

Embodiment and Performance in Pedagogy Research

Investigating the Possibility of the Body in Curriculum Experience

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Introduction

THIS PAPER grows out of a desire to investigate the role of the body in performative pedagogy, specifically the student-participant body. Accordingly, a drama based event taken up with teacher education students is used to analyse the places and facets of learning that can emerge from performative pedagogical practice. In relation to the field of drama and theatre education, “embodied pedagogy” seems, at first glance, like an obvious element of the physical and experiential reality that is performance and drama practice. However, in social constructionist paradigms—the theoretical framework within which a large proportion of work in theatre and drama education research is carried out—the body is considered as representational and subservient to the mind (Perry, 2010). As a result of this perspective, the body, in social constructionist drama and theatre education research is rarely positioned as a focus of analysis; it is generally considered as a tool for inquiry and representation only in as much as it is a signifying object (Davidson, 2004; Osmond, 2007).

Critical performative pedagogy complicates this dynamic by considering the body itself as a place of learning and experience (Pineau, 2002, p. 44). In this way pedagogy can be loosened from a continual trajectory to representation and allows for students to exist and explore as inquiring subjectivities, less restricted by the visual sign systems of their bodies. Performance in pedagogy, as we take it up in this study, allows for experiences of learning that can include what Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) describes as “the inaccessible-through-cognition-or awareness events of mind/brain and body” (p. 16). In considering the sensations that are crucial to understanding, Ellsworth asserts that the notion of learning as experience pushes us to reconsider the practices that frame the work we do in pedagogy, and to question some of our taken for granted or invisible assumptions. We are prompted to acknowledge the relative lack of discourses and research tools at our disposal to theorize and analyse these “places of learning” and to explore new possibilities in research and meaning making.

In this paper we examine the “experience of learning” (Ellsworth, 2005) in relation to embodiment and performative practices. Performative pedagogy and embodiment can be considered fields of scholarship with distinct histories and anatomies; in this study we draw the two together and consider how bodies are constructed and understood in the context of performative pedagogy. In the second part of this paper we turn to data from a drama education classroom to illustrate how the body can be considered in analysis and can reveal complex and informative notions about teaching and learning, as well as bodies and performance practices in the classroom. We draw on poststructural theories, particularly the work of Gilles Deleuze and his collaborations with Felix Guattari, to inform our method of analysis.

Embodiment in Performative Pedagogies

We believe embodiment isn’t simply an interesting possibility for education, nor is it an alternative practice or method: embodiment *is*. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, to analyze, celebrate, problematise it or not, we are all bodies, six point six billion of us, engaged to varying degrees in our own journeys of learning and living. In exploring the cultural politics of performance spaces, Elin Diamond (1996) suggests that in the temporality of a performance practice participants are constantly negotiating “between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations)” (p. 5). Diamond goes on to suggest that “between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critiques” (p. 5). In recognizing the experience of the body in performative pedagogy, we join a growing number of other scholars such as Ellsworth (2005), Grosz (1994, 1995), O’Loughlin (2006), and Pillow (2000) who are asking how to consider pedagogical spaces with bodies as an essential element of practice and analysis. The poststructuralist theorists mentioned here consider the body and mind as co-existing in relation to structures, discourses, time, place, and other. The body in this case is corporeal, biological, sensual, social, cultural, and ultimately relational.

Embodiment in performative pedagogical practices, we maintain, describes teaching and learning in acknowledgement of our bodies as whole experiential beings in motion, both inscribed and inscribing subjectivities. That is, the experiential body is both a representation of self (a “text”) as well as a mode of creation in progress (a “tool”). In addition, embodiment is a state that is contingent upon the environment and the context of the body: “Continuously and radically in relation with the world, with others, and with what we make of them” (Ellsworth, 2005, p.4). Within performative pedagogy bodies can be acknowledged, made visible, and moved to the center of pedagogical experiences. Bodies are perceived as inscribed and inscribing people’s relationships, engagement, and interpretation of multiple ways and histories of being, experiencing, and living, in the world.

