The Researcher's Role: Teaching Social Research Methods with Participatory Theater and Role-Playing Techniques

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ABSTRACT

The educational and research program for students launched in 2019 as a participant laboratory for the master's degree Course in Sociology and Social Research at the University of Calabria aims to teach sociological research methods through theatrical techniques and exercises as tools for social work (Gurvitch, 1956). The program consists of two complementary learning modules executed sequentially by two teachers with different professional backgrounds in order to develop in-depth research skills, both quantitative and qualitative, with an active approach to leading students into effective strategies of interaction for field study. Students come into contact not only with the subject-object of study, but also (and above all) with themselves, thus reducing some of their insecurities and discovering their own limits in terms of prejudices and stereotypes through the use of applied improvisation. In this way, particular attention is paid to the role that the researcher must assume in specific research contexts, working deeply on himself to achieve spontaneity through role-training sessions (Moreno, 1947; 1953).

In practical terms, exercises are used to stimulate sociological imagination and promote concentration: exercises of cooperation and collective strategies, techniques of active participation and construction of the group climate to gain access to the field, exercises for control and analysis, and verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal communication (i.e. how to present yourself in public through video recordings). For example, the Theatre of the Oppressed system (Boal, 1979) shows the relationship between news and newsworthiness and proceeds with their related deconstruction. It also consists of many different ethnomethodological experiments and exercises about conversation analysis: elements of common sense, idioms, constructions, and stereotypes present in speech. This kind of "Theatrical sociology approach" combines sociological, psychological, and pedagogical knowledge with theatrical games that become tools for the investigation of social phenomena in complex contexts. Beyond their diversity, science and art share the ability to discover and create (Nisbet, 1962), and this is what we strive to teach our students.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

Started in 2019, the *Didactic, editorial and research Laboratory* is a highly innovative educational course in the master's degree of the "Sociology and Social Research" program offered by the University of Calabria. It is also the first of its kind in the country, combining social research methods with applied theatre techniques as tools for sociological inquiry.

The course consists of lectures, seminars and tutorial assignments with practical experiences to show and analyze the whole research process from the beginning - how to approach the field - to the end - for example, on how to write an academic paper and improve public speaking skills. This course focuses on teacher experiences in this area, with the aim to encourage students to reflect on themselves and their choices through pedagogical and theatrical training that also includes metacognitive strategies.

As teachers, we help students to recognize and value their professional life experiences and self-awareness, teaching them how to identify and overcome limits and insecurities, thereby reducing the risk to lapse into prejudices and stereotypes with their subject/object of study.

Indeed, in fieldwork, the researcher interacts with or observes individuals or groups, and gathers data along the way. Therefore, it is imperative to learn how to manage personal opinions and endeavor to not be influenced by common sense thinking.

With the help of theatre techniques and exercises (Gurvitch, 1956), we strive to guide students in a process of reflection and action, preparing them for complex thinking about their role in a dynamic and complex reality.

Structure of the course

The laboratory includes two different activity modules.

During the first part, given by Alma Pisciotta, students are involved in many participatory theatre activities and improvisational acting exercises to discover the expressions and elements of verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal communication. It helps researchers in different circumstances such as during an observation or while conducting an interview.

In contrast, the second part, given by Luciana Taddei, is dedicated to applying quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Mertens et al., 2016), starting from a theoretical and epistemological perspective that bridges the gap between historical paradigms of social research (Greene, 2015). We retrace with students all phases of research design, starting with theory and hypothesis to the reporting of results.

In particular, the training includes giving interviews with or without questionnaires,

conducting natural and systematic observations, organizing experiments, and using secondary documents and data to carry out an entire research project. Great attention is paid to digital and visual methods, as well as to social network analysis and interdisciplinary research.

Finally, we focus on the best way to write or present scientific results. Students can explore the difference between writing articles, chapters, books, and papers, bearing in mind the possibility of using auditory and visual channels.

Editorial lessons focus on: 1) how to carry out bibliographic research, report citations and references; 2) how to write a text in its contents, structure, format, layout, as well revision; 3) the best ways to present data and documents (tables, graphs, images, figures, attachments, hyperlinks, etc.); 4) existing possibilities for the dissemination of results (reviews, editors, web, and open access).

