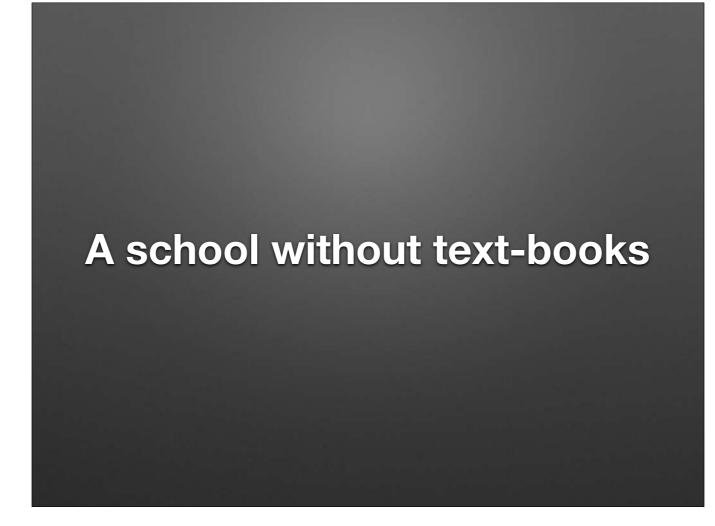


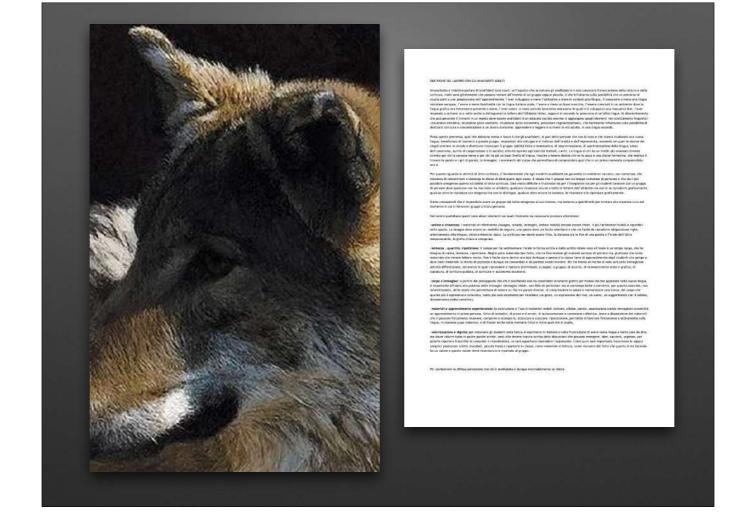
Asnada is an association composed by women with different formation and age. We work on migration and integration in Milan through two Italian language schools (one for adults, one for teenagers) and different territorial activities.

We've developed a passion on pedagogical research about heterogeneous groups and about teaching the language as a way to build collective, conflicted and free thought. Our work has political aspects, as migration is a political act too.

Here we talk about our work with illiterate people: not a method, but a permanent research. Our aim is to bring inside the school an alive language, significant for all the individuals composing the classes: teachers, students, volunteers.

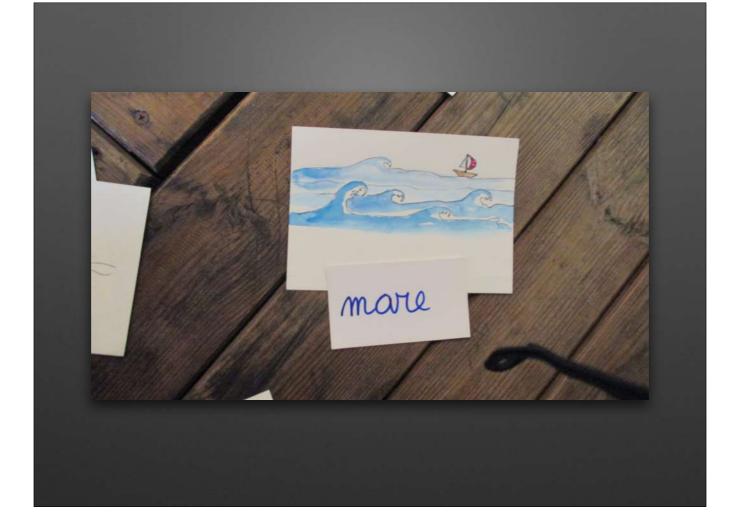


In our schools we don't use a text-book. We build our text day by day, with the words, the sentences, the short stories that we collect during the school year. At the core of the school-work there are the students, with their questions, their interests, their points of view. But also the teachers' and volunteers' interests and passions. How do we find them? Which devices help us?



