

Veà Vecchi
June 22, 2012
NAREA Conference, Portland, OR

“Hopefully by the end of the three days you will have a more precise idea of the atelier, today I will just give you some basic points. I think that the title of the presentation can already help you to understand some of the meanings around the atelier. We often hear nowadays, much is being said about creative thinking, about teamwork, about research. And these aspects are mentioned and desired as assets, as positive assets, that will help advance human culture. Those of us who work with children and youth of today, I think that we need to constantly re-think these characteristics (creative thinking, teamwork, and research) and make connections with contemporary society. We need to experiment with these characteristics in a concrete context in order to exercise and train them, so they can evolve. So the mission of the atelier in the end is to be involved directly in project approach, and also to create and manage the context for the children to work in. In order to create, to produce, what we wrote already, in new visions, new interpretations. In talking about this culture, and the culture of the atelier, I’ll be talking about it not exclusively in terms of the atelier with young children, but also for all ages within the schools, but also out in the cities. It’s difficult though to talk about the atelier only using words, because the essence of the atelier has to do with projects and works being produced. The atelier is made up of thoughts, but also with actions and doing. Not only visual works produced, but also works of explorations of sound and movement with the body. In particular, and especially, the atelier has to do with the processes that lead to the production of these works. Loris Malaguzzi talked about the atelier as being an impertinent atelier; it’s a term that I like very much. It’s a place that’s guaranteed that knowledge and learning are taking place with the mind and the hands connected with the rationality and emotions connected. The atelier is also a physical place where products are conceived and produced, using different materials and techniques. Where the authors of these projects are the children and the youth, with adults who learn how to listen, teachers and adults who support the children and listen to them as they carry out their own research and listen to the questions that children ask themselves, teachers who try as little as possible to impose their own ideas on the children. Allowing the children as much as possible to be the protagonists of their own imagination and their own strategies for learning. It’s precisely because of the fact that nothing has been pre-fixed or pre-established, that the atmosphere is one of attention towards research that involves the children as well as adults. This kind of atmosphere creates what I call “cultural excitement” which is the excitement of the thought process. And this is very productive for advancing your thinking. It’s difficult, but it’s fun. It’s not easy to do, but you learn to do it. I’m going to just scroll through some images of work done by children of five years old, because this will kind of be the starting off point for some reflections: an angel made of wire, ceramic leaves, an investigation on the identity of a ray of sunlight, the mystery of a slanted shadow, the musical score that is the soundtrack for a crowd of people, a construction with the aid of digital technology. I could show so many other projects, some are simple and some are complex. Some

are done by individual children, some in collective situations. But there is one element that is similar for all these: What they have in common is that they are constructed by way of processes that move back and forth between disciplines. These boundaries and these disciplines traditionally are kept separately. Moving back and forth among disciplines is the natural flow when there is no attention paid to these boundaries. Without any fear of breaking the rules of a society that is often quite timid, breaking the rules of a culture that often finds a sense of security in these boundaries, these separations, that finds power in these boundaries and separations. This kind of separation, however, is contradictory to an actual, biological reality. As you all know, even the smallest part, has its own function, but they all work closely together. With all of our body and with all of our perception. All of this is taking place with a marvelous, and still somewhat mysterious connection. It's so important to keep in mind constantly this biological unity, and not betray it, to produce the best results- not just in education but every human endeavor. This way of thinking and doing things, this kind of cooperation, is very close to the way of doing that children have. Children don't separate the head from the body. They don't make thoughts rigid into discipline. Children have an empathic relationship with the world around them. The culture of the atelier supports this empathy. The atelier supports this because it's an important base for the ecological thinking that we believe is so necessary and so urgent. This kind of empathy in education is something that is an everyday aspect. It involves also just the smallest things. Even the simplest flower, not only because of its form as a daisy, not because of the formal aspect of the flower, but children's natural way is to also see this as a living organism. A living organism exposed to climate changes, to sun, to rain. Exposed to life, to change. The passing of time. In fact, the form is actually constructed within change. It's constructed within the pulsing of life. And it is where art and biology can and must co-exist. Intensifying the sense of solidarity towards that organism. Even a simple orange, you can be interested in its beauty through its changes, through different phases of its life. At the Loris Malaguzzi Center we have a display where we offer the children these series of fruits and vegetables, throwing in various phases of the changes. Where art and science live together. Where you find the beauty that passes through all of the lifetime of organisms. Bringing out very interesting processes for both children and adults. This is a quote from Gregory Bateson, which may be a little difficult but I think it's fundamental: "I hold to the presupposition that our loss of the sense of aesthetic unity was, quite simply, an epistemological mistake." If we don't have this sense of the pulsing of life with everything that surrounds us, then I think we've lost a piece of our own lives.