This paper will examine the first part of the teaching and learning path. Among the various elements that characterize the *Didactic, editorial and research Laboratory*, participatory theatre and role-playing techniques represent an innovative approach to develop the researcher's awareness.

Laboratory teaching

Our teaching and learning proposal is structured as a team project (Hesse-Biber, 2015) including teachers with different backgrounds and a group of master's students with distinct interests. The collaboration between teachers and students allows approaching the topics in a flexible manner, continuously stimulating student interest and focus. The Laboratory never has a pre-structured plan of lessons, however lessons come up through student suggestions and teacher acceptance of *stimuli*.

We believe that the application of social research methods must be adaptable and innovative, and our teaching and learning process follows this assumption. The constant discussion with students is useful for both parties: teachers can always question themselves without losing reflexivity, and students can become protagonists of the entire research process through discussion with teachers on an equal footing. This kind of interaction requires lessons that develop from practical experiences and teachers who can tolerate and embed ambiguity and "disorder" (Bazeley, 2003).
The laboratory integrates theory and practice in every step of the teaching and learning process.

Theory is the basis on which collective knowledge can be co-built, but starting with a real-world problem is a more natural method in which the individual is able to learn deeply (see for instance, Gorard, 2010). Questions and methods are derived from the concrete problems we face in the field.

Lessons are planned mixing frontal lectures, collective activities, self-assessment pauses and individual meetings (Taddei, 2021). Frontal lectures are necessary because of the different levels of training from which students start. Collective activities stimulate the active participation of students, encourage debate, promote collaboration, and stimulate

exchanges through examples, exercises, and simulations.

For this course, there are also important self-assessment pauses. On the one hand, students can understand the level of knowledge achieved; on the other hand, teachers can identify gaps in knowledge and grasp how to adjust and individualize pedagogical practices.

In addition, individual meetings are planned throughout the course period with the aim of individualizing the single carriers.

Each year, our laboratory teaching helps us to understand better the difficulties and potential of the students. This interactive laboratory aims at transforming traditional learning by proposing a way of teaching that "challenges traditional views and assumptions; encourages new ways of thinking; and conceptualizes [research methods] in light of new knowledge, scholarship, and ways of knowing" (Kitano, 1997, 23).

Participatory theatre

Since theatre was born, it always had the function of telling stories as a celebration of society by playing pieces of reality or describing imaginary places and worlds filled with myths transformed into ethical questions posed directly by actors to audience. In contrast with other forms of comment and debate, such as the role played by mass media or other cultural products like movies in modern society, every theatrical event is a creative communication process in which partners (actors and spectators) are both present at the same time in the same place. This characteristic configures theatre and all live

art performances as a peculiar social interaction and as "an active agent of change, a form for communal reflection, and a space in which to imagine a better way of living together" (Turner, 1982). This is most evident in all experimental and immersive theatre forms grounded in audience involvement and widely used in psychology. In these cases, the audience is often called the *spect-actor* (Boal, 1979).

In fact, an interesting set of theatrical circumstances and exercises comes from the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a term coined by Brazilian artist and activist Augusto Boal who encouraged his audience to react directly to the action. Two of his most popular techniques are *Forum Theatre* and *Image Theatre* already used in psycho-pedagogical approaches to reduce dropout.

The first consists of proposing to a group of spectators, after a first improvisation of a scene, that they replace the protagonist and try to improvise variations on his actions. The real protagonist should ultimately improvise the variation that has motivated him the most. *Forum theatre* releases the audience from the obligation of being passive so that everyone can play a part in the process by interpreting his own role, expressing his ideas, and practicing the actions he deems necessary to free himself from oppression.

The second is composed of a series of physical exercises based on the concept of a multiple mirror of the gaze of other individuals. A group of people looking at the same image is realized on the stage, for example by the *Conductor* or by other participants by showing their feelings, and what is evoked for them, and what their imaginations build up around that image.

This multiple reflection will reveal the hidden aspects to the person who created the image. It is up to the protagonist (the builder of the image) to understand and feel whatever he wants or is able to take from this process. The *Image Theater* has many variations: from rebuilding the image in another manner of static poses to completing the image built by others.

Role-playing techniques

In this connection, productive methods of describing interaction among individuals are *sociodrama* (Moreno, 1943; 1944) and *psychodrama* (Moreno, 1946) already invented by Jacob L. Moreno in 1936, in which theatrical techniques and exercises are honed into an educational approach for social groups in psychology and sociometric analysis. Both use similar spontaneous role-playing, exploring aspects of life through concrete and active actions.