Look at these pictures.

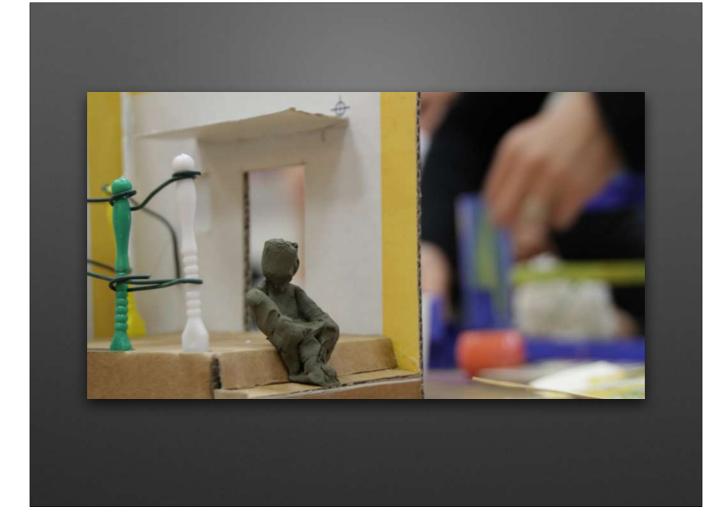
On the right we have a text, a human product. On the left, another human product, a drawing by an Italian painter, Marzio Tamer. The first one talks only to literate people: the second one talks to everybody - of course if you can see. It doesn't matter if you went to school, if you speak one or more languages, if you are, or you are not, clever. Everybody sees this wolf. A wolf plunged in the obscurity, here and there touched by the light, perhaps the light of the moon. He/she is staring at something: a prey? a puppy? an opponent male? The pictures talk to everybody in a different way and the words can help us to share this different points of view.



Pictures are very important in our job with foreign people, especially if they are illiterate.



Not all the pictures, obviously, because there are pictures that don't talk and pictures that are able to cause emotions, thoughts, words. Pictures that transmit only stereotypes, and pictures that you can use to build up a story. The experience of the language can start from here: sharing beautiful images and looking together for the words to share, the developing story, the emotions and the thoughts originated by the pictures.

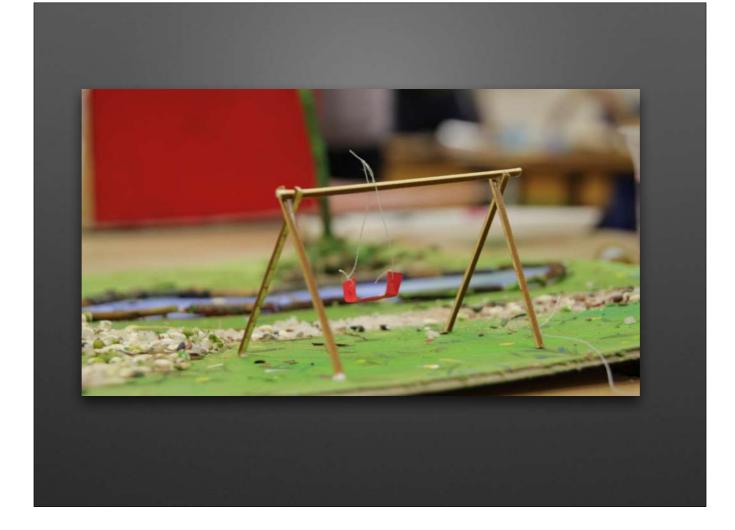


Another source are the handcrafts, which are able to speak also if we don't have any common language. As the Tamer's wolf, this little clay figure, sitting on the house step, tells everybody different things: the pleasure to be alone when everyone is out and the home is finally empty; the desire of some fresh during a summer day; the wait for somebody who's late...

