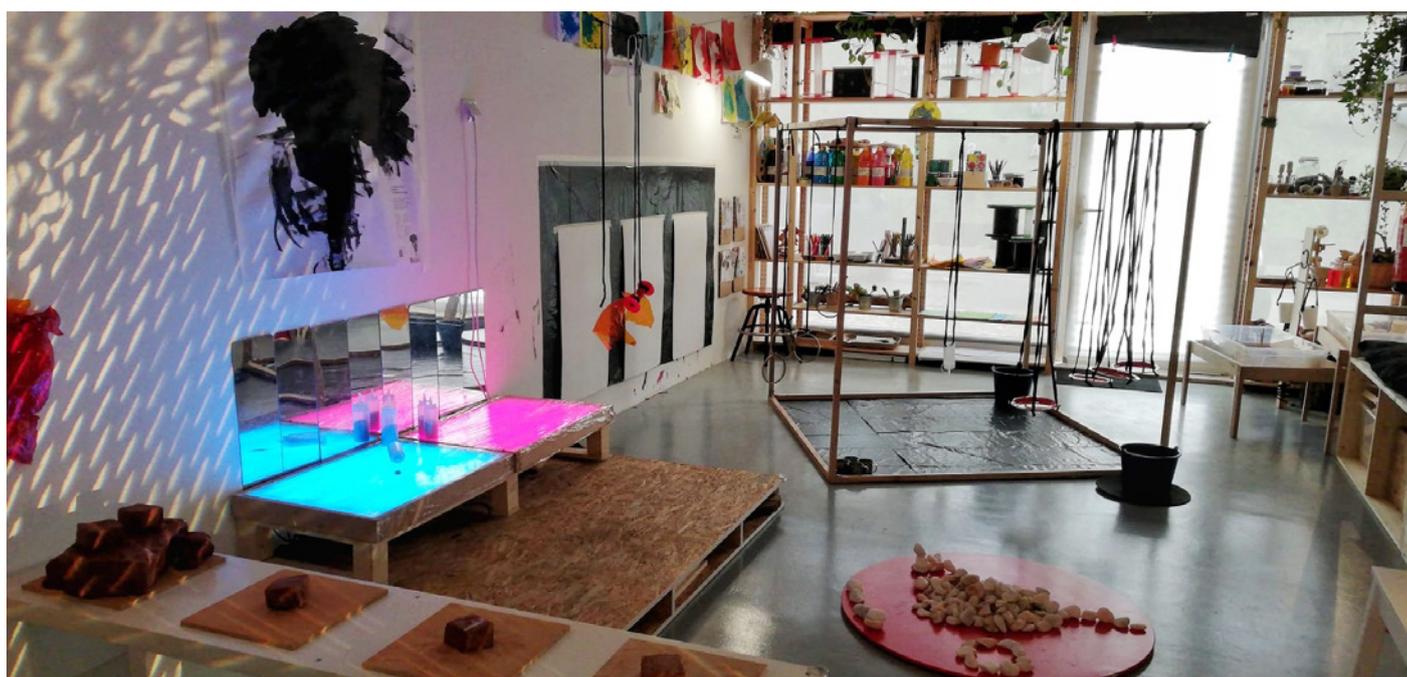


# A Reggio Emilia inspired Atelier in the time of social distancing

by Sara del Rio

The Atelier, as space for research and children's creative explorations, has a set of philosophical principles that are difficult to adapt to our new paradigm of "social distancing." Staying true to the importance of materials for children's development, my hope is that Atelier practices won't fall into forced adaptations that deny the essential rights of children. In this article, I explore these challenges in further detail.





The past few weeks, despite being confined indoors due to Covid-19, have been hectic. We are testing new procedures. We hope these will only be temporary and that we will soon return to life as we once knew it.

Schools are moving to online platforms. Those that are based on a ‘content-transmission model’ will continue to ‘transmit’ only changing the media. Other educational organisations adapt to technologies to ensure the collaboration and autonomy of students. Theatres and opera houses transmit live recordings and stream their programs. Museums provide virtual visits. Thousands of companies adapt to remote work, managing teams and projects through online platforms. Even some factories have adapted their production system to offer goods with increasing demands.

