Moving Bodies and Minds - The Quest for Embodiment in Teaching and Learning

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“To teach is to transmit experience” (Irigaray, 2005, p. 58)

Introduction

Much of Western education is distinctly disembodied with students being asked to sit still and the teacher is often rooted behind a lectern or glued to the keyboard to move the PowerPoint presentation forward. The body/mind distinction is clearly expressed in what we expect from schools and universities in that they appeal to minds but often disregard bodies. The “embodied experiences of being and doing” (Matthews, 1998, p. 327) are so far still a fairly under-researched area in educational research. The field of teaching and learning seems to be dominated by cognitive theories that ignore or at least neglect the bodily experiences of teaching and learning.

The introductory quote of Irigaray (2005) stresses that learning is transmitted experience. This experience itself is socially constructed. Constructivist theories in education following Vygotsky’s (1978) groundbreaking work have regularly pointed to the individualized nature of learning. Theorists in this area have started to play with making this constructed knowledge visible through for instance drawing on visually-inspired learning like concept-mapping (Kinchin et al., 2005). However most of the approaches neglect embodiment. An exception is physical education (PE) which has for some time tried to overcome this mind-body dualism (Armour, 1999). Research has for instance explored body narratives in PE teachers (Sparkes, 1999). The notion of body narratives refers to the idea that we know our bodies through discourses rather than in any unmediated ways. The German language distinguishes between Körper, as the instrumental and objective exterior, and Leib, as the subjective and phenomenological experience. In physical education the emphasis seems to the former which can be dissected and analysed. However, Sparkes (1999) suggests employing narrative ways to understand embodied experiences of the Leib (see also Sparkes, 2003a; Sparkes, 2003b).

Merleau-Ponty (2002) famously argued that we conceptualize through our bodies. Researchers in education (Jarvis, 2006; Jarvis and Parker, 2007) as well as management (Yakhlef, 2010) have argued that learning is a much more holistic experience encompassing the senses as much as the brain. Others have suggested that the body itself can be a source of learning and insight (Beaudoin, 1999; Matthews, 1998). In theatre studies, material arts as well as yoga are recommended to overcome the body/mind dualism (Zarrilli, 2008). However, research that is taking embodiment in teaching and research seriously is still scarce.

This paper makes a contribution towards understanding embodiment in teaching and learning. This paper will do this by drawing on two examples of embodied learning and teaching. First, it is explored how teachers in business schools are prepared to teach the case method. The focus here is mainly on teaching rather than learning. Second, it is highlighted how yoga transmits embodied knowledge. I here focus on the interaction between teacher and learner and how this influences learning outcomes. I finally offer a
tentative research agenda to explore embodiment in teaching and learning. I will understand management and yoga through a practice-based lens (Billett, 2004; Corradi et al., 2010; Raelin, 2007). Much of this paper is based on what could be described as auto-ethnography (Muncey, 2010) where the researcher’s embodied experiences are a source of insight (Lea, 2009; Smith, 2007). In this paper I will reflect on my own experiences of learning to teach management and yoga. The comparison of these rather unusual areas, will contribute to the exploration of new ways of learning and teaching in higher education.

**Embodiment in Management Teaching**

Business schools are often seen as having a more vocational character than other disciplines taught in university (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005). Business schools are supposed to develop their students to be business leaders of the future and to teach them in such a way that they can enhance business practice (Ghoshal, 2005). Rather than reading theoretical books, most business schools today teach MBA students based on the case study method developed by Harvard Business School (Argyris, 1980; Barnes et al., 1994; Ellet, 2007). The case study method follows a problem-based learning approach (Stinson and Milter, 1996) that is also used for instance in medicine (Barrows, 1996). The case study method emulates real-life experience by providing a written text on a business situation. Students are asked to read and prepare the cases to discuss them with the professor in class. Most of the class is centred on courses of action and their consequences. This is thought to develop students’ practical thinking and help them to navigate real-life business situations. While the case study method is not without criticism (Argyris, 1980), it is used in most business schools around the world because it provides a “fundamental emphasis on the practical, the applied, and on learning through involvement and doing” (Osigweh, 1987, p.122). This involvement and doing could be seen as an embodiment but, as I will show, the embodiment mainly seems to entail the teacher rather than the learner.

