

The Empathic Screen: Storytelling and Narrative Identity for Extending the Digital Relationship Through Performative Artistic Practices

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Abstract: This study is designed as a qualitative pilot study adopting a case study design (Yin, 2009) within the university course, held both online and in-person, titled "Techniques and Languages of Performance" at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples. The investigation, framed within the Art-Based Research (ABR) framework (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015) and applied through the CReAP+T approach (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022), explores whether theatrical practices and autobiographical storytelling, through the use of performative pedagogy, can transform the digital screen into an empathic screen. The research question guiding the analysis is: can art enrich relational dynamics and facilitate the perception of students' identity, making the online dimension a space of extension rather than a weakening of human bonds? The process was structured into several phases, including: theatrical training (body and vocal exercises), autobiographical storytelling exercises (through interviews and logbooks), and the creation of a final video self-portrait. Data were collected through a plurality of instruments: logbooks, transcriptions of self-narratives, and open feedback. Data analysis was performed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a Qualitative comparative analysis between the in-person and online experiences. The results highlight that the activation of the pillars of Embodiment and Performativity facilitates autopoietic feedback capable of contributing to the students' perception of their narrative identity, promoting transformative learning even in distance education contexts.



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Keywords: Performative pedagogy; Theatre; Embodied learning; Storytelling; Technology; Theatrical practices.

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1. Introduction

The current socio-educational scenario is characterized by an unprecedented technological pervasiveness (Floridi, 2017) that guarantees unlimited access to technology, blurring the boundaries between physical and virtual reality. This generates hybrid environments where the Self risks getting lost in a continuous oscillation between real and digital experience, with significant repercussions on the identity, relational, and formative processes of individuals (Remotti, 1996; Santoianni, 2003). This necessitates a critical reflection on the effects such a scenario can have on fundamental growth processes, including the construction of the self. In newer generations, the Self is increasingly shaped within a hybrid dimension where the boundary between physical reality and virtual space progressively fades. Internet and social media thus function as distorting symbolic mirrors, capable of reflecting idealized and unrealistic images, as well as increasing forms of alienation from one's own body and embodied experience.

In this context, the educational system is called upon to redefine a new configuration of learning environments that qualify the roles, skills, and responsibilities of students and teachers, while simultaneously raising relevant ethical, pedagogical, and formative questions related to the conscious and critical use of technologies. Without adequate methodological support, students risk falling into the condition that Louis Jovet (1954) prophetically defined as the "disembodied actor": a subject who is digitally present but ontologically absent in their bodily, sensory, and experiential dimension. In the context of cyberspace, "the body does not count, even if, in the life of bodies, cyberspace counts" (Bauman, 1999), highlighting a structural tension between physical and medial presence. Furthermore, the technological revolution has led to a profound restructuring of spatio-temporal coordinates, affecting not only their perception but the very concepts of space and time (Lévy; De Kerckhove, 1998). The transformation of the processes of perception, identification, and interpretation of spatio-temporal dimensions, together with the redefinition of distances, favors the construction of unprecedented relational and identity forms. In this perspective, "here" and "elsewhere" tend to overlap in a simultaneity that contributes to the formation of a "multiple identity," a hallmark of the postmodern condition. This dynamic is particularly significant when considering identity as a fluid, historically, and culturally situated construct, resulting from a process of continuous negotiation with the environment and defined within a system of social relations (Remotti, 1996).

The present study, therefore, stems from the urgency to counteract such fragmentation, identifying artistic and performative methodologies as the key to a re-unification of narrative identity. The investigation is framed within the Art-Based Research (ABR) framework (Barone & Eisner, 2012) and adopts the CReAP+T approach (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022) to investigate how theatrical practices can restore centrality to the bodily dimension even in the digital realm. Through theatrical training and autobiographical storytelling, the aim is to offer students the necessary detachment to observe their own image and understand if, beyond the

filters and superstructures of the web, the performative act can transform the technological screen into an empathic screen (Gallese & Guerra, 2015).

