituality and Emotion" performed a 20 minutes show in a small public theatre in Turin. The story, narrated without any words, was about two different cultural groups, represented by two different traditional musical instruments, who alternated between moments of harmony and moments of war around the lake, an inflatable swimming pool in the middle of the stage, that represented both the link and the border between them. Even if the plot was quite simple and linear, thanks to the use of the lights, music, video, and the movements of the bodies, the show gave a strong emotional impression to the spectators, as was evident from the commentaries offered at the end.

When we realized what we had been able to realize, at first we were astonished. As Suominen (2006) reflects *we form an understanding of who we are by reflecting on the documents we create or accept as a presentation of the self* (p. 141). The performance we created was a mirror that showed us what we were able to build, and it was also a way to make visible the process we passed through to arrive at that final point. It was the document that allowed us to fix the experience in order to be able to come back to it and to analyze it.

For the same reason, it is interesting to analyse, step-by-step, what made it possible to pass from the initial situation, in which we felt completely lost and had no ideas about what to do, to a situation where we produced and performed a proper public show. Regarding the process, we can highlight four main

innovative points: a) The use of art for dealing with difference and re-thinking identities; b) The role of facilitator as mediator and coordinator, where everybody was invited to share his/her skills and competences; c) The creation of a learning and productive environment, spending time on getting to know each other, on relaxing and on feeling self-confident; d) The intensity of the experience during the five days, 24 hour per day, of living together.

Using art to deal with differences and for re-thinking identities

Having the aim of organizing a performance helped us to shift from a dialogue between cultures into a dialogue between persons. Culture is not an abstract concept, rather, there are people that embody them and that express and relate themselves through a dialogical relationship within a cultural, linguistic, and religious frame (Bruner 1984). Thus, an intercultural learning process should at first make people aware of themselves and then makes them able to re-elaborate and negotiate diversity into their personal narrative (Canova 2001).

From this point of view, the stage is a deeply symbolical place where people can elaborate different strategies of selfhood that permit them to deal with differences. In fact, building alternative narratives about ourselves, others, relationships and identities is a matter of learning, and requires a place and a time for giving it a try. This was made possible during this project both by the intensity of the experience, which easily drives participants into transportation, and through the artistic language we were using.

Working with art during our process was both a limitation and a resource. On the one hand, it was a challenge for non art practitioners, like the majority of us were, while on the other it allowed us to avoid the problems of language and communication that arose from the diversity of our group. Most of time it was very hard to find a way to communicate, considering that we needed to use a common language, English, that was not perfectly spoken by anybody. For the same reason it was not possible to base the show on dialogue and cues played by actors. Instead, we had to find other ways of communicating, namely, we were forced to use bodies.

In formal education bodies are forced into a fixed position, sitting in front of a desk, silent and almost invisible. Indeed, the body is the place where the mark of culture is most clearly visible and it is the first place of clash in an intercultural encounter. Differences in distances between bodies, and requested or forbidden movement, stir up instinctive reactions. Performance is a learning process where we became conscious of the bodies - our body, and those around us - and we experiment different ways to use and move them.

When the stage gave us this opportunity to create a narration by avoiding the difference of language and instead using bodies, music and images, it became important to learn how to be on stage, how to coordinate everybody, and how to have a silent dialogue. It was not possible to create a very precise sequence of steps that we, as non-professionals, would have taken a lot of time to understand and memorize. However, at the same time we had to find a way to be able to do our movements in harmony and synchrony. The idea was that twenty people on stage should be able to perform without preparing and memorizing a complex choreography.

Unexpectedly we discovered, thanks to the professionals that helped us, that the easiest and quickest way to do achieve this was to learn how to listen and follow other peoples' bodies. We started doing simple movement exercises on stage, first individually, then in couples, mirroring the other person's movement. Then we learned how to measure the intensity and the energy of our bodies; with everybody in a circle we switched from slow and soft movements to quick and dynamic ones.

