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Alienation and emancipation at the university through performing arts

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This paper, co-written by three students and two lecturers of a master's course called "Arts-based Approaches to Research and Teaching", focuses on the way in which the performing arts can contribute to the identification and definition of a scholarly research question. Based on a discussion of the phenomenon of learners' alienation in formal education systems, and its restrictive effects frequently pointed out in the specialized literature, we address the problem of the opening towards autonomy in the definition of an original research problem. To this end, the article will (1) introduce our theoretical reflections, discussing the issues on the phenomenon of alienation, emancipation and creation of knowledge within the university setting; (2) explain the structure of the course, with a focus on the place of performing arts in the curriculum; (3) present three vignettes displaying three cases of elaboration and reflection by participant students; (4) offer a final discussion and conclusion on the potential of performing arts to "shake up" or "destabilise" the usual alienation experienced by students regarding the appropriation and creation of knowledge at the university.

1 Introduction

This paper presents the collaborative reflection of three students and two lecturers of a master course called Arts-Based Approaches to Research and Teaching, delivered at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. We explore how performing arts at the University may support the creation of an original research question by master students. More precisely, we explore the intersection between alienation and emancipation in higher education, through the application of performing arts in the process of formulating a research question for a master thesis. This question is explored through three reflective reports, three student vignettes that illustrate how artistic methods disrupt traditional academic structures and promote intellectual freedom. We argue that the course, based on the experience and discussion of short activities inspired by performing arts, creates a space for critical reflection and change, in which students can move more easily from alienation regarding scholarly knowledge to the capacity to engage with its creation. Formal education systems often foster a sense of alienation in students, restricting their autonomy in academic inquiry. This study presents the idea that engaging with performing arts can counteract this alienation, providing a pathway towards autonomy and the creative formulation of research questions.

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2 Alienation in formal educational systems

Alienation is a polysemic notion used vaguely in everyday discourse to refer to any process by which human beings become strangers to themselves and lose awareness of the relationships they maintain with others. Nevertheless, this lax popular usage retains some fundamental aspects of the definitions that originated in the field of law. Indeed, one of the oldest systematic meanings of alienation refers precisely to the juridical act by which a possessed thing is transferred, either for free—as in the case of a donation or cession—or onerously—as in a sale or exchange. The action of alienation can also refer to the loss of a symbolic good or a faculty, such as freedom, or the capacity to make legitimate decisions, as in cases of legal inhibition resulting from a judgment of interdiction (Bercherie, 1980). Alienation acquired its connotations of madness towards the end of the eighteenth century from the slippage of meanings, from the field of law to psychiatry (Napolitano, 2000). However, the recognition of the loss of certain faculties—in legal terms, of the rights to act autonomously—is parallel to a social process that first recognizes these capacities as a given right (Napolitano, 2000). It is precisely the shift from the *Ancien Régime* to the modern State which enables the emergence of the *subject of rights* (Bock, 2018). The alienated is, then, an estranged citizen, who has lost something constitutionally or socially given to them (Porot, 1984). The alienation of the spirit is nothing other than the aberration or disequilibrium that displaces the subjects from their capacity to act (Foucault, 2003). The mentally alienated subjects become strangers to themselves: if their faculties are not in agreement with their self, because they have lost them totally or partially, it is another instance that governs themselves. Thus, with the birth of the modern medical clinic, the physician makes up for or overcompensates the lost reason (Lantéri-Laura & Gros, 1987), while the legal instances must declare the alienation that has occurred to delegate the lost faculties to the judge or a third party. This is not only for medical reasons, but also out of consideration for social order and control.

In this medical-legal view of alienation, we can recognize the process of dispossession, by which someone is deprived of independent judgment and is subjected to expert diagnosis or legal judgment (Seeman, 1991). As a metaphor for this meaning, we find these ideas in Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and the works of Hegel and Feuerbach (Kojève, 1969). But it is Marx who deploys this notion, for the first time, with all its density. The notion of alienation appears in his philosophical writings (1944) and finally in his theoretical apparatus on the consequences for individuals of their relative position to the means of economic production. Seeman's work (1959, 1975) operationalizes the Marxist notion of alienation through a series of definitions of individual perceptions of the conditions of life. This approach allowed the development of different research traditions that referred to the notion of alienation to understand different social phenomena (Musto, 2013), and, in particular, the *processes of*

estrangement that take place in total institutions (Clark, 1959; Goffman, 1961; Kalekin-Fishman, 1998) and educational establishments, from a critical perspective (Freire, 1970; 1985; Pangilinan, 2009; Peñalonzo, 2002). This conceptual framework was also applied to examine certain processes promoted by modern formal education systems.

