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Proceedings of A Body of Knowledge - Embodied Cognition and the Arts conference
CTSA UCI 8-10 Dec 2016

Nicoletta Ferri and Ivano Gamelli

BODY of KNOWLEDGE

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Nicoletta Ferri and Ivano Gamelli

In this contribute we want to present and share the perspective of *Pedagogia del corpo-Embodied Pedagogy*, a quite recent teaching in Italian Academic System; it was founded about fifteen years ago at the University of Milano Bicocca, Department of Human Sciences of Education.

The basic assumption of this pedagogical approach is to reconsider the role of embodied knowledge in educational processes, connecting areas that in Italian schools, but also in the curriculum for professional educators, are traditionally separated like thinking and perceiving, speaking and acting, moving and teaching/learning.

Through a constant field research work, which blends narrative and autobiographical techniques with moving and body expression, this academic teaching wants to retrace new pedagogical approaches for projects addressed to children and adults drawing educational principles from different practices and body disciplines with artistic, rehabilitative and educational background (Dance, Theatre, Feldenkrais Method, Psychomotion...), and transfer them into educational settings.

1. The theoretical frame: what we are talking about, when we speak about “the body”?

Body is not an object, it doesn't exist by itself. According with Carlo Sini¹, who is one of the most important contemporary Italian philosopher, “body” is a word (as “mind”, after all) whose meaning is defined in relation with a specific context².

The small child *is* a body. “I’m hungry, I’m thirsty, I’m in pain, I’m happy”... the infant doesn't say it, it lives it. The baby who shouts- Sini says- doesn't know that he is shouting; is the world that is coming back to him; the answers and the reactions of the others will make him discovering, along time, not only to be, but also to have a body.

To be/to have a body is the basic ambivalence of human beings.

Body is a two-faced phenomenon; in German language (and in the phenomenological tradition) there are two different words to speak about the body; *leib*, the perceiving body, and *körper*, the body as a thing, as an object. For medical and scientific knowledge, the body is just an organism –and we properly take care about its health- one “thing” that we know to have but we often forget to be. We are dazzled by the “known body” but unaware of the “perceiving body”. And in schools, at least in Italian traditional schools, from the first years until the university, we are taught a perspective on the body where it seems there is no space for the living body, in relation with who we are. What they teach us is an abstract body, not the living, perceiving one.

But what does it mean a “perceiving knowledge”?

First of all we want to underline that the education leading a child or a kid to love the body passes through the relation that adults, educators, teachers and parents have with their own body. Between 6th and 18th months children live an important experience for their psychophysical development: the experience of the mirror³. During that period the baby is still in a phase of dependence and immaturity of motor coordination system development. When he/she joyfully recognizes his image in the mirror, a new subject comes to life.

¹ C. Sini, *Il silenzio e la parola*. IPOC, Milano 2012.

² I. Gamelli (a cura di), *Ma di che corpo parliamo? I saperi incorporati nell'educazione e nella cura*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2012.

³ F. Dolto, J.D. Nasio, *Il bambino dello specchio*. Marietti, Torino 2011.

This reminds us that the conquest of the first identity is passing through the bodily representation that the mirror experience makes possible through the mediation of another image. To be/to have a body means that there is a “me” which exists thanks to an “other”.

1.1 What is the object of Embodied Pedagogy?

We can say that Embodied Pedagogy is a com-position of different kinds of knowledge and practices, gravitating around the educational value of bodily, living experience; it's a sort of constellation of different way of knowledge that can not be easily reduced in a definitive/complete synthesis.

If it is true that Pedagogy is a science in which theory and practice always have to dialogue, in Embodied Pedagogy this is a even more crucial aspect.

The area of interest of this discipline doesn't include only educational practices of experts and specialists of the body. Rather it is, in our intentions, a cross-sectional formative attitude, addressed to anyone who is involved in educational and care giving contexts; it is characterized by the dimension of discovery, opening to senses and involvement of thinking-body-emotion.

