

The penitentiary school: between didactic and education of the individual.

Theatrical methods and artistic languages as a tool of didactic innovation in adult's penitentiary reality.

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Abstract

In the Italian prison reality, the school activities of every order and degree have been guaranteed by law since the end of the 70s of the last century. The present contribution intends to stimulate a critical reflection on the dimensions of educational action in complex social situations such as that of prison. He wants to offer an opportunity to rethink paths and tools of educational planning in relation to the use of new training methodologies, such as the theatrical methodology in its different modalities and its specific styles. It is difficult to satisfy the needs of treatment, orientation, social integration and re-education and at the same time develop formal knowledge. The active and participatory methodologies of the theater can be useful for the change of the context of life.

Keywords: adult education, theatrical methodologies, school in prison, innovation, participation

Social and pedagogic-didactical scenario: the reason of theatrical activities in penitentiary education

The reflection about education and school didactics has an initial presumption. We are asked to focus our education action on the subject and his learning potential that allows him to develop knowledge through making contact, elaborating and transforming symbols and the environment knowledge. The educational action has as a source of knowledge the relation between the subject and the environment. Because of this, the educational action,

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generates significant learning only if it comes from a continuous experience. All individuals, when starting a formal education experience, bring implicit and informal knowledge coming from their previous experiences. This pattern leads towards the creation of engaging and open-minded didactical situations, also through experiences of collective knowledge building where personal learning becomes the heritage for building new intergroup connections (Stollo, 1997).

Inside Italian correctional facilities, school activities of any level are guaranteed by the law since late 1970's. The Penitential Ordinance and the execution rules include the arrangement of mandatory school courses and professional training, while for high school education there are memorandums of understanding for their launch between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education and the agreement between the Local Education Authority and the Regional Provider of penitentiary administration. All Italian penitentiaries follow an organization pattern where a Didactical Commission is provided. The Didactical Commission is composed by different expertise (Director, Pedagogy responsible and teachers) that work towards the inmate re-educational path. They have to define an individual learning project for all inmates that wish to participate to learning activities (Benelli, 2012).

The 34th article first subparagraph of the Italian Constitution says: "school is open for all", recognising everyone's right of using the public service offered by the Italian State (as described in the 33rd article second subparagraph) to satisfy educational needs.

The article goes on specifying how secondary school is mandatory and free and has to be provided for at least 8 years, nowadays has been extended to 10 years by the law (n. 9, January 20th 1999, G.U. n. 21, January 27th 1999). The article specifies that this right is extended to the "highest studies", for all individuals, capable and worthy, even if they can't afford it as specific grants are set in order to overcome economic inequalities that can prevent from the use of this service. The article 33 of the Italian Constitution (involved in the article 21 about freedom of expression) about "art and science freedom", "informational right" and "health protection" (Constitutional Court sentence of December, 7th, 1994 n. 420) highlights an overview where is underlined the psychological, intellectual and physical welfare right even if detained, where personal growth through activities that can enrich people is an integral part. It is important to deliver tools for the fulfilment of the

mandatory school to those who enter the penitential circuit, guaranteeing individual educational paths that respond especially to the “week subjects” needs. First of all, alphabetization as the Directive n.22 of February, 6th, 2001 of the Public Education Ministry establishes.

The academic year 2014-2015 stats show how the Italian facilities schools attendance is growing. The stats say that 1.139 studies courses have been launched, with a total of 17.096 subscriptions. CILS courses (Ex. Alphabetization) have been 212 with a total of 2.966 subscriptions of which 2.753 foreigners. The percentage of promotion is 38,4%.

Regarding CA courses (Ex. Primary School) in Italy have been launched 182 courses, with 2.860 subscribers, 1.947 foreigners that led to a promotion percentage of 37,2%. The higher education courses (Ex. 1st grade CSI Secondary School) is active with 311 courses and 4.801 subscribers (2.397 foreigners) and a promotion percentage of 30,8%; 434 CS courses (Ex. 2nd grade Secondary School) have been launched with 6.649 subscribers, 1.410 foreigners and a promotion percentage of 52,4%.