School alienation[1] has been invoked to explain the configuration of negative attitudes in students (Morinaj & Hascher, 2019). It is often referred to as a factor in explaining school failure, problematic behaviours, and enrolment dropout (Finn, 1989; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018; Mau, 1992; Morinaj & Hascher, 2019). It is usually associated with disengagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004; Kocayörük & Şimşek, 2016) and a whole range of attitudes of rejection and disinvestment from the educational institution (Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003; Calabrese & Adams, 1990; Castillo et al., 2003; Sutherland 2011), most especially during secondary education. In a sense, all these school defeats can be attributed to the alienating character of institutions that flatten autonomy and prevent the emergence of students' subjective, creative, and original qualities. The system of behavioural norms, evaluations and relations with disciplinary knowledge imposes the uniformity required by a system that must reproduce a type of citizenship per a general social project. Critical pedagogies have frequently criticized the rigid structure of formal education, which tends to reproduce fixed and dominant norms, therefore reproducing not only a type of citizenship but also a system of inequalities.

In the case of higher education, alienation manifests as the effect of knowledge regimes localizing knowledge creation only on the side of “experts”, incarnated in the form of professors, bibliographic corpus, or other authorised instances. The students must alienate themselves to these instances because that is where knowledge is “situated.” Although this is a caricature, it is constantly observed that in contemporary universities it is difficult to promote the emergence of a type of autonomous and critical subjectivity, despite studies on disciplinary didactics, creativity and critical pedagogy having put all their efforts into designing educational situations that enable the students as active subjects, knowledge producers, aware of their power.

Following Hascher & Hadjar (2018) we can see that works on alienation in educational systems can be categorized in three main types. On the one hand, studies on the different forms of alienation (Barnhardt & Ginns, 2014; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Caglar, 2013). Secondly, we can identify studies on the symptoms or indicators of alienation (Leduc & Bouffard, 2017; Tarquin & Cook-Cottone, 2008). Finally, a group of works refers to alienation in school as one

[1] We refer to school in a broader sense as formal education systems, regardless of level.

of the different social instances in which a transversal estrangement is experienced (Osin, 2009). The idea of alienation as a social problem persists in all these works.

Throughout the paper, we will use the term 'emancipation' to refer to the process by which students will reclaim intellectual autonomy in the university context, transitioning from passive recipients of knowledge to active creators. Alienation, often seen negatively, will be reinterpreted as a 'precursor' to this emancipation. The concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990; 1997; Marton, 2008), which we will introduce in our discussion, will refer to the ingrained behaviour and dispositions that shape student performance and attitudes in academic settings. We will argue that the performing arts will disrupt these patterns, creating a space for critical reflection and change.

3 Description of the university course

Our reflection takes place in the context of a master's course entitled *Arts-based Approaches to Research and Teaching* (henceforth ABA). The course was established circa 2021 to introduce master's students to performative methods in research and teaching and is offered as an elective methods-course in the interdisciplinary module of the core curriculum of the Master's in Social Sciences at the University of Neuchâtel. Although the course is delivered by two lecturers from the Institute of Psychology and Education, it is open to students from different disciplines, primarily in psychology and education, geography, anthropology, sociology, and migration studies. The learning goals focus on the capacity to discuss critically (a) the connections of art and science; (b) the uses, benefits, limitations, requirements, and functions of artistic methods in scholarly research, and (c) the uses, benefits, limitations, requirements and functions of artistic methods in education. The pedagogy is based on a mix of direct experience in practical workshops, presentation of key examples from the field, theoretical readings, and reflective analysis in dialogue. The course assessment is a short performance with a written statement of intent.