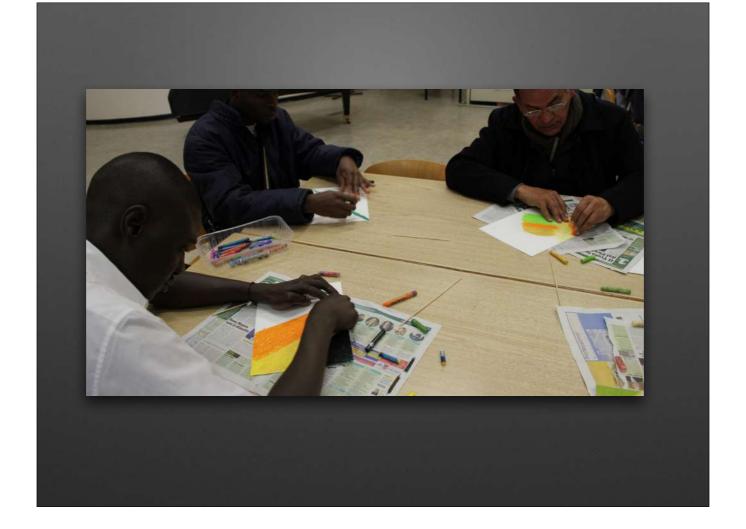
This is what Irina, that created this figure during a workshop, told us.

When I am tired, sad, when I desire the silence I sit on the house step and I look at the trees, the sky, the lizards or the birds.

We can't find these kind of words in a text-book of L2 language.



The pictures, the handcrafts but also the silent-books play an important role in our educational approach because they are one of the sources of the words that enter into the school. We use them with all the students, not only with illiterate people, because we trust also in the beauty, in the generative power of the beauty.



Sometimes the words come from the students, sometimes from the teachers, sometimes from the volunteers, sometimes from the discussions that we share on a specific topic that's interesting for the group.



In our schools, we work together for one hour every day: it doesn't matter the level of the language. We think that heterogeneity is the law of life and it can help to break the mental categories with which everybody classifies the others. The experience tells us that it is very important, especially for illiterate people, to participate to every school activity, also when it seems too difficult. Sometimes we discuss all together: with the help of paper stripes, of some students as natural mediators, of the body language. The group has the task of finding the way for everyone to understand, especially when we have to take common decisions: organizing an outing day, spending some money, arranging an event.



During this shared time, that we call "the circle", we play, we sing, we do theatre exercise.

We play because during the game the protections decrease and we learn with fun; we sing because the language belongs to the musical area and while we're singing we can learn without effort;

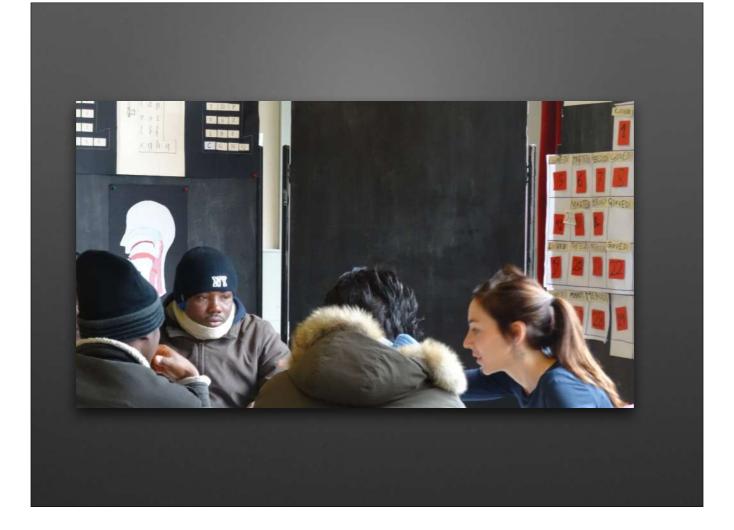
we do theatrical exercises because we also communicate with the body and the body can help us to become stronger and brave.

The circle is like a language-gym: a time when everybody becomes more attentive and sensitive to the others and to the whole group.



At a certain moment, illiterate people need to have a devoted space and time. A silent and intimate space, dedicated to five-six people. Sometimes we have one-to-one learning moments.

A space where the shame of the illiteracy can dissolve in a good relationship - an pedagogical relationship. A space where the individual learning rhythm can be respected.



