

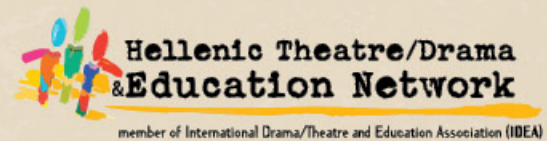


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“A way to cope with **existence**” **Theatre** and **pedagogy**: protocols, techniques and experience

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“A way to cope with **existence**” Theatre and **pedagogy**: protocols, techniques and experience

Guido di Palma



Montpellier School of Philosophy, May–June 1968,
a debate on the role of psychologist in society:

“I was there to say something. And so, I said it: What needed to be done? Take a travelling troupe and go wherever there are children placed in Institutions or Guest Houses, become a painter and have fun and pick one kid here, another kid there, a rascal here and two rascals there, discover with them ... a way to cope with existence”.

(Deligny, 1973, p. 226)¹

An essential characteristic of theatre pedagogy² is that it is placed within a framework of knowledge transmission which takes place in presence, that is through direct contact between teacher and student. With all due respect to the endless manuals on acting that have popped up in the past thirty years and are mostly based on the tradition of American pragmatism, in which the relationships between means and purposes constitute an important regulating principle, I maintain that in no way theatrical knowledge can be transferred through an “algorithmised” system.

Treatises and manuals may serve as important suggestions, still learning should not be disassociated from the direct experience of doing, and the origin of this experience, both in traditional and contemporary pedagogical systems, is no other than the relationship between teacher and student. I would like to begin from this premise in order to share certain observations about the features of different approaches to theatre pedagogy, which I find quite useful, especially in environments connected with social theatre.³

The tradition

Jerzy Grotowski would often recount a story from his visit to the People's Republic of China when he was young. On that occasion, he watched two actors, a father and a son, performing in succession the same *dan*⁴ role. In his opinion, the physical score of both actors was similar, but everyone else claimed that the father was better. Grotowski asked why and one of the masters replied: "Look, the son has sweaty armpits". The young man was still struggling to reproduce the score that had been passed down by tradition, and part of his attention was focused on the details of the role, thus he could not be free. In oriental cultures, faithful reproduction of everything the master has offered constitutes a widespread practice, a pedagogical pillar. For example, in the flourishing tradition of the Chinese storytellers, *shuoshude*, which has lasted from the end of the Song dynasty (12th century) through modern times, a student has to give up their own name and take the name of the master (Pimpaneau, 1978, p. 69). It is an extremely powerful symbolic gesture: Knowledge transforms and the former identity, as in a rite of passage, is abandoned in order to adopt a new one. Such renunciation implies not only full acceptance of the master's authority, but also recognition of a new line of descent. A similar custom in Japan is that of *iemoto*, the headmaster of a school of Noh theatre, who as the guardian of knowledge passes it down to his son or an adopted son who takes his name.⁵

Even in Western traditions, albeit in a less codified way, the master is expected to assume an authoritarian role, which is much more powerful the closer these traditions are with the models of oral culture. A master's authority serves to preserve the corpus of knowledge, because if students were to develop a critical attitude during the learning phase, selecting experiences and information of their apprenticeship according to their own taste and temperament, they would undermine the consistency of the process of passing on the craft. In oral cultures, careful and rigorous repetition constitutes the only guarantee for the effectiveness of experience.⁶

In his still contemporary essay "The Techniques of the Body", Marcel Mauss insists that there is no transmission unless the gesture intended to be transmitted is traditional and effective and tradition is in fact guaranteed by the authority of the master (Mauss, 1950/1965, pp. 389–90, 392).

Theatre pedagogy

In theatre pedagogy, both traditional and contemporary, the significance and the value of the quality of the human relationship carry decisive weight, as well as the value of the situation that produces the experience. This brings us back to the observations made by Mauss and, most importantly, it places the pedagogical relationship of theatre in the sphere of *fourth knowledge*,⁷ whose main characteristic is that it is generated through experiential learning.

