

**PERFORMATIVITY AND THE TEACHING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
PRESENCE AND DISTANCE: AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION**

**LA PERFORMATIVITÀ E LA RELAZIONE DIDATTICA TRA PRESENZA E
DISTANZA: UN'INDAGINE ESPLORATIVA**

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Abstract (ENG)

This contribution is part of the theoretical framework that interprets theater, the performance art par excellence, as didactics, and didactics as theater.

The paradigm of performativity in didactics makes it possible to structure the teacher's performance as a harmonious integration of body and action that co-constructs the didactic event through the student's influence.

After outlining the theoretical framework, we investigate whether and how performative competence composed of the typical elements of theatrical dramaturgy can support the teacher's teaching practice both online and in person. Our research question therefore investigates when and why, for teachers, this competence improves the teaching relationship with the student.

Abstract (ITA)

Il presente contributo si inserisce nel quadro teorico che interpreta il teatro, arte performativa per eccellenza, come didattica, e la didattica come teatro.

¹ The contribution represents the result of a joint work of the authors, however the §1 paragraph on the *theoretical framework* is drafted by Eleonora Mazzotti, the §2 paragraph on the *survey instrument* is drafted by Marco Rondonotti, the §3 paragraph on the *main research results* is drafted by Salvatore Messina, the §4 paragraph on the *conclusions and discussion of the results* is drafted by Paolo Raviolo.

Il paradigma della performatività nella didattica permette di strutturare la performance dell'insegnante come un'integrazione armonica di corpo e azione che co-costruisce l'evento didattico grazie allo studente.

Dopo aver delineato il quadro teorico, indagheremo se e come la competenza performativa composta dagli elementi tipici della drammaturgia teatrale possa supportare la pratica didattica dell'insegnante sia online che nei contesti presenziali. La nostra domanda di ricerca indaga quando e perché, per gli insegnanti, tale competenza performativa possa migliorare la relazione didattica con lo studente.

Keywords

Performativity, teacher-student relationship, exploratory investigation, questionnaire, distance learning.

Parole chiave

Performatività, relazione insegnante-studente, indagine esplorativa, questionario, apprendimento a distanza.

1. Theoretical framework

In the studies of teatrology, theater is defined as “what happens between the spectator and the actor” (Grotowski, 1970, p. 41), indicating the process of relational alignment created during the performance between the two protagonists of the event.

Both theater and didactics are organized precisely on the co-constitutive and immanent relational process between the different subjects, enhancing and emphasizing both the dialogic and ritual dimensions of the educational event.

At a neuroscientific level, the bonding process perceived by the classroom could be called “didactic grooming” (Rodriguez, 2012), which defines the care of the teacher towards his students; by studying the cortisol curve and the release of endorphins, the researcher documented how the true educational and didactic relationship produces a feeling of well-being and bonding.

As the true nature of teaching is performative (Rivoltella, 2021a), it enhances and supports the relationship between teacher and student because it makes the spectator—the student—the protagonist.

The understanding of gestures emerges through the reciprocity between the subject's intentions and the observer's gestures. The body is not only a mediating channel, but also what enables knowledge and the construction and creation of meanings.

This allows us to investigate how the understanding of motor behavior is not the result of a reflexive mediation, but an intercorporeal one (Merleau-Ponty, 1945); it is as if the intention of one inhabits the body of the other, and vice versa.

Therefore, in such a paradigm, the teacher's performative action does not become a meaning for the application of theatrical and studied gestures to captivate the audience but the very substance of performative teaching; it is performative precisely because it enables the bond and the relationship with the student in a pragmatic manner. Furthermore, this bond is maintained when interaction is experienced in digital environments (Rivoltella, 2021b).

In any working session, the sensorimotor transformations of the *mirror* responses by mirror neurons allow “the observer to represent the observed action in terms that are not only visual or, more generally, sensory, but also motor, thus being able to have the same representations

that he or she would have if it were her or him performing that action” (Rizzolatti - Sinigaglia, 2019, p. 167) and predict whether or not it will be effective in execution.

Online studies conducted on the Italian population (Calbi *et al.*, 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic confirm the participants' ability to recognise each other's emotional expressions: despite them covering the lower part of their faces and not being physically present, the participants were able to decipher emotional expressions.