Our previous experience teaching this course has shown us something significant. As passionate teachers, researchers, and advocates of these methods, we must not underestimate the challenges master's students face. Many are discovering for the first time how to connect their artistic experiences with their academic studies and apply this new knowledge to their thinking and practice, such as using the arts in research or teaching. We need to construct with the students, step by step, the heuristic potential of these methods *and* their feeling of confidence to practice them. In fact, in the first edition of the course, all the students seemed to have enjoyed the course and were curious about this new topic, however, only a minority of them could make an immediate transfer to their concerns and research topics: most of them continued to consider these methods as an interesting

theoretical possibility, and preferred to produce a classical essay for their final evaluation (which was possible at that time). In the second edition of the course (2022-2023), we introduced two main changes: first, we decided to reduce the scope of the projects, topics and methods presented to the students, to spend more time on each of them, and to draw explicit links with their situation; second, we alternated practical workshops with theoretical readings and discussions. The students were invited to participate in practical workshops led by artistic experts in contemporary dance improvisation and visual arts, or to lead one themselves, and to reflect collectively on this experience. The course assessment was a combination of a short essay and a final individual performance. This time, most students commented that they understood the potential of arts for research and teaching better, gave personal concrete examples, anticipated the difficulties of using them in the formal educational context, and imagined relevant ways of exploring the arts in their research practice. For the third edition of the course (2023-2024), the small number of students allowed us to focus directly on the individual research projects of the students for their master's thesis. The course created a consistent space for critical reflection through dialogue, in which collective reflections followed either short introduction exercises focused on their own research, presentations of cases, reading of theoretical papers, or practical workshops (we organised two 1.30 hour-practical workshops delivered by two artists in contemporary dance improvisation and improvisation with objects). For example, we invited the students to go outside the university, walk, explore around, and take pictures which made them think of their research topic for them to comment on them back in the classroom. Then we had a general discussion on the role and potential of metaphors in scientific creation. The course assessment was a final individual performance, linked to the research question in progress in the context of the student's master's thesis. The next section reports three cases on the development of a research question. We include three vignettes from students, which serve as illustrative examples of how the performing arts influenced their development of research questions.

4 Developing a research question through the performing arts: three cases

A research question's development is the least parameterizable phase of the scientific enterprise. Identifying a field of problems and subsequently formulating an operationalizable question is a creative process for which there is no formula (Albright, 2023). Through the following three vignettes, we will try to illustrate how simple arts-based resources can contribute not only to the definition of the problem but also to the creative emergence of new insights and relationships between theories, practices, and biographical experiences. The three vignettes carry the subjective perspective of the students on this emergence process. In

this section, the reflection is inductive, drawing meaning from the personal journeys of three students as they navigated alienation and emancipation through arts-based learning.

Vignette 1: Children's Relations with the More-than-Human (Aneth Sacher)

Human beings often perceive their relationship with nature as a dichotomy. Our species has altered a huge part of the natural environment, destroying to rebuild, and reproducing landscapes artificially. Most environments we call "natural" have been modified and redesigned to be "like nature." This is one of the findings on which we can base the study of children and the more-than-human relationship, as it allows us not to idealize a "pure" nature and to consider the transformations conducted by humans.

This separation between humans and the more-than-human is so pervasive that we almost forget that we cannot live without the environment. Instead of being afraid of what surrounds us, and wanting to have control over it, it is important to get to know the flora and fauna that allow us to live and to consider ourselves in and with nature, rather than against or alongside it. Awakening the sensitivity and interest of a person, and especially of a child, can be achieved through observing the environment, but also through an understanding of the cycle of life.

As a master's student in social sciences, I have developed a particular interest in psychology and child development. Having played music since I was little and having an interest in the arts in general, I participated in the Arts-based Approaches to Research and Teaching seminar because it offered me the opportunity to integrate an artistic dimension into my academic career. Moreover, thanks to the professors, we had the chance to participate in the Scenario conference in Dublin (2024), where we discovered new and enriching perspectives. The practical workshops, the theoretical courses, and the conference allowed me to learn how to link artistic performances to empirical research and how to apply it in teaching.

My research topic focuses on the relationship between children and the more-than-humans. At first, I wondered how I could make a notion understood through the body, especially to children, so that the abstract would be accessible. I wanted to create a performance that most people could reproduce, with a certain freedom. Dancing allows us to emphasize different amplitudes, rhythms, tempos, movements, and more. Improvisation allows us to be in the moment and embody the experience.

