

THE WRITTEN WORD IN THE DESIGN OF LEARNING SPACES: WORKSHOP *A REDE*

MARTA GUERRA BELO

DELLI/ LUSÓFOINA UNIVERSITY (PORTUGAL)

Marta Guerra Belo has a degree in education, a master's degree in graphic design, and is currently developing a PhD in design. She works mainly in commissioned and self-initiated projects in book and editorial design, identity design, visual arts and research. Marta teaches at DELLI – Design Lusófona Lisboa. Orcid: 0000-0001-7668-3176

Corresponding Author:

Marta Guerra Belo
p5664@ulusofona.pt
Lusófona University
Campo Grande 376
1749-024 Lisboa
Portugal

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Abstract

This article presents and reflects on the work developed in the Workshop *A Rede* of the *Picnic* educational project, part of the 7th *Other Delli Week*, an event for students of the communication design degree programme at DELLI - Design Lusófona Lisboa. This project proposed exploring the learning space as an informal and communitarian environment, transporting the school out of doors through the structure of a picnic. The workshop dealt with the design of natural space through the concepts of appropriation, protection, relationship and communication, in the relationship between the suspended fabric, the written word and poetry. The team explored the word (its construction, rhythm and meaning), typography (experimental work on letter design) and their relationship with support, material, and space, to create a poetic structure with six suspended fabrics. The article is divided into four sections: a brief overview of the *Picnic* educational project; a theoretical framework; a description of the activities; and finally, a reflection on the work process and results. The text is guided by visual references that frame the project and photographs collected during its preparation and final installation. This article was developed especially for the *Typography Meeting 13 – Other Typographic Worlds*, framed in the topics *Art, Language and Typography*, *Text as Image and Image as Text*, and *Pedagogy and Methods in the Teaching of Type Design*.

Keywords: Pedagogies in art and design; design; space; typography; poetry.

#1***Picnic***

The educational project *Picnic*, curated by Marta Guerra Belo and Luís Alegre, took place between 10th and 14th October 2022, as part of the *Other Delli Week*¹ activities of the Communication Design degree course at DELLI – Design Lusófona Lisboa. It was attended by the entire undergraduate student community, a group of ten in-house teachers and two external guests – designer and professor Miguel Vieira Baptista and artist/architect Cristina Galizzioli.

This workshop was developed in the context of the PhD research *School as Playground – Alternative Pedagogies for Higher Education in Design*, which explores school as playground and playground as school. This research looks at the limitations of the traditional education system and, by considering playful thinking as an innate capacity for action and learning, proposes the design of an alternative ludic school structure in the context of higher education in design. The *Picnic* is framed within the empirical exploration of this research with the intention of analysing the educational plans and strategies within DELLI as a research case study, and testing new pedagogical tools designed based on the ludic pedagogy studied.

This educational project allowed us to explore alternative processes and pedagogies in design education to realise the discipline's potential for changing school reality, and the importance of our participation in this process, especially in the design of spaces, tools and forms of communication. We were able to try experimental creative processes, especially in the context of typography and letter design, through the exploration of the word as language and meaning, in a playful and collaborative context. At the same time, it has contributed to bring the academic community closer together,

especially teachers and students, promoting team spirit and personal relationships. To do this, we used the informal and apparently powerful structure of a classic picnic as a playful framework to design the week of activities.

#2***Play, informal space and learning***

Play is one of the most important elements in our lifelong (self-)education (Brown, 2010). We all play, enjoy playing and know what it feels like to play (Koven, 2020; Sutton-Smith, 1997). It's intrinsic to us. It is an essential element of our existence and an ancestral behaviour that is part of our thinking, language and actions (Groos, 1901/2008; Suits, 1925/1978; Huizinga, 1938/1949; Wittgenstein, 1953; Caillois, 1958/2001; Fink, 1968; Bateson, 1972; Bruner, 1983; Brown, 2010; Eberle, 2014). When we play, we are training ourselves for life and for the demands of our culture (Carse, 1986) adapting our body, mind, intellect and emotions to interaction with social circumstances (Groos, 1901; Vygotsky, 1966/2016; Eberle, 2014; Brown, 2010). Our process of (self-)education takes place in constant negotiation with the context, through reason and emotions (Damásio, 2017), as also our innate ability to play.