Performance elements make up “the study of pre-expressive stage behavior that underlies different genres, styles, roles, and personal or collective traditions” (Barba, 1993, p. 23). The pre-expressive elements refer precisely to the physical tensions, to the energy that allows the actor to be alive; the *Bios* is what enables “the spectator's attention to be held before any message is conveyed” (*Ibid.*).

The teacher's body makes it possible to approach reality and interact with it: a body that speaks, listens and learns (Sibilio, 2011).

2. Research Methodology

The elements presented above enable us to define an adequate conceptual *framework* to better investigate the meaning of performativity in learning contexts. In some cases, the university studies proposed to the future teacher provide specific paths for the development of performative competence; the teacher can strengthen this competence even beyond the time of his or her training, assuming the typical perspective of the reflective professional (Baldassarre, 2009). In this way, the teacher is able to observe the ways in which he or she accompanies students in developing personal metacognitive strategies (Borkowski - Muthukrishna, 1992). In this sense, it is vital that the teacher maintains effective communication with the pupils, particularly in terms of the relational dimension (Mitchel, 2014).

These considerations were the starting point for defining our research question: do teachers understand performative competence as a way of paying attention to the relational dimension that binds them to students? Our hypothesis is that the presence of performative competence plays a role in the relationship between the teacher and the students in the class. Furthermore, we believe the teacher's performative competence can be structured as a teaching strategy.

The objectives of our work are the following:

- Survey teachers' representations of performativity in education
- Analyse the adoption of performative elements in the teaching practices implemented by teachers
- Detect the ways in which the teacher expresses performative competence in caring for the classroom, conceived as a relational context

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, an instrument called the *Teaching Performative Scale* (TPS) was developed (Mazzotti - Messina, 2022) to detect the teacher's performativity levels in standard teaching contexts (Carenzio – Ferrari, 2022), i.e. school and university. The instrument was validated in terms of construct and content by means of a process divided into three phases: the first is that of *expert judgement* (Escobar Pérez – Cuervo Martinez, 2008); the second is statistical, through the administration of the questionnaire to a sample with the same

characteristics as the research sample (the data were analyzed using SPSS software); and the third phase involved contributions from experts following the analyses carried out (in particular, two items were revised and replaced with control items that returned a very weak negative correlation).

The process of defining and translating the items identified in the literature required painstaking work involving various professionals and teachers over a period of approximately one calendar year, at the end of which it was possible to improve and validate the survey instrument. In its final version, the instrument is presented as a questionnaire consisting of 34 items referring to the elements identified in the literature². Specifically, the TPS is subdivided as follows:

1. *Anagraphical* area to map the teacher's professional profile, also paying attention to the discipline of reference, i.e., the grade of school in which he or she performs a greater number of hours
2. *Performative skills* area (Carlomagno, 2021); this is dedicated to investigating the specific training of teachers, particularly regarding the performative aspects in education
3. *Dramaturgical elements* consciously or unconsciously adopted by the teacher for didactic communication in presential, online and mixed settings (Cascetta - Peya, 2003) and the teacher's *representation* of the situation (Rivoltella, 2021b)

The anagraphical area aims to map the profile and professional training of the teacher; there are 7 questions indicating *gender*, *age range* (in a range of 5 years), *professional category* (3 response alternatives), *school order in which he/she has teaching experience* (10 alternatives including the option "other"), *region in which he/she serves*, *training* and *years of teaching* (8 response alternatives in a range of years).

The area of performance skills investigates the aspects of theatricality acquired by the teacher in previous formal and informal contexts and the skills possessed that are applicable in presential, semi-presential and online settings. This section consists of 16 questions, 7 of which are on a 6-way frequency scale and 4 on a 6-alternative multiple-choice scale, as well as 5 open-ended questions.

The last area, linked to the teacher's perceptions and representation in the performing field, aims to detect whether the teacher sees similarities between theater and teaching; it consists of 10 questions, of which 4 are batteries containing 6, 7 or 8 items on 6-mode frequency scales, 3 are open-ended questions and 2 are multiple-choice questions with images (8 alternatives per question).