Through this pilot study, the intention is to observe whether the conscious and creative integration of art and technology can make the teaching-learning process a place of profound, connected, and authentically embodied human exploration, answering the following research question: can art enrich relational dynamics and facilitate the perception of students' identity, making the online dimension a space of extension rather than a weakening of human bonds?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 *Storytelling as Transformative Learning*

Identity, understood as a dynamic and fluid process, requires an active and participated relationship with the other and with the environment. Through the perception of how we think we appear to others, how we believe others judge us, and how we react to these perceived judgments, we construct our self. Identity results as a repeating act, and its existence is based on constant execution and recognition, thus assuming a performative connotation (Butler, 1990).

In this research, storytelling emerges as one of the primary means through which individuals construct and communicate their identity (Bruner, 1991). The stories we tell about ourselves not only reflect our experience but also structure it, providing coherence and meaning to our lives. In other words, narrative is the medium through which the individual organizes their experience, placing it in an order that makes the past sensible, the present interpretable, and the future oriented.

In the field of learning, narrative activity plays a crucial role in the student's educational journey. During the school years, students form their thinking, their relational and social strategies, as well as their cognitive, linguistic, and expressive skills.

From this epistemic horizon, the construction of the self through narrative reflects the need to approach the learning process as one that is strongly co-constructed in the constant relationship between the student, the teacher, peers, and the environment (Sibilio, 2014, 2020; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991/2024), aligning with the vision that education itself is a continuous reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1998). Furthermore, the teaching-learning process cannot be separated from the embodiment of experience (Gallagher & Lindgren, 2015; Di Paolo & Thompson, 2014), as it is through the body that we perceive and interact with the world and construct our knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

2.2. Learning and Technology

The epistemic framework that views cognition as an emerging and embodied process, and the teaching-learning process as relational and situated, inevitably leads to reflecting on the active role of technology and artifacts as co-agents in the construction of knowledge (Latour, 2022). This perspective supports the idea that the "revolution we are experiencing affects multiple aspects, not only our way of thinking but also our way of feeling and being" (De Kerckhove, 2016), since the use of new tools requiring new mental strategies also produces neural changes.

In this sense, education and training must promote new skills, including digital literacy, understood not only as technical competence but as "knowledge that serves as a tool for building new knowledge" (Olimpo, 2010). Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2022) offers a meta-disciplinary lens to fully grasp the implications of this co-evolution. According to ANT, non-humans (actants) "must be actors [...] and not simply unfortunate supports for symbolic projections" (Latour, 2022), because cognition is fully distributed in socio-technical networks where objects and material interactions play an active role in shaping experience.

Despite the solid theoretical foundation supporting a radically extended pedagogy (embodied, situated, and co-evolutionary), educational practices continue to show rigidity, highlighting the gap between the effectiveness of technological innovations in controlled contexts and their limited large-scale diffusion (scalability) within the school system. Addressing this issue requires expanding the investigation to the systemic problems of usability, scalability, and sustainability that characterize the implementation of innovations in schools (Fishman et al., 2004). A pedagogy of co-evolution must therefore integrate this relational and material dimension to overcome the isolationist view of the mind.

It is precisely in response to this need that methodological approaches emerge, aimed at reconnecting the body to the educational experience, even in environments mediated by technology. Performative teaching experiences in technological contexts, for example, demonstrate how it is possible, through the exercise of the body in action, to encourage the overcoming of presence/distance boundaries and reaffirm the importance of embodied experience (Carlomagno et al., 2021). Such practices offer an operational solution to the gap between theory and practice (Fishman et al., 2004), concretizing the assumptions of learning that is always and inherently experiential, co-evolutionary, and situated. This framework pushes research toward the exploration of non-linear pedagogies that value the complexity of the Human-Environment-Technology interaction.