Teaching the case method is very different from delivering a more traditional lecture. A normal class starts with the lecturer asking a question and students commenting on it. These questions centre around what happens in the case, what are the challenges and what would you do in that situation (Ellet, 2007). The teacher normally collects comments and writes them on a white board, which makes this approach to learning much more interactive than traditional lectures in higher education. The teacher is much more of a discussion leader than a lecturer. The faculty training in a business school would entail training on how to discuss cases, how to deal with difficult students and several sessions of individual and group voice coaching.

During such training, it was common in my experience that faculty members are encouraged to develop a presence in the room. This is very similar to how management gurus engage their audiences. A management guru would generally have a lavalier microphone and walk around on stage often interacting with the audience. This connection with the audience is referred to as being an authentic or kinesthetic speaker (Morgan, 2008). To become a kinesthetic speaker, it is important to understand the power of non-verbal communication to build a connection with the audience. This connection with the audience is established through being present in the physical space, such as walking the stage or room, walking into the audience and back, gesturing and developing a personal connection through telling a personal story.

Faculty trained in the case method are asked to see the lecture theatre as a stage and to walk around and stand in different places to engage the audience. The faculty member is trained to be a performer. The whole process is embodied and developing an awareness of the body is encouraged. It is for instance not unusual to ask faculty members to engage in relaxation techniques such as the Alexander Technique to relax before teaching a session. The body is used in teaching, particularly by male management educators through performances, such as posture, leaning closer to the student, making sweeping arm movements, being confident, strategic use of the voice and certain forms of dress that convey authority (Sinclair, 2005; Swan, 2005). A prominent example is management guru Tom Peters. This alludes to the fact that the normalised bodies in management education are those of men (see also Eagleton, 1998; Kelan and Dunkley
Jones, 2010; Perriton, 1999; Sinclair, 1997). This means that only a narrow range of experiences is allowed for sharing.

So far, I have mainly focused on the embodiment of the teacher in the case study method. However, what happens to the learner? While the teacher performs the discussion of the case study and encourages class participation through using his/her body as an instrument, the class itself cannot move much. Apart from making oneself visible if one has a contribution to make or the occasional role play, most of the time students are confined to their own seats. Even though the learning experience in itself is not very embodied, the case study method is seen as a preferred way of teaching given that the material is brought to life by a narrative scenario and an embodied teacher. Advantages of the case method include asking students to engage with the material through exposing the learner to real-life scenarios (Osigweh, 1987). On the other hand, this encourages a rather static view of change assuming that the future events students are going to encounter emulate the past and also the tendency of developing group think in the class situation where other points of view of the world are excluded (Osigweh, 1987). What the case method achieves is that students gain confidence to make decisions in the business world. Through working with case studies and finding a solution, they do not necessarily develop universally applicable knowledge, but they gain confidence in their decision making. One could argue that such confidence is not purely cerebral but also embodied.

While there is little research that explores the embodied effects of the case method, such an approach might highlight a perspective that has so far been neglected. In this section, I have shown that teaching the case method is an embodied approach at least from the perspective of the teacher. The learner in contrast has a rather cognitive experience and is often not encouraged to be embodied. I will now contrast this type of learning to an area where the learner is more embodied.

**Embodiment in Yoga Teaching**

Focusing on yoga is a novel way of exploring embodiment in learning and education and teaching yoga is rarely considered when teaching management. The notable exception is Sinclair (2005) who combines being a management professor with being a yoga teacher. She writes about how yoga can add a new dimension to management education in which greater awareness of the body emerges. Yoga creates a heightened awareness of the body and through yoga the body itself can become an instrument for learning and insