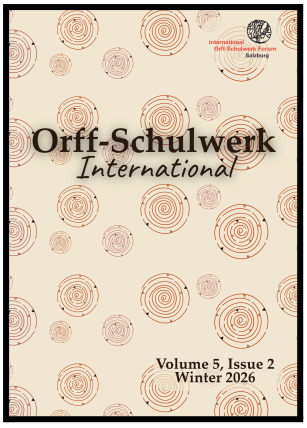
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Weaving Stories Together: From Personal Narratives to Collective Theatre

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Weaving Stories Together: From Personal Narratives to Collective Theatre

Panagiota-Betty Giannouli

Introduction

Today, there is growing international recognition of and debate surrounding the role of the arts in education. Through its World Conferences on Arts Education and related initiatives, UNESCO, together with the World Alliance for Arts Education (WAAE)[5] has consistently advocated for the recognition of the arts as an essential dimension of quality education. As stated in the Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education (UNESCO, 2010), a document developed within the framework of the UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education, the arts contribute to social, emotional, and ethical development. They foster dialogue, cooperation, empathy and intercultural understanding, while enabling learners to engage critically with the complex challenges of contemporary society.
It is within this broader educational and social vision that I would like to position the work I am presenting today. In this presentation, I would like to share a process developed within a university course in Theatre/Drama in Education of the Department of Early Childhood Education **/** National and Kapodistrian University in Athens.

Stories are central to this process, but my focus is not storytelling as an isolated technique. Rather, I will discuss how personal narratives become one of the threads through which a group gradually creates a collective dramatic performance.

But I would like to begin with something very simple. We all carry stories. Stories about who we are. Stories about where we come from. Stories about what we have experienced, what we have lost, what we hope for, and what we are still trying to understand.

But stories are never only personal. They are also cultural, they are social, they are educational. They are shaped by the worlds we live in — and by the worlds that have shaped us.

1. **The danger of a single story**

The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story* (Adichie, 2009) reminds us of something very important: when we hear only one story about a person, a group, or a country, we risk misunderstanding them. We risk reducing them to something simple, fixed, or stereotypical. And I believe this analysis can be applied in the educational context. Especially when we work with students who are training to become educators.

A future educator will meet many stories in the classroom: stories of children, families, bodies, languages, silences, fears, strengths, and possibilities. So, it is essential to learn how

[5] Organisations of WAAE:
IDEA – International Drama/Theatre and Education Association, InSEA – International Society for Education through Art, ISME – International Society for Music Education, WDA – World Dance Alliance

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to listen without reducing the other to a single story. It is the complexity that matters - the interconnections of the stories.

In the course I will discuss today, we use stories and theatre as part of a learning journey. Not only as techniques. But as a space where stories can be opened, shared, questioned, and transformed. A process where we can feel safe enough to speak. Safe enough to move. Safe enough to listen. Safe enough to create. A process that invites us to go further: to express ourselves artistically, to meet the stories of others, and to discover what connects us.

Why is this important?

Because very often, we believe that the difficulties we face are only personal, only individual. Only ours. We may even believe that we are entirely responsible for them. But when stories are shared, something begins to change. We start to see that what we experience personally is often connected to wider social, cultural and educational conditions. We begin to recognize not only our differences, but also the similarities, tensions and questions that we share.

Stories help us see and feel these connections. They help us communicate across differences—not only those that seem far away, but also those we meet every day: in our own environments, in our classrooms, in our communities. Even in communities that may appear small, familiar or homogeneous, there are many voices. Many experiences. Many stories.

2. Theatre in Education - Participatory Theatre - Applied Theatre

The course I am talking about is entitled *Theatre in Education: Pedagogical and Social Interventions*.

The key word here is *social intervention*—not in the sense of imposing meaning or directing participants towards predetermined messages, but in the sense of creating a space where participants can explore, question, communicate, and engage in meaning making around the social concerns they encounter as human beings and as future educators.
This approach draws on the traditions of Theatre in Education (TIE) and participatory theatre, which over recent decades have increasingly informed the broader field of Applied Theatre, encompassing a wide range of participatory, socially engaged, and often politically informed theatrical practices (Jackson, 1993; Jackson & Vine, 2013; Nicholson, 2005; Prentki & Preston, 2009).

These traditions remind us of theatre's roots in community and of its potential to function also as an educational medium and as a form of social engagement. In this sense, theatre is never merely representation. Following Brecht, theatre can be understood as a way of examining social reality, questioning what appears natural or taken for granted, and imagining how things might be otherwise. Theatre allows experience to be viewed from a critical distance, revisited, reshaped, and shared with others (Brecht, 1964).

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Like all the arts, theatre offers rich opportunities for expression, creativity and meaning making. What makes it distinctive, however, is its capacity to invite us into roles. By stepping into another person's perspective, we are encouraged to experience situations, relationships and dilemmas from within. In this way, theatre does not simply talk about empathy, it allows us to rehearse it. We begin to imagine what it means to stand in someone else's place, to see through different eyes, to question our own assumptions, and imagine different ways of being in the world.

Interestingly, a similar discussion exists within the storytelling community. In exploring the close relationship between storytelling and theatre, Wilson draws attention to the ways in which storytelling and theatrical performance intersect (Wilson, 2006). From a Brechtian perspective, this relationship can be understood not simply in terms of representation or character embodiment, but as a mode of performance that maintains a degree of distance and invites the audience to engage critically with the story being presented.

In a time when education is often reduced to the measurement of skills and the reproduction of dominant norms, theatre offers a different kind of space. Education, then, becomes more than the transmission of knowledge. It becomes a space where students can reconnect with themselves, with others, and with the world. This brings us to education as a human, social and political act.

I believe that the arts have a particular capacity to create such spaces, as I suggested earlier. I can speak especially from the fields of music and dance, drawing on my experience and on the work of colleagues with whom I collaborate closely at the University, such as Olympia Agalianou in our department. I also draw on collaborations in other contexts, including WAAE Congresses and several projects in which I have been involved. While our artistic languages may differ, we share many common concerns: participation, group work, embodied learning, listening, identity, and the creation of meaning through artistic experience.

In our pedagogical approach developed within Theatre and Education, storytelling becomes the starting point for the process of collective artistic creation, critical reflection and social awareness. Rather than focusing on drama techniques themselves, I would like to explore how the design of the process enables students' voices to emerge, meet and be transformed through theatre.

So, the central question of this presentation is:
How can students' personal narratives be transformed, through theatre, embodied and movement-based techniques, into collective dramatic material that cultivates expression, communication, collaboration, empathy and social awareness?
How do we weave a collective performance from personal stories?

3. The weaving process

The final theatrical composition develops gradually through a structured process. This is why I use the metaphor of weaving. A single strand remains a strand. But when many strands meet, when they cross, resist, support and respond to one another, a fabric begins to appear.

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The process unfolds through a series of interconnected stages: building the group, cultivating active listening and communication, introducing stimuli that invite personal material, recognising shared themes, transforming stories into body and image, improvising, testing, selecting, composing, performing and reflecting.

In the same way, the performance is woven from personal memories, objects, gestures, voices, silences, images, social questions, improvisations and reflective responses. Theoretical perspectives are present throughout this process, but they are not separated from practice. Dewey (1933, 1938) helps us understand learning as experiential and reflective: students do not simply talk about stories; they live, shape and reconsider them through action. Vygotsky (1978) reminds us that learning is social and relational, because meaning is created through exchange, voice, listening and response. Bruner (1990, 1991) helps us understand storytelling as a process through which people organise experience and construct meaning. And Freire (1970) allows us to see how learning becomes critical when personal narratives begin to reveal wider social conditions and open possibilities for dialogue and transformation.

3.1. Building the group - the safe space

The first step is building the group. Before personal stories are shared, the group needs a ground. It needs trust, attention, rhythm. A shared space. A sense that one can try, fail, laugh, hesitate, speak, move, and be seen without being judged immediately.

So we begin with games, exercises of trust, rhythm, movement, voice, concentration and collaboration.



Building safe space

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Building the group

The aim is not simply to warm up the body. There are always specific exercises for active listening, empathy and forms of communication. The following are students' own words, reflecting ideas that came up repeatedly over the years, in different forms:

> *"Through the games, we felt more comfortable, and a more collaborative atmosphere began to develop in the class."*

> *"We began to build a relationship of trust and cooperation, which are among the most important things for our course."*

3.2. Objects and imagined/true stories

Gradually, personal material begins to emerge. One powerful stage of the process is the work with objects**.**

Each participant brings a personal object. The object is first given to another participant, who is invited to imagine its story. Only afterwards does the object return to its owner, who shares its real story. The object functions as a mediator. It allows personal stories to be approached without immediate exposure. First, I speak through something. Then, if I feel safe enough, I may speak about myself. The object also becomes a bridge to the other. It carries memory, but it also invites imagination. It encourages us to enter, carefully and respectfully, into a possible world that may belong to someone else[6].

[6] There are several object-based exercises that can be adapted and modified to serve this purpose, provided that they foreground the dimension explored here. What matters is not the specific exercise itself, but the way in which it is adapted to bring this dimension into focus.

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A student wrote:

> *"When the time came to share the true stories, the atmosphere became serious and there was complete silence. Each story was unique, and everyone really wanted to listen."*

Another student reflected**:**

> *"I realised that every object is a treasure of memories."*

Here, storytelling is not simply narration; it becomes an ethical practice of listening. I imagine, but then I step back and receive the story of the other. I begin to understand that my interpretation is never the whole story.

This brings us back to Adichie's idea of *the danger of a single story*. Although each story is unique, many of them evoke shared experiences. What initially appears deeply personal gradually begins to reveal common human concerns and shared social experiences.

3.3. Life maps and personal narratives

One of the most important steps in the process is the creation and sharing of life maps. Through life maps, students begin to organise memory more consciously. They choose significant moments, places, relationships, losses, achievements, questions and turning points. They begin to see what has shaped them.

A life map, when kept private, is a personal document. But when shared with others, it becomes an invitation to listen. It creates a moment where personal memory enters the group space (Pammenter, 2006). Importantly, students retain control over what and how much they choose to share. They decide how many significant moments and how many details they feel comfortable disclosing. They are encouraged to remain attentive to the boundaries within which they feel safe during the activity and to participate only to the extent that they themselves wish to. This allows personal storytelling to become a voluntary act rather than an expectation of personal disclosure. Now storytelling has become a way of meaning making. It allows students to say: this happened, this mattered, this changed me, this is something I still carry.

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Drawing the life map



Life map journey

> *"The activity helped us understand each other better and brought us closer, because we shared personal stories."*

> *"I felt that theatre is a way to share your truth."*

So, personal narratives are not collected to be reproduced. They become material for exploration.

3.4. From story to body, rhythm and image

The next step is crucial: the stories move from words to bodies.
They become still images, gestures, movement patterns, looks, distances, rhythms, repetitions, silences, and spatial relationships. A phrase can become a posture. A memory can become an image. An emotion can become rhythm. Social pressure can become a group formation.

This is the point where stories become embodied storytelling. At this stage, specific theatrical techniques gradually become part of the group's expressive vocabulary. Through image theatre, improvisation, movement and vocal exploration we play, we observe what emerges, we keep what has strength, we reshape it and we try again:

> *"It was as if the first part focused on movement and expression of the body and face, and the second part on movement-emotion and expression of the soul."*

This reflection is particularly important because it captures something central to the process that repeatedly emerged, in different forms, in students' reflective journals: movement is not only physical. It becomes a way of reaching emotion, creating meaning and entering into relationships with others.