2.3. Learning and Art

Overcoming an isolationist view of the mind finds in the performing arts a privileged field for experimenting with non-linear didactic paradigms (Carlomagno, 2023). In particular, theatrical practices serve as a "complex object of study on action

and relationship" (Carlomagno, 2020), whose dynamics "elude an exclusively logical-formal investigation" (Carlomagno, 2020), triggering learning processes that reflect the interactionist and bio-educational nature of knowledge (Frauenfelder, 2018) and the capacity of the artistic event to generate a profound transformation in the subjects involved (Fischer-Lichte, 2014; Leavy, 2015).

For the actor-student to learn to make their body a "receptive and resonant instrument" (Barba & Savarese, 2011), a continuous reorganization of the relationships between perception, action, and emotion is required. Among theatrical practices, theater training constitutes a tool for educating the perceptive body since, when applied to the educational field, it acts as a process of sensitive transformation (Carlomagno, 2020) aimed at refining presence, deep listening to oneself and others, and regulating movement and emotions (Stanislavskij, 1938/2008; Grotowski, 1968; Barba & Savarese, 2011).

This work acts on the boundaries that divide the human being from themselves and others (Grotowski, 1968), fostering effective action (De Marinis, 2000) in which synesthetic capacity emerges as the operational structure of the action. The body thus becomes a space of mediation between internal impulses and external events, translating emotional experience into motor experience (Damasio, 1999) and actively shaping the mind (Gallagher, 2005). This performative dimension is grounded in the nature of theater as a shared action space where cognition emerges from interpersonal synchronization (Sofia, 2024) and embodied simulation (Gallese, 2008; Gallese & Sinigaglia, 2011). Scenic practice is therefore configured as a pro-social act (Neelands, 2009) capable of stimulating meaningful (Ausubel, 2004) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2003).

3. Research Design and Methodology

The study aims to examine how the integration of theatrical and narrative practices in the educational field can influence students' bodily, emotional, and relational perception. The central research question guiding the investigation is: can art enrich relational dynamics and facilitate the perception of students' identity, making the online dimension a space of extension rather than a weakening of human bonds?

3.1 Methodology

This work is configured as a qualitative and exploratory pilot study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) within a case study design (Yin, 2009). The investigation is framed within the Art-Based Research (ABR) framework, in which artistic processes constitute the primary mode of inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015) as well as its object of study.

In this context, ABR is applied through the CReAP+T approach, in which the performing arts act as a catalyst to humanize distance education, transforming technology into a tool capable of extending the perception of the body and the self.

“CReAP + T is a model capable of making Corporeity and Creativity central to the learning experience, enhancing Relationship, stimulating emotions, soliciting Action and strengthening the artistic and didactic dramaturgical nature of Performativity also in a Technological environment. It is focused on theatrical practices and is a mode of didactic action to learn, create and act together, embodying a systemic, inclusive, adaptive and non-linear approach of the body in contamination of the transpositive action (Chevallard, 1989).” (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022) The model is structured around nine interconnected pillars: (Embodiment/Creativity (C), Relationship (R); Emotion/Empathy (e); Action (A); Performativity (P); and finally, Technology/Training (T) (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022).

3.2 Participants and Setting

The study involved 24 students from the "Techniques and Languages of Performance" course (Master's Degree in LIVRE) at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples (A.Y. 2021/2022). The hybrid format, with an average of 17 students in person and 7 online, ensured continuity and flexibility in participation. The research was structured into 10 weekly sessions of 3 hours each, for a total of 30 hours.

3.3 Phases and Data Collection Tools

The project was structured into three phases aimed at guiding students through a journey of personal exploration and self-construction:

First phase: **Theatre training and bodily awareness**

During the first phase and throughout the entire workshop, theoretical lessons alternated with theatre training sessions: relaxation and breathing exercises, activities to increase bodily awareness, and interactive games to create a non-judgmental relational environment. At the end of each training session, students were asked to reflect on and record their experiences.