Play is intrinsic to human communication and interaction, through imagination, words and actions (Huizinga 1938/1949; Caillois, 1958/2001; Wittgenstein, 1953/1958; Brown, 2010). All social and cultural activities are inseparable from language (verbal and non-verbal) which is (inter)dependent on our playful thinking. When we communicate, we are always involved in language games, and these are responsible for our learning and the very formation of the life we experience (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958). The play space is thus a *poetic communication* space (Huizinga, 1938/1949) where words, images and actions can take on different meanings

¹ Other Delli Week is the name of the project of the intermittent workshop weeks of the degree course. They take place twice a semester, with different internal and external curators and guests, inside and outside the area of art and design. These weeks function as alternative and sometimes complementary pedagogical models to those explored in the course, and address methodological, technical and theoretical domains, often overlapping at different levels.

and interpretations. Its openness allows for discovery and novelty. We can only express our potential, find fulfilment and our creative growth in an environment of play, which can range from a simple dialogue to a complex visual performance (Brown, 2010).

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Playful thinking manifests itself very clearly in language games through the interaction between mind and word (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958). Language functions as an abstract system where the word reflects the objects of the world (Voloshinov, 1986). This interaction happens especially because each word exists in three simultaneous aspects, which broaden its level of interpretation: firstly the word fits within the 'dictionary', and the potential meanings attributed to it, without meaning i.e. it is disconnected from the living context, lacking emotional expressiveness and values; secondly, the word is dependent on the use we make of it (when we say it or write it we reproduce the presuppositions, such as the context, emotions and values that are associated with others' use of the same word); and thirdly, the word is dependent on a specific utterance and a specific moment. In other words, we attribute meaning to the word in and through its own use in a particular situation where we have our own specific interests or objectives (Bakhtin, 1986). Thus, each word or set of words (a sentence or a poem) function as tools for interaction because their ambiguity allows us to observe and construct different meanings (Empson, 1949) which in turn always generate new dialogues and, consequently, learning.

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The informal space is an essential condition for human interaction and for our growth as individual and social beings, helping to shape the structure of the formal space itself (Laguerre, 1994) and, more than that, contributing to break down its limits in its capacity to stimulate communication

and natural integrated learning. It allows us to act within our contexts and interests, following our intuition, and to develop our own learning experiences.

As a play structure, the informal space fosters our ability to communicate by developing our intelligence and creativity. But most of all, it helps us to understand others, rules and co-operation (Mead, 1999). Its entropic freedom stimulates, refines and strengthens our social skills, nurturing our emotional and intellectual well-being. Within this space we are challenged to play with language (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958) and to interact with others in a free environment, which allows us to discover ourselves as people, to make choices, to take decisions and to act in accordance, not only with our individual needs, but especially with the needs of our community (Brown, 2010). The feeling of freedom offered by the informal environment broadens the ambiguity of dialogues and our interpretation of what we experience, allowing us to observe situations and others from different perspectives. At the same time, the sense of belonging makes us more involved and motivated with our learning, as well as fostering a willingness to share experiences and knowledge, developing our self-confidence, autonomy and sense of cooperation.

This informality doesn't occur in a vacuum. The spaces where informal practice takes place are often formal spaces which due to their characteristics or the will of the participants themselves become informal (Laguerre, 1994). These spaces are everywhere and stimulate our desire to play. However, although the different contexts in which we live – formal and informal, real and virtual – are always educational, they don't always offer the freedom to be playful. They increasingly fail to provide an open and flexible structure that allows us to play, think and learn (Byung-Chul Han, 2022). The formal school is part of this learning circuit and has always been positioned as a space where formality and seriousness crowd out the potential of the informal space as a playful learning structure.