The decision was made in the late '60s in Reggio Emilia to have in each infant/toddler center and preschool an atelier along with the person known as the atelierista, who would be resident there. It was a choice then, as now, that was revolutionary, because it changed the conformist way of thinking of education, and the conformist way of looking at knowledge and learning. Having created a dialogue between social constructivist pedagogy and the poetic languages of the atelier, I think had an incredibly strong effect. Something quite subversive. In a very short

time after the original introduction of the atelier, the culture of the atelier came out of the atelier itself and began to suffuse the whole school. Obviously the atelier brought into the school certain techniques and certain culture, but had intense effects on all aspects of the school. One of the important contributions of the atelier, for example, was the attention to the physical environment of the school that we inhabit everyday. We carried out a number of different studies on how children inhabit the physical space. As we believe that this is an integral, and important part of our educational experience. It's important to feel well-being in a place, to inhabit a place with a good feeling. This conviction and this experience led us to carry out this kind of research in conjunction with architects and designers. Which led to the publishing of a book. The book gives a number of references and presents different environments, not only in Reggio, but also from other places as interpretations based on this way of thinking.

Another important contribution of the atelier, was the development of the observation and visual documentation of the children's learning processes. We often observe and document individual children and groups of children, looking at their learning experiences and strategies. We do this using different kinds of instruments. We use different kinds of tools and instruments for this purpose, but the important thing is that we are the ones that are constructing these instruments ourselves. Constructing a tool for a specific person means undergoing a very interesting process. Just a little piece, a fragment, to help you understand what I'm saying now: here are some columns built, constructed by children of five years old. You will find this also in the exhibit. The children's hypotheses for these columns, were columns that would be transformed by taking on a different skin. Each of these columns is accompanied by a working notebook. The books document the strategies of work and thinking that the children applied in this process. Here is just a fragment of the documentation regarding the rubber column. The children confront this problem of cutting out the pieces with a lot of courage and determination. It's not easy, as you can well imagine, designing these cut-outs with the right relationship between pieces cut and pieces open. Often they cut out pieces that fall off. They consult each other, try and try again, make mistakes, experiment with various strategies, and they verify their strategies. The final results are actually the result of a process that had a lot of trafficking going on. The teacher gave the children the time to realize the problems that needed to be confronted and to find solutions to them. To resolve the problems both as individuals and as the group.

In all the work with the children there are always surprises. For example, in this case, all of the cut-off pieces that were not used, rather than throw them away, the children put them together into a small composition, to keep them together. Children do not like scraps and throwing things away, as those of you who work with children well know. They like to keep things together and they do so in creative ways. What happens, usually, in cases such as this one is that a technique is taught to the children, and very often the children are also given the formal model that they are to follow. Teaching techniques to children, giving them a formal

model, it's not that it hurts them in anyway, and perhaps the final results in formal terms may be more or less the same- what changes most, perhaps, are the traces that remain in the thought processes and in the children's approach. Going back to the brain- in the recent issue of an Italian science journal, there was an article about the possible mutations that can be brought about by experience, and how these influence the brain- actually mark the brain. Let's ask a question, then. Imagine this question: What kind of traces are left from an experience of doing something in a rushed fashion, something that's not very interesting, as opposed to doing something that's very engaging and interesting and involves interesting processes?

Working in groups, as Tiziana mentioned, is also a typical way of working in our experience, in alternation with working as individuals. As you know, being able to work in a group, and working together, is an essential quality of civil society. Knowing how to work in a group, and contributing something of your own, and taking advantage of the richness of the contributions of others, from a very young age, is very important. Let's not confuse, though, children working closely together as children working in groups. In Reggio, in order to make this research and exchange and comparison an even strong element, we established the Loris Malaguzzi International Center, who's vision is to conduct research in education. The Center was constructed by a lot of hard work over a number of years, because all over the world, education isn't a big draw for money. Over time, the structure of thinking that's represented by the atelier, became the sort of trademark of Reggio Emilia. It extended outside the boundaries of physical schools to these other contexts which we call urban ateliers. Where we wanted to offer as much of these types of experiences, as much as possible, to citizens of every age, 0-99, 100. In places and experiences where we can experiment and keep creativity alive. The desire, the objective of this, is to try to maintain and preserve certain characteristics that are particularly specific to childhood, and to the atelier: Curiosity (we saw this in the video very evident), the intention to research, courage, empathy with the vital energy. The experience of these urban ateliers actually contributed in giving further vitality to the ateliers in the schools. This experience made it also even clearer the message that the infant/toddlers and preschools and schools for young children, are, and must continue to be, laboratories for ongoing research. I think that these ateliers that are situated physically in different places and are open to people of different ages are having an important impact on the experience of the ateliers within the schools. I think this will be clear when Frederica and Peter present the body and its dance to you this afternoon. We're at the end here, but I wanted to show you some examples of these urban ateliers so you could see what they are all about. Some of you may have actually attended or experienced some of these. There are ateliers like "Ray of Light" which is a large, permanent atelier inside the Malaguzzi Center, where the phenomena of light are investigated in this space between physics, optics, and art. A similar approach also in the atelier which is called "From Wave to Wave", situated in the hills outside Reggio Emilia, where investigations are carried out on energy, light, and water, by children and families, also professional development for teachers, to experiment with some of the phenomena produced in different environments. There are also some large and