In this time-space for the little group, homogeneity helps. The ones who already know letters have a hard time to wait the ones who don't; those who went to school lose their motivation if in the same class there is somebody who never had an education. And the ones doing much effort, is discouraged. So, if in the school group we prefer the heterogeneity, in the level group we try to assemble people with similar linguistic competences.

This is very important with people that never went to school: for them, learning the writing and the reading is like climbing a very hard mountain. They need protection.



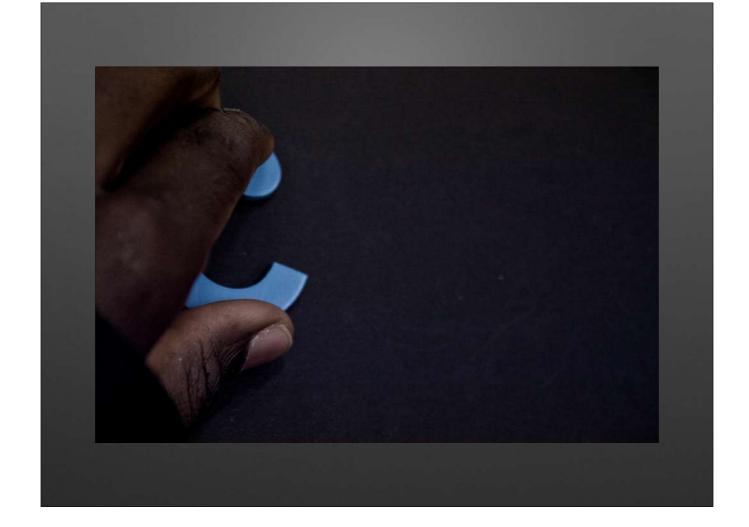
Let's come back for one moment to this picture: what can we say about it even if we can't read any single word or we can't understand Italian?

We identify a text with a title. We also see some paragraphs and some bold type words. All these elements are familiar to us, even if we don't understand the words and the meaning. Nobody feels any negative emotion in front of this picture. We know it.

This is not the case for illiterate people that never went to school. They don't have the instruments allowing us to organize our thought.

Teaching to write and to read also means teaching a way to organize the mind, it's a way that we assimilate since childhood and during many years of school.

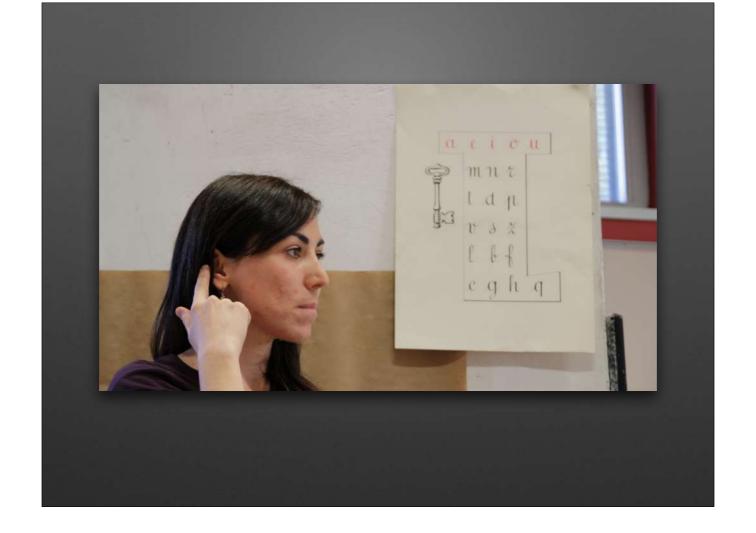
As Ivan Illich said, our mind is organized (perhaps we should said: we are organized) like a library. Expressions like "start a new paragraph", "wrap", "choose a title", "fullstop" or "comma", but also connecting the letters and separating the words, are some of the achievements that we, as teachers, must support.