The design school is trapped in an obsolete highly massified and mechanised model sustained by the past and adapted to the techno-economic needs of the present (Illich, 1970; Freire, 2015; Morin, 2015; Giroux, 2019). Educational spaces are almost invariably closed, multifunctional, hierarchical and non-sensory, prepared for standardised, individualised, and competitive teaching, which favours above all directed cognitive processes and digital superficiality (Vet, 2020). Their normative environment insists on remaining divided, exclusive, and disconnected from the outside environment where we naturally grow and learn.

At the same time, higher education design students are often challenged to develop their practical projects outside the classroom. If their learning is no longer confined to the formal learning space, then it becomes urgent to discuss and design informal learning spaces in which students can fulfil their needs (Yau, Chin & Hsu, 2023). These spaces should be designed with the students' comfort and well-being in mind, in terms of space, furniture, materials and environment, but also in terms of promoting socialisation, conviviality and free discussion, becoming a place of social construction in the development of knowledge (Yau, Chin & Hsu, 2023). Also, students ought to take part in planning the design of these spaces. In this sense, to guarantee the effectiveness and success of the design school we must rethink its structure in relation to the informal space, which also includes spaces outside the school boundary, such as nature, the library, museums, etc. The school can become an organised, open and hybrid learning space that allows us to learn in a natural and integrated way.

It's no coincidence that the most memorable moments at school, the ones we keep in our memories, are almost always lived outside the classroom. They are unplanned moments, shared with others in a free environment. Most of the experiences we have in this informal space have the power to naturally articulate our thinking with our senses, sensations, and

emotions, and lead us to spontaneous, and effective learning processes (Montessori, 1912/2017; Dewey, 1928/1997; Franco, 2011; Rovere, 2023). *Why isn't the school designed to absorb this space? Why don't we break with its formality and turn it into a productive informality? Can this informal space, adapting the words of Ivan Illich (1970), deschoolise the school?*

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More than an act of survival, eating is a social act, part of our culture (Ochs, & Shohet, 2006). We like to share mealtimes with others, as a ritual or celebration. It's a moment of dialogue and closeness, regardless of the space that surrounds it. Whether at the kitchen table, in a restaurant or on a bench in a garden, it always presents itself as a playful experience. It's an immersive moment that convokes all our senses – sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch – not only in the relationship we establish with food and objects, but also in the relationship we establish with others, through our thoughts and emotions, and through communication. We can compare the moment we eat to an artistic performance in the sense that we seek the same pleasure of reading poetry or attending a concert. This performance extends to countless formats and spaces, which we design or appropriate to intensify the experience. Here, two central processes develop in the cultural structuring of socialisation: learning and linguistic socialisation (Ochs, & Shohet, 2006). There is a constant exchange of information and emotions that involve the participants in their own spontaneous learning processes. Thus, the meal has all the characteristics of a playful experience and is essential for social interaction and learning (Lalli, 2020), building social relationships and friendships, as also for social participation and strengthening communities (Dunbar, 2017).

The picnic clearly represents this concept of the meal as a play structure. It's a collective outdoor social event where all the participants collaborate with food and conversation. It celebrates sharing and community spirit, as well as communion with

nature and our playful essence. It is an artistic performance (a nomadic one) that appropriates space, creating a sense of belonging to the place that is occupied through the simplicity of the elements that make up this meal – the objects, the food and the people – and the desire to be together and celebrate, similarly to a *happening* (Allen, 2016; Kaprow, 1993).