The penitentiary school, through the Ministerial Ordinance 455/97, has been competing with the Permanent Territorial Centres (CTP) that have been taking care of adults education, working towards specifics expertise and for a professional re-qualification.

Since last academic year (2014-2015) new Provincial Centres for Adults Education (CPIA) have been launched. These new centres perform the functions that Permanents Territorial Centres (CTP) and evening courses schools use to do. Their activities are based on the right of an Adults Education (EDA) system and a lifelong learning as stated during the 5th UNESCO International Conference held in Hamburg (July 1997) that led to the subscription of a document that focuses on education for all adults in the world.

Regarding mandatory school and professional education, are provided and ruled by the Penitentiary Ordinance and the executorial laws, secondary education courses launched through memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education and the agreement between the Local Education Authority and the Regional Provider of penitentiary administration.

Specifics about teacher's role in the penitentiary school

To be able to teach in a special and specific reality like this, teachers have to be employed at the public school, but a specific education or training is not provided, neither a method or one about the adults educational relation. The educational activities rely just on the ability of the teacher to adapt didactical methods and educational encouragement to a reality where the security paradigm restricts technological support or ICT (Information and Communication Technology) aid for adults education, with a lack of significant teaching-learning processes. (Orefice, 2011)

In this context, the risk of developing a weak educational process and a rather toothless learning path is high. This is the reason that calls on fostering methods that allow a real building process for new knowledge while using the best opportunities coming from reflections elaborated in the pedagogic-didactical field.

In a paradoxical logic – as the prison shows in the guise of Institution and as set social goals – penitentiary school reality works as a “workshop” where is easier experimenting artistic practices today seen as necessary, and sometimes essential, when talking about subject education and his basic, specific and transversal skills development. (Lizzola, Brena, Ghidini, 2017)

This contribute wants to stimulate a critic reflection on the dimension of education action towards complex social situations like in prison, giving the chance to re-think educational planning paths and tools related to the use of new educational methods, like the theatrical method in his different ways and specific styles. Compared to other working methods on adults teaching-learning processes, the benefit of the theatrical method in education is to think at the educational moment as a “workshop time”, where every adult can experiment himself on a better self-communication and on communicating with others. Body language, expressive arts and communication languages like photography and video production in both traditional way of work documentation and research of new approaches to these techniques, allow the subject to feel active and to communicate with the reality, that during the detention, remains mostly just a thought rather than rarely experienced. (Costantino, 2016)

The didactical methods for penitentiary school

The construction of the didactical method in prisons reality and penitentiary school activities is both Constructivism and Metacognitive theoretically and methodologically oriented. The core of the didactic is about the learners who learn through their cognitive potential and gets in touch with reality by transforming, elaborating and processing signs and relationships in different settings.

The group's methodology is a participated and a relational approach. Such approach refers to either the proposals of tools construction and the reflections concerning education and school experience in prison. Following the relational orientation, the subject's educational experiences take part of a bigger part of reality including either the different relational and experiential contexts and the local territory as concrete set of life too. A dynamic relational perspective provides a more accurate picture of the world, and guides us toward more helpful ways of living.

According to the relational perspective a global educational approach has to be used to focus on the connection among subject's education and external reality (which has got its own specifics at detainment). In this way, the educational issue is studied by the connections put on in every experience of life.