The body is our method, our subject, our means of making meaning, representing, and performing. Despite this, as Bronwyn Davies (2000) asserts, it is “our minds that we are practised at knowing,” and “in our most familiar discourses, mind is separate from the body” (p. 19). Nevertheless, if we cannot deny our bodies’ relevance, then it seems to us that we must raise awareness of the discourses that are embedded in them. The discourses of the body, like all discourses, can be both productive and oppressive tools. We believe it is useful to examine how the body in pedagogy works as site of cultural inscription where norms, practices, and symbols are inscribed by the body and for the body.

The limits of writing the embodied performance

Jean-Luc Nancy (1994) reminds us that our endeavour to *write* about embodiment fails before it begins, as the body is impenetrable by the means that we have at our disposal—words, ink, page, computer. And we would add that the endeavour to talk about the body is also challenging if not futile, due to the discourses that we have at the ready, that is, the dominant discourses of the mind. In the face of this methodological predicament, Caroline Fusco (2008) regrets that in educational research a “discursive and material disinfecting and cleansing take[s] place” in the transcription of body and space to written or visual texts (p. 160). In the following analysis, we acknowledge the limitations of representing research in the written and visual format of a journal article, but embrace the affordances that analytic discourses and written text provide. In this way, we aspire to contribute to a much larger conversation that necessarily extends beyond these two authors, beyond this study, and beyond the modalities of written and visual texts.

Inscribing and Inscribed in the World: Analyzing Bodies

Methodological Approach to Performative Experience

Wrestling with the contradictions inherent in capturing and representing embodied and spatial data in two dimensional forms, we adopt the theoretical stance of performative pedagogy that aims to explore the perspective of “knowing how” and “knowing who” rather than a more traditional “knowing that” and “knowing about” (Conquergood, 2002). Supporting this is the consideration of alternatives to representational thinking as proposed by various poststructural thinkers (e.g., Spinoza, Artaud, Foucault). To this end we draw on nomadic thought as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). Within what is collectively a diverse and substantial body of work, Deleuze and Guattari challenge representational logic, the dominant paradigm of thought since Plato (Massumi, 1992, p. 4). Nomadic thought rejects “the artificial division between the three domains of representation, subject, concept, and being” (Massumi, 1987, p. xii). In this way, it replaces analogical thought with that which is rhizomatic, and guided by forces of sensation and affect. When we temper our inclination to interpret meanings from actions, words, or images, and lend our attention instead to the way activities and processes (of actions, words, images, etc.) are functioning, the possibility for analysis expands and offers levels of understanding that are often beneath the surface of representation or semiotic sign systems. This analysis doesn’t hinge upon selected modalities (eg. visual analysis, text analysis, etc.), rather it considers experience unfolding. Understandings and conclusions taken from this perspective can exist as part of a fluid uncovering of experience, as opposed to a labelling and defining of results.

Our attention then in this study is focused on process, with signification and semiotic regimes as a secondary (but always present) consideration. We are interested in considering experience, and the learning experience in particular, as a process of emergence. An attention to process, and emergence (movement) brings to the forefront an attention to the body. Brian Massumi (2002) grapples with the problems of putting corporeality back into the body and matter back into cultural materialism, and to this end he suggests that his task is not to contradict signification, rather to “find a semiotics willing to engage in continuity” (p. 4). Finally, the notion of

emergence, suggests the *change* inherent in embodied experience. The notion of *becoming* is a central aspect of Deleuze's corpus, and is taken to describe "the continual production of difference" (Stagoll, 2005, p. 21). Many poststructural theorists have taken up this notion of becoming, to replace the more traditional focus on *being* (Davies, et al., 2001; Knight, 2009). Applying this to education, Ellsworth calls for a pedagogy that "address[es] a student that is not coincident with herself, but only with her change. ... a learning self that is in motion" (2005, p. 7).