The transmission of knowledge cannot be based on a *banking model* (Freire, 1970/1971, p. 80),⁸ otherwise it could not be creative. The so-called *problem solving*, which is so popular in corporate culture, does not produce, despite its immediate practicality, any creative or active knowledge, no matter what one might say.

Piergiorgio Reggio, echoing a rich literature in pedagogy associated with experiential learning, claims that obstacles arising during a learning process should not be removed,

because difficulties, especially the unpredictable ones, represent "a vital formative material, through which passes –in transformative terms– the possibility of creating learning" (Reggio, 2010, p. 71). Nevertheless, the convenience of formulating learning processes is always a quite strong temptation. Even when didactic forms remain open, this does not necessarily mean that their reception will not tend to translate passed down experience into a series of exercises to be applied. The temptation of a "protocol" constitutes a shortcut, which is quite appealing thanks to the convenience it affords. Formalising exercises is much simpler than managing a process of *coscientisation* (Freire, 1970/1971; IDAC, 1973).⁹ This is the main problem that theatre pedagogy must face and to which an effective answer is not easily provided. How can I deal with chaos, the adventure of meaning as Barthes understands it: "what happens to me unexpectedly (what is revealed by the Signifier)" (Barthes, 1991, p. 4)? It is about opening ourselves up to the meaning of forms, surrendering to their logic and letting, as in a melody, the relationships between the notes reveal their implications without interference.

For teachers and students, the greatest risk of pedagogical processes is the easiness with which a result can be quickly accomplished by mastering a "know-how", merely by adopting and applying techniques, thus optimising both time and outcomes as if it was a job like coaching in the movies or in musicals: achieving a result rather than transforming the individual. In a dialogue between Suzanne Bing, a facilitator at the theatre school of Jacques Copeau's Vieux Colombier, with Maurice Kurtz, who was trying to schematise the school's pedagogy into a "protocol", the actress stated:

People of our craft ... teach, guide, advise in an improvised simulation of love that is forever renewed. Even if one could study these methods in thick books, what would still be missing, in order to apply them, is the persona of the master. Every one of us and every one of them, your actors and your pupils, could say, just what Montaigne (TN: philosopher of the French Renaissance) said about Etienne de la Béotie (TN: humanist poet and Montaigne's friend) "Because it was him, because it was me". (Bing, 1951)

We must be cautious with acting manuals, because their aspiration to guarantee safe and successful results, based on a sequence of exercises that have been reduced to a "protocol", transforms the uncertainty of listening to oneself and others into the certainty of focusing on the target. This is the reason why the Zen master ousted Eugen Herrigel from his teaching. The German philosopher had mistaken the means for the end. The external work for the internal work:

The inward work consists in his turning the man he is, and the self he feels himself and perpetually finds himself to be, into the raw material of a training and shaping whose end is mastery. In it, the artist and the human being meet in something higher. (Herrigel, 1953/1975, p. 53; Herrigel, 1971, p. 68)

For this reason, theatre schools, and beyond, ought to be safe places where one can make mistakes.

Protocol and individual experience

Very often, we perceive actor training as a transfer of knowledge that is limited to formal techniques, fixed in progressive sequences. Exercises and their combination are nothing more than a fetish that risks taking us away from heart of the problem. It is no accident that Stanislavski provided us with his "method" in the form of a diary kept by a fictional student, Kostantin Nasvanov. Stanislavski's book *An Actor's Work on Himself* is divided into thematic chapters, however it is a narration by an individual, thus putting emphasis on the experiential process and not on a systematic and prescriptive treatment. The knowledge of an artisan has its own rigour, its own specific knowledge, which is not based on a *theoretical and classificatory consciousness*, but instead on a *situational consciousness*, where the signifier emerges from the facts and the adventure of the signified is indivisibly fused with the actions that produce it. As Wittgenstein (1922/2009) writes in *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, only facts can make sense, not a class of names. The possibility of experience and learning through it consists in the ability to enter a relationship with facts, with the world, and in this way, build meaning (sense). Knowledge is the construction of meaning starting from the facts of the world, it is not the classification (classes of names) of facts based on abstract knowledge and categories.