historical atelier experiments, like that of Remida, the creative recycling center, that originated based on an intelligent intuition. It collects industrial scraps from about 200 different companies, and reinvents these materials creatively. Another atelier experience that we call Reggio narrates, is now in its 7th edition of its experience, just like the NAREA summer conference, and it's one that really involves the entire city, with lots of voices involved in storytelling. It's an interweaving of parents who've been trained in the art of storytelling, alongside professional actors and storytellers. All of these atelier experiences have also become nomadic, they can go to different places and cities. Like a Ray of Light atelier set up in a bookstore in Milan, also experiences of body movement and dance, which you'll see a bit later, or children and parents working together to create objects out of clay. I really like this image because they have three generations in this family working on making a vase out of clay together: the girl, her mother, and grandmother. These are small and simple experiences, but it's clear that the educational experience is transversal. We have some other very small ateliers that ... Amelia is scolding me she says I always go way to fast. So every now and then I hear her voice saying "Slow down!" Also important for the quality of life are all of the aspects of food and food preparation, flavors, and taste. This is an extraordinary opportunity for an atelier exploration, which we also have now at the Loris Malaguzzi Center. Other smaller atelier experiences, for example, some that have to do with mechanics and manual experiences, others for creating digital environments. They are contexts that, when you see them without people there, seem to be very simple. Certainly we can find in other places much more sophisticated tools and instrumentation. We think that intelligence and beauty is found in the experience of the group and the individual if there are those elements that we have been talking about. It's really interesting to see how people coming from different places, from different professions, come together and then make their own contributions to these experiences from a scientific point of view, from an artistic point of view, from a point of view of optical science, etc. Even a webcam, which is by now a very commonly used object, can become an extraordinary instrument when it's couched within a particular project. It would be a mistake to consider only the instruments and tools that we use, or the part that has only to do with performance, without thinking and reflecting deeply on the processes that take place using these instruments.

→ creative thinking, teamwork, research

I wanted to say something also about digital technology. Digital technology can conserve all the vital energy, the creativity, of children, if the approach to the digital technology is creative. I'll show you a small fragment here to show you what I'm talking about. Starting with the children who play with these characters that they so well love that have these special powers, and the children themselves want to have these special powers. Children investigating autonomously programs like PhotoShop can discover new possibilities. They can use these programs and launch themselves into new adventures. One of the functions of PhotoShop, for example, is called "stamp". And just randomly, this boy discovers a particular possibility. It gives him the power of invisibility. The same "stamp" function is used by a friend of his for a completely different purpose, multiplying all of his limbs, including his tongue, and the boy says, "That way I can speak many different languages". When

there's all of this discussion about using digital technology, and the risks and the dangers and all this, it just depends on the approach to these technologies. The important thing is to keep everything together. It's an approach that Tiziana mentioned, and that you have experienced as well, that the important thing is to keep a certain contact with things. The idea is that the culture of the atelier is something that is transversal to all (ages, edges?). We can see it even as a sort of virus that goes around and passes through and produces creativity. It comes out of the scholastic institutions, expands over the territory of the city, with the aim of spreading a culture that is attentive to the quality of the processes, which is counter to the culture of throw-away things, and that is against indifference, which is one of the worst... Attentive, rather, to always seeking beauty, because we need beauty, and the care taken in what we do, and the care of the environment in which we live. So I conclude with two images that are very dear to my heart. This is one from 1950, at a school in Reggio Emilia. I don't know if those of you are familiar with the great filmmaker Federico Fellini- perhaps you see some similarities. This image from 2012, there's a strong harmony between these two images. Both of them include the processes of play, invention, creativity, the pleasure, the joy, and the excitement of thinking, and this is what education should always keep in mind. It should constantly extend into the future, and this is what should be the task of the atelier."