Like *psychodrama*, the essential goals of *sociodrama* provide greater insight and understanding of human relationships, a more thorough and relevant expression of emotions, and experimentation with new behavior or attitudes in a mutually supportive environment. However, in *psychodrama,* the focus of the action is the life of an individual, while in *sociodrama* there is a common theme, issue or situation that the group strives to examine, not only through verbal discussion or debate but also through spontaneous action. Where psychodrama deals with personal relationships, *sociodrama* focuses on professional, workplace or public relationships. Instead of a single individual taking on the role of protagonist (the most

common situation in *psychodrama*), in *sociodrama* the group itself becomes the protagonist of the session. Thus, a fundamental difference between the two is in the types of roles explored. While *psychodrama* uses as a basis for action the personal roles and life story of an individual, *sociodrama* gives the opportunity to explore the roles that people have in common.

Inspired by *psychodrama* and *sociodrama*, but developed in another way, the *Playback Theatre* was invented by Jonathan Fox and his wife Jo Salas in 1975. The *Playback* method (Fox, 1986; Salas, 1993) is based on improvisational storytelling theatre in which the people in the audience, composed of single individuals or members of a specific group (for example: refugees, students, families, ethnical and cultural minorities or social groups), tell stories from their lives and then watch them performed by actors on the spot, and not by themselves - such as in Moreno's model. Far from the positivistic perspective of the sociometric approach, this method appears less invasive for participants because it allows them to take an emotional distance while watching their stories, memories and experiences from another point of view through the artistic interpretation of actors.

The *Playback Theatre* can be used in any analysis of social issues because it represents a powerful tool for research focused on life experiences, common sense, the collective imagination, and their links. Moreover, a *Playback* performance may begin with an explicit theme, and the stories are created following its thread. Sometimes there is no theme as a base, and the underlying concerns and interests of the community will reveal themselves through

a deeper tapestry of the stories. This is not always evident, and a skilled conductor can stimulate consciousness by the end of the session.

Every playback session is led by the *Conductor* who covers the role of facilitator of the process. The session starts when someone who volunteers to tell, called the *Teller*, will come over from the audience area to the *Teller*'s chair. The story is told from this position with the support of the *Conductor* in a brief interview in which the *Teller* also chooses actors to play roles in the story. Once the actors are chosen, they stand and the *Conductor* says: "Let's watch".

During the performance, the actors and musicians will spontaneously improvise a re-enactment of the story, and this takes place in different artistic forms (often without dialogue and only with physical action), in order to present and capture the essence of the story. Following this step, actors look to the *Teller* to receive feedback about their work. This moment represents the opportunity to say something more about feelings provoked by the performance. At times nothing more needs saying, or perhaps a few words - sometimes the *Teller* is given the opportunity to correct or transform the scene, and the actors will replay it.

Lastly, the *Conductor* thanks the *Teller* who returns to his seat in the audience, and another person is invited to tell the next story.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the peculiarity of this educational project resides precisely in the methods used in the investigation of convictions, behaviors, and beliefs shared by students through the performance of theatrical activities as strategies. This configures a kind of *theatrical sociology* understood as a specific theoretical-methodological approach, which may combine the corpus of knowledge of the art of acting with those of the social sciences (Pisciotta, 2015; 2016; 2017). It is based on those representations, which aim to stimulate the audience reactions of expecting a direct involvement on the physical, emotional and interpretative level just as it happens in the *breaching experiment* of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967).

The use of theatre in social work is not only desirable but sometimes necessary, especially in critical contexts such as dropping out of school or in cases of social and economic marginalization. Theatre is a sophisticated expression of a basic human need to tell stories by bringing people together, and to create meaning through narrative and metaphor. Further, and this applies to some kinds of theatre other than those described in this essay, theatre influences thinking and feeling about our lives. It also encourages finding a way to resolve conflict and social problems through self-reflection in a carefree mode of communication that becomes increasingly helpful with young people.

Numerous are the studies of theatre in a social context, but there are few cases in which sociology, as opposed to other social

sciences, has used the techniques of theatre for its own scientific purpose and analysis, although George Gurvitch proclaimed his desire to rebuild a more empirical sociology inspired by similarities between society and theatre (Gurvitch, 1956).

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