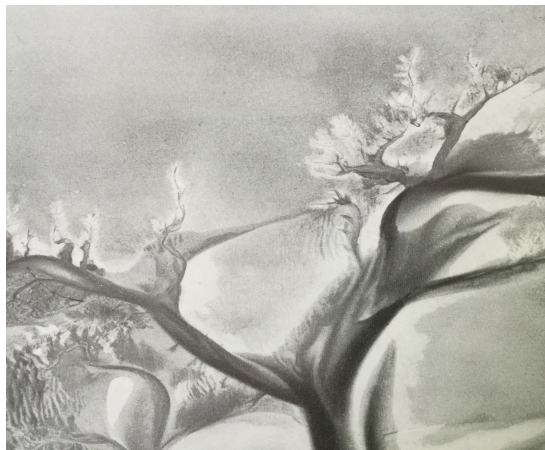
Embodied pedagogy wants to critically revisit the common way of working with education and care where the body turns out absent, dridled, disciplined or only spoken (the theory without embodiment is one of the great limits of academic knowledge). In this perspective the embodied training in education and care focuses on presence, on listening and on the competence of being present. With this purpose, Embodied pedagogy moves in educational settings principles and methods that are at the base of different forms of bodily education like, for example, psychomotion, dance, theatre, massage techniques, educative sport practices, relaxing and voice training techniques and a multitude of others, like educative and artistic training methods through body agency.

In short we can say that Embodied pedagogy aims to be a change of posture. In its traditional, biomechanical, definition, posture is the static configuration of a body in the space and the relative relationship the occurs between its segments. In contrast, from the point of view of

Embodied pedagogy, the word “posture” is related to an action and it has a dynamic sense: it is the resultant of a sort of “global learning”, linked to the way in which emotions, intentions, motivations, direction and execution of the action are organized while the action is still ongoing. The difference existing between the definition of “posture” as static condition and as dynamic way of acting and being in the world, is the same that exists between the concept of body schema (built on perceptions), and body image (which includes also affective, motional and relational aspects). The consciousness of bodily posture is not only the consciousness that a mind can have of the body, but includes also the embodied consciousness that a living being directs towards the world and its perceiving experience. Therefore the change of posture is not only an individual matter: it has a wider dimension that includes all the subject’s world references⁴, in their complexity.

Embodied pedagogy, in summary, aims to cultivate, take care and enrich the awareness of our posture, which is the embodied resulting of our way to stay in relationship with the world.

1.2 A Theoretical frame of Pedagogy of the body: a three way path



(T. Schwenk)

It is not easy to try to identify specific borders in the field of Embodied pedagogy because it lies in a crossroad of different disciplines and theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, we’ll try now to identify three theoretical roots of this academic teaching, connected with Italian academic context.

⁴ P. Maccagno, *Lungo lento. Maratona e pratica del limite*. Quodlibet, Macerata 2015, pp. 21-22.

1.2.1 *The first path: psychomotion*

The first path is the one of psychomotor education tradition.

“Psychomotion” is not only a theory and a specific body technique, it is connected with a childhood ontological condition: children’s way of being, living and knowing the world “as a whole” at the beginning of their lives. It is about the experience of “being a body” we mentioned above, which in Piaget’s studies corresponds with the sensory-motor and symbolic dimension. Psychomotor Theory and Practice was born in France in the first half of the last century, largely through the efforts of movement and sport educators (Pierre Vayer, André Lapierre, Bernard Aucouturier), psychomotor specialists who were not satisfied with mechanistic and higienistic view that effected their work through/with the body. Since then psychomotor theory tried to define its own identity, an epistemological status that could assure a specific function in the educational and re-educational domain, interrogating a variety of paradigms with different assumptions (medical-functional, psychoanalytic, semiotic, sociological⁵). Today psychomotor practice, as an educational and therapeutic proposal in kindergardens and rehabilitative contexts, it is recognized for its focus on the “living, bodily, experience”, and in particular on “the tonic-expressive and emotional modeling process of the body, in its meeting with the others and the world”⁶. Its very specific setting had certainly large influenced many educational domains through a new vision of body dimension that allowed and authorized children to live their body and to know through it.