Therefore, theatre pedagogy is organised through experiential situations so that "acquiring experience" becomes the outcome of the facts that the teacher-student relationship manages to *put into action* and bring to stage.

Situational pedagogy

I wish to elaborate more on this learning condition which could be defined as *situational pedagogy* (*pedagogia situazionale*). Experiential learning is impossible without the

pragmatic dimension of specific action, therefore of bodies that act. In this sense, theatre pedagogy in our society preserves behaviours that derive from oral culture.

In a study conducted among populations in Uzbekistan, Alexander Luria, the great Soviet psychologist, showed that while a literate person organises his knowledge into abstract categories, an illiterate person thinks based on situations. A literate peasant separates the tools he is shown (saw, axe and hammer), distinguishing them from a log which is not a tool. On the other hand, the illiterate peasant places the log along with the rest, because he groups them based on a working process (Luria, 1976, p. 94).

Situational thinking plays a central role in organising the knowledge of the body and then transmitting it. Training, which is structured in exercises, is organised precisely through situations in which a set of physical operations are combined in a path of gradual focus. If the exercises are structured in a coherent whole, then their serialisation can lead to a process of acquiring certain skills, which, however, before being formalised through repetition in techniques, define themselves as a "creative opening".

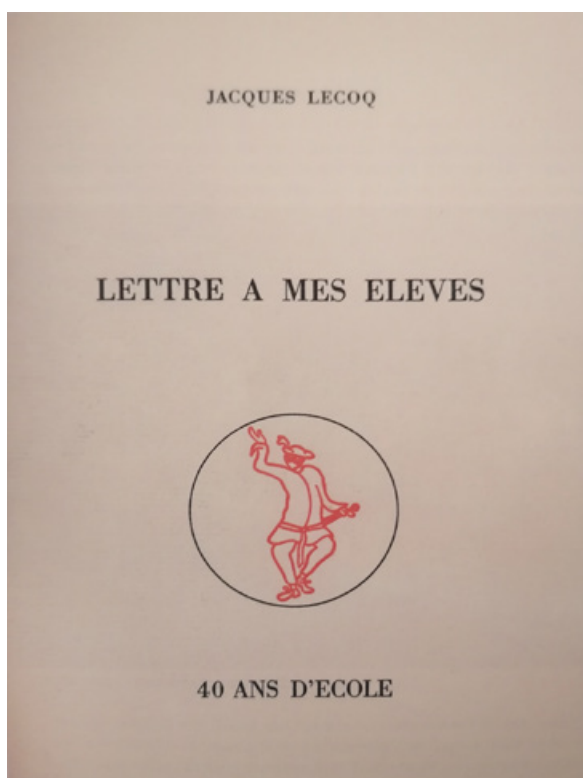
If techniques intended as formalised sequences of effective operations are to be transmitted, because they can be very important for the practice of necessary skills for an actor (breathing, voice regulation, posture, etc.), then it is best that they should not be given as "protocols", but that they should be rediscovered so as to become an organic part of people's experience.

Most importantly, it is essential that any "theoretical" temptation should be avoided. A simple question may be enough to lead people to anchor to the specific and the direct experience of the essential act which is required for solving a problem born from doing.

The artisanal question

In 1978, Peter Brook begins the programme for his performance of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* at the Bouffes du Nord theatre (Brook, 1978) with a short parable, which he proposed again with small but important alterations ten years later, at the end of *The Shifting Point* (Brook, 1987/1988), thus giving it a particular meaning in relation to his conception of theatre. I summarise it briefly, because it offers a perfect example of how experiential knowledge works.

After the creation of the universe, people get bored, so God creates theatre to cure their boredom, which He presents to the angels saying: "Theatre will be several things combined. It will be the field in which people can learn to understand people better, the tool which will allow the scholar to understand the laws of the universe and a comfort to the drunkard and the lonely" (Brook, 1978, p. 5). Everyone on Earth enthusiastically welcomes the divine invention but soon they begin to quarrel because authors, actors, directors, and spectators want to affirm their predominance over others. Since no one is able to prevail, they decide to turn to God by asking Him who among them has the most important function. An angel relates the message to the Lord who thinks: "I see, they need a trick" (Brook, 1978, p. 6). He scribbles a word on a sheet of paper, puts it in a box and sends it to people with the same angel. The box is opened and there is only one word written on the paper:





"INTEREST."