The Participatory dimension resumes the premises of the relational model and it is adapted to the relations, consciousness activated and informally developed among subjects' knowledge, local knowledge, teachers' knowledge and disciplines. Participation is a constituent element of cognitive processes and refers to emphatic aspects of the knowledge construction and management. (Orefice, 2006)

Learning is not a transfer of contents from teacher to learner. Learners cannot acquire new information if they are not able to relate new knowledge to their own processed knowledge and their real life experience. Every learning is useless and irrelevant if the learner does not perceive this kind of connection among his knowledge and if different knowledges do not connect to each other. These specific working methods require a huge willingness from teachers and educators to dialogue between them and trying not to be self-referential but fostering an active dialogue among different disciplines and different arts. (Buccolo, 2015)

A participative method, interdisciplinary, through which can be differentiated the educational proposal, based on participant subjects different needs, becoming an incentive for self-knowledge and a chance to get involved as a possibility of comparison and relations with others. This working method requires involving subjects while learning directly in the whole planning process, starting from a real interest and from needs definition or facts considered as relevant towards the construction of possible solutions or shared actions, until assessment and successive re-planning, stimulating students to a sharing and responsibility process, not always possible through other teaching ways. Such educational process requires a continuous re-elaboration, reflection and content assessment and a systematic analysis of the educational and animation patterns that are possible to be structured in every reality and every specific context. Satisfying needs of treatment, orientation, social integration and re-education on one hand and formal knowledge development on the other hand, is extremely complex, but the challenge is that participative and active methods from theatre can be used as an engine for changing life context and subjective shift. An Integration that starts from enhancing the best practice, already existing, carried out by institutions and private individuals, integrating capacities and abilities of the institutions involved and those existing on the territory, with the goal of inmates social reintegration. This is an aspect that Institutions outside prison have to undertake at first-hand. (Buccolo, Mongili, Tonon, 2014)

The theatrical approach offers a learning experience that goes over didactic, where it's easier accept and reflect about ourselves while thinking on how to improve, as theatrical methods play on emotions which are action and changing engine sources. A significant learning process from any discipline integrates the intellectual understanding of issues and solutions through experience thanks to the "holistic" learning capacity activated by mind, body and emotions. This process pushes, naturally and spontaneously, towards a continuous interaction among different disciplines levels and foster the whole range of human intelligence. (D'Ambrosio, 2015)

It is important to apply the theatrical approach in education contexts and penitentiary education as it is a pedagogic way that allows to promote didactic changes building flexible contexts. This allows students to explore different methods necessary for adults education in schools with a specific focus on *lifelong learning* study area.

Improvisation and comedian art theatre method

Using theatrical improvisation method in the penitentiary field has a huge value in terms of knowledge of the own potential and development of own relation capacities while facing the unforeseen, for relation building, systemic and interdependent actions as well as managing situations that require clearness of action, and abilities development in the complex language use area (Borgato, Vergnani, 2007).

Improvised theatre major features have a significant value for subject education. Complex dimensions that play an active role towards potentials development useful for the individual in order to build positive relationships with the environment and to improve the ability to interact with others. The action carried out within improvisation field encourages to acquire communication and relation expertise based on listening and emotive connection, to build interaction and a constructive dynamic with others, to rely on the own creativity, to know how to accept and manage risks. (Molinari, 2008).

Improvisation method has a pedagogic ability within, as it allows the subject to show immediately and spontaneously, deep aspects of his own being and feelings. At the same time it stimulates high levels of relations with alterity.

A circular process that allows listening education as well as the attention on what happens inside and outside the subject and frustration tolerance. It allows also to transform displacement felt when facing the unexpected trough building a solution unforeseen before, adaptation and taking quick decisions when facing unthinkable situations. A good intersubjective relationship is key for subject's welfare and when it becomes dialogue and confrontation testing site, it allows belonging sense shaping towards a given context and his goals. In this way the subject can feel more involved within the community, starting an active participation to social life with his own relation expertise and a significant self-consciousness.

The subject, during the performance finds himself as leader of his own acting and thinking with others, compare with others and goes along with different points of view. The subject finds himself handling and managing his own body that becomes a privileged tool of expression, but at the same time uses complex cognitive knowledges that makes him more self-conscious and aware of his own abilities and potential.