Even physical and motion education, thanks to the contributions of psychokinetic of Jean Le Boulch and the sociomotricity of Peirre Perlebas has revisited and often transformed the traditional and inelastic model of technical body training with proposals for educational sport more open to symbolic, emotional and relational dimensions.

In Italy, since 1970s, the psychomotor “revolution” has engaged other researches. “At school with the body”⁷ was the slogan of an intense educational season where the theme of

⁵ S. Fauché, *Du corps au psychisme*, PUF, Paris 1993.

⁶ G. Chiavazza, *Psicoterapia e psicomotricità: il territorio, le mappe, i percorsi*, in “Psicomotricità”, n. 13, ANUPI, Milano 2001.

⁷ AA.VV., *A scuola con il corpo*. La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1974.

subjectivity in learning and teaching, a so long mortified dimension, was strongly outlined, by educational practices influenced by power issues and class based inequalities.

The change in body representations and the breakup with a strongly mechanistic and stereotyped view of the body consented to many teachers, educators and animators of that generation to give form to a series of great experimentations that influenced many school contexts for the next years. In summary, it was a proposal that suggested an educational training “through all the senses”, a “living” training.

They passed from a body conception controlled and blocked, to one that was considering the body as a place to animate and to listen to. This determined the start of workshops season in the schools⁸, implicating the availability of the adult to get involved in the trial, to question the quality of Presence in the educational relationship. It grew a new sensitivity for what is engaged in the relationship between the educator/teacher and the student, adult or child, and a big interest for latent and unconscious aspects of the relation. Psychomotor practices, in conclusion, took place in Italian school not only for their specificity; the trickiness to outline a specific epistemological area of action gave birth to many practical proposals and new sensitivities that contributed in many educational contexts to change the idea of a fragmented body.

1.2.2 Second path: the aesthetic view

It was the German philosopher Alexander Baugarten, in 1735, to speak about aesthetic, regarding the etymological meaning of “knowledge through senses”: in Greek αισθητικός is related with the verb αισθάνομαι which means “to perceive”. Embodied pedagogy argue the idea that considering the “aesthetic” condition (so what opens to the possibility to know through senses) of any learning must be part of every pedagogical agency⁹. The human senses are not five, they are much more. The sense of balance, temperature and of pain, of blood pressure and fluidity, the “common chemical sense” and, above all, the proprioception (the

⁸ I. Gamelli (a cura di), *I laboratori del corpo*. Libreria Cortina, Milano 2009.

⁹ C. Mustacchi, *Ogni uomo è un artista*, Meltemi, Roma 1999.

awareness of our body). There is the sense of movement; all these are forgotten senses in our educational culture.

More, sensory perception, cognition and action are not sequential –following the so long belief that is at the base of the traditional teaching/learning systems. The three functions are simultaneous. We don't see only with the visual brain, but also with the motor one. When we observe someone doing an action we involve a part of our brain that is normally activated when we complete the same action. Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia in their wellknown theory of mirror neurons¹⁰ hypothesize that the language comes from transitive (to grab, to hold, to reach etc..) and orofacial (to bite, to ingest etc...) actions. So the success of every learning is related to the coexistence of observation and action. The things that whoever can learn through this way are incredibly superior to what we can teach according to the traditional model of teaching/learning. The aesthetic path of Embodied pedagogy is connected with educational theatrical researches. Theatre was always a place of action and word; it experiments around the same categories that lay the foundations of education: word, body, space, time. "Theatre", as Riccardo Massa was used to underline, "is a great metaphor of education"¹¹. What is true for theatrical domain is true for the educational and vice versa.