Although it began in the closed environments of the French aristocracy, the emerging English middle class democratised it and brought it to the countryside (Lee, 2019). Today, the picnic represents freedom, community and our deep bond with nature. It maintains a unique ritual of preparation that requires collective involvement: the spot, the food, the objects, the transport, the journey, the terrain, the mood, the comfort and the playfulness. It is extremely methodical in its informality, but totally dependent on chance. Due to its characteristics, it presents itself as a highly social, cultural and educational play structure. *Could the picnic be a school or could it be designed inside an old school?*

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To try to answer this question and to design the week of activities, the working group used four structural elements as a basis: *the Blanket* – marking out the ground and designing the dining space; *the Hammock* – appropriation and designing the surrounding space; *the Meal* – preparing and laying out the meal; and *the Day* – setting up and make the picnic event. Although the group worked towards the same goal, four teams of approximately thirty students were created, each with a group of four mediators who defined the actions for each workshop.

In this article we reflect particularly on the workshop that explored the concept of *the Hammock (a Rede)* and made it possible to explore two pedagogical ideas that are pertinent to rethinking the design school, specifically in learning about space, communication and typography: the design of the

learning space outside the architecture of the formal boundaries – space and environment – of the design school, by its own participants; and its relationship with the designing of the learning environment within that space through language, words and typography, as playful communication tools. The conceptualisation of the space and materialisation of the graphic supports made it possible to work with the students on basic concepts of letter design, scale and projection in a real context. At the same time, organising the work in groups allowed them to experiment more consciously with the concepts of collaboration and cooperation in their learning processes, which are inherent to the game.

The entire work process was based on the *poetic communication* of the play present in poetry (Huizinga, 1938/1949) with the interpretation and deconstruction of two poems through the isolation and appropriation of the word to construct new meanings (Bakhtin, 1986), and the exploration of the concept of spontaneity in poetry and in the informal space – the nature.

This exploration between the boundary of poetry as a space for play and informal space as poetry offered students the chance to experiment the ambiguity of words and their relationship with the design of letters in an unlikely environment, with unexpected results.

#3 Workshop: *A Rede*

Despite the participation of the whole group in the design of the different activities, the workshop was developed and mediated by teachers Marta Guerra Belo, Marco Balesteros, Paulo T. Silva and Telmo Chaparra. It was entirely practical, lasting 8 hours, held in DELLl's studio, with approximately 30 students – divided into 6 working groups.

The aim of the workshop was to design the space surrounding the meal, which would take place in the Park José Gomes

Ferreira in Alvalade (Lisbon). The appropriation of the space would be made from the delimitation of the territory and would have to create a relationship between the natural elements, the dining and socialising spaces, and participants. The elements should metaphorically interfere in the space and create relationships of proximity, separation, connection, and continuity, as well as protection, comfort and contemplation. At the same time, the aim was to create a visual and written discourse that would transform the space into a poetic and communicative structure.

Based on the classic concept of the hammock which we typically hang from trees, and its relationship to the predefined references (the works *Casa Paisagem* (2021) by the artist and architect Cristina Gallizioli, *Grande Núcleo* (1960) by Hélio Oiticica, and *Fabric, Paint, Steel cables* (1973) by Daniel Buren), students were challenged to work on large suspended fabrics, in which they would explore the written word, its construction, rhythm and meaning – as also typography, by drawing letters by hand – in its relationship with the support, material, scale and space. These 'poetic fabrics' would represent 'open walls' distributed throughout the garden through their structure, material, position and the poetic elements shared within them, with the aim of creating an aesthetic effect of surprise.

This idea of exploring the scale of objects and words in space stems directly from the desire to explore the concept of *poetic communication* – playground – mentioned above. It was intended that, in addition to learning through imagination, creativity and sensory stimulation (practice), students would also be able to explore the word and its power of communication (written and typographic communication, particularly), convoking it as a tool to involve people in space with others and in dialogue, allowing for new interpretations and situations of sharing and learning.