But even if it is temporary, I want to take the opportunity to reflect on how this Atelier, *Maria Brinca à Sombra* Atelier, can fit in with the shift towards social distancing while still maintaining its relevance. The Atelier is a significant space in children’s lives as it is a multiplier of creative possibilities, explorations

and knowledge (Gandini, 2012). It is also a defending voice of childhood culture, free play and active learning through materials and relationships. That’s why I believe this reflection is important because these spaces are not only relevant for the children and families who attend them – but also for all people engaged with children.

### The Atelier as a multiplier of possibilities

The Atelier is a space for collective thinking and research. It is not just a place to learn about art and artistic techniques. Children approach the materials with an inquiring spirit, questioning themselves while sinking their hands in the paint, hypothesizing while mixing colors, observing others while playing with clay. This thinking is done with the materials, of course, but it is also necessary to understand what is beyond the physical “space”.

The Atelier is the space, but it is also the people and the relationships they produce. There is a whole materiality but there is also a metaphysical side, which is beyond the materials and the “here and now.” I want the Atelier, as a practice of thought, to continue in people’s lives after they visit the physical space.

The objective of *Maria Brinca à Sombra* Atelier is to offer a space for research, experimentation and for the construction of individual and collective learning. My hope is to continue to use my role as an Atelierista and to offer new perspectives and challenges to the children’s ideas, to contribute to this multiplication of possibilities, even at a distance.

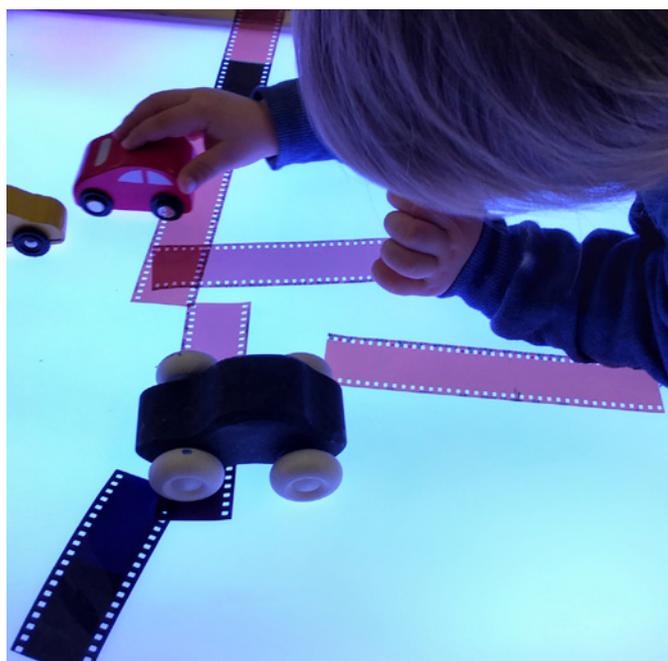
If we are aware of the importance of the Atelier then we have to find ways to continue to involve children in meaningful investigations, to provoke observation, interest and relationships. We must put the limitations of distance to work in favour of our objectives and values, and not against.

## The challenges of a socially distant Atelier

In late March, a new situation hit my Atelier space. The Atelier was suddenly closed. We don't know for how long.

**First challenge:** Maintaining the relationships with children and families that regularly attends the Atelier. For us, most of these families have attended the Atelier one or twice a week as part of a group session. Children are used to being part of their group and enjoy the social affordances this time offers. My first challenge was to create a new space for our meetings.

**Second challenge:** How are we going to make this work, taking into account children's diverse age groups? We receive children between one and four years of age. My second challenge was what is the best duration for each meeting? As well as what's the best digital platform to run the Atelier sessions on?



**Third challenge:** I do not want the Atelier meetings to offer pre-programmed or step-by-step activities for families. The internet is sufficiently full of ideas. I just want to be with them, to show that they continue to be important and be part in our Atelier group. We can do many things or nothing at all. The "what" mustn't override the "why".

The image we have of children will greatly influence the relationship that we will create through the digital platforms. Children do not need to be entertained. They have everything they need to entertain themselves. That is, to go to "a place rarely visited by children today – their imagination." (Brown, B., 2020).