Discussions throughout the semester helped me deepen my thoughts, particularly on the impact of human actions on the environment. For example, referring to the photo with the two feet (Figure 1), while we can walk on the grass, humankind creates artificial paths to facilitate our movements, which direct us towards an itinerary and kills everything below.

Moreover, the workshops at the Lokart (a local dance studio) enabled me to gain a better understanding of the role of performing art in higher education, as we were engaged in a fully improvisational experience through the body, and thus in a process of assimilation. Joëlle Valterio, a lecturer in dramaturgy, gave us the opportunity to improvise with objects and question their established use. This experience enabled me to think consciously about the usefulness of objects and how we use them. Being in the present moment means thinking explicitly about the world around us and approaching it with a new point of view; it also means realizing the constraints imposed on us by the environment, and therefore the importance of these constraints in artistic practices. Finally, during the detailed exploration of improvisation for collective creation with Simon Henein, I was able to grasp the phenomenon of synchronization between individuals, the importance of refocusing in and with our bodies, and the complexity of our senses (seeing, touching, hearing).



Figure 1: The two sides

The initial idea for my final project was to perform the various stages of growth through the body: I decided to represent five phases in the growth of an avocado pit. The first is dormancy, the second is germination, and the third is stem and leaf growth. The fourth phase is a metaphor for flowering and ripening, and finally, the fifth phase refers to the end of the plant's cycle, and therefore of the avocado pit (Figure 2). I put together a montage of pieces of music with different rhythms and tempi to highlight the evolutionary stages of a plant. Finally, I used the candle object to symbolize the fact that a seed, in a dormant state, even over an extended

period, can give and create life. In addition, the candlelight may reflect the botanical definition of dichotomy, which is not the opposition between two elements but refers to the “division into two parts […] giving rise to two morphologically similar yet autonomous parts” (Gola, 2014). This means that a plant never really dies. The improvised dance movements reflect the unique growth experience of each nucleus.

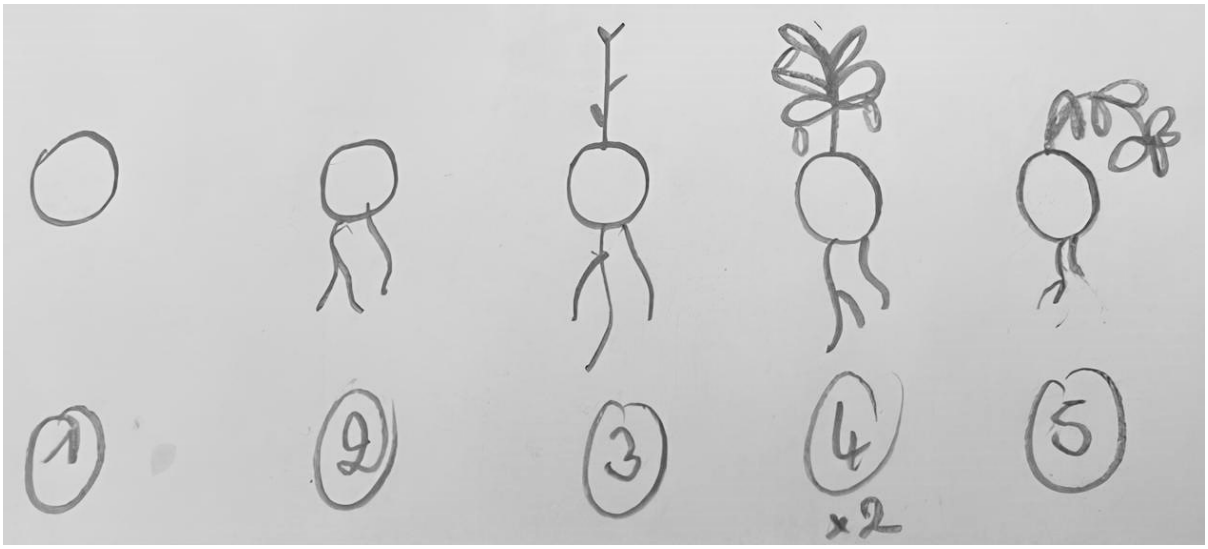


Figure 2: Five steps for a plant's cycle (Author's drawing)

For the final performance, I first installed avocado pits that I grew at home as they enable us to see how the roots, stems and leaves develop. I also prepared the music and positioned myself in the shape of a nucleus, as I think I can represent it with my body, with a candle in my hands. I started the music, and the performance began. It consisted of an improvised dance following the different rhythms suggested by the music. Through the dance, I tried to represent the separate phases of a plant's growth. Starting with the nucleus that emerges from the earth with its roots growing, then a stem that makes more leaves, which receive rain and sun, then gradually weaken, wither, curl up and return to the earth.