As such, it was pre-defined that the words explored on the fabrics had their origin in two poems from the book



Fig. 1 *Casa Paisagem*, Cristina Gallizioli, 2021. From: 'Casa Paisagem Montemor-o-Novo' by Riccardo De Vecchi in *Riccardo De Vecchi*, 2021 (<https://riccardodevecchi.net/Casa-Paisagem>).



Fig. 2 *Grande Núcleo*, Hélio Oiticica, 1960. From 'Hélio Oiticica: The Great Labyrinth' by UUM in *Universes in Universe Magazine*, 2013 (<https://universes.art/en/magazine/articles/2013/helio-oiticica>).

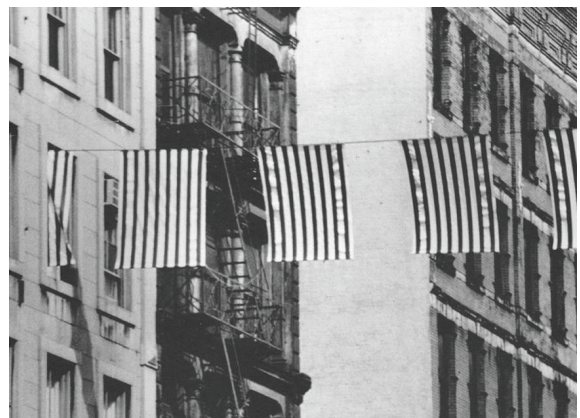
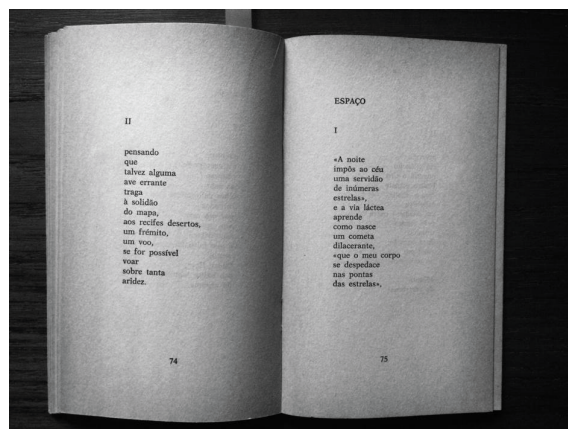
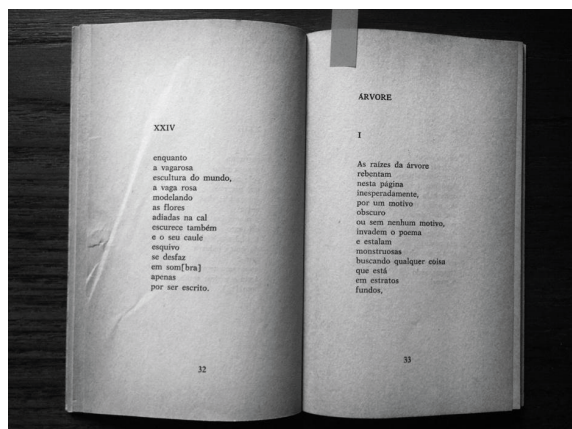


Fig. 3 *Within and Beyond the Frame*, Daniel Buren, 1973. From *A Survey of Works 1966–1995* by Daniel Buren, New York: John Weber Gallery.



Figs. 4 and 5 Poems *Árvore* and *Espaço*. From *Micropaisagem, Cadernos de Poesia 1*, by C. Oliveira, 1969, Lisboa: Dom Quixote, pp. 33, 75.

Micropaisagem (1969) by Carlos de Oliveira: *Árvore* (Tree) and *Espaço* (Space). Based on their theme, the poems themselves would create a relationship with the outdoor space to be explored, allowing students to experience and imagine this space before it was conceived and lived in.