Theatre is an art that develops within a *life form*, a simulated life experience that anyway develops emotions and feelings of real life itself. It is a *poetic art* that becomes concrete reality where individuals create, construct, and what takes shape – through words, gestures, movements – is always something new, a *quid* that has the same taste of life. Improvising on stage becomes mostly a time and place where testing complex dimension of subjective self and social self, interacting with others that, through the dynamic and communicative circularity, can communicate to the audience and observers, the value of listening, the taste of attention to small gestures, the pleasure of harmony and mutual understanding and support (Burroni, 1999). Within improvisation there is an educational action towards those who have the observer role. Being able to observe the development of a creative story and see how, even without a cognitive conciliation and common meanings building determined by a dialogical interaction, we can not only understand, but also create together, producing an interesting, and often funny act of education. Nowadays the subject that observes feels the value of relationship and interaction based on body, mind and goals synergy. For this reason the improvisation of few opens participation for all: on one hand active, for those who are on the scene, on the other hand, mediated by the pleasure and raised interest of those who observe. Emotions that take space within dynamics, offering role-playing experiences, sharing, empathy, triggering even within the observer a creative and involving activity.

Improvisation within education field is still not read in his potential that can have, as education activity planning, often is based on a high goals willingness and the teacher tend to use methods that are more manageable not only in what is held within the same method potential, but also within the implementation process (Buccolo, 2008).

Clearly is not the teacher or the tutor of an educational process that improvise, but it is the method that offers stimuli and education paths defined and structured. This does not mean that the teacher has to have expertise on this field, if the group that he is facing put itself on a difficult reception of the proposed activities from who is the process responsible. In this case even the sight of who has the task to manage the education context has to know how to improvise, in other words he has to have a point of view capable of compete with the unforeseen, dimension of being of who does not fear his own limits and who can rely on his own resources.

Theatrical improvisation, in truth, is precisely the opposite of approximation, because it associates a long self-training work on oneself with personal preparation. The trainer, as well as the trainees, has the opportunity to increase their ability to listen and communicate with each other, through improvisation, using their own body and their own voice, all the senses, within a careful direction of the spaces, timing, and a communicative style, which opens to a continuous transformation through others.

What is exceptional is that, when you start to improvise, contrary to what you would expect, like being afraid not to know what to say or do, you realize how much we all need to express ourselves and we are able to create, although with a few solicitations and no object available, a broad and dense dialogue between the participants. During improvisation it clearly emerges how, in our daily work, we are often not attentive to the messages that are offered to us, as we have repeatedly the tendency to speak over the others, to carry forward only own point of view and our own message, showing a certain difficulty in sacrificing what one is about to say to the words of the interlocutor, and even to give him support when he feels in difficulty. Interesting is the analysis of the dynamics that have been created on stage which bring out how often in the dialogues the subject tends to move away from the goal of communication and how difficult it is to stay focused on the issues to be addressed, without wandering or leaving the domain of imagination on reality (Pittau, 1999).

Training based on theatrical improvisation allows the development of certain skills, such as self awareness and group awareness, time and space management, individual listening, group and situation listening, the ability to recognize one's own creativity and expressiveness, the ability to face and solve problems and unexpected situations, the speed in interpreting and responding to stimuli, the ability to take risks and responsibilities, all elements that are found in training with such a method of work.

In fact, improvisation requires speed and flexibility of thought, the ability to change even instantaneously in a given direction, openness of mind, mnemonic abilities, absence of prejudices and a cultural baggage to be used without being mediated by the intellect. Improvisation fosters ideas, creativity, enlightenment and inspiration. It happens in the presence of certain and precise rules. It is neither anarchy, nor the absence of rules or laws, nor chance, but it is simply a flexible path of learning, as well as of research, with a precise

aim, which requires a good dose of openness, flexibility and speed of thought, ability of confrontation and dialogue, continuous consideration in progress of the various possibilities existing for the attainment of the purpose that we set ourselves.