Figure 3 and 4: Avocado pits in the final performance

The observation of this performance develops the imagination and aims to bring to life a plant's life cycle visually and emotionally. Using the universal language of movement creates a bond of empathy between the individual and the natural environment and provides a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Thanks to the exercises throughout the course, I have come to realize that we are always performing and improvising and that we cannot do so without our bodies or cultural objects. This means that every action is guided by our knowledge and that we act according to unspoken cultural rules (tacit rules). Compliance with these societal rules depends on our representation of them. Through representation, we are not simply copying or transferring, but rather recreating the links between what we know and what surrounds us, thus creating new meaning and learning. Individuals build society but are also shaped by it. To represent a thing, an action or a movement is to move from the sensory-motor plane to the semiotic plane, for which we call on knowledge and various resources.

Vignette 2: Becoming Migration Policies (Anna Zolotareva)

The course was offered in the interdisciplinary module, and I chose it as an elective course, because I wished to learn some creative techniques for myself and possibly my career and research aspirations. My personal experience in arts is rooted in non-professional

performance and dancing. In my professional domain of Migration Studies, I came across use of performing arts as tools for narration about trauma. This technique dates to the Theatre of the Oppressed (Teatro del Opresso) developed by Augusto Boal (Boal, 1993). During my work in Lebanon back in 2019 I watched many performances made by non-actors, who received a training in the technique and founded theatre groups to collaborate with local migrant communities (Laban Theatre in Beirut, Shababic Theatre in Tripoli). I was surprised by how easily the performers transferred emotions and trauma experience on the stage yet kept it a safe space to live through the situation presented. Back then I realised how versatile performing arts could be and what potential they had in humanitarian sector working with vulnerable social groups. Therefore, I was motivated to explore arts-based methods in theory and practice.

For the final project I chose to investigate migration policies. In today's more diverse culture, the topic of multiculturalism (Taylor, 1994; Brubaker, 2002; Modood, 2016) is frequently referred to when dealing with integration. Some scholars (Kymlicka, 1995; Bouchar, 2011) raise questions of national identity and elaborate on the migrants' democratic participation rights. Others draw attention to migrants' marginalization (Koopmans, 2010). These heated debates surround equitable participation and access to services, goods, the job market, and social amenities is currently at the top of the agenda. Many scholars criticize discrimination of migrant groups because of their difference (Phillips, 2007) and condemn common narratives of "otherness" and "identity boundaries" (Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

The conflict between us and them heated by the power hierarchies plays a significant role in these disputes. State regulation is an important aspect of the governing machinery and control. Not only is the entry point a struggle, but also the full system of resource distribution and access to services.

In my study I intend to investigate how in daily lives, power hierarchies play into the migrants' lives and define their right for participation and sharing of resources. One of the challenges for me as a researcher is to look at the policies which are regulating thousands of lives without having real connection to them. As researchers we are rarely as much in the process as our objects are (be those people or policies). We tend to be outside of the process and have an extremely limited observational role.

Challenged by the distance from my research object, I tried to become this object through improvisation, thus changing perspective from myself being a subject 'the one who observes' to the object 'what is observed.' In academia text production is the result of research, as well as the main channel of knowledge transfer. Therefore, I was deeply puzzled about how to

dissolve from the generic format of production into an interaction with environment and space.

The solution to this required time and my honest decision to go for this new experience, offered by the seminar. The suggested structure avoided many examples and instead concentrated on learning through experience and interaction. This was implemented in three main steps: first, in the practice-based work we concentrated on the exploration of the bodily expression, space and object interaction. All of these were new to me - physical movement was always void of thinking, an opposition to mental activity.

