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Drawing upon my current work (*Applying Performance*, Palgrave) on the use of contemporary performance techniques in social and educational contexts, this paper explores a developing interdisciplinary dialogue between performers, psychologists, neuroscientists and health practitioners.

My study is informed by recent discoveries in cognitive neuroscience, particularly mirror neuron theory which has significant implications for applied theatre and performance. The relations between performer and participant in theatre can be theorised in terms of mirror neuron activity: ‘like a mirror image, the same sets of neurons are activated in an observer as the individuals actually engaged in an action or the expression of an emotion or behaviour (Berrol, 2006)’. There is a growing body of evidence that the mirror neuron system is involved in understanding intentions, in emotions and empathy, in language, imitation and theory of mind. My research uses mirror neuron theory to explore the relations between performer/practitioner and participants in applied theatre activities in social, community and educational contexts. By way of example, the paper focuses on an interdisciplinary collaboration exploring drama, performance and digital media as interventions for autistic spectrum conditions.

Autism is a condition associated with a ‘triad of impairments:’ social interaction, communication and imagination. Recent neurological research points towards deficits in areas of the brain associated with empathy and the imagination. Current interventions have shifted from traditional behavioural to contemporary behavioural and social pragmatic practices, particularly in terms of ‘early intervention’ with pre-schoolers. For young autistic children, emotional and intellectual development is dependent upon interventionist strategies to address the ‘deficits’ identified in the triad of impairments with particular attention to areas of joint attention, eye contact, symbolic behaviour and initiation of social contact. These interventions focus on the acquisition of social communication and (particularly in the case of ABA) academic skills. The Kent research project, however, addresses one of the fundamental diagnostic factors which distinguishes autism from other related conditions in terms of the imagination. The project draws upon recent research in cognitive neuroscience, particularly mirror neurons, to explore the possibilities of interventions which directly engage the imagination, creativity and symbolisation through the practices of drama and performance.
The programme of interventions are designed to help autistic children to compensate for the ‘triad of impairments’ through participation in interactive drama based activities which are experiential and physical; the activities create alternative mediated realities in order to help the participants to develop embodied understanding and to encourage emotional engagement.

The paper addresses questions about the relation between affect and effect in this work? (Impact, evaluation and aesthetics) and considers the ethical problems and challenges of using ‘applied performance’ with vulnerable groups.

Bibliography

(2001) The “shared manifold” hypothesis: from mirror neurons to empathy in Journal of Consciousness Studies