The notion of *assemblage* with Deleuze and Guattari's nomadic thought can be understood as the "performed organization of language (enunciation) and 'content' (material and conceptual bodies)" (Leander & Rowe, 2006, p. 437). We use this understanding to frame our examination of how things happen within a dramatic encounter. George Marcus and Erkan Saka (2006) inform our use of the concept of assemblage, suggesting that it focuses "attention on the always-emergent conditions of the present while preserving some concept of the structural so embedded in the enterprise of social science research" (pp. 101-102). In this study, we look at the emerging relationship between the organization of partial assemblage (the emerging embodied social constructs), in relation to larger assemblages or organized institutions (larger social performances outside of the dramatic encounter). We maintain that it is important to consider the relationship between language and bodies "on the same level" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, as cited in Leander & Rowe p. 437), and always in flux and motion. In alignment with nomadic thought, we attempt to avoid the notions of beginnings and endings or hierarchies between language and bodies. In this light, we are looking at relationships not in terms of fixed meanings, but as emerging, evolving, and unfinished within the experience under analysis.

In the next section we contextualise our data with a description of the pedagogical situation. Within the context described, we select and outline an exercise that involves a heightened and self-conscious awareness of the relations between the performed self, the performed character, and spacial relations. We use this data as a way to experiment in our method and approach to the analysis, with the support of the reflective processes of the participants embedded in the pedagogical practice.

Specifically, we analyze three performative moments, each moment coinciding with one focal student. We analyze the body in relation to three main constructs: Space, movement, and relations. These constructs provided an analytical framework through which to consider the performances, inquiries, and representations in the data. By weaving semiotic references (words spoken by students, gestures and postures made), with descriptions of how dynamics within and beyond the classroom are functioning, we attempt to engage in a fluid use of semiotics, one that plays a part in our understanding, but does not stabilise, nor sterilise it. Finally, we look at a focus group discussion with the participating students to relate our formal analysis to their own informal reflective analysis of the process.

Sélavi and "Proximity to the Problem"

The following drama-based process happened in the context of a drama education course within the teacher preparation program at an university in Western Canada. Author, Carmen Medina, observed and video recorded this section of the course for the purposes of this study; author Mia Perry, was not present for the data generation, but was a member of the study group participating in this project, exploring new theories of performative practices and re-considering the predominant constructions of drama in education.¹ The course typically consists of students

enrolled in the elementary and secondary program with a number of these students also seeking their degrees to become theatre teachers. While not fully representative of the ethnic diversity on the region, the course did include students from diverse gender, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This diversity was not perceived by the instructor or the researchers in terms of fixed cultural traits that students may bring; rather diversity worked as a resource brought into the performative space that made visible student engagement in cultural and identity practices that are complex, unfinished, and evolving. The drama professor, Gary (all names used are pseudonyms), devised a drama exercise using the picture book *Sélavi* by Youme (2004). *Sélavi* is based on a true story about children made homeless through the ravages of war in Haiti during Duvaliers' dictatorship. The intention was to create make-believe worlds that would emerge parallel to the text, working in encounters before, during, and after the reading of the book (See Medina, 2007; Medina, Twomey, & Weltzek, 2007, for a description of the entire drama). The story begins, "Not so long ago and not so far away, people with guns could take a family, burn a house and disappear, leaving a small child alone in the world" (unnumbered pages). The tale follows *Sélavi* as he attempts to survive alone. He connects with other homeless children and forms a ragtag family unit, living behind a banyan tree and surviving by foraging in dumps, doing odd jobs, and begging. It is not long, however, before the military chases the children from their makeshift home forcing them to once again roam the streets. A group of concerned citizens, calling themselves the "Mighty River," embrace the children and raise funds to build a home and provide for education and food. This safe place is short lived as the military burns the house to the ground. Undaunted, the community rebuilds, this time creating and running a radio station with the children and proclaiming, "We will write our messages in the air where they cannot be painted out."

