

The *Atelier*: For a Richer and More Comprehensive Knowledge of New Cultural Visions

By Veà Vecchi

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In recent years, much has been said about creative thinking, teamwork and research as positive assets that will support the advancement of human culture. I believe that it is important for those of us who work with the children and youth of today to constantly rethink these concepts, and make connections between them and contemporary society. We must experiment with creative thinking, teamwork and research in concrete contexts so these dispositions can evolve. In the Reggio Emilia educational project, the mission of the *atelier* is to be directly involved in *progettazione*, and to create and manage creative contexts for the children so that they can produce new visions and new interpretations.

I would like to consider the culture of the *atelier* for young children within the schools but also the culture of the *atelier* in the city. It's difficult to discuss the *atelier* using only words because the essence of the *atelier* has to do with works that have been created. The *atelier* is composed of thoughts but also of actions and doing. Not only visual works are produced in the *atelier* but also works that include sound and movement. In particular and especially, the *atelier* is related to the processes that lead to the production of these works.

Loris Malaguzzi talked about the *atelier* as being an "impertinent *atelier*." This is a term that I like very much. The *atelier* is a place that guarantees that knowledge and learning are taking place with the mind and the hand as well as rationality and emotions connected. The *atelier* is also a physical place where products are conceived and produced using different materials and techniques. It is a place where the authors of these products are children and youth working alongside adults who have learned how to listen...teachers who support the children as they are carrying out their own research,

listening to the questions that the children ask themselves...teachers who try not to impose their own ideas on the children...teachers who allow the children to be the protagonists of their own imaginations and their own strategies for learning as much as possible. It's precisely because nothing has been prefixed that the atmosphere of the *atelier* is one of attention toward research that involves the children as well as the adults. This kind of atmosphere creates cultural excitement...the excitement of thought processes. This is a very productive atmosphere for advancing your thinking. This process is difficult but fun; it's not easy to do but you learn to do it.

The work of children in the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia is sometimes simple and sometimes more complex, it can be created by individual children or in collective situations. But what these products have in common is that they are constructed through processes that continuously move back and forth among different disciplines, which are traditionally kept separate from each other. When no attention is paid to the boundaries between the disciplines and there is no fear of breaking the rules of society, moving back and forth among the disciplines becomes natural.

Society often finds a sense of security as well as power in these boundaries and separations. This kind of separation, however, is contradictory to biological reality. As we all know, each part of the body has its own function yet body parts work closely together in a marvelous and somewhat mysterious way. It's so important to constantly keep in mind this biological unity and not betray it in order to produce the best results in education and in every human endeavor. This way of thinking and cooperation is very close to the way of children. Children do not separate the head from the body. They don't separate their thoughts into rigid disciplines. Children have an empathic relationship with the world around them.

The culture of the *atelier* supports this empathy because it is an important base for the ecological thinking that we believe is so necessary and so urgent. This kind of empathy in education is an everyday aspect and involves the smallest things. Children see the simplest flower as a living organism exposed to climate changes, to life, to change and to the passing of time. In fact, the form of a flower is actually constructed through change and within the pulsing of life. This is where art and biology can and, actually, must coexist, intensifying the sense of solidarity toward that organism.

Consider even a simple orange. You can see and be interested in its beauty through the changes in the different phases of its life. At the Loris Malaguzzi International Center, we offer children the opportunity to experience a series of fruits and vegetables shown in the various stages of life...stages

where art and science live together...where we find beauty that passes through the lifetime of all organisms, resulting in very interesting processes for both children and adults. I believe this quote by Gregory Bateson is fundamental to this discussion: "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 the sense of the pulsing of life with everything that surrounds us, then I believe we have lost a piece of our own lives.

In the late 1960s, the decision was made to have an *atelier* and an *atelierista* in each municipal infant-toddler center and preschool in Reggio Emilia. It was a choice that was revolutionary then and now because it changed a conformist way of thinking about education, of looking at knowledge and learning. This choice created a dialogue between social constructivist pedagogy and the poetic languages of the *atelier*. This decision was actually quite subversive. In a very short time after the original institution of the *atelier*, the culture of the *atelier* began to infuse throughout the entire school. The *atelier* brought certain techniques and certain culture into the school but also had an intense effect on all the aspects of the school.

One of the important contributions of the *atelier* was the attention to the physical environment of the school that we inhabit everyday. We carried out a number of studies on how children inhabit the physical space. We believe this is an integral and important part of our educational experience. It's important to feel well being, to feel good while inhabiting a place. This conviction and this experience enabled us to carry out this kind research in conjunction with architects and designers, which led to the publishing of a book titled, *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children*. The book presents different environments in Reggio and in other Italian communities as interpretations based on this way of thinking.

Another important contribution of the *atelier* was the development of the observation and visual documentation of children's learning processes. We often observe and document individual children and groups of children, looking at their learning experiences and strategies, using different kinds of tools and instruments that we construct ourselves. Constructing a tool for a specific purpose is a very interesting process.