All these exercises made us able to organize sequences in which two groups almost danced one in front of the other. A group leader had the responsibility of deciding the movements while the others followed him/her. For each sequence that was established, a different group leader took charge, allowing everybody to play the role of the leader, while we concentrated on learning how to synchronize our movements. The

final effect from the outside was that of a choreography of twenty people divided in two groups, who first appeared to dance among themselves and then face-to-face as if they where fighting. This was achieved, even though there was no choreography behind the movements, but just a series of exercises and few hours of rehearsal on the stage.

Body and art are also deeply linked to emotions, and, as we can see from psychological studies, emotions play a pivotal role in the processes of changing the self, considering that e*motionally powerful life events have been shown to precipitate identity change* (Lewis and Ferrari 2001, p.197). Emotions are indeed key points in the organization of the self and in the construction of identity narratives; involving people in experiences that they consider emotionally meaningful is the first step in initiating reflection and it invites people to experience themselves in other roles and in other relations.

Whereas working with emotion in real life could be dangerous, both for the possibly real consequences and because people can be overwhelmed by their feelings, art is a place where we can not only easily shape and transmit emotion, but we can do it in a safe place. Inserted in an educational project, art becomes a vehicle for experiencing other narratives and drives self-change, which is the basis of education.

People bring their emotions, feelings and narratives with themselves, but on stage, and through performance, they can experience new ones, that, perhaps, in real life they are afraid to live or are unaware that they are able to feel. One of the aims of performing a show is to transmit the emotion to the audience as well, and, in this way, get more people involved in the process.

The deep emotions that we share during the preparation and during the performance of the show created links between people. On the day of the show, everybody was very excited, and during the farewell party in the evening, sadness and nostalgia took over. Everybody knew these were the last few hours we would be spending together. For several months after the event, the mails we were exchanging still held the traces of the deep emotions we felt.

The educator's role

As the *Learning by Design* (Kalantzis and Cope 2005) experience shows us, we learn better when we participate in the design of our learning process. When people can choose what to learn and how to learn, they feel committed to the process and take better advantage of the experience; they change their role to an active and responsible participation. Meanwhile, educators act as mediators, persons who, even with deeper knowledge, do not have the role of teaching and deciding what to do, but one of helping the group in make decisions and realize outputs.

The mediators that helped and guided us in the realization of the performance were social theatre professionals and joined their theatrical experience with pedagogical attitudes. At first they focused on recognizing and bringing together different skills that the participants had, work from the idea that the background of each participant should be shared in order to become a resource for the group. For this reason we dedicated time to discovering everybody's skills, and a long time was spent listening, or watching, individual presentations about our previous experiences related with water, whether it was research, artistic, in nature or otherwise. Spending time on presentations has another important role; in fact, issues related with interculturality are primarily related with personal identity and for this reason the first step of an intercultural education is a reflection and awareness about who we are in relation to the cultural environment we live in.

Afterwards, we divided ourselves into subgroups of music, images and bodies based on everybody's skills and desires. The role of educator in this stage was to propose and teach exercises that allowed us to develop the performance. We started with a debate around key word we wanted to bring into the performance and then we had a larger discussion about the scenes we could imagine and their sequence. Bruner (1984) argues that education take place exactly during these moments of discussion: *la educación, si ha de preparar a los jóvenes a vivir la vida, debe participar en este espíritu de foro, de negociación, de*

recreación de significado (1) (Bruner 1984, p.83). The place of education is therefore the place of the forum: where different ideas are shared, discussed and exchanged.