As in theatre so in education: more than the places in which their mutual knowledge is developed, more than the buildings where they happen, more than the contents and methodologies, it is the same structure that make them so intertwined. A structure characterized by the embodied relation among people who are involved with them, by the weave of their voices, by the meeting of their bodies. Listening and presence are fundamental competences of both teacher and actor as well as the capacity to improvise on stage, to take elements from the context and to turn them into the play.

¹⁰ C. Sinigaglia, G. Rizzolatti, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2008.

¹¹ R. Massa, *Riccardo Massa: lezioni su La peste, il teatro, l'educazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2001.

1.2.3 The third path: the narrative perspective

The third path of the Embodied pedagogy regards the connection between body and words: how to give word to the body and body to words; it is about the experience and the discursive and conversational reworking, both oral and written, of the experience.

Body and word, action and reflection, should't be separated in every authentic educational practice.

The educational training is not an intellectual matter, based on speeches, but a real act, characterized by practices. Indeed we must say that the separation between mind and body has been fueled, on the contrary, by the vision of many “(through)body educators”, who supported the idea of an education not very sensitive to the connection between words and body, compromising in this way the outcome of a training process “sensitive to the body”¹².

The spoken word, even in its immediacy, is always an act subsequent to the making of an experience. The “verbalization” (the word) usually follows the experience (the body). But the experience of verbalization is an experience already?

Storytelling and experience, body and word, action and symbolization are bound at the same time in the educational relation through a process of mutual contamination.

Every narrative is always a relationship, an embodied relationship. Every story telling (and every teaching) is deeply intertwined with teller's lived, physical life.

In the perspective of Embodied pedagogy, it is central that different languages can meet and intertwine each other.

The quality of the educational training depends on the way all these moments are twisted and made up.

2. Workshops connected with Embodied Pedagogy

Since the beginning of the Faculty of Science of Education in the University of Milano-Bicocca, fifteen years ago, workshops have been an important part of the curriculum: the guiding idea of taking together theory and praxis is fundamental in educational teaching training. Lessons are composed by a part of frontal teachings and a part of workshops where

students can get in touch with educational methods and models studied in manuals, going through the living experience for building knowledge upon practical competences. Workshops's aim is to give students- who are going to become teachers or educators- the chance to work on embodied knowledge, especially on Presence and Listening, as important resources and expertises in their future profession. They are built and structured by an interdisciplinary approach that involves body expression, dance and theatrical techniques, psicomotricity, theatre, dance, Feldenkrais method, yoga, art education. Drawing educational principles from different practices and body disciplines with artistic, rehabilitative and educational background and transfer them into educational settings is the specific function of the workshops. So the specific discipline/methodology that is at the base of each workshop is an occasion, for students, to know in a closer way a certain discipline, with specific didactics contents that could be practical tool for their future work as teachers or professional educators. But at the same time is a chance to critically reflect, through the workshop proposals, on specific and embodied expertises of educational knowledge. To make it possible, it's very important to build a good workshop setting.