Item no. 24 of the questionnaire asked the following question: "*Thinking about the target group of students you work with, how much do you think performance competence improves the relationship between teacher and student? Try to briefly justify your answer*". The open-ended answers were analyzed according to the typical grounded theory approach (Glaser - Strass, 1967).

² The questionnaire was made available online via Google Forms, which enabled its wider distribution.

3. Research

As discussed above, the TPS questionnaire is a semi-structured instrument constructed to detect the performativity of the teacher in distance learning situations; in the present contribution, the main elements of performativity supporting the teacher-student relationship are investigated. To investigate this question, an initial exploratory data collection was launched in September 2022. The sampling is of the simple random type, using the CAWI method of administration, except for the convenience sample of 'trainees in primary education sciences' (fourth year, A.A. 2021/22, Catholic University of Milan) who answered the questionnaire shared on the university platform on a voluntary basis.

Main research results

The final survey sample consisted of 101 subjects belonging to the professional categories of teacher at all levels (68.3%), university teacher (11.9%) and Primary Education Science graduate (19.8%). Those who teach at school or university had been in the profession for less than 10 years (64.4%), about 7% between 20 and 25 years and 5.9% for more than 30 years, while only 8.9% were students in training. From the point of view of the training received in the field of dramaturgical skills applied to teaching, 69.3% of the interviewees stated that they had never *participated in a dramaturgy course or workshop because it was not foreseen in the training offer* (66.3%) or because they had opted for other types of courses (3%). The remaining 30.7% of the interviewees had been able to take part in activities on dramaturgy skills applied to school because they had been provided in the training offer in an optional (3%) or compulsory (27.7%) form. Generally speaking, the elements of theatrical performance in education were considered important by a large part of the reference sample³ (75.6% of the sample were in the *very and very much* category and 22.8% in the *fairly* group). However, this competence was considered less relevant when teaching is experienced in an online environment: while 80.2% of the respondents considered performativity as very important when the setting is presential, this figure drops to 55.4% when it comes to distance learning.

This trend does not change if the teacher has attended a course or workshop in dramaturgy; 83.9% of the teachers who had attended didactic dramaturgy courses claimed that it is very important to offer training opportunities to acquire performance skills in face-to-face teaching situations (in addition, this opinion is shared by 78.6% of those who had never attended dramaturgy courses).

However, the difference is evident when the didactic setting moves online: the teachers trained in this area who choose the highest level for their questionnaire answers are only 58.1% of the sample, while those who have not been trained make up only 54.3%. The remaining respondents do not place themselves at the lowest level by choosing "little", but recognise on average a good level of importance to performance competence.

There is always a direct positive correlation between the performative elements investigated in the teaching practice of the respondents and performative competence understood as improving the teacher-student relationship. The differences in perception between those who had attended a specific course on performative skills applied to teaching and those who had never attended

³ A note on methodological data analysis: to facilitate the reading of the data, the response categories on a six-level scale were merged by semantic proximity into three response alternatives (e.g. 1-2=1; 3-4=2; 5-6=3).

a specific course were minimal (80% vs. 74.3%). Table 2 shows the importance attributed by lecturers and teachers in training (for response modes 5: very - 6: fundamental) in relation to the proposed elements of performativity. For 82.9% of our sample, paying attention to *movement* is a fundamental element, as are *paying attention to pauses* (90.8%), *voice modulation* and the use of a correct *linguistic register* (97.4%), the use of *space* (88.2%) and *proxemics* (94.7%). *The columns in Table 2 labelled as in-presence teaching and distance teaching show the results of the importance attributed to the same performative elements listed above both in person and during distance learning. It is evident that these elements are considered at least as very important when in a presential setting, whereas this importance is drastically reduced when the setting moves online.*

Performativity elements	Relevance	In-presence teaching	Distance teaching
Body movement	82,9%	75%	53,9%
Pause	90,8%	73,7%	56,6%
Voice	97,4%	73,7%	30,3%
Language register	97,4%	69,7%	36,8%
Area	88,2%	72,4%	39,5%
Proxemics	94,7%	61,8%	29,0%

Table 2: The performative elements in teaching practice

To investigate the meanings attributed by teachers and lecturers in training to the importance of performative skills in improving the teacher-student relationship in more detail, the following question was posed: “*Thinking about the target group of students you work with, how much do you think performative skills improve the relationship between teacher and student?*”. A total of 75.2% of the respondents view this competence is very important and 22.8% think it is not very important, while only one respondent does not think it is necessary. Additionally, a request for motivation formulated with an open-ended question was attached to this item. For the analysis of this response, the grounded approach was adopted (Richards - Morse, 2009); this method is also used for all analyses of the answers to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire that we will present in future contributions.