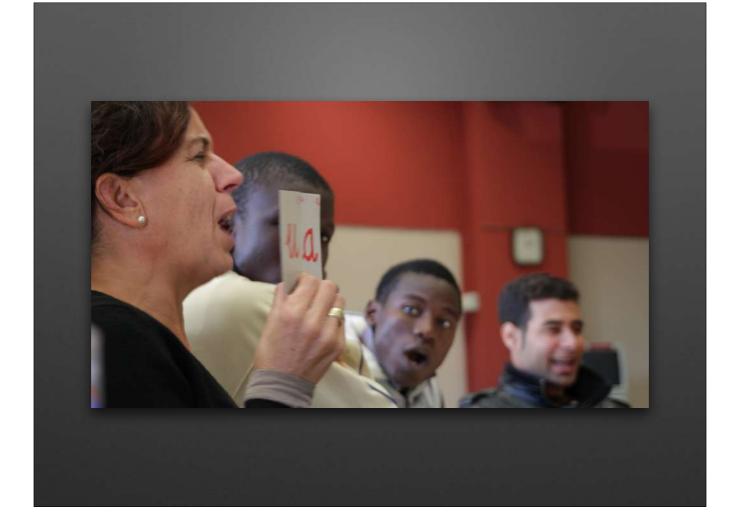
In the little/level group, it comes the moment when we go through the symbols and the sounds of the new language. Even in this moment, the body is important.



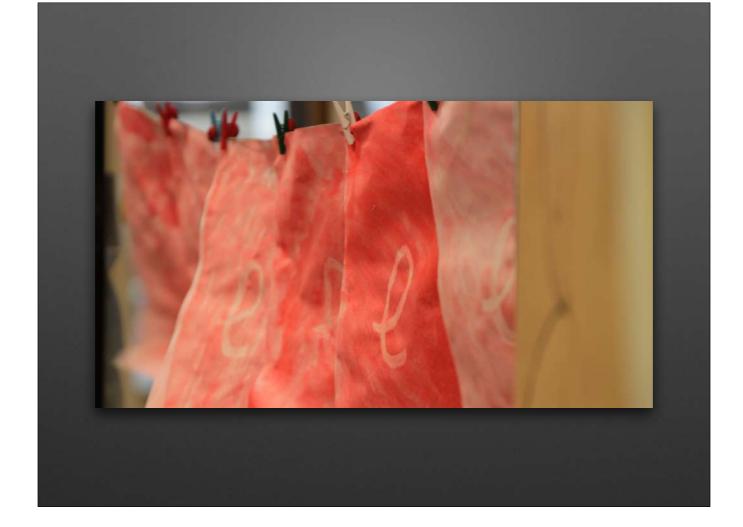
It is important to touch the letters, to discover their shape. Here you can see a Montessori tool: blue for the consonants, red for the vowels.