2.1 Embodied Pedagogy workshops: a space to explore

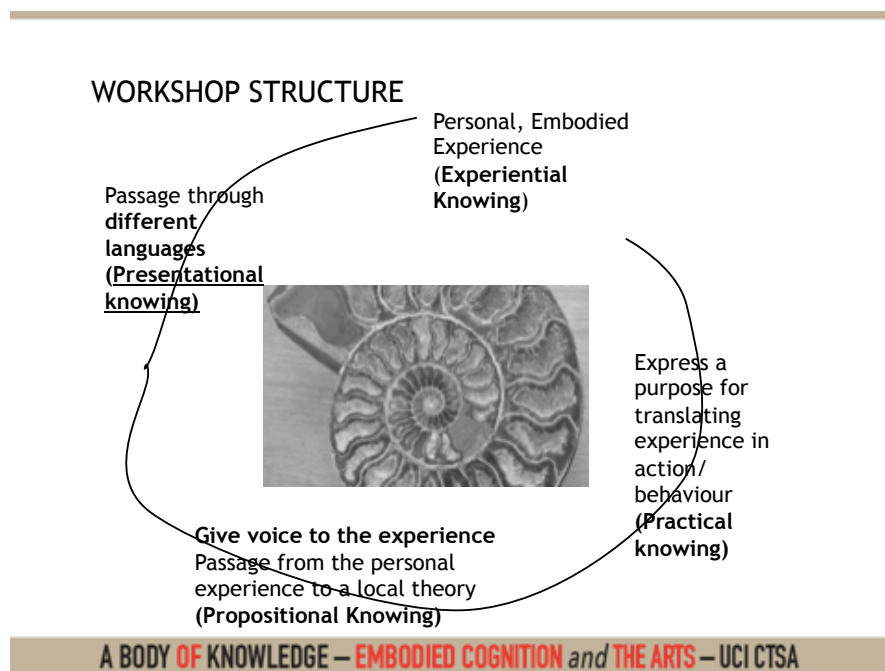
The first element that we want to consider of workshop setting is the space. Physically, lessons take place in a special wooden floor classroom, sufficilently empty to move free even in large group. A space to explore. Maybe it seems not so important to pay attention on the class, but in our University was not easy to preserve a not-structured teaching place, without chairs and tables fixed on the floor. And this situation reflects the general academic italian learning paradigm, structured on dis-embodied values: learning process has only to do with the upper part of the body (head/brain, eyes, hands...), not involving the rest of the body that is better, even-they say- for safety/insurance reasons, to stay sitting on a fixed chair. On the contrary, Embodied Pedagogy claims more sensitive place for a more sensitive education, that involves senses, perceiving and action as mind and reflection as well.

¹² I. Gamelli, *Sensibili al corpo. I gesti della formazione e della cura*. Libreria Cortina, Milano 2011.

In workshops, there is “a space to explore” not only in a physical, but also in a relational way: students can find a place to be involved in bodily dimension without thinking at evaluation (the assessment of the workshop depends on teachers, but is generally based on the number of hours of presence and on written reflections about the seminar that are asked to be sent to the teacher after the workshop). And this is precious especially because students very often say in their written reports that it was the first time that they had the possibility to go through body experiences that put them in contact with their living, perceiving body. They often speak about a sort of rite of passage.

2.2 Embodied Pedagogy workshops structure

No matter on which body discipline is based the workshop, the structure is almost the same and it is coming from participative research, in particular from Cooperative Inquiry of Heron and Reason (1996) in the interpretation of Laura Formenti (2009), who suggests to speak about a spiral movement of the research that combines together different kinds of knowledge.



Students always start from an activation through the body: it's the moment of the personal, embodied knowledge, where they enter in contact, as we were saying before, with a specific

body approach. Let's take contemporary dance as example (Experiential knowing).

Then they have the possibility to transform the living and perceiving experience of the movement passing through other languages (presentational knowing), for example they can enter in a free, personal, autobiographical writing, where they can let words emerging from the body experience, connected with a specific educational theme, for example the presence or the touch, or listening...

This is an occasion to explore and develop narrative abilities passing through different languages (body-language, speaking, drawing, writing...). And this maybe is one of the highest aims of scholar education.

Then there is a moment in which students can give voice to the experience, trying to formulate a local theory (Propositional knowing), trying to connect the experience with their present or future profession of educators.

Words are necessary to let the body experience lying down, settle down for being integrate. Students often write their considerations, intuitions and beliefs and then share them in small focus groups.

In the last part of each meeting they are asked to try to immaginate a possible practical trickle down of the workshop, express a purpose in action/behaviour (practical knowing). This last part has more sense for worker-students, who can immediatly put on practice what they have learned in the workshops; for the others are just purposes of actions that will become concrete in their professional future.

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