The theater-laboratory methodology: from disciplines to expressive didactics

Another form of theater of reference for the development of disciplinary skills is the use of different forms of expression for the discussion and the construction of new knowledge on the great themes of life. Since the end of the Eighties, the idea of using theatricality to deepen certain issues, such as the environment, multiculturalism, food, health, etc., has been increasingly developed. Addressing a theme in a theatrical way has its pros and cons. A common defect when dealing with a workshop that revolves around a thematic project, is the "constrictive" dimension in which the teacher, the theatrical expert and the participants visiting are forced to meet, as any theme needs an immediate definition of the objective to be reached and therefore a choice and a selection of theatrical techniques to be used, in order to obtain an effective and exhaustive theatrical communication. The pro is undoubtedly that the theme becomes a catalyst of energies, avoiding dispersions and digressions, because theatrical techniques are immediately applied and deepened in their communicative capacity. A thematic project undoubtedly requires more time than a simple laboratory approach to theatricality as it requires a specific work on communicative, expressive and interpretative skills, but, above all, it requires a capacity to identify and develop a content. A research phase must therefore be opened with the participant group, which must be constantly followed by the teacher and such a type of laboratory represents an integral part of the program and in the teaching activities. The first phase then moves to the search for objective information (scientific or literary) but also through the sedimentation of the same information and the subjective analysis of the meanings that the theme suggests. The emotional experience of each individual participant must "contaminate" the objective information in order to make an image closer to the imaginary of the participating group. To use a metaphor, the participant (and the whole group) must digest (internalize) the information. In this phase the teacher must be able to grasp the elements of interest aroused and launch "emotional solicitations" in order to "activate" the individual imagination in order to be able, in the end, to take over that interweaving of

thoughts, feelings and emotions, which are the basics of the dramaturgical material. The second phase foresees a much more difficult aspect, that is the choice, among all the emerged materials, of the most functional stimuli for theatrical communication. A selection work, of which the teacher will have to take responsibility, having to deal with that part of the attachment to ideas and proposals, to which no one intends to give up as products of their own creativity. In this sense, the teacher must have consolidated his own leadership that allows him to make each member of the group feel as recognized in their ability and to feel welcomed their intellectual product and their commitment, trying to make the most of each one, leveraging more on the dimension of the product that comes from collective collaboration than on the subjective product. After this choice of content, the real stage of the dramaturgy is opened, in which the teacher and the students share their creative abilities: the construction of a dramaturgical structure, made up of the emerged materials, able to express the best the results of the first two phases. The concluding representation will have a ritual function, in which the gratification of arriving, having fun, to a theatrical communication (improperly called a show) takes on a double meaning:

1°) through the theatrical synthesis able to communicate the result of a long and elaborate work;

2°) achievement, after the representation, of the global comprehension of the communication set up. It is not rare, in fact, that only after meditating on the work carried out and represented, the group that participated in the laboratory fully understands the meaning of the whole project. Precisely during the process of verification of the work carried out the knowledge learned is re-established, the potentialities emerge, the unexpected reversals of roles usually considered unmovable, the awareness of having other and many expressive possibilities (learning how to make new emotional notes play) etc. The experience of a laboratory thus conceived and so practiced is a seed deposited in the soul of the participant.

Conclusions

Learning at a personal level of *empowerment* through the acquisition of new skills while planning, organizing and realizing school activities through active and participatory

methods, allows the maturation of a greater protagonism and a greater knowledge of oneself and the expressive potentials.

At the same time this allows a different relationship between teachers, detainees, agencies and the non-profit world present in the territory, allowing different subjects involved to increase the quality of life and contribute to the process of promoting well-being for our daily life.

Putting the school world at the center of prison reality means activating an important value in local development, using it as a device for a social and cultural change. A development path that requires sharing at all levels to activate real participation models, in the awareness that each path requires constant and significant monitoring and evaluation, with criteria and indicators that allow the detection, from the operators, of the strengths and weaknesses in order to establish a redefinition of school improvement plans in the prison reality.

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