

# “So Many Stories”. Some Pedagogical Reflections on the Workshop

*Silvana Vaccaro*

(Bicocca Milan University)

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## **Abstract**

The author had the chance to be a privileged observer of the workshop activities. The workshop was not only an educational and artistic experience for the participants, but also a life experience that triggered a positive change in them. For the university students, it was a way of changing their perspective on a world that is often surrounded by prejudice and stereotypes and whose representation rarely corresponds to reality. In contrast, for the young boys at the Bekka, the workshop was a way of challenging their knowledge and learning more about something they would never otherwise have studied. The author noticed how pivotal the learning environment is for those boys, many of whom never finished school and reject it as something superfluous and a constant reminder of their failures and inadequacy.

**Keywords:** Education; intercultural relationships; situated learning; empowerment; obeying the law.

## **The “Outside” Inside. The Educational Value of a Meeting**

Their experience “inside” the prison has a double effect on the university students: it allows them to see what happens inside these closed spaces, spaces that are regulated by laws (laws which dictate punishments and precautionary measures, or alternative measures, etc.) and by internal rules that regulate everyday life in the prison. These rules are usually unknown to the students, as they are often undisclosed. On the other hand, the way students

interact with the young people at the institution has a profound emotional impact on the students. They learn to see the boys who live inside simply as people of their age, with different backgrounds and experiences, who share the same fears about the outside world and their future.

At first, the university students worked inside the theatre, a welcoming space that makes you wonder if you are really inside a prison; the mood inside the theatre makes it impossible to understand where it is located. The first two meetings with the educator and the coordinator of the education sector were an important learning opportunity both for the students and the minors in prison. The latter were admitted into the theatre as of art. 21 of the penal code – that is, without the supervision of prison officers: the topics discussed during these meetings were really captivating for the students, who listened to the lectures very attentively. The first one focused on the legislative aspects of correctional facilities, while the second, sought to show what life in prison is like and illustrate the activities implemented to rehabilitate the boys who are detained at the Beccaria.

Things radically changed when some students started working inside the prison, even if they had already been told what to expect. From their log-books and what I had the chance to observe in the “blue room,” I detected a radical emotional change in them. This change is the result of a series of factors. First of all, they are asked to leave their phones and all their personal belongings inside the lockers at the prison entrance because, as instructed, all personal items must be left “outside.” After, they are faced with the gates and the clanking noise they make when they close behind you. After a long walk, they get to the “blue room,” where they can meet the minors who aren’t allowed in the theatre, the boys who are not even allowed to walk around the prison, without the supervision of prison officers.

While the theatre almost makes you forget where you are, the “blue room” gives you a real sense of the place you are in: a prison. Meeting the boys of the Beccaria inside the “blue room” is a whole new experience. That space has the power to alter your perspective on things. It’s as if the boys allowed in the theatre are not actually in prison.

During the workshop, students learn how to look at things with fresh eyes; they start asking questions and trying to find answers, and they change the way they interact with people who are different from them. Everyone deserves a chance. “It’s easy to put things into boxes and pretend

everything's fine," a student writes in her logbook as she relates how important and emotionally fulfilling these weeks have been. Therefore, this workshop wasn't just a chance to put on a show or to get some ECTS, and an opportunity to think and to engage in a dialogue. An exchange that allowed both sides to change.

This shift in perspective led our students to see the boys at the Beccaria in a new light as they engaged and exceeded their expectations. This change is also reflected in the students' logbooks, where many express their surprise at discovering how deeply sensitive these boys can be. They were particularly impressed by the boys' ability to read and interpret Shakespeare – an experience completely new to most of them.

## What Happens Inside?

Interacting with the students wasn't easy for the boys in prison, but they soon got over their circumspection and decided to trust them. They started sharing their thoughts and opened up because, thanks to the way the setting was arranged, they understood the students were there for them and were willing to grow with them. The interpersonal interaction that was initially frustrating for the boys at the Beccaria ultimately allowed them to unlock their potential, thanks to the peer education system led by Giuseppe Scutellà.