Second step was to go on a personal explorative walk. I observed the flocks of various birds (sparrows, seagulls, crows, and pigeons) trying to get crumbs around the place next to the university. Their interactions seemed to be spontaneous and chaotic, but in a closer look were following strict hierarchical orders. Bigger birds were always getting access to food, while smaller ones had to be fast and even hide their crumbs to eat. Further, I was observing the spatial division of the area around the university campus - places of leisure, lunch zone, sitting areas.

The final stage was an individual performance. In the process of creation of my piece the most important, as well as most challenging, was interaction with objects, space and sounds, tactile experience. There has been a significant amount of visual evidence in migration research, which led to many strict terms and symbols which can be easily recognised by the audience. This has been one of the barriers while indulging in the arts practices, which demand an elevated level of abstraction from the common ground (Irwin, 2019).

Approaching scholarly research this way was completely new to me, coming from the academic tradition where the mind does the creating. It needed time to start hearing how my own body perceived and translated the environment around. I realized that new cognitive dimensions can be put in focus while the mind is not dominating the process. It does not exclude the mind entirely though. Its function becomes less dominating and leading, instead the physical experience and perceptions leading the process, while mental dimension registers the process.

Given that my thesis deals with heavily labelled terms like refugee, migration crisis, power distribution, I wished to avoid a mere replication of those. Instead, I focused on the interaction within the process and learning along with that: the idea was to become a policy and explore how it interacts with humans, migrants, and host community, how does it affect their cooperation.

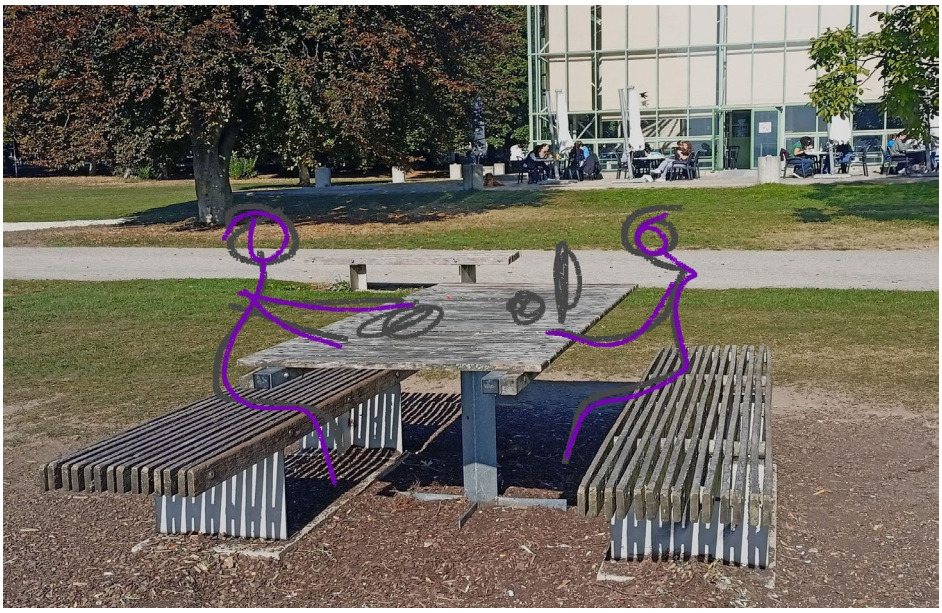


Figure 5: Table as metaphor

Choosing a form of performance, I aimed to set up the problem as a running process and become a part of the migration environment acting automatically, on someone's demand. My choice of objects was an entire improvisation, finding them in a charity shop. I decided to construct the performance based on their features, rather than looking for features for a predefined scenario. This way the objects made the story evolve. Placed on a surface they started telling the story (figure 5).



Figure 6: Rules of sharing in the final performance

The setting of the final performance is a dining room in a house, including basic elements, such as a table and a drawer of dishes (figure 6). The performer moves about the room, arranging

the table while presenting a story about the house's regulations. The setting demonstrates a hosting country with a clear social order, policies, and regulations.

Setting up the table, the performer indicates the existence of so-called 'sitting rules', which refer to discussions about migrant participation and civil rights. The performer discusses inviting others to the table, including migrants and foreign citizens. Not all of them reach the center of the table; others can only sit at the corners. The same concept is mirrored while serving dishes and distributing meals. Following this everyday cycle, the performer's discomfort increases with each subsequent move. He knows that the regulations in place are ludicrous. The dinner table scene is not just a tool of migration policy, but also a critical reflection on the 'sitting order', the 'rules' of distribution, and the difficulties they symbolize.