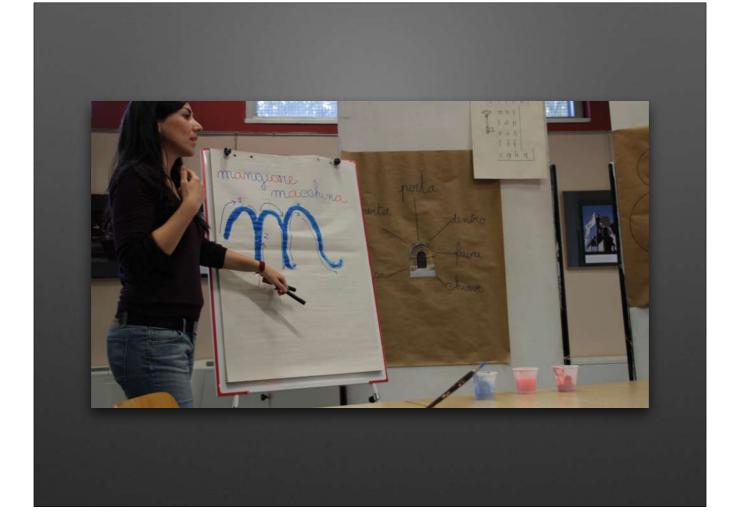
Every letter has a sound



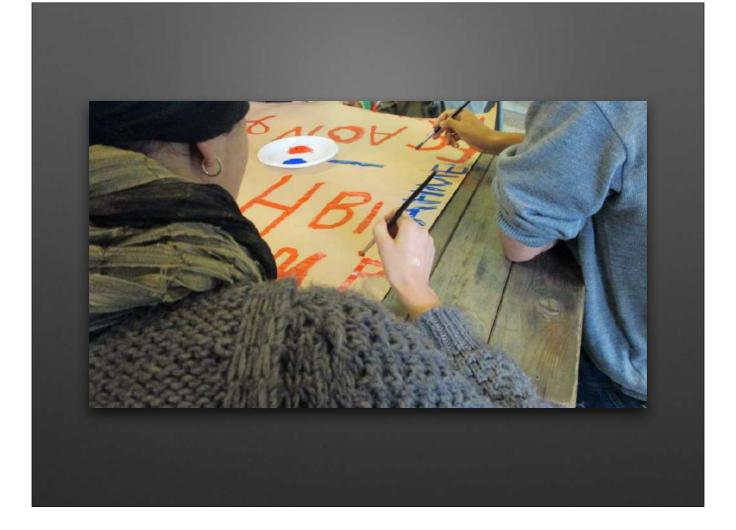
that can change when is connected to another.



Every letter can be discovered in a different way - for example, with a watercolor red on paper where the teacher writes the letter with a white wax-pastel, non visible at a first glance. It is important to vary the way of presentation and discovering of the letters: it helps the memorization and to avoid boredom.



Every letter has a special way to be written, a special movement.



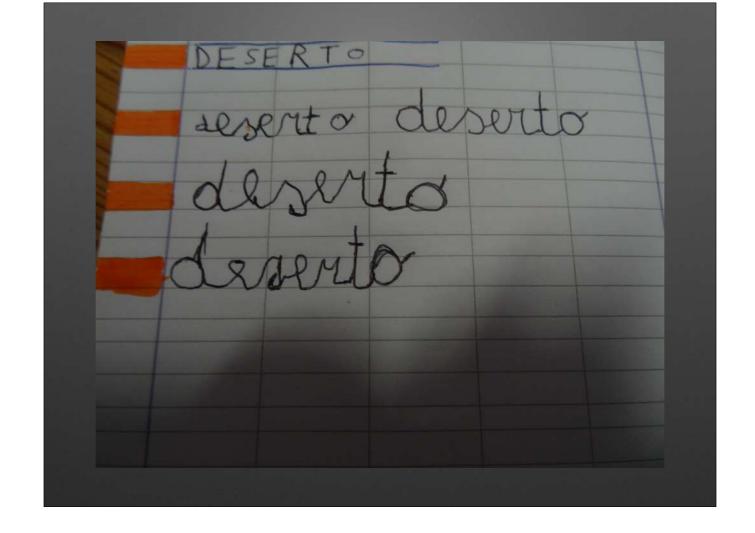
We start writing with a brush and tempera, on big paper sheets- here, Habiba is writing the letter of her name. Otherwise, we offer a tray filled with sand or with cornflour: writing with the finger is funny and simple. A little movement and mistakes disappear!



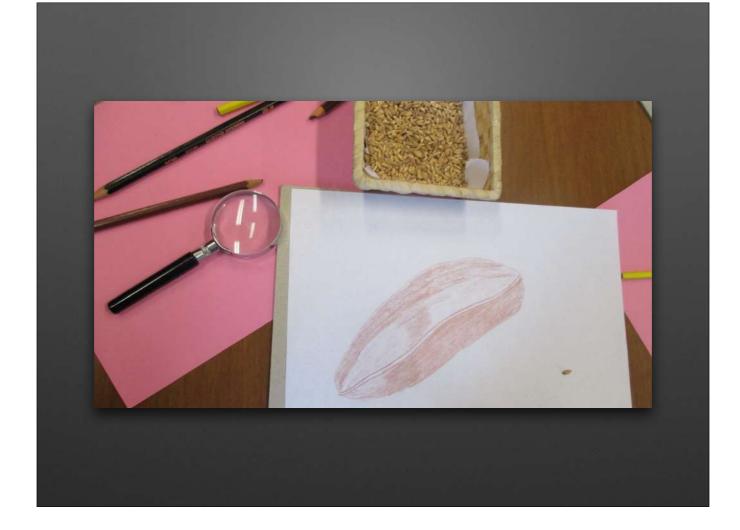
Only in a following moment we offer markers and, later, pens. Finally, the pencil, because it cuts the paper and it needs a good control of the hand pressure.