## Continuing collaborative discussions during the time of social distancing

What new role, or roles, can the Atelierista have if we no longer have a physical space or materials for children to interact with?

The Atelierista is the person responsible for the Atelier, usually someone with a background in the arts. The Atelierista facilitates children's meetings with the Atelier's materials supporting them in their inquiries. The Atelierista observes the way each child manipulates and combines the materials and collects evidence about their interests, learning and development. Based on these observations, she (or he) will offer new materials and experiences that make sense within the continuous flow of ideas and concepts that are being explored by the child.

I have the privilege of participating in a weekly video call with a group of Atelieristas from around the world. Over the past few weeks, we have reflected on this new 'social distancing' paradigm. For example, we have been questioning what role the Atelieristas plays in an Atelier that is being facilitating through a digital

CONTENT	MATERIALS	TIME	PEOPLE	SPACE
Discover content through exploration	What materials are available at home	The two biggest transitions of the day disappear: home/Atelier/home	Maintaining relationships is fundamental	For relationships and for listening
Adult commentary helps children to reflect on their processes	What's their potential?	There's more time without interruptions: every moment may generate choices	Continue to share ideas and research possibilities in collaboration	For empathy
Non-traditional approaches with materials may lead us to practices	Establishing a relationship between things and ideas is how innovation start	Recognize and take advantage of learning opportunities when there is nothing intentionally prepared	Feedback from families in order to have continuity in the proposals	To think and make choices
Explore the multimodal perspective of meaning making	Learn to build knowledge with resources that are available	Create critical thinking habits not just during an "activity"		To satisfy the need for discovery and participation
				Of respect for the identity of each one
				Recognition of each individual as a co-constructor of knowledge
				(Rinaldi, 2006)

Organizing ideas to find their potential in this new paradigm.

platform. We have been supporting one another to rethink our practice with children and what makes sense within the current world events. We have given special attention towards the need to continue to value personal interaction and collaboration in the unique space of the Atelier.

Before the pandemic started all of the Atelieristas, including myself, would carefully prepare the Atelier's environment including selecting the materials and setting up a space for the unexpected and creative meetings (DiBello and Ashelman, 2011). So, what about now, that we no longer have the physical Atelier space?

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## The “what” mustn’t override the “why”.

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### Five ideas to take into account

I consider the following five principles as the foundation for the Atelier in a time of social distancing:

**Content.** The Atelier’s content is a core part of my intentional work. The content includes the relations between materials, children’s processes, ideas and thoughts. In the Atelier, I observe, document, reflect and relaunch the content over time.

**Materials.** The materials, which in the Atelier are selected and organized with intentionality in this paradigm of social distancing materials are unpredictable and not homogeneous. But in the Atelier, materials are not just a physical thing but also embody ideas and concepts. In a time of social distancing, material selection for online activities is difficult as I do not know what resources families will have at home.

**Time.** The time we will spend together and all the time that will, or will not, be influenced by these brief meetings. We can motivate a certain research and observation spirit during the meetings and hope that this will influence their interactions the rest of the time.

**People.** Children and families, with whom we will have a distant but close relationship, because we are available and because this is a collaborative effort. The way we are going to nurture this relationship is directly related to the new concept of space.

**Space.** Space is the “third educator,” as Loris

Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach tells us. And now, more than ever, it takes on a deeper meaning. The environment as a ‘third-teacher’ means the space is defined as a context of “multiple” listening that involves us all individually and in a group, where we listen to each other and to ourselves (Rinaldi, 2006).

### Strategies for a distance Atelier

Taking into account these five principles, I have been thinking about strategies to bring the Atelier to the children, if not physically then at least symbolically and of course, in a way that makes sense in our context.

So, I sent families the challenge to meet once a week for about 15-20 minutes through Zoom calls. These will be short encounters, but we thought it was acceptable considering the ages and the growing screen time, which is a concern in this phase of confinement, also because it is the chosen way to maintain contact with other people, specially grandparents.