*The angel, a little annoyed, shakes his head and thinks:
"Yes, I see, this is the trick."*

Others angrily protest.

"This is ridiculous..."

"As if we didn't know..."

"It is childish..."

"He is mocking us..."

People forget the word of God and begin fighting again.

A few centuries later, a young actor, during a terrible fight among members of the theatre company he belongs to, remembers the old story, tells it to his companions and this time the divine trick reveals all its effectiveness:

"Interest... to interest... this means not to bore..."

"Oh, no... To not bore is one thing. To interest is quite another."

"To interest whom? You? Me? Us? Them?"

"Well, I am interested... you are not. Or we are both interested. But they are not interested at all. What is the thing that could interest everyone at the same time?"

This simple and childish word (interest) gradually became dense and complex like a drop of water under a microscope.

Until the day that the challenge initiated by this word finally became understood. Because if the play is too slow, it is not interesting... If it is too fast... If it is too deep... If there are too many spectators... If there are too few... If there are too many old people or too many young people or too many intellectuals or too many simple people... If it is too serious... If it is too funny... He who studies the universal laws finds bedtime stories

without interest, but whoever wants to understand what motivates people is not interested in transcendent symbols: without laughter and tears, without a little warmth and a little music, neither the drunkard nor the lonely have anything to gain. In fact, what is necessary is to satisfy everyone at once within the same event.

How can we do that?

And so it was that the people of the theatre discovered that whatever the nature of the problem was, it was always necessary to refer to the grand word.

As always, a Divine Trick is elusive and inexhaustible."
(Brook, 1978, p. 7–8)

Interest is what sets the artisanal question in motion, it has the same value as a Koan in Zen practice.¹⁰ The problem to be solved mobilises the whole person, which obviously implies an emotional aspect induced by the individual's effort to change their point of view, renounce the usual geography, throw themselves into the chaos of disorder to go through it and let the journey itself redraw a new landscape.

This process, and not the implementation and repetition of a technique, is what renders theatre pedagogy effective. In this way, the individual is led to discover what they need at any given moment and this path will constitute their technique.

The great risk of teaching of processes through "protocols" is to abandon oneself to the rigid application of techniques. It is essential that one should be particularly aware of the protocol temptation and instead, surrender oneself to the chaos so as to discover personal knowledge and, with it, oneself: "Wherever we touch the principle, we touch the sources of the techniques. It is a way of acting with one's own being, it is not a science" (Grotowski, 2016, p. 168).

Therefore, pedagogy as an organised guide of knowledge transmission methods ought, paradoxically, to be shaped as a lack of method, as was the case in La Grande Cordée (The Great Cord),¹¹ the project designed by Fernand Deligny. A group of delinquent adolescents, instead of the discipline of imprisonment, were treated with the discipline of freedom, scattered across a large area where they could live and work. Although there was no method, there was a doctrine summarised by its inventor as follows: “Let the unexpected act, no matter what may happen” (Deligny, 1973, p. 208). Deligny was convinced that no pedagogical effort could be truly effective unless it was supported by research and revolt. Years later, remembering La Grande Cordée project, he wrote: “We cannot really speak of a method and this position of ‘it doesn’t matter’ is definitely not a pedagogical position. However, it is the one that discovers infinite horizons” (Deligny, 1973, p. 211).

The useful disorder of forced freedom: protocol and experience

The Greek term τέχνη [technē] signifies manual skill, but in our culture technique has lost its specific physical dimension. It has been algorithmised and designed as an abstract process protocol, almost like a mathematical formula. This rigorous codification of exercise and technique often risks erasing the value

of experience understood as personal discovery. Learning a technique cannot be limited to mere application of exercises, as all too often happens in various theatrical contexts.