One significant part of the larger drama process dealt with explicit and implicit characters in the story presented. Gary placed a chair at the front of the room stating that it represented "the problem" in the story. The students were then invited to improvise and take on the role of either an implicit or explicit character in the story—to physically position themselves in relationship to the problem (for example close to, or far away from, the problem). In this position, students were invited to verbally state who they are, how they related to the problem, and why they positioned themselves in that specific location. We refer to the exercise in question as, "proximity to the problem." At this point in the drama the students were highly engaged and quite immersed within the literary and drama world.

Moment one: The politician

The individual performance shown in figure 1 is an interesting example of how space and body in the performative moment are transformed to explore relationships within and outside the drama world. Renaldo stood on top of a table at the side of the room to start speaking to the empty chair in the center of the room (signifying "the problem"). He crossed his arms and turned his body away from the centre and the chair. Here we can identify a sharp shift in the dynamic of the classroom. This student took up the instructions of the exercise, took the initiative to consider, and then utilise, space and furniture, and layered his contribution further with his own physical manifestation of "politician." He states: "I am a politician." Physical action is constructed simultaneously with spoken discourse: "I'm above the problem because everyone's down below me and I'm sort of turning my back. I can see the problem but I'm not really going to do anything about it." Physically and verbally he speaks of the embodied; of being in the

world where physical status exists, where space has metaphorical and real implications, and bodies are inseparable from these transactions.



Figure 1: The politician

If we consider the representations of this moment (the recorded text, the image, the description of the event) in terms of what is happening, what relations and affects are occurring, the analysis of this moment becomes a rich dialogue of embodied interactions. In this moment, Renaldo is not only positioning himself in relation to “the problem”; but also as a student in relation to his class, to his subject (in this case: drama; social justice; literacy education), and to his teacher. Within the performative moment of process drama, roles taken on are layered in amongst roles already owned: Renaldo as student, comes into proximity with his role of politician; Renaldo as politician comes into proximity with his class. Within the performative moment, the body is made visible and the body generates a way of being in the world. Finally, within the performative moment, Renaldo experiences these relations and dynamics through his embodied self: inscribed and inscribing meaning.

Renaldo reflects on the relationship between bodies, experience and the world in an interview where he had an opportunity to watch a video of the exercise. Now, adding the role of spectator to his repertoire, he speaks of the experience:

I knew what we were going to do with the proximity to the problem, and I didn’t want to keep it on the same plane. I wanted to be higher or lower cause I knew, I think, that by just picking a politician naturally could be higher. It’s top down. Looking down or something. I think that’s what I wanted to do, open up the space.

Renaldo's response relates to the critical discourses of space and acknowledges the close relationship between space, place, and politics. He was aware of what tools were available to him, to engage in the transformational nature of space within the performative moment, to participate in that activity. As a result, he chose a role that could disrupt the single plane of the classroom space. The politician, in his opinion, became a useful role with which to initiate this disruption. He connected space with politics within the performative world and explored how politics can work in society. The large social discourses that relate politics with high status became key for Renaldo in determining how to place the body, how to act, and how to speak.

Moment two: North America

Within this performative world there is also the potential to explore institutionalized discourses, suggesting that performances are not limited to an isolated individual. Rather, they take place within people's individual and collective memberships in social groups, participating in particular activities, and promoting certain ideologies.



Figure 2: North America

Megan, in figure 2, named her role, "North America." She climbed a set of stairs, restricting her own vision of the class, and partially concealing herself from some of the students. Her body faced away from the room, her head and torso partially turned back, with one hand held out to the room behind her. In a similar movement as Renaldo, Megan disrupts the single plane of the space. Unlike Renaldo though, she uses a staircase in the manner that it is meant for (i.e. climbing up). In this way she maintained convention in a way that Renaldo (by climbing on desks) didn't. She distanced herself from the rest of her class, as well as from the symbolic chair. In this personal and metaphorical space, Megan constructed and presented layers of embodied experience. Situating herself at a higher level can be seen as the development of a geography where space is connected to hierarchy and status. Geography becomes political as Megan names, "North America" to verbally describe her contribution. Politics and geography informs our understanding of the movement of turning away from the rest of the room, people, and problem.