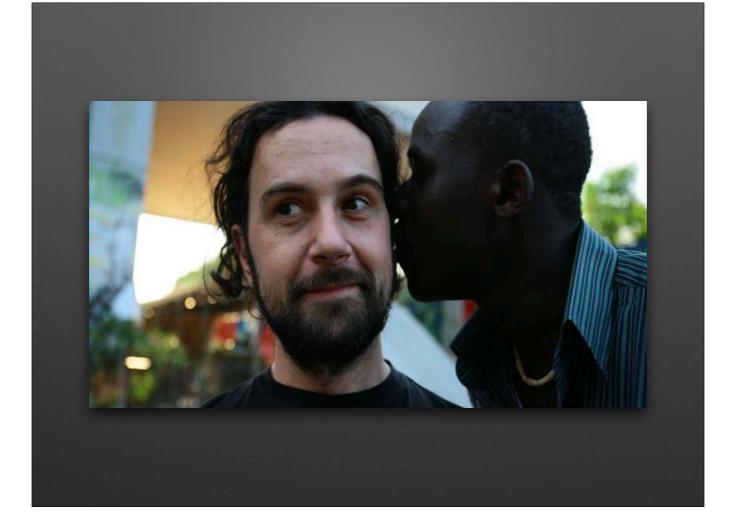
Slowly we discover words that are important to us



and we try to write them.



The strain of learning can be diluted by offering different activities, helping the necessary manual skills. Here you see a drawing of a seed watched through a lens.



Also the listening is supported by games: for example, by a "wireless telephone", in Italian but also in the other native languages.



In the experience of learning how to write and read, it is important to have a reason.

Why learning to write and to read?

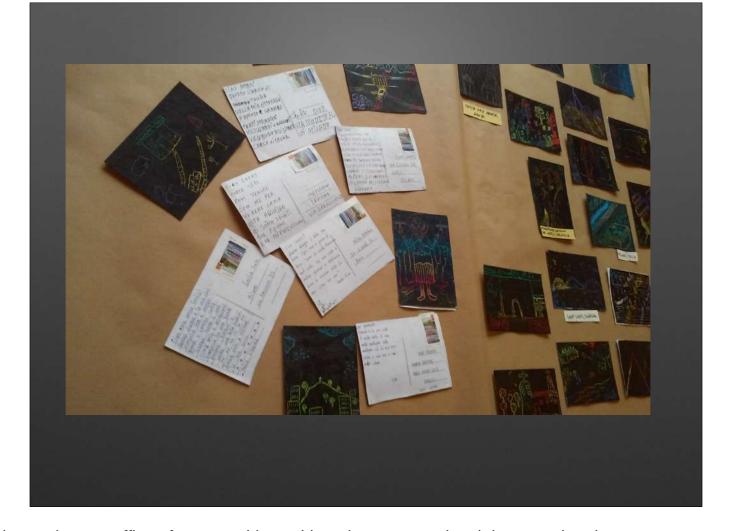
Emad, a student from Egypt, had a dream: to open his own bakery in Milan. He wanted to learn because he wanted to be able to read the needed documents. This was his reason.

Sometimes the reason is hard to find. But we have to look for it, because without a good reason nobody learns. So, it happens that we suggest some simple reasons, like:

to write sms to the family, to understand/to write a rap-song, to understand/to write the order in my next job as a waiter.



Or to draw and to write a postcard. Again a workshop, again an handcraft in which all the school group is involved.



Real postcards, obviously, that we bring to the postoffice after our writing, with real stamps, real recipients, authentic messages.



We can also build up a class-dictionary, where the handcraft is a very simple collage.



Or we can try to understand together why the "pils" (GDPs) of the countries, in the world, are so different. A good subject, for teachers and for students, engaged in the growing injustices.



These different datas can be made more evident with some three-dimensional graphics: the highest, black, are the United States; see the difference with Senegal, or Somalia! It is a good topic to discuss, isn't?



From the letters to the words, is a long way. Two years, at least, for people who never went to school.

These tools we've created inspired by Maria Montessori are helping us a lot: an alphabetic box where letters are divided in a specific order. Again: consonants in blue; vowels in red. In the last line the letters following some specific phonetic rules in Italian: c, g, q, h.



Beside the alphabetic-box, we've created this slat-board, a very simple and cheap tool to be made with some plywood - where the letter-cards can be posed. We use this slat-board to compose but also to correct words and sentences. Every student in this way can try one, two, three time, standing up, going in front of the others, asking for the others' help. Moreover, he/she can be active and learn by doing, using his/her mistakes in a positive way.