On the contrary, one should develop the quality of listening to oneself and the context, which is closely related to affectivity. The sense of effectiveness of imitating a gesture generates an emotional response and makes the gesture unforgettable to those who perform it. Therefore, in such a pedagogical context, it is not at all appropriate to separate a mimetic behaviour from a transformative one, as Howard Gardner (1989/1991) instead suggests. The mimetic reproduction of an effective behaviour only partially passes through the application of a “protocol”. The individual is aware that if they behave in a certain way, they will accomplish a specific result. The satisfaction drives the repetition of the effective gesture that leads to a transformative adaptation to the needs of one’s body. This can also trigger a process of *coscientisation* which, by going beyond the satisfaction of repetition, allows a more conscious use of the skill achieved.

Behind techniques, thus, lies experience. Indeed, we could regard techniques as the repository of consolidated experiences. However, in order for these experiences to be objectified and therefore, transmitted without losing their life-giving function, we should not limit ourselves to the formulation of their protocol, but rather we ought to rediscover the

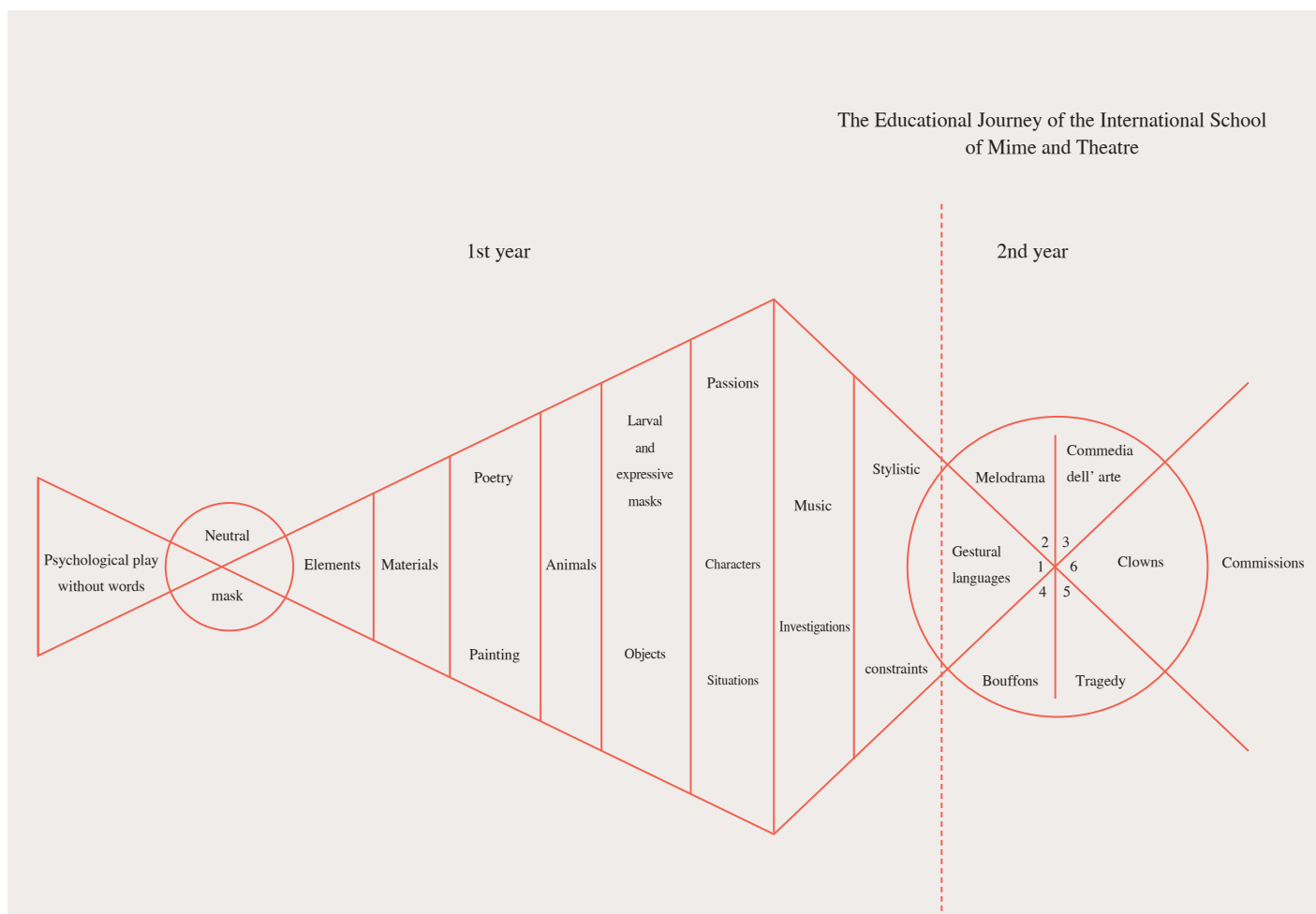


Figure 1: The educational structure of the International School of Theatre of Jacques Lecoq

process that defined them. In other words, if education is a system that allows specific experiences to be induced, then it is the situation and not the rule that allows us to adopt a creative attitude, and we could regard theatre pedagogy as a didactic treatment of situations in which the emotion of listening and discovery are not just indicators of the effectiveness of the process, “the points where the heart dreams”, but also signs of a new invention.

When Jacques Lecoq in *The Moving Body* distances himself from the great oriental traditions, to which he refers as “symbolic theatre”, he does so in the name of this principle:

Such traditions demonstrate symbolic theatre that has crystallised into its perfect form. When matter becomes saturated, it crystallises into a geometric form which is fixed and immutable. This quality characterises the Japanese Noh and the Kathakali. They have reached perfection in forms which are ideal for what they aim to achieve. Although the actors in these traditions must, of course, inhabit these forms, and nourish them, they do not have to invent them. I prefer to work on theatres whose forms are still open to change and renewal. (Lecoq, 1997/2000, p. 119; Lecoq, 2011, p. 105)