The chosen typeface would be the one presented in the two poems in the book. Of Roman origin, the typeface was enlarged and then drawn in superimposition. The creation process allowed students to draw the typographic anatomical shapes (in lower case) on a monumental scale – a mural – in which they were able to apply fundamental concepts such as macro and micro typography. At the same time, they were presented with some visual and typographic references, and shared some graphic materials – books, magazines and catalogues – which allowed them to broaden their design thinking and define some group criteria for the development of the project, which we frame in the creative process below.

#4 Creative Process Installation

On this basis, students began by choosing the words using criteria such as meaning, ambiguity, metaphor, irony, ideogram, or the deconstruction of language. After this choice, they made decisions concerning the size of the fabrics, which were cut on a large scale in different shapes; the size, framing and composition of the letters in these shapes; and the colour – black (on unbleached fabric). During an exploratory visit to the park, students had taken photographs of the spot where they intended to assemble the *poetic fabrics*, which they used to imagine and make assumptions and assemblies.

Considering the size of the fabrics/letters, the images of the words had to be enlarged with projectors onto the fabric/wall which the students then painted with acrylic, using a brush.

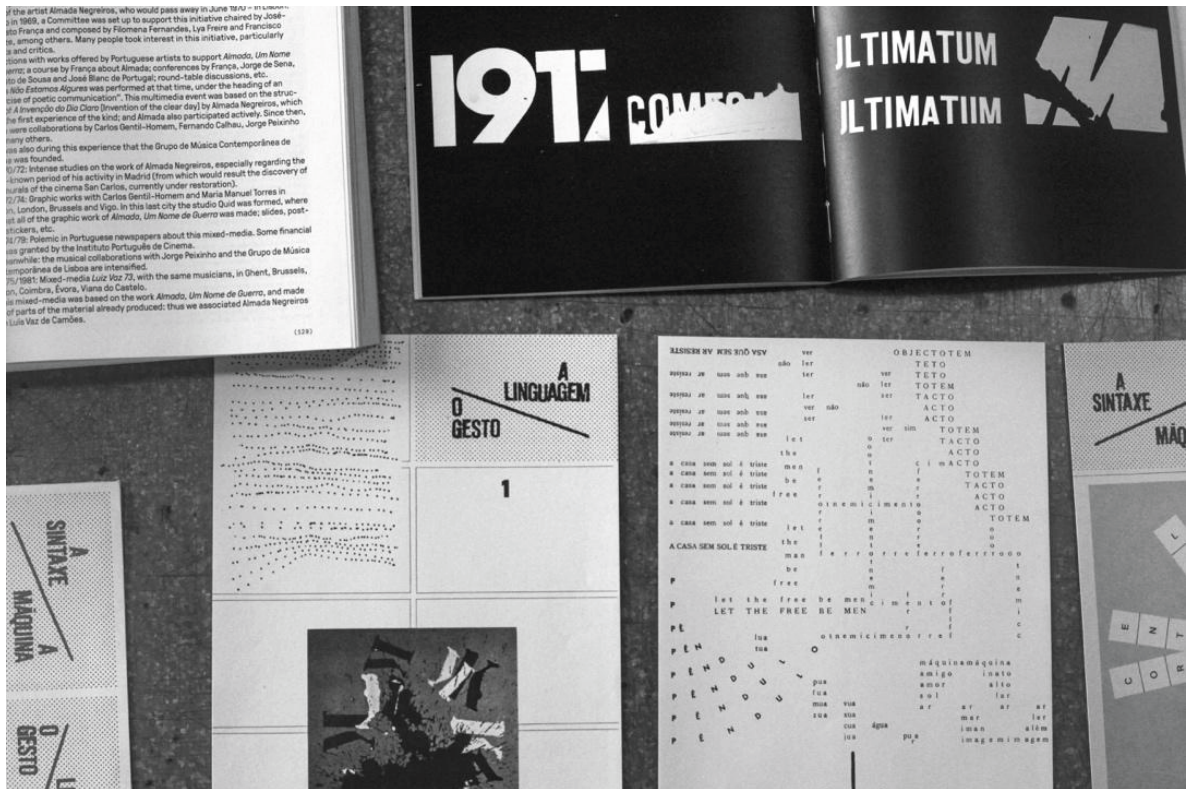


Fig. 6 Visual references shared with the students, workshop A Rede, DELLI studio, 2022. Photo by Neuza Leote.