When the word or the sentence is correct, everyone can copy it on his/her notebook: a good feeling to have a shelter without the red-mark of the teacher!



This is how the words, the sentences and the little-stories grow, through a long way.

We care about every single trace of every single student. We copy them and we bring them to school the next day or week and we share them in the big group. It also gives occasion to read in front of the others, to listen to the others' thoughts, to overcome our shyness, recognizing the pleasure to hear our words kept with care. Time by time, these patrimony becomes the school text-book.



We hope we gave you an idea of why we talk about "the experience of the language". We want to finish sharing some things we have understood working with illiterate people.

The first: order and clearness.

Order in the room, order between the tools, order on the whiteboard.

Everything must be clear and necessary. Every sign non necessary is an obstacle.

So, the whiteboard must be the mirror of the notebook:

the line

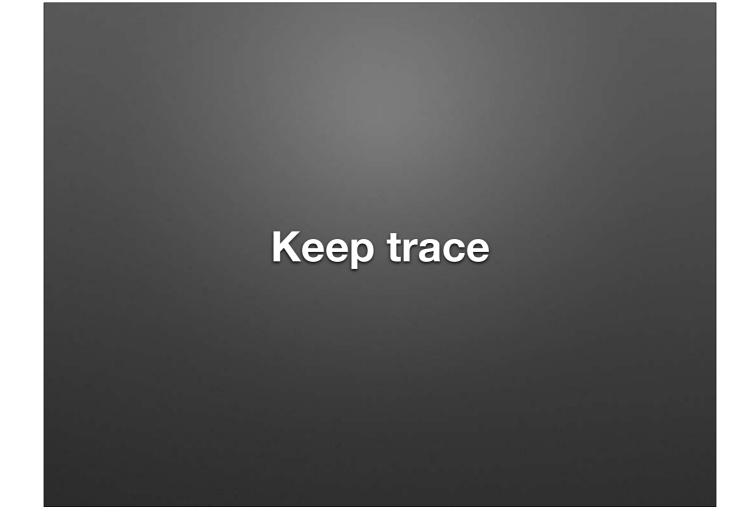
the new line

the edges...



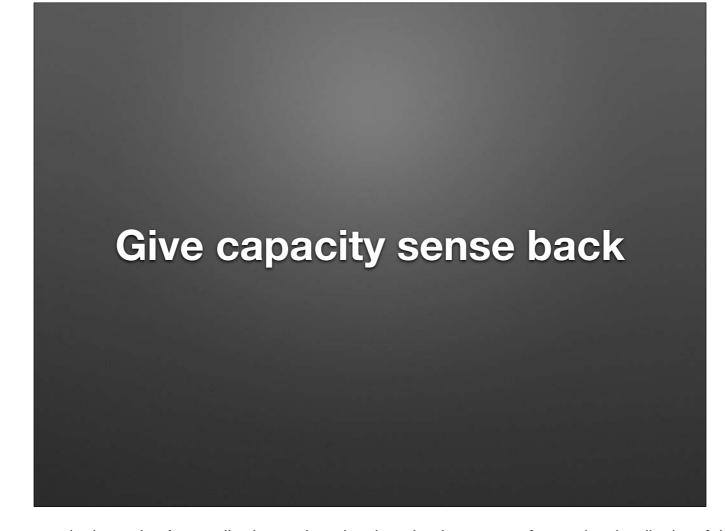
Slowness: the time is very important with illetterate people. We never have enough time; but we have to do as we had an illimitate time. The good time is the turtle-time. Quantity: do little, do slowly, do deeply.

Repetition: never get tired to repeat, using well-known old words, before introducing something new.



Keep trace of everything, obsessively:

- * every word (on little cardboards);
- * every sentence told by the students;
- * important pictures;
- * fortuitous discovering.



These traces allow us to give value to every single student's contribution and to give them back a sense of capacity, the dignity of their thought. Being illiterate doesn't mean being idiot. As a teacher, we must always remember that.



Finally, excite.

For every mistake, that helps the group understanding better.

For every advance, even if it is minimal;

for every contribution, even if it is minimal.

We need to be actors when working with illiterate students. Everything must be exaggerated, because the struggle is near. Supporting the effort is our first task.

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Thank you