In her words: “What problem? I’m in North America.” In other words, the politics of *not seeing* are seen to be embedded and embodied in the politics of North America. In this case the role that took the form of a continent was made specific (unlike the “politician”). We therefore look to the specifics of her relationship in this role, in this case, to the problem, which geographically, is the Caribbean/Haiti. Amidst this specific political, geographical, and institutional statement is Megan, a student performing in an institution in North America; in this institution, Megan is working with a text on the effects of war in Haiti. When we consider this performative moment in terms of how it is occurring (who, how, and what is being inscribed), rather than simply what is represented, the levels of experience and meaning-making multiply. Megan’s contribution to this interpretive drama exercise is complex. She brings the active, participatory student *in relation with* the socio-political reality and conventions that she lives in interdependency with. Her movements and actions bring critique to her society, whilst at the same time, her dependence on, and manner of participation in, her society suggests the ethical problems so closely connected to social justice work in education. In Megan’s words: “I am critical of this society’s—myself included—hypocritical life style.” The performative space in this case allowed for the emergence of larger ideological discourses. The performative moment is not a rehearsal for life, as is often implied in Applied Theatre and drama education, it *is* life.

Moment three: The teacher



Figure 3: The teacher

The performative moment is a plastic and fluid one, in flux, in tension and in relation. The present is in relation to the past and the future; the here is also there; the I is the we; and the fictional is the real. This becomes transparent in the contribution by Virginia who took on the role of “teacher” (see Figure 3). She crossed behind the chair, grabbed another student’s hands and said: “I am a teacher ... [who wants] to work with the parents.” In taking someone’s hands,

Virginia negotiates space and relations, and in a different way from her classmates we discussed previously, she disrupts the single plane of the classroom as it usually functions by making physical contact. By connecting corporeally with another student, Virginia sets in motion the opportunity for that other student to contribute to the embodied process of her contribution. How the hand is received, and how it is held is now a physically collaborative process. The performative moment allowed Virginia to demonstrate a physical text (that of reaching out to touch another) and inscribe a new text (that of an inter-dependent relationship with a fellow student). As the role of teacher is added to this event, her actions are complicated further. She is a student, being a teacher, being in relation. Her spoken reflections add to our analysis of her experience:

It was interesting to actually read the book and think oh, okay, if I were there, you know, I would want to step in with the parent and do what I can do. Just like I would here, working in Canada it just kind of made you really stop and think...and especially looking at everyone, the way they were positioned. It was just, yeah, here, this actually goes on in the real world and we did it in a little room.

Her embodied and spoken discourses were centered on collaborations between teachers and parents. Virginia's participation in the performative event suggests the process of imagining ways to become a participant in a real, but distant, community. This is an interesting perspective to consider as we think of the imaginary as an essential part of the identities we perform, and our participation, in various communities (Appadurai, 1996). She imagined her actions as a supporter of a parent who tried to help a child, "Just like I would here, working in Canada." Her contribution in the performative moment was layered with her actual history of participation in her community. Furthermore, the drama event made Virginia "stop and think," to look at everyone in the constructed drama, and situate herself in relation to it. For her, the power of the engagement relied on the possibility of considering the "real world" and exploring it within the safety of a "little room."

The porous assemblage of the performative event

The data represents a complex performative event in which embodied discourses emerge in pedagogical interactions. Students can be seen to be engaging their bodies in a negotiation of ideological and intellectual ideas, both of their own and of other participating and performing students. Figure 4 maps the performative event and portrays a broader overview of roles enacted and the inscription of emerging social performances. Three embodied spaces are traced that relate to the following categories of spatial positioning: individual, institutional, and interconnected. Each student entered the space as part of a partial assemblage (the emerging moment in the drama) and related the partial moment to larger social performances that are not present (or at least not visible) in the immediate classroom world. As opposed to a linear telling of a story, the performative event provided an opportunity to use a range of perspectives that relate and depart from each other in multiple ways and directions.