The method of Lecoq’s school is a particularly effective example of what I have termed *situational pedagogy*. It derived from the school of Vieux Colombier of Jacques Copeau, mediated by Jean Dasté, and moved along the same lines. However, this does not mean that the creative pedagogy of Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing was replaced by a prescriptive and banking model of pedagogy. What was obtained from the matrix were not protocols but rather the distinction of certain didactic phases, formalised in *learning themes*.

With the *learning themes*, each participant in the teaching process, whether teacher or student, confronts and simultaneously responds to situations that occur in relation to the learning group. This mobilisation of knowledge according to the didactic context leads the school to recover a dimension that Lecoq calls permanent research, shared between teachers and students. Thus, the school proposes a difficult, yet exciting balance between “the pedagogy of experience” and “the pedagogy of the protocol”: a protocol that serves to arrive at the technique and a protocol that serves to arrive at experience.

Thus, despite having a rigorous architecture, Lecoq’s International School of Theatre manages to maintain an open teaching mode, capable of following the development of the relationship that is established between students and teachers in the various phases of the course.

At this point it seems I can say that 21st century theatre pedagogy and traditional theatre pedagogy share a common need to establish a *founding space* in the teacher-student relationship, albeit in different methods. In it there is an intermediate and precarious situation of identification between subject and models, which François Jullien calls “*the nowhere of between*” (Jullien, 2012/2014, p. 62). An atopic condition, in which student and teacher, though in different ways, find themselves in a position to operate between two sides without belonging entirely to neither one nor the other. In this

way, it becomes possible to carry out experiences in a protected territory, located within specific *learning themes*, but free from the bottlenecks of protocol and available for invention.

Becoming a spring

In the technocratic age we live in, which has embraced the philosophy of business management manuals, by applying them to every aspect of our daily lives, it should be remembered that the problem is not turning learners into people capable of executing protocols with maximum effectiveness, but creating the ability to overcome difficulties by understanding the meaning of what is being done. For this reason, however paradoxical it may seem, the quality of a pedagogical process is closely related to failure. In the field of theatre, a pedagogical process must be a safe place to make mistakes.