But we must not forget that this is a hard work. Being able to talk in a group, interchange ideas, find agreement and negotiate is something we have to learn and practice. Frequently, while we were preparing the performance, we felt lost, especially when we were involved in discussions for hours and hours because we were not able to reach an agreement. In the images group, responsible for the visual part of the show, we spent an entire afternoon arguing over which was the right computer program for editing the video that should be part of the set design, some of us preferred to use one and others preferred another. Due to this discussion we had to do the editing at night. The short loop we were able to edit was, for us, the visible result of the complexity of arriving at an agreement in an equal and horizontal manner. We came to the conclusion that to being able to dialogue and work in a team is the result of a learning process.

If a small, and almost insignificant detail, such as the choice of an editing program, could stop the teamwork during an entire afternoon, we can have an idea of the complexity of a process, building a performance, that requires constant decision-making. It is important to be able to organize this kind of movement that easily shifts from a moment of advancement to a moment of quarrel and an end to the work. For this reason, a limited and focused intervention from the mediators was needed to help the group solve the moments in which everything was blocked, but they had to be careful not to loose the dialectic nature of the process and the space for debate.

The space of art can be a privileged one for stepping out from the static way of education in favour of a dialectical one. In the free space of art, in this case the stage and the development of a performance, we feel more comfortable carrying out debates and discussions and we become capable of negotiating a new meaning, by being open to hearing different opinions, as well as learn how to better communicate and ague our ideas.

In the conversation I had the opportunity to have with the mediators, in which we discussed the process they followed, they affirmed that there are no fixed rules for organizing a group. Each group of people is different and has its own dynamic. For this reason, it is necessary in every circumstance to find out what is the best way to work with a specific group, which has its own dynamic and its own way of working. They see themselves as other learners in the group, with more experience and more technical knowledge, but aware that they also are learning during the process and that they also have to build their relationship to the people in the group.

Learning environment

The notion of learning environment is becoming more and more common in the field of education. This is perhaps due to the fact that, in this field, the work of Foucault (1975) has become a common reference. His analysis of the re-organization of the space of re-education of prisons, that involved also schools in the late nineteen century, marked a starting point for reflecting on how a place influences the way we learn and the identity we develop.

As we already analyzed, the stage, for example, is a symbolical place that lets us step out of ourselves: performances, like role games, allow us to be other, and weaken the typical mechanism we develop to defend identity in the face of diversity. We are more open when "it is just a play" and not real life. Thus, role-playing does not avoid conflicts but it allows us to live conflicts without serious consequences, and in this way, it teaches us how to deal with them.

From this point of view the stage is a privileged learning environment in relation to identity, but it is not enough by itself. A symbolical space is necessary for the creation of a more relational space, Ellsworth (1989), in her analysis of the faults of critical pedagogy, defines it as a "safe space", a space where people feel enough self confidence that they can express and open themselves. This kind of safeness is created mostly outside the organized time of work, through informal relations in free time, but it is necessary to create the possibility for working. It could sound contradictory, but as the same Ellsworth experienced in her class, when she was trying to develop debates with her students around the theme of race and racism:

Participants in the class agreed that commitment to rational discussion about racism in a classroom setting was not enough to make that setting a safe space for speaking out and talking back. We agreed that a safer space required high levels of trust and personal commitment to individuals in the class, gained in part through social interactions outside of class-potlucks, field trips, participation in rallies and other gatherings (Ellsworth 1989, p.316).

During the days of the Youth Forum, in spite of the short time that we had for organizing the performance, we spent almost an entire day creating the "safe space" Ellsworth is talking about. This meant creating an environment where everybody felt free to express him/herself so that the work of building the performance could truly be the result of the everybody's participation. One of the reasons we achieved our goal of creating a performance is that, at the beginning, we spent time getting to know each other through the short presentations we prepared at home about water. This helped us to gain a first impression about who were the components of the group, to memorize names, to find common points and interests. In a second part of the process, the facilitator invited us to start working in small groups where it was easier for everyone to speak, and we engaged in a debate about the key words we would like to bring into the performance. Only in a third moment did we gather in one circle to start discussing, all together, the theme and the sequence of our performance.