The bodies' use of space in the experience suggests layers of social meaning embedded before, beyond, and within the performance. For example, in examining the moment when Gary asked the students to take up and explain their roles, three categories of bodies distinguished the participants' roles and positions (see Figure 4 below). For the purposes of our analysis, we

named these bodies, *institutional bodies*, mostly traced around the outskirts of the diagram (red lines); *individual bodies*, traced throughout the space (blue lines); and *interconnected bodies* traced in the center of the room (green lines) in relation to the problem. In examining the planes of view in Figure 1, it is worth noting that bodies also disrupted the “single plane” view of the classroom and three planes emerge: the high (police and North America); low (father and child); and center plane (other participants). Despite the representational nature of the still images and diagrams that remain from this exercise, and despite the teacher’s need to move on from this exercise to the next, we maintain a focus on the process-driven nature of this event. In light of this, and the theoretical approach that informs our analysis, we do not focus explicitly on beginnings and endings; instead, we look to the flux of bodies and discourses in the assemblage that merge to perform and explore social discourses and power relations.

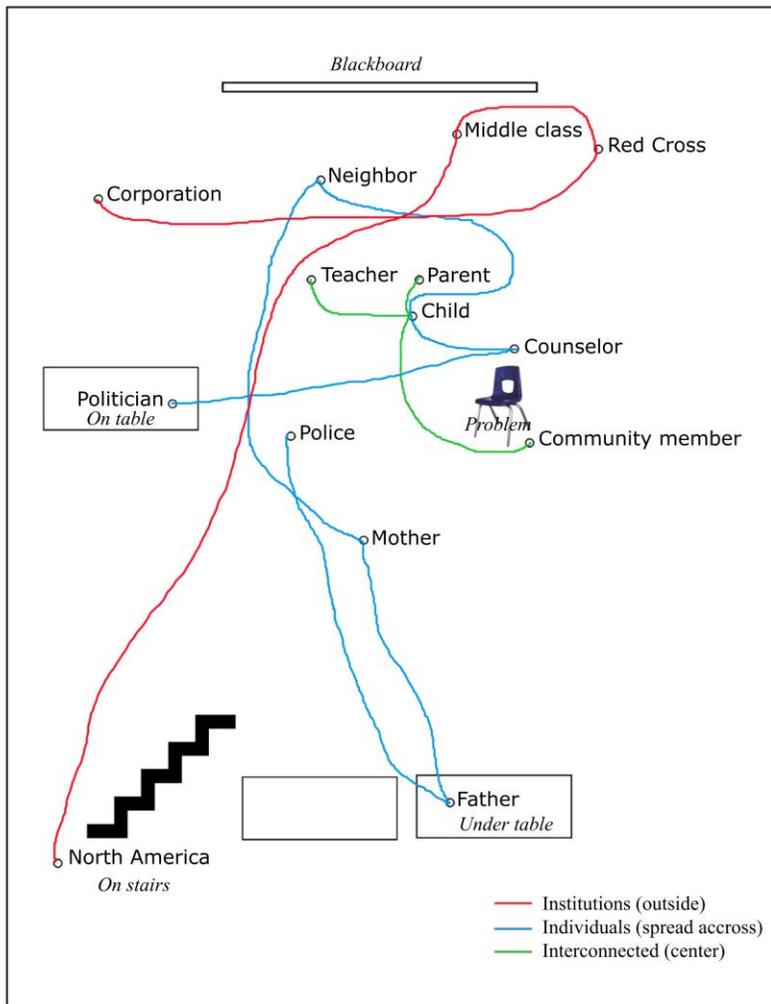


Figure 4: Performance map

The Tensions of Experiencing and Becoming in Embodied Pedagogy

In considering the Sélavi “proximity to the problem” exercise, it is worth remembering that the students entered the improvisational space with a guideline: “Find a role, and look for that role’s relationship to the problem (the chair); position yourself in relation to the problem and

voice who you are and what you are saying to the problem.” With these guidelines the students inscribed and reinscribed the situated and the larger social worlds with their bodies. Drawing on improvisational impulses, students created dynamic ways to redefine and transform the classroom space.