Thus, I conclude with an apparent contradiction. Although the figure of the teacher in theatre carries a certain weight, the act of learning tends to prevail over teaching¹² and this allows us to regard the didactics of theatre as entirely inscribable in the context of experiential learning. In this sense, there are three attitudes that I consider characteristic:

1. The student initiates the didactic relationship by demonstrating their willingness to learn in various possible ways and undergoes some sort of vocational control whose essential characteristic is an active aptitude for learning. This is why Plutarch regarded students as wood to be lit and not as bottles to be filled (Plutarco, 2006, p. 91).
2. The teacher does not provide formulas or protocols to be applied, but produces situations from which the attention and processing skills of students are stimulated in order that they will find solutions. I call this **situational learning**.
3. Personal experience lies at the centre of the pedagogical process and ought to produce dynamic and not ontological knowledge. The aim is the absorption of effective actions that cannot be defined simply in terms of techniques, but rather in terms of process and discovery, because as Rilke says: *Whoever pours himself out like a spring, he’s known by Knowing* (Rilke, 2000, p. 379; Rilke, 1977, p. 161).

Translated from Greek: Aimilia-Alexandra Kritikou

Notes

All Translator's Notes have been prepared by Christina Zoniou, who translated the article into Greek from the Italian original. All quotes in the English version have been translated by the translator unless otherwise referenced.

1. Translator's Note (TN): Fernand Deligny (1913–1996) is a French educator who remains close to the ideas of C. Freinet. He was one of the most influential figures in special education. He opposed the isolation of autistic, delinquent and difficult children or their participation in formal school education and instead proposed that they should be introduced to real situations that awaken the child's interest.
2. TN: In this article the term *theatre pedagogy* (*pedagogia teatrale*) refers to educational systems for actors and performers.
3. Here I organize in a provisional form some of my observations arising from the work on theatrical pedagogy conducted in the past three years at the research centre of the Sapienza University of Rome, within the framework of "Per-formare il sociale", a research project funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research.
4. TN: *Dan* is a term for female roles in Peking Opera, which were traditionally performed by male actors.
5. See Ortolani (1998) for more information on Japanese theatre.
6. On the cultural framework of traditional theatre, I would like to refer to my essay "La trasmissione dei saperi del corpo" [The transmission of the knowledge of the body] (Birbaumer, Huttler, & Di Palma, 2010).
7. This is how Italian pedagogue Piergiorgio Reggio defines the *fourth knowledge*: "The knowledge that derives from the facts of life is profound. It is the fourth knowledge, fundamental and structural, which allows the development of the other three kinds of knowledge ("know", "know how to do", "know how to be"), which are traditionally regarded as a reference for training activities. Without the fourth knowledge, "to know" becomes abstract, academic and futile knowledge. "To know how to do" becomes an ability without understanding. "To know how to be" becomes an unquestioning adoption of behaviours and attitudes" (Reggio, 2010, p. 164).
8. TN: Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire calls *banking* (*depositaria* in the Italian original) the model of education in which the teacher treats the student as an empty vessel, an empty banking account, which has to be filled with deposits of knowledge, as opposed to the liberating pedagogy.
9. TN: The well-known concept of *coscientisation*, introduced by Freire and translated also as critical consciousness, refers to the process of critical literacy, through which a critical view of the world and empowerment are accomplished.
10. TN: Koans are short stories, parables, puzzles, or maxims used in the practice of Zen Buddhism. They form a type of symbolic communication between teacher-student that act in terms of instant enlightenment and cannot be explained logically based on the Western way of thinking, with which we are familiar.
11. TN: A collectively run educational programme introduced by French pedagogue Fernand Deligny, in cooperation with Henry Wallon, after World War II for the anti-institutional communal living of delinquent children.
12. TN: *Learning and teaching* in the Italian original.
13. TN: See Plutarch's *De Recta Ratione Audiendi* [On listening to Lectures] (1927), part of *Moralia* [Ethical Essays]: "For the mind does not require filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood, it only requires kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for the truth" (p. 259).

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