Vignette 3: Reflecting Environmental Influences and Freedom (Yemariam Abebayehu)

The environments that surround an individual—physical, social, cultural, emotional, financial—contribute to several aspects of a person's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth throughout their life. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights how these layers of influence interact to impact one's development, from immediate surroundings to broader societal contexts, and Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of one's environment on their cognitive, emotional, and social development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bandura, 1986). Therefore, the general idea behind my thesis topic is how these different environments impact a person's life trajectory, including their relationships, successes, and how they adhere or diverge from generational patterns. It would draw on Sameroff's transactional model, which frames human development as a mutual interaction between an individual and their context (Sameroff, 2009).

As a master's student in psychology and education, my academic journey has coexisted with my passion for art and performance. With a background in live performance, particularly spoken word, I have always been interested by the ways creativity and artistic expression contribute to and intersect with development. My academic and creative backgrounds are what led me to enrolling in the Arts-based Approaches to Research and Teaching course, which appeared as an opportunity to gain experience in how empirical research can be blended with artistic inquiry.

When I started the course, I was eager to see the connections between the arts and education as a learner and performer. However, I still had doubts regarding the actualization of said connections for the final performance project based on my thesis topic, especially since I was not entirely sure what I would research at the time. Since I was still figuring out how I would

approach the vague research question I had, the task of balancing research and creativity seemed almost impossible.

One of the course workshops involved a photography exercise were students had fifteen minutes to take pictures of anything connected to their thesis topic. After taking the photos, they were to present their reasoning behind their chosen shots to the class. My pictures were mostly nature shots; I chose different states and interactions between the elements in each shot. These images reflected my contemplation about how different environments— represented by these natural elements— can either nurture or hinder growth.



Figure 7: Plants growing in a designated space according to the assigned design.



Figure 8: Plants that are alive/dying/dead and growing in the same space.

The process of choosing these shots while thinking about the reasoning I would later present to the class helped me think of my research project differently and how it can be approached from different angles. For example, an individual could already be following a certain trajectory that they are comfortable with, and their external environment supports that. On the other hand, an individual could be attempting to follow a trajectory unsupported by their external environment. Both instances can be observed simultaneously in various settings, like the plants I photographed. Therefore, I chose to have my performance directed by the audience.

For my final performance, I prepared a list of ten nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs and put them into a small Ziploc bag. At the beginning of my performance, I set a timer on my phone to indicate to the audience that they could randomly select words from the bag at their own pace. The words that they said dictated what I did on stage. For example, the word “embrace” prompted me to mime a hug. If the word “reluctantly” followed, my actions and facial expressions would indicate that the hug I was giving was against my wishes. The audience provided words that prompted me to act out various locations, actions, and feelings.

Although I had already prepared lists of words to control my actions on stage during my performance, I gave the audience the power to inform me which words from these respective lists would dictate what I do. I knew what was available to me to set the scene, but my discovery of the order and combinations primarily influenced my performance. The words listed for me when the timer on my phone was running indicated how pre-existing conditions can control one's actions, thus either promoting or limiting one's growth throughout one's life. The time I spent on stage after the timer ran out was in an "empty" state as if I had just woken up from a fever dream and was trying to sort out my reality. This staging served as a reflection of how an individual can be influenced by their environment and/or changes to it, thus reflecting the research question.

The arts-based approaches discussed and explored throughout the semester allowed me to apply the same flexibility in artistic thinking to thinking regarding learning and research. Flexibility in artistic thinking, which involves openness to experimentation and the willingness to try new methods or techniques, translates seamlessly into approaches to learning and research. Allowing oneself to be flexible in one's creative process leaves the potential for a more profound creation because different angles can be explored and built on. This same concept also applies to one's learning process since there are various methods to retain information outside of a teacher-oriented learning environment. When it comes to research, flexibility is a tool to alleviate pressure or confusion when deciding on a research topic or research methods. Essentially, embracing the flexibility inherent in artistic thinking enhances the creative process and is an asset in learning and research, promoting diverse perspectives and innovative approaches to both.