Shakespeare. Romeo. One of the first things one of the boys said was: "I can hardly read this, how the f... am I supposed to understand this?." Well, it's certainly different from the elegant language you use! We laughed. The others were as puzzled as he was, but they had decided to trust the process. Even though working on such a difficult script wasn't easy, they did their best. Notwithstanding their cultural and educational limits – some of them struggle to read – the boys started asking for help and relied on the students, who welcomed them without judging.

All the boys were involved in the task, even those who could hardly speak Italian, and the students made sure everyone could contribute. There was an Albanian boy who didn't speak a word of Italian; but one of the students just happened to be from his country, and not only did she help him get involved, but she also managed to teach him part of the script; she became the go-to girl for him. It's clear how important the workshop and theatre in

general were for the boys. The script is full of words or expressions which can be difficult to grasp, so being in a group makes learning easier. This collective work can trigger a positive response, and help the boys become really passionate about these texts. Thanks to this workshop, they had a chance to work on texts they would have never read on their own or would have probably not been interested in, had they studied them at school. The cathartic power of theatre is not the only thing that makes it the perfect activity for these boys. It can also be an opportunity to find new interests and motivations, a perfect example of “Situated Learning.”

The boys and girls who took part in the workshop chose each other and bonded spontaneously but always under the supervision of the leaders, who acted as facilitators or mediators of this experience. This working method was pivotal for acquiring linguistic skills, especially for the non-Italians. For them, the workshop provided a chance to master the Italian language and learn how to write and communicate. What is even more staggering is that these boys showed a sincere interest in reaching those goals set by the adults they worked with. They learned to read and write, to enjoy positive interaction with the adults, with their peers and with the students, and to develop social skills and self-control because they felt it necessary; something changed that made them see all of this as a necessity and not just as an obligation imposed by the educators. They were willing to learn, read, and get to the workshop knowing their lines and not just the first ones. They wanted to find out more about the play and its cultural background. They put a lot of effort into looking good: they were always smart and clean. They were curious and asked students what they were doing at university, and they were surprised to learn that sometimes the students spent more than eight hours a day studying. So, they looked at each other, giggling and saying they would never be able to do that. But then, they spent the whole evening and sometimes even part of the night studying the script in their cell and asking the officer not to turn off the lights.

This experience was precious. It was an occasion to learn more about these boys. It allowed me to observe the acquisition process that allows them to develop new abilities and social skills from the people they work with, something which is hard to observe in other activities.

The workshop ran from 27 October to 1 December, every Tuesday (in the afternoon and sometimes in the evening) and Saturday (all day). It was

a rather short period, but full of emotion and ideas. The final performance was an opportunity to get closer to these boys and to assess the value of the expression “obeying the law” through Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*.

## Logbooks

Saturday at the theatre: creative and fun moments, when I felt we were doing something valuable from the very first moment.

Tuesday in prison: the mood is different. We go from being happy to feeling hopeless and giving up. It is as if nothing could be done.

I have so many questions. I wish I could see these boys and get a sense of who they are. They are indeed young, and they shouldn't be affected by their past mistakes. But it is also impossible to pretend they did nothing.

Ilaria Greppi, 1 December

The Puntozero association plays a significant role in these boys' lives. It teaches them how to love themselves and their former life that betrayed them. And I think there's nothing better than this. Everyone should have a second chance, because humans make mistakes, and we can learn a lot from our mistakes.

Khristina Karabin, 1 December

Since my house is not far from the prison, I decided to go there by bike one day, and I took it inside the theatre.

At the end of the day, I was with Kristian, and I had my bike with me. As soon as he noticed the bell was broken, W. started telling me all about his work: he repairs bicycles. So, he said he would bring me a brand-new bell and adjust it with a screwdriver.

I was impressed and thanked him, but I would have never imagined he would do it! He thought of me and my broken bell.

Sometimes W. still texts me asking if I need some help with my bike. We became friends unexpectedly, by chance.

Letizia Ceriani, 12 December