Here are some strategies that I am adopting and constantly reviewing:

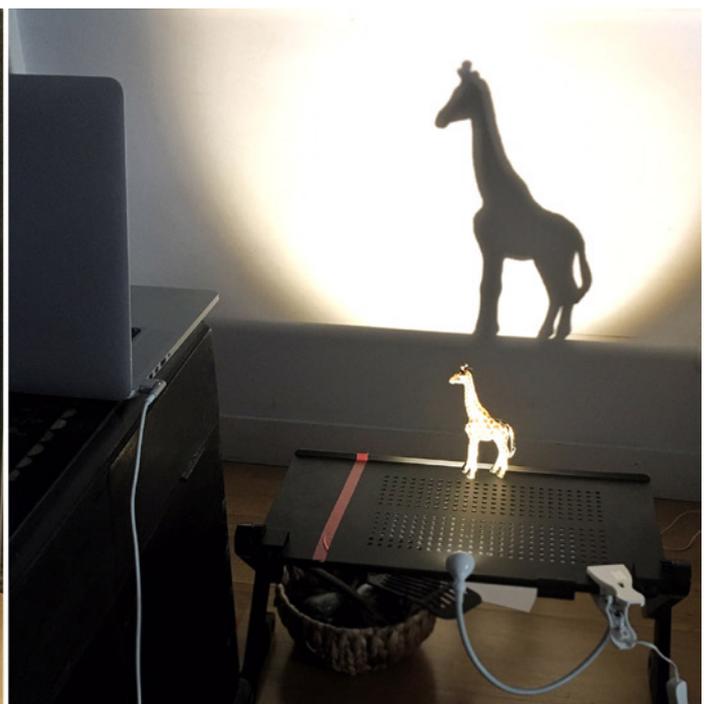
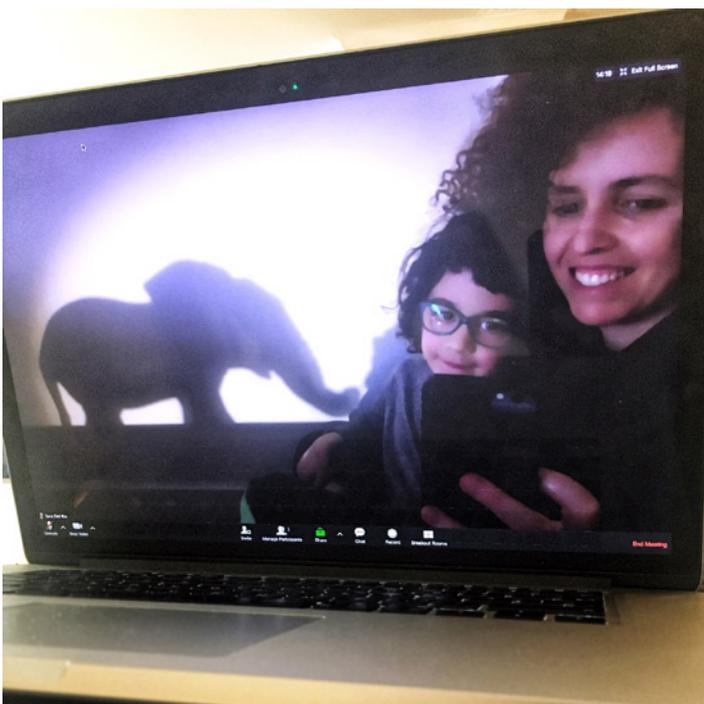
- I am making a reference guide of the potential digital resources that I can use. These resources includes screen format, placement, spatial relationships, screen shares, lighting, microphone. For example, I will show a material (e.g. a plastic animal) that we have in the Atelier and that they play with a lot. Instead of simply holding it in my hand, I can take advantage of the rectangular shape of the screen and show the animal moving along its four sides. By doing so, the screen’s edges suddenly takes on another meaning.
- I am also making a list of possibilities for exploration and how I can communicate this visually via video: for example, motivate observation and notice differences in something they have at home,

and that I have in mine, but with another format, color, sound, etc.. Motivating observation that may not only be outward, it can also be interior observation, borrowing some tools for reflection and questioning from philosophy with children to, for example, provoke the confrontation of ideas, dialogue and curiosity.