In the "Dialogues with places" section of "The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit, there is documentation about a project called "If columns were...?" when four to six year-old children from the Diana Preschool constructed columns, inspired by a visit to the Loris Malaguzzi International Center. The five-year old children hypothesized that the columns would be

transformed by taking on a different “skin.” A work and study notebook documented the strategies of work and thinking that the children applied in the process of constructing each column. The book, *The Black Rubber Column*, includes documentation of experiences with some of these columns. In it, the children confront with courage and determination the problem of cutting out pieces of paper that would cover the columns. As you can imagine, it’s not easy to design cut outs with the right relationship of pieces cut and pieces connected. Often, the children cut pieces that became separated from the paper. The children consulted each other; they tried and tried again, made mistakes and experimented with various strategies; they checked and verified their strategies. The final cut outs are the result of a process, in which teachers gave children time to confront and find solutions to problems both as individuals and as a group. As always, when working with children, there are surprises. In this case, the children made a composition out of all the cut off pieces. Children don’t like throwing things away; they like to keep things together and they do so in creative ways. What is important is to document the traces in the children’s thought processes and approaches.

In a recent issue of an Italian science journal, there was an article about the possible mutations in the brain that can be brought about by experience and how these experiences can influence the brain...how they can actually mark the brain. What kind of traces are left from a rushed experience that is not very interesting as opposed to an experience that is very engaging and involves interesting processes? Working in groups is typical within in our experience in Reggio and being able to work in a group is an essential quality of civil society. Knowing how to work in a group from a very young age, contributing something of your own while taking advantage of the richness of the contributions of others is extremely important. But let’s not confuse children working closely together with children working in groups.

In Reggio, in order to make research and exchange an even stronger element, we established the Loris Malaguzzi International Center with the mission to conduct research in education. The center was constructed through a lot of hard work and effort over a number of years. Over time, the structure and way of thinking of the *atelier* has become a trademark of the Reggio Emilia educational project. The culture of the *atelier* has expanded outside the physical boundaries of schools to other contexts that we call “urban *ateliers*,” where we offer experiences to citizens of every age in places where they can experiment and keep creativity alive. The desire and the objective of this effort is to try to maintain certain characteristics that are specific to childhood and to the *atelier* ...curiosity, attention to research, courage, empathy and energy. The experience of the urban *ateliers* has actually contributed to giving further vitality to the *ateliers* within the schools. This experience has made the

message even clearer that the infant-toddler centers and preschools are and must continue to be ongoing laboratories for research. These *ateliers* that are physically situated in different places and open to people of different ages are having an important impact on the experiences in the *ateliers* within the school.

Examples of these urban *ateliers* include the “Ray of light *atelier*,” which is a large, permanent *atelier* inside the Loris Malaguzzi International Center where the phenomena of light is investigated through explorations of physics, optics and art. Another urban *atelier* is called “From wave to wave: *Atelier* of waters and energies,” which is situated in the hills outside of Reggio Emilia. Here, children and investigations are carried out on energy, light and water by children and families, and this *atelier* also provides professional development opportunities for teachers. There are also some large and historic *atelier* experiments like that of REMIDA, the Creative Recycling Center. This *atelier*, which originated through an intelligent intuition, collects industrial scrap from about 200 different companies and reinvents these materials creatively. Another *atelier* experience is called “Reggio *Narra*” (“Reggio Narrates”), which invites the entire city to experience many voices engaged in the art of story telling. This event is an interweaving of parents who have been trained in art of storytelling along with professional actors and storytellers. The “*Atelier* of taste” is an extraordinary opportunity for exploration in the Loris Malaguzzi International Center. This *atelier* is important for the quality of life because it includes all of the aspects of food preparation, flavors and tastes. Some of these *atelier* experiences have become nomadic; they have traveled to different places in different cities. For example, a “Ray of light *atelier*” is set up in a bookstore in Milan.

There are also urban *atelier* experiences of movement and dance in Reggio Emilia as well as one where children and parents work together to create objects out of clay. Other smaller *ateliers* have to do with mechanics and manual experiences, and there’s one for creating digital environments. These are simple contexts but it’s clear that the educational experience they provide is transversal. Certainly we can find in other places with much more sophisticated tools and instrumentation. But we believe that intelligence and beauty can be found in individual and group experiences, and we have found that it is really interesting to see how people from different places and professions make their own contributions to these experiences from scientific and artistic points of view. Even a web cam, which is now a commonly used object, can become an extraordinary instrument when couched within a particular project. What is important is that we think and reflect deeply on the processes that take place while using these instruments.

We see the culture of the *atelier* as a sort of virus that produces creativity, and expands from the school over the territory of the city with the aim of spreading a culture that is attentive to the quality of the processes. The culture of the *atelier* is counter to the culture of throw-away things and indifference. It is attentive to always seeking beauty because we need beauty. The culture of the *atelier* is also attentive to the care taken in what we do and the care of the environment in which we live. Education should always keep in mind and send into the future the processes of play, invention, creativity as well as the pleasure, joy and excitement of thinking. This also must be the task of the *atelier*.