Furthermore, we also used the free time to continue building the *high levels of trust* required for working in the best manner. Since we spent almost two days in the theatre, for the rehearsals and the show, lunch and dinner became pivotal in this process. These were the moments when we could continue talking about the show in a more relaxed atmosphere, or switch the conversation to more personal themes. Sometimes in these moments good ideas emerged or solutions to problems were found.

The intensity of the experience

Intercultural experiences are based on the idea of sharing everyday life between people from different origins, as, for example, the intercultural exchange developed inside the action 1 of the Youth in Action programme by the European Union. But the idea of building a common and public output together creates a completely different approach to the process of constituting a group. The relationships built inside the groups are stronger; everybody becomes concerned with the mission they must achieve in such a short time.

From conversations with the mentors of the project we arrived at the conclusion that an experience, to open the possibility of changes in the self, has to reorganize the life of the participant, at least during the time of the workshop. Only in this way will it be a break in one's everyday life, and become a transportation of the self into another world (Green 2005), a process that makes it possible to acquire the power to carry out the changes requested by an intercultural education. As Green reflects, transportation *can aid in learning about expanding, and changing the self* (Green 2005, p.57). Transportation is directly linked with an experience that involved people twenty-four hours a day.

Considering that educational processes are always linked with identity and aim to provoke changes in the self, the question of the time during which a process is set up and its intensity is crucial. The transportation into another dimension, considered by Green, is possible only if the experience, at least while it is taking place, can change every single instant of a person's everyday life. On the contrary, what we are experiencing is a nice adventure but not sufficiently deep enough to have an impact on "real life". As suggested before in the reflections on the *Learning Environment*, the intensity of the experience augment the possibility of shared free time and thus the creation of the "safe space" of trust and confidence.

Conclusions

As ironically suggested by Baricco (2008) in his essay about "barbarians", a Greek word to define non-Greeks and therefore non-cultured people, *the dread of the civilization is not to be defeated by the*

barbarians, but instead to be corrupted (Baricco 2008, p.172). From this commentary, that also reminds us that dealing with diversity is an old problem, especially around the Mediterranean Sea, we can gather that our relationship with diversity is a problem related to identity, and to the organization of the self. The fear generated from diversity is the fear of getting lost, of losing ourselves, our identity and of being forced to change into something unknown, something that we are not able to control.

The experience of the performance project shows us that it is not possible to reduce intercultural education in learning to a list of differences between cultures, habits, languages, or traditions. Instead, intercultural education is, first of alls, a way to learn how to deal with differences, and second, a way to understand that the process of negotiating cultural meaning is one that we start to learn in our own culture.

A deeper reflection made us aware that the problem with our relationship to diversity is a problem that is internal, and not only external, to any culture. Diversity is something that is both inside and outside the same culture (Geertz 2001). It is not just a problem of relations between ourselves and others, but also about ourselves and how we deal with the culture, or cultures, we are involved in. Peoples who do not follow mainstream cultural principles, seen as foolish or rebels, are considered "others" in the same way as people belonging to a different culture (Foucault 1961).

For this reason, intercultural education is a work that is related to situated cultural identities. It does not involve abstract culture but rather, people who embody cultural meaning (Bruner 1984), which express and relate through a dialogical relationship with a cultural, linguistic, religious frame and who are also able to negotiate them again. Indeed, an intercultural education that focuses only on difference and the acceptance of others carries out a process that stereotypes and fossilized culture, forgetting that a culture is dynamic, something that is alive and in continuous change. The risk that we run in this case is that we merely substitute the collective imaginary that we have about a culture with another one, without understanding that the whole picture we can create is useful, but partial, and linked with a specific time and place. To be able to create a dialectic dialogue based in diversity, instead of one that fixes images of otherness, is one of the aims that a project of intercultural education should achieve.

Notes

1. "Education, if it has to prepare young people to live life, should participate in this spirit of forum, of negotiation, of the recreation of meaning."

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