

RADICAL PRESENT AND REFLEXIVE CONNECTIONS. DIDACTICAL APPROACHES TO ALIENATED SPACES

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Abstract

Our starting position is the observation of disappearing public spaces and due to that an increasing alienation in social structures (the global pandemic situation having accelerated this). From two different fields of pedagogy (philosophy of education and performative arts) we aim to set up didactical approaches that give a counterbalance to those tendencies. Especially growing possibilities and challenges of digital formats lead us to a pedagogy of the “Radical Present“. On the basis of our previous theoretical research and practical work in schools and workshops we want to discuss and apply concepts and methods of “Reflexive Connections“ and „Whole-Body-Performances“ as ways of initiating experiences in pedagogical settings. Anyone who shares the interest of finding ways of connection as a joint democratic idea is welcome to participate e.g. teachers, graduate students, masters or doctoral students, researchers and others (8-12).

Keywords: *Radical present, reflexive connections, spaces of empathy, „soft eyes“, experience.*

1. Coping with alienated spaces

Watching tendencies of fragmentation via (digital) social bubbles, alienation from politics up to narratives of post democratic times, altogether being boosted by biased algorithms and the present distanced living and learning in the pandemic situation, our didactical project ‘zooms’ in on the concepts of the “Radical Present“ and “Reflexive Connections“. To us as a theatre pedagogue and a philosopher of education it is a professional urge to work on theoretical concepts, didactical methods and pedagogical settings that give balance to those tendencies of alienation.

2. Forms of the radical present

The aim of this research is to find methods and concepts for pedagogical spaces of connection and reflection: with oneself, with each other and as a co-existence in a democratic community. We understand these as key aspects to deep learning and “Bildung“ based on theories of John Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno and Homi K. Bhabha.

Our pedagogical foundation is based on John Dewey’s idea of democracy not only being a form of government, but furthermore “a primarily mode of associated living, of a conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey in Bohnsack 2003:11). This idea is banal and complex at the same time. As it refers to the mode of humans as social beings, but also to the complex structures of difference. The dialectics of alienation and connection are, due to this a core aspect in the process of learning as enrichment.

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty stresses out the body as a phenomenon that materializes the past, present and future. Our concept of the ‘Radical Present’ derives from the combination of the body as a chiasmatic entity, but also from its fragility and mortality that points out the immediacy of any perception and cognition (see Merleau-Ponty 1966: 3-18, 91-96).

With the concept of “hybridity” the cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha uses from a postcolonial perspective almost arty approaches to topics of difference and negotiation as a mode of empowerment. The radicalness of his works is to be seen in the way Bhabha shows the connection between even paradoxical and asymmetrical power relations through the fragility and vulnerability of the human body and mind. Bhabha directs the view to ways of resistance and empowerment through cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic methods and strategies (see Bhabha 2002 and Hosseini-Eckhardt 2021:207).

3. Ways of reflexive connections

The didactical approaches of the “Radical Present“ and “Reflexive Connections” are based on three main criteria:

1. Working on human-personal relations in spaces of empathy

Through exercises of re-knowing and observation, we seek to build a time-space where knowing someone else is related to understanding from where (which perspective) we observe him/her. Sometimes we just need to hear a common story of his/her life, to start to empathize and recognize ourselves in an-other.

2. Initiating experiences

From a theatrical and performance pedagogy point of view, we can say that the purpose is not to "teach something" but to initiate "experiences".

Every action, such as walking in a room or describing an object, are opportunities to re-discover how we learn, who we are in a particular group of people or at a specific moment in time.

3. Exercising philosophical watching: “Soft Eyes”

Connecting these ‘here and now‘ situations to abstract levels of community and society by practicing ‘reflective watching’.

4. Methods of whole- body- performances

Based on the above concept this workshop will apply hybrid methods. This means a combination of experiments with “Body Performance” such as exercises of “Philosophical Reflections” for present and digital formats.

1. Here and now (1 min of your lifetime with yourself)

For the introduction we apply methods of the choreographer Mary Overlie, inventor of the “six viewpoints” which is a structure for dance improvisation in time and space. It involves the awareness to work with: “Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement and Story” (Bogart, Anne & Landau, Tina:2014).

2. Radical empathy (3 min of your lifetime with another person)

The methods of the Radical Present are somatic (soma/body-mind) and are based on working with the previously mentioned "here and now" situations and then put them in function to another. That is to listen and try to understand someone from one’s radical present. On this occasion we will tell a corporal story -from of ourselves, -from our bodies. A moment of the radical empathy arises when e.g. a story is connected to a corporal experience and is communicated that way. Through this joint corporal aspect (shared vulnerability) others will be able to make a new kind of perception of this story and may even find an empathetic approach to the other person.

3. Physical imagination (Be in the body of someone else)

After listening to another person's story, we will do an experiment concerning empathy. We will try to put ourselves in the body of another person. Using our imagination we will narrate and present the story we were told to others as if it were our own story.

This experiment seeks the recognition of fragilities that bind us together as human beings.

4. Why (Philosophical reflexions of the Radical Present as a consciously experienced time):

“Soft eyes”

- What do I see when I look at something?
- What distracts me?
- How do I widen my view for a broader context?

5. Experience of dependence

To cope with alienation we need to take seriously the paradoxical condition that people are individuals and at the same time seek connection. For that we explore pedagogical potentials of the Radical Present in order to initiate conscious experiences of one's own dependence on- and responsibility for others.

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