Throughout the above analysis, we have drawn on both captured image and reflective text of the student participants. As we indulgently break open performative events to look for ways to consider and talk about the body in pedagogy, it becomes ever more possible to regard these events as complicated, messy and difficult spaces, and to break away from the tendencies to label, classify and interpret the body as only representative, or as only text. When we think of the implications of this work for pedagogy, it is important to acknowledge that this complicating of experience doesn’t have to begin at the stage of research analysis or assessment. In the case of this data, the process began with the drama exercise. In a group discussion after the exercise, some of the students commented on their experience of participating in the exercise:

Dave: That was really uncomfortable.

Jackie: Yeah

Renaldo: Good Start

Jackie: Being the children it was very uncomfortable when every one of the adults were saying nothing but, stop go away. It was kind of eek. Knowing you we’re going to talk about that stuff.

Gary: Did you say weak?

Jackie: No eek, like oh no.

Gary: May I ask why? What about it...

Jackie: Because it’s a little almost like being bullied, kind of...

Gary: Bullied?

Jackie: Yeah ‘cause we’re not used to being in that position though, of someone picking on us.

Dave: I felt guilty, I don’t know why...

This excerpt shows the tensions people experience in exploring multiple positions negotiating self and other in a drama. Scholars such as feminist poststructuralists Lather (1992), Ellsworth (1997), and Enciso (2003) argue that any pedagogical experience is connected to the larger social, cultural, and political positioning we perform in our lives. Contextualization then, according to Enciso (2003), is key in understanding that, in classrooms, we don’t work in context, rather we work contextualizing and constructing performances. These acts of contextualization relate to how we live in the world, and bodies are an essential part of this process. Therefore, an awareness of the body’s roles in contextualizing in teaching and research could help us understand the complexities of how learning happens, not just in the mind, but in the whole being—that is, a whole being, or a “learning self” (Ellsworth, 2005)—that can experience empowerment, discomfort, victimization, guilt, etc. These embodied experiences of learning bring up tensions but also immense possibilities in understanding.

Conclusion

The body in pedagogy and research is a site of learning, of experiencing, of becoming. Furthermore, the role of the body in research needs to be acknowledged and considered beyond its role as signifier. As we have seen here, by looking at the relationship between body and space, new perspectives and trajectories in our interpretations of students' learning moments emerge. As argued at the beginning of this paper, the body, like any signifier, exists in relation to its environment: therefore, space matters. Acknowledging the role of space can help us open up our understanding of the body as "being-in-the-world" in order to move to a fuller perspective on bodies and texts.

In mapping people's performances, particularly in relation to embodiment, it was helpful to reflect back with the participants, considering a specific moment, to talk about how they constructed their contributions and who became implicated in the performance. We were less interested in hearing what they felt the performance was about, than what they thought was happening and how that "happening" gets constructed. The influence of nomadic thought has helped us understand how people function in these dynamics, and the hybrid nature of people's performative worlds. This is significant as we think of the role of the body in the construction of space and subjectivity, as opposed to simply the representation of such notions. Participants (in this case, educators) in this classroom-based drama activity, engaged in learning about drama and pedagogy, using both the physical and visual discourses of performance, and the textual discourses of reflection.

As we progress in this field, we are looking at ways to analyse bodies in movement as well as when they are static. This challenge involves developing new methods of analysis but also new methods of dissemination. With the proliferation of online journals these challenges have become more realisable. As we receive information in more and more diverse and dynamic forms, an engagement with ideas around embodiment, a continuation of the inquiry put forward here, becomes ever more relevant.

Notes

1. This study was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the Institution in which it was carried out.

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