Second phase: **Personal inquiry and identity construction**

In the second phase, students began a personal research project, structured through guiding questions for the construction of their final performance:

- A. They described themselves using the predicates "I am, I do, I dream," to reflect on their values, activities, and aspirations.
- B. They interviewed a parent about their birth, asking what that moment meant to them.
- C. They collected responses from family members, friends, and a teacher to the questions: "Who am I? What do I represent to you?"

These responses could be expressed through various creative formats, including audio, video, or written texts, offering students the freedom to express themselves through media that best represented their inner selves.

Final phase: (Authentic task) **Realization of the performance**

Finally, as an authentic task, students were required to create a final performance in the form of a video that narrated themselves through their own eyes and the eyes of others. The assignment was to combine all the material collected and re-elaborated during the journey to build a self-portrait that intertwined self-perception with external perspectives, emphasizing the entire process of identity exploration.

Feedback and closing reflections

At the conclusion of the course, students completed an open-ended questionnaire to provide overall feedback on the experience. The questions asked them to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the journey, and to reflect on the personal questions they had found answers to, as well as any questions that remained open.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis adopts an interpretative qualitative approach based on the triangulation of different analytical techniques. It is important to reiterate that the sample experienced a fluid mode of participation: students were able to choose from time to time whether to attend in person or online, thus developing a critical awareness based on the direct comparison of the two experiences.

The analysis process was structured into three complementary phases:

a. Thematic Analysis

Recurring patterns were identified within the documentary corpus (logbooks, transcriptions, and feedback) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were coded to bring out the most significant thematic cores related to self-perception. Specifically, the texts were broken down into keywords or significant phrases and then grouped into thematic macro-areas.

b. Qualitative comparative analysis

Despite the flexibility of participation, the analysis isolated the feedback related to the online sessions (averaging 7 participants per session) and compared it with that from the in-person sessions (17 participants). Specifically, the quality of the relationship and the perception of the body were compared across the two settings

(in-person/online). The objective was to verify whether the screen acted as a barrier or as a tool capable of extending human relationships.

c. Analysis of Adherence to the CReAP+T approach

In this final phase, the results were mapped onto the seven dimensions of the CReAP+T approach (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022), with the aim of verifying whether the activities had effectively activated the pillars of the model (Embodiment/Creativity (C), Relationship (R); Emotion/Empathy (e), Action (A); Performativity (P), Technology/Training (T) .

4. Results

This section presents the results emerging from the workshop process, reorganized through a thematic analysis aimed at answering the central research question: can art enrich relational dynamics and facilitate the perception of students' identity, transforming the digital dimension into a space where human relationships extend rather than weaken? The collected data were not analyzed as isolated entities, but as pieces of a process. The following analysis moves away from a simple chronology of activities to focus on the emerging thematic cores.

4.1 Thematic Analysis

Macro-Theme	Evidence from Data	Interpretative Analysis
Theme 1: The Body as a Bridge between Presence and Distance	<i>"Feeling the body in motion, to be able to free oneself and almost 'stretch' to better readjust all the pieces".</i> <i>"The importance of breath and relaxation... gave me a way to focus on details... finding an inner peace"</i>	Theatrical practice transforms the perception of the body from an isolated object into a tool for connection. The idea of the body as a receptive instrument prevails. Online students do not suffer from the distance but use the training to "stretch" their presence beyond the screen.