5 Discussion

The preceding vignettes offer clues to recognize a process towards autonomy promoted using tools from the performing arts. First, it is possible to recognize a phenomenon of contrasts between different *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990)*:* the one that corresponds to the traditional academy and the one that comes from an artistic practice. This contrast highlights a distinct way of doing things in this course, related to an unusual way to produce ideas. Interestingly, all these aspects are observable thanks to the contrast with traditional educational and research practices. Unlike a traditional art course, where participants may feel pressure to master a technique or create a polished artistic work, here we see the emergence of a different type of pressure. The challenge lies in resolving the creative problem of formulating a research question with minimal predefined tools or guidance. That is why we believe these pedagogical strategies take on a special density when developed in institutions that are not normally centred around the logic of production and creation of the artistic field. The contrast

between two ways of inhabiting the university is possible because, institutionally, there is a preexisting framework on which to cut out a different logic. This allows for creative transgression, and a beginning of emancipation.

This effect of contrast between different logics of knowledge production facilitates the access to the consciousness of one's activity. And this is one of the key points tending to what a research problem is. The grasp of consciousness, as a process of meta-reflection on our activity, is an instance of distancing in the opposite direction to alienation. Meta-reflection supposes that one takes oneself and the context as objects for imagination and reflection; it is precisely this kind of decentration that is blocked in situations of alienation—something that in sociological theory in the Marxist tradition is reframed in the distinction between the class position "*in itself*" and "*for itself*".

But from the point of view of the subjects, a precondition is the internalisation of these two types of practices. This instance of alienation—the educational system in its known forms—seems to be precisely the necessary condition to promote the transition towards autonomy. Under the condition of making another world, with other reference points and rules, exist. From our perspective, the inevitable alienation implied by the participation of the social institutions of formal education should be a preliminary moment of a process leading to autonomy. The ever-present risk is to stop the movement at the stage of alienation, without providing the necessary institutional opportunities to overcome it.

As for the creative process necessarily involved in defining a scientific research problem, we know that it requires a playful activity that is difficult to achieve when the subjects are constrained by rigid institutional rules. The course offers the conditions for a double movement to emerge. On the one hand, a distancing from the tacit norms on the uses of space, body, time, and interactions with others. But at the same time, there is a focus on the quest for a topic, an interest centred on looking at the same phenomena from all points of view, like surrounding a mountain to observe it from all its faces. The teachers' focus on metaphors, used all along the course, adds to the dimension of play, of creative shift, fostering a diversity of points of view on the same object, connecting conceptual, kinaesthetic and aesthetic experience and thinking. Students take photographs and comment on some of them for the group. The reactions of the group, teachers, and peers, contribute to developing their thinking on their research object. The search, the capture, the examination of a photograph that makes sense in relation to the object of her research, that is, a visual echo of it, are moments of the elaboration process.

Furthermore, this playful attitude has another indirect benefit since it desacralizes the academic activity. The free exploratory attitude, close to play—especially to children's play—

removes solemnity from the activity and, consequently, lifts the barriers of criticism. When actions are no longer subject to evaluative judgment, a new repertoire of interactions legitimately emerges. In other words, ideas, and actions that might be deemed absurd, unnecessary, or misplaced in a traditional academic context have a full right to exist here.

Lastly, the course introduces an aesthetic dimension into the academic sphere that has two important consequences. As an activity of alternative representation of natural language, the arts enable the creation of new creative coordination between objects, ideas, and concepts. This new dimension is not driven by rational logic but by a sensibility that enriches it. In addition, the aesthetic dimension offers a field of possible new relationships between the experiences of the biographical sphere, theories, and scientific practices.

6 Conclusion

The performing arts provide a unique and effective means to challenge the alienation experienced by students in higher education and give impulse to a process of emancipation - first of all, by reconnecting the students to their body, sensations, and the environment, in a playful and aesthetic mode, then to their background outside of the university, whose relevance in the academic context is legitimated in this course. The incorporations of artistic methods into the process of research question formulation encourages students to explore new ways of thinking, seeing and relating to their research objects. This approach fosters autonomy and intellectual freedom, based on integration of various experiences, different regimes of knowledge production, and multiple vital concerns, shaking up the traditional frameworks that often stifle academic inquiry. Our findings suggest that the transition from alienation to autonomy can be catalysed through the creative disruption offered by the arts.

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