In proceeding with the coding and recording of the answers, categories emerged that made it possible to re-read how useful the teachers consider performative competence to be. Table 3 offers a summary reading by presenting the categories that emerged from the teachers' verbatims and the consequent coding with a literal code; for each category, the sample size and the consequent percentage is included.

For 56.5%, performative competence allows for the establishment of the didactic relationship because it draws the students' attention; moreover, the scenic elements put in place by the teacher are seen as an opportunity to engage. One participant commented: *“I think this is an essential part of being welcoming and capturing students' attention”* (ID: L1⁴). The emphasis is on the teacher and the ability to inhabit one's role while keeping rhetorical and scenic skills active. In addition to a low percentage of those who consider competence as a true didactic mediator capable of creating a positive classroom climate capable of *“Amplifying communication levels”* (ID: L2), a small percentage (5.9%) considers performativity to improve teacher-student relationship, as the body is a vehicle of knowledge and the basis for a meaningful learning process: (ID: ME1) *“The body communicates, it is an inclusive language and reinforces what we want to communicate. The use of the body shapes what we want to communicate [...]”*.

However, for 18% of the teachers, performative competence makes it possible to enter into an authentic relationship with the student; one teacher (ID: R2) remarks: *“It is necessary in order to make the educational act resonant and an opportunity for a relationship.”* Nearly 8% define performative competence as not useful in the educational context of reference or not explicit in their thinking; U1 writes: *“I do not think that online the academic audience can benefit (in terms of attention and participation) from increased performative competence”*.

It is apparent that the relationship remains stable in all the categories investigated (university, traineeship students and teachers of all ranks); the highest percentage still holds the view that performativity is a tool which enables engaging the other at multiple levels.

<i>Performance category</i>	<i>Encoding</i>	<i>Numerosity</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Performativity as learning development (embodied/knowledge transfer)	PA	6	5,9%
Performativity as a teaching mediator (regulation, lesson effectiveness, positive climate)	PMD	12	11,9%
Performativity as a tool/function (utilitarian, more attention)	PS	57	56,5%
Performativity as didactic rituality (authentic relationship with the other)	PR	18	17,8%
No or absent performativity (not explicit or useful for relational purposes)	PN	8	7,9%
Total		101	100%

Table 3: The performative categories

⁴ The submitted verbatims are associated with an identification code taking into account the progressive order and the subject area of teaching.

4. Data discussion and conclusions

A first outcome of the research is certainly the field experimentation of the Teaching Performative Scale (TPS), after the validation it was used on a first sample, returning data that we can consider significant about the perception of performativity as part of teacher's professional skills.

First of all, most of the sample consider performative competence in teaching as important (74.3%), this is true even among teachers who have not received specific training. However, this competence often seems to be perceived as a transversal element that supports the establishment and support of the educational relationship, while it seems to be less directly connected to the dimension of learning. Most of the sample agrees that performativity in online contexts is more linked to movement and voice, aspects like speech pauses and the linguistic register, rather than to space and proxemics that appear less perceived as communicative mediators in this framework. In general, performative competence is still considered less relevant in distance learning, even if the importance of a performative awareness among the teacher's skills is also recognized in online environments.

From the research data analysis it also emerges that the laboratory training activities are perceived by teachers as important for improving their own performative competence, from the point of view of the effectiveness perception the experience of a specific training on performativity seems to influence more the management of the online educational relationship compared to that in presence, where the difference between trained and untrained teachers is less relevant.

The next phase of the research will see the application of the research tool on a larger sample and in-depth qualitative research through structured interviews to better define the framework of the teacher's performative skills. The final results are expected to be a relevant input for the redesign of structured training curricula for initial and in continuing teacher training.

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