- To provoke children's imagination. Our brain is prepared to respond to emotion and through a narrative we can plant ideas, thoughts and emotions. A narrative does not have to be literary, it can be spontaneous, and arise from what we are observing at the moment, from a cause-and-effect situation. The metaphor, which we observe so much in the daily life of the Atelier, can also be an ally in this context.
- Always have an intentionality at the beginning of each video call. Taking into account what I know about each child in the group, their interests and motivations, I can prepare the experience in a more

meaningful way for each one and be prepared to adapt different paths depending on their response. This may contribute to a greater retention and appropriation of what was done, after the video call.

- Pay attention to the response time to have a balance between silence and voice. It is not necessary to hear voices all the time, in the Atelier, I even prefer that the voices of adults are not heard. But it is necessary to be aware that in a video call a longer period of silence can make them turn off the screen. And at the same time managing the mic time so that everyone can participate and be heard.
- How I will react to what they do or say in order to ensure interactivity? Perhaps using movement and sound. Interactivity can also be some cause-effect games, for example, me changing the position of my body, or of objects, depending on the movements or sounds they make, they clap their hands and I roll my head, they jump and I wrinkle a piece of paper, etc.



- Document, as far as possible, what happens during the video calls to make a bridge with the next call, to remember what we did and what we talked about, and also to have supporting material to suggest new interactions. I can also ask parents to pay special attention to some aspects of their children's play, or to comment on what was evident in between our sessions. I have not yet chosen the time and format for these shares but from experience something tells me that they will happen during the video calls. It's important to ask parents how can we manage this so that the video call is not all filled with "adult conversation".
- In addition to seeing ourselves, through the screen, we also see the mother, father, brothers, we see the house, we see the toys, we see each other in our private world. And this is different from being in the Atelier. We are going to bring more aspects of our individuality and that is fun to discover, makes us feel closer and real.

Basically, if all these experiences help these children to develop autonomous, creative and critical thinking, I will be happy.

## Conclusion

It is no secret that no one was prepared to switch to a "distance Atelier". Before this health emergency, the majority would say it is impossible. Impossible to close schools. Impossible to start working at home. But here we are.

So, I wanted to take this opportunity to reflect and learn about the relationships and connections that exist in this unprecedented time. It has helped me to reflect on the objectives and relevance of the Atelier in our current society. And, to what extent we can adapt to this new paradigm. This is significant as one day we'll be back in the physical space but we won't pick it up from where we left it.

I have defined five principles as the foundation for the Atelier in a time of social distancing that guided my reflection to find a set of action strategies for the Atelier.

If my focus is on the process, and if I want to continue to accompany children in their search for meaning, then my role will no longer be so much to prepare the physical space with materials and provocations. Instead, it will be to prepare a symbolic space where there is relationships, sharing and collaboration. Where each child feels motivated to observe, to hypothesise, to participate, and where they feel valued.

## Further ideas for reflection

I have other questions that I would like to continue to reflect on with others. These include:

1. How to adapt an Atelier's practice, based on research and collaboration with young children, to an online digital platform?
2. How will video conferencing influence children's experiences and their meaning-making?
3. What is the potential of digital media for the "distance Atelier"? And how can it complement children's experimentation with physical materials and concepts?
4. Multimodality highlights that communication occurs in multiple media, and that media have "resources" that allow different forms of cognition (Bezemer & Kress, 2016). What kind of new relationships and forms of cognition will emerge?
5. How can we promote and sustain a culture and community that thinks collectively (Gandini, 2012)?

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*Maria Brinca à Sombra* is a Reggio Inspired Atelier opened in September, 2017 and it's located in Lisbon, Portugal. We started this project to offer

art activities and sensory experiences focused on the integral development and expressive needs of young children. At the end of the first year we realized that behind each gesture was a question, an inquiry, and we started actively listening and reflecting on the interactions and learning experiences provided by the materials and creative mediums that were available.

For further information, please visit:

[www.mariabrincaasombra.com](http://www.mariabrincaasombra.com)

[www.instagram.com/mariabrincaasombra](https://www.instagram.com/mariabrincaasombra)