Despite the superimposition as a basis for orientation, the aim was for the students to explore the shape of the letters in spontaneous gestures, so that they could feel their own gesture and free interpretation of the poetry, and thus stimulate their senses and sensitivity. We immediately realised how demanding it was for them to free themselves and explore drawing spontaneously without the support of outlines, which had to be encouraged and exemplified by the mediators. Even with this help, the difficulty felt by most students was noticeable. One group of students used woollen thread and embroidered the letters on the fabric, using as a reference the work *Avessos Encadeados Sombra* (1971) by Lourdes de Castro (presented to them previously). It was interesting to follow the discovery process of this group of students who had never embroidered before. The lack of experience



Figs. 7 and 8. Selection and deconstruction of words and letters, as also visual compositions. Workshop A Rede, DELLI studio, 2022. Photos by Neuza Leote.



Fig. 9 and 10 Drawing and painting on the fabrics using projection. Workshop *A Rede*, DELLI studio, 2022. Photos by Neuza Leote.

demanded a lot of experimentation to achieve the results they desired. Also noteworthy is the involvement and mutual help that took place at this stage.

Despite the difficulties caused by the small size of the space for the number of people involved in the project and the scale of the material developed, as well as the lack of some technical support material, all pieces were completed at the end of the eight hours of work, with success and satisfaction of the whole group.

On the day of the installation – the last day of the *Picnic* week, at the same moment that the other teams were also installing the rest of the material – students began, with the help of their tutors, by walking around the park to understand how they could appropriate the space, find comfort zones, and create connections, taking into account the existing natural elements (vegetation, topography and light). A connection was made tangible with the marking of the territory – with a red ribbon – as also the rest areas – grey foam bases, designed in the other workshop: *A Manta* (*The Blanket*) led by guests Cristina Gallizioli and Miguel Viera Baptista.



Fig. 11 Group of students working on the fabric with embroidery, workshop *A Rede*, DELLI studio, 2022. Photo by Neuza Leote.

Fig. 12 Group of students and tutor organising and hanging a final fabric piece outside in order to dry, workshop *A Rede*, DELLI studio, 2022. Photo by Neuza Leote.



Fig. 13 Group of students and tutor testing the *poetic fabric* on the spot, workshop *A Rede*, José Gomes Ferreira Park, Alvalade, 2022. Photo by Neuza Leote.



Fig. 14 Students and tutors recognising the space and selecting spots, workshop *A Rede*, José Gomes Ferreira Park, Alvalade, 2022. Photo by Matilde César.

The work team decided on a strategy for suspending the fabric pieces which consisted of using a cord, also suspended, stretched, and attached to the trees. Ladders were needed due to the size of the trees and the fabrics. It was interesting to realise the relationship they had to establish between the dynamics of the space and the structure and composition of the elements, in particular their breadth and scale, which are usually beyond their control. The works on fabric, which seemed large in scale when worked on in the studio, were the proper size when installed with the scale of the park's natural elements.



Figs. 15 and 16 Group of students fixing the fabrics to the trees with rope, workshop *A Rede*, José Gomes Ferreira Park, Alvalade, 2022. Photos by Neuza Leote.



Fig. 17, 18, 19 and 20 Results and picnic, *Poetic fabrics* in action, workshop *A Rede*, José Gomes Ferreira Park, Alvalade, 2022. Photos by Catarina Cruz.