Theme 2: Reflected Identity and the Narrative Self	<i>"I am... I still cannot give myself a certain answer. I am what I have been, what I am, and what I will be."</i> <i>"But the mere fact of putting ourselves in relation with those who are or have been part of our lives gives us the possibility to define who we were and who we are today."</i> <i>"I asked myself, 'have I actually ever really found myself?!'"</i> The sister defining her brother as <i>"a sun and a moon... capable of bringing out discordant character traits."</i>	Identity is constructed in the dialogue between self-narrative ("I am") and the gaze of the other (interviews). Feedback from family members acts as a social mirror that integrates self-perception.
Theme 3: The Empathic Screen and Technology as a Cognitive Tool	<i>"I was very struck because, even behind the computer screen, I felt a certain affinity with her (the teacher), in terms of sensitivity and understanding for the other in their various facets."</i> <i>"Being very shy, I don't like being the center of attention at all, but I tried."</i> Some data report that <i>"the webcam pointed... sometimes distracted attention," but this distraction was then overcome through "virtual social presence."</i>	Technology is not a limit but a "cognitive tool." The smartphone and the webcam become extensions of the perceptive-body, allowing for an authentic self-narrative even in a virtual environment.

4.2 Qualitative comparative analysis (In-person vs. Online)

In order to verify the impact of the setting on identity and relational dynamics, a comparative analysis was conducted between the two subgroups of students (in-person and online). This analysis does not aim to establish the superiority of one mode over the other, but rather to reveal how the same artistic and narrative practices are re-elaborated and assigned meaning based on the presence (or absence) of digital screen mediation.

The comparison was structured by systematically cross-referencing direct testimonies extracted from logbooks and final feedback. Specifically, the analysis focused on four key dimensions: 1) the quality of the relationship, 2) the perception of the body, 3) the use of technology, and 4) the process of self-discovery.

Dimension	Analysis of the Experience	Testimonies (Data from the Text)
Quality of the Relationship	In-person: Horizontal sociality and immediate collective stimulus.	<i>“The collective environment and the exchange of ideas with my colleagues was a source of help and great stimulus.”</i>
	Online: Empathic connection and elective affinity mediated by video.	<i>“Even behind the computer screen, I felt a certain affinity with him [the teacher], in terms of sensitivity and understanding.”</i>
Perception of the Body	In-person: Physical action and control of energies in real space.	<i>“Control of one’s energies in relation to others and to the surrounding space.”</i>
	Online: Body as a receptive instrument that projects itself beyond the monitor.	<i>“Feeling the body in motion, to be able to free oneself and almost ‘stretch’ to better readjust all the pieces”</i>

Technology	In-person: Device perceived as an external or disruptive element.	<i>"The webcam pointed at those present and the large screen sometimes distracted my attention."</i>
	Online: Tool for expression and overcoming personal limits.	<i>"Being very shy, I don't like being the center of attention at all, but I tried through the video."</i>
Process of Self-discovery	In-person: Laboratory learning based on "doing" together.	<i>"The laboratory work was very stimulating... knowing how to bring out my creative side beyond the usual theory."</i>
	Online: Immersive experience that "breaks through" the digital barrier.	<i>"Like all experiences that somehow 'pass through' you... I found in the teaching... a great love."</i>

4.3 Analysis of Adherence to the CReAP+T approach

The data were reinterpreted in light of the seven dimensions of the CReAP+T approach (Creativity, Embodiment, Relationship, Emotion, Empathy, Action, Performativity, Technology/Training). This analysis allows for a mapping of how each specific pillar contributed to the transformation of narrative identity and the enhancement of relational dynamics, even within a digital environment.

Component	Operational Definition	Evidence and Data Citations
C - Creativity	The ability to generate new visions of the self through diverse languages.	1 Free choice between 'audio, video, or written texts' for the narratives. 2. Self-definition through metaphors: <i>"If I had to describe myself with one word, it would be dream"</i>. 3. Use of creativity to move beyond theory: <i>"Bringing out my creative side beyond the usual theory"</i>.
E - Embodiment	The body as a receptor of impulses and a communicative bridge.	1. Online body projection: "almost stretching the body" beyond the screen 2. Sensory awareness: the use of relaxation and breathing to find "inner peace" 3. Empathic gaze: "through my gaze, I am better able to communicate what I feel"
R - Relation	Construction of a social presence and empathic bonds.	1. Perception of the other at a distance: "Perceiving what the person in front of me is feeling" through the screen 2. Relationship with the teacher: "I felt a certain affinity with him in terms of sensitivity."