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From story to body and rhythm



Improvisation

3.5. From personal narratives to shared themes

Across many individual narratives, the group begins to notice what is needed to be heard; the fear of exposure; family expectations; self-determination; responsibility; gender and stereotypes; vulnerability; resilience; acceptance; social pressure; and the desire to speak and be recognised.

The question is no longer only, “What is my story?” but “What do we want to say together?”

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At this point, a story about family can become a question about expectations and autonomy. A story about silence can become a question about voice. A story about vulnerability can become a question about care, power or social judgement.

Video 1. Excerpt from Salomé Marguet's Documentary, Theatre in Education Course: Exploration and Reshaping.

In this sense, the process does not simply "use" personal stories. It enables participants to recognise how personal experiences are connected to wider social relations and cultural meanings.

One student wrote:

"The activity helped me understand how prejudices affect our decisions, and it gave the group a way to discuss these issues openly."

Another reflected:

"Maybe we become better people when we realise that everyone carries their own story, and that it could also be ours."

This is where the process becomes not only expressive, but also educational and socially aware. The story becomes a doorway to empathy, complexity and critical reflection. We can gain a brief insight into the sharing process, which echoes the experiential learning cycle described by Kolb (1984): doing, reflecting, learning, and applying. In this sense, the sharing process becomes part of a continuous movement between experience, reflection, learning, and the application of new insights.

3.6. Composition

We have formed smaller groups of five to six students. The final composition, developed collaboratively within each group, is woven from fragments: a phrase from one student, a gesture from another, an object, a still image, a shared fear, a silence, a repeated movement, a poem, or a collective question. These fragments are brought together and reworked to create a shared composition that reflects the experiences and contributions of the group.The final performance therefore does not reproduce the personal stories literally. It transforms them. Personal material passes through aesthetic, embodied and collective processing. It becomes a shared theatrical language.

At this stage, individual voices do not disappear. They are held within a collective form. Sometimes one voice speaks. Sometimes many voices speak together. Sometimes the body speaks before words. Sometimes silence carries the meaning.

Video 2. *Group Composition — Rehearsal Excerpt.*

This is why the performance is not simply an artistic expression, but the visible trace of a pedagogical process: from hesitation to trust, from personal memory to collective composition, from private experience to public theatrical expression.

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4. Reflective journals: what changed?

Reflection was present throughout the process, and the reflective journals gave students a structured way to return to their experience.

Through the journals, students could ask:
What happened to me?
What happened to the group?
What did I discover about myself?
What did I begin to understand about others?

What interests me is that the students reflected thoroughly on the whole process itself: trust, listening, hesitation, misunderstanding, vulnerability, collaboration, respect, responsibility and growth.

> *"Through the theatre course, I am beginning to discover aspects of myself that I did not know I had."*

> *"I liked that I could express my feelings freely without feeling that I would be judged."*

> *"We managed to create a space where everyone felt comfortable sharing very personal and moving stories."*

These reflections suggest that the process shaped how students perceived themselves, one another, and the world around them. They began to recognise previously unnoticed aspects of themselves, to encounter their classmates as people carrying memories, struggles and desires, and to understand how personal narratives can open onto wider social realities.

5. Closing: holding many stories in the same room

The synthesis brings together many of the elements described above: a story that emerges from sharing is transformed through collective creation, becoming a shared experience that brings individual voices into dialogue with the social realities of the world we inhabit. A similar process takes place in other courses, where students work with dramatic texts. Whether the story is personal or already written, the task is not simply to reproduce it. Students enter the story, interpret it, question it and bring their own perspectives to it through collective creation. Perhaps this is why, even when the process touches difficult memories, sensitive questions or social tensions, it rarely ends in heaviness. The process often leads instead to connection, relief, joy and hope, because theatre allows us not only to face experience, but also to transform it.

> Video 3. *Synthesis Presentation — Excerpt from Salomé Marguet's Documentary, Theatre in Education Course.*

And perhaps this is the fabric we have been weaving all along: not simply a performance, but a community of people who have learned to listen, to imagine, to question and to create together. A community that begins to understand not only who we are, but who we might become together.

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