#5. Results Final Reflection

The results of the workshop were surprising and gratifying. Despite the difficulties mentioned above, the group was committed and involved throughout the process. They shared a good working environment, evidencing a lot of collaboration and mutual help, as also good task and time management. Despite some difficulties experienced in the spontaneity required for drawing and painting the letters, they managed to overcome all obstacles, especially through cooperation and through sharing experiences among groups.

Considering that many of the students were working together for the first time (the teams were made up of students from different years), the collaborative spirit and easy rapport between everyone was noticeable. The role of the mediators was very important for organising the group and stimulating creativity, as well as dissolving any embarrassment or shyness which often arises in short-term collective work experiences. There was a sense of responsibility and consequently greater involvement on the group of students, as they knew that their work

was part of a larger collective project and that therefore their role and actions would have an impact on the whole project.

The proposed objectives were successfully achieved, which was partly due to the simultaneous solidity and flexibility of the activity plan, at many points allowing spontaneous decisions, supported by its pre-defined structure. The students, teachers and guests were satisfied with the materialisation of the objects and the result, with the installation in the park, which turned out to be surprising due to its scale and appropriation of natural space.

The students had the opportunity to learn typography and letter design in an experimental exercise in which the word and its meaning had a direct relationship. It was interesting to see how students interpreted the poems, selected the words and gave them new meanings and visual languages. We believe that the playful format of the exercise proposed to the students, combined with the beauty and simplicity of the poems, made it possible to stimulate the students' curiosity and involve them in the activity, placing them imaginatively in the natural context that, although they already knew it, they would later explore. The deconstruction of words and meanings and

the creation of new narratives, free from preconceptions or impositions was noticeable. This was also evident in the shape of the fabrics, the visual compositions of the words on each one, the size and arrangement of the elements (both the letters and the empty spaces), and their (inter)relationship. The students got into a play mode and were able to develop their imagination and creativity naturally.

The *poetic fabrics* appropriated the space to create an immersive, beautiful and poetic environment that undoubtedly communicated not only with the rest of the park's natural elements, but also with all the other elements installed, the whole dynamic of the picnic and all the participants. The

relationship between the typography, the support, the monumentality and its relationship with the space created a framework with an aesthetic effect that was both surprising and delicate, just like the poems and nature itself. The lightness and mutation of the fabrics and their composition in the space – exposed to the wind, light and shadow – transformed the design of the letters throughout the day, amplifying their message and meaning.

To finalise, the convivial and learning environment designed by all the participants of this week, presented here through the workshop *A Rede*, had a very relevant impact on the relationship between students and teachers within the DELLI community.



Fig. 21 Embroidered *Poetic fabric* suspended in the trees, workshop *A Rede*, José Gomes Ferreira Park, Alvalade, 2022. Photo by Matilde César.

Compared to other events of workshops held throughout the course (before and after this week), it was clear that this playful learning structure which brought together design practice, artistic experimentation, informal space, nature, meals and the resulting socialising and fun, brought students and teachers closer together in a way they had never felt before, breaking down some barriers between hierarchical positions, creating friendships and strengthening the community as a team. This closeness and trust were reflected in the classroom and project development contexts through greater involvement by students and deeper relationships between classes. In short, it has created a generalised emotional and relational well-being that contributes positively to everyone's performance. The *Pic-nic*, in which the workshop presented, has become a pedagogy model for planning future course activities.

As an open-ended conclusion, we leave an excerpt from "Da espontaneidade em poesia"², from the book *Na Senda da Poesia* (1969) by Ruy Belo:

Poesia é complicação, é doença da linguagem, é desvio da sua principal função, que será comunicar. Só o poeta se fica na linguagem. Os outros passam por ela, servem-se dela, embora possam ser sensíveis a ela³. (p. 148)

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- ² Spontaneity in poetry.
- ³ Poetry is complication, it is a disease of language, it is a deviation from its main function, which is to communicate. Only the poet stays in language. The others pass through it, make use of it, even though they may be sensitive to it. (Translation by the author)

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