E- Emotion/ Empathy	Recognition and management of deep emotional states.	1. Final emotional oxymoron: the feeling of "sad joy" expressed by the students. 2. Family emotions: the father speaking of the birth as "the most beautiful emotion of my life".. 3. Overcoming fear: the anxiety of "never having truly found oneself" transformed into awareness.
A - Action	Learning as an active process rather than a purely theoretical one.	1. Physical training: "Feeling the body in motion" 2. The action of "readjusting all the pieces" of one's life experience through theatrical exercise.
P - Performativity	The public expression of the self to validate identity	1. The final video-self-portrait as a synthesis of narrative identity. 2. Putting oneself out there despite limitations: "Being very shy... I tried" (performative exposure) 3. Performance as a "mirror" to narrate oneself through the eyes of others.

T - Technology	Technology as a cognitive tool rather than a purely technical one.	1. The smartphone used as a recording device to "look at oneself from the outside" 2. The empathic screen that enables a "piercing" experience even online. 3. Overcoming the barrier: the webcam, shifting from a distracting element to a means of "affinity"
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5. Discussion

The data emerging from the thematic analysis highlight that the perception of identity was not experienced as an isolated act, but as a co-constructed and dialogic process. Through self-narration and family interviews, students experienced what the CReAP+T approach defines as mirroring (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022), allowing them to integrate their subjective vision with a social one. In this sense, Performativity (P) acted as a device for objectification: staging one's own story allowed students to look at themselves from the outside, stabilizing a new self-image.

One of the most relevant outcomes concerns the overcoming of the digital barrier; the results suggest that the pillars of Corporeality (C) and Action (A) made it possible to establish a presence even online. Through the screen, which became an empathic screen (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2022), technology was perceived as a cognitive tool capable of extending bodily sensitivity. Online students reported the sensation of a body "stretching" beyond the monitor, demonstrating that autopoietic feedback (Fischer-Lichte, 2014) can activate an embodied simulation as effective as that in face-to-face settings.

The discussion cannot ignore the strategic value of Relationship (R) and Emotion (E). The sense of belonging to a virtual community, combined with the "sad joy" felt at the end of the journey, testifies that art is capable of generating authentic bonds. Performative pedagogy emerges as a powerful tool for transforming the digital screen into an empathic screen. The study shows how art can enrich relational dynamics and facilitate students' perception of identity, thus making the online dimension a space of extension rather than a weakening of human bonds.

The results highlight that the activation of the pillars of Corporeality (C) and Performativity (P) facilitates autopoietic feedback capable of contributing to the students' perception of narrative identity, promoting transformative learning even in distance education contexts.

The results suggest that the systematic integration of artistic and technological practices can redefine the boundaries of digital pedagogy, turning it into a place of profound human exploration rather than just the transmission of theoretical knowledge.

Although students had different experiences depending on the course format, both groups benefited significantly from the methodologies used, which proved capable of stimulating individual expression as well as the creation of a learning community.

5.1 Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Despite the encouraging results, this pilot study presents some critical issues that pave the way for necessary future investigations. Firstly, the small sample size (24 students in total) and the limited duration of the course do not allow for a large-scale statistical generalization of the results, framing the inquiry as an intensive case study analysis.

Secondly, the purely qualitative nature of the research, while ensuring unique interpretive depth, has highlighted the need to integrate quantitative measurement tools in the future. The inclusion of validated measurement scales would allow for a more robust methodological triangulation, crossing narrative data with objective statistical evidence.

In conclusion, the experience of this pilot study encourages continuing along the path traced, enriching and refining the educational process to respond more effectively to the needs of students and the challenges of a digital pedagogy that never renounces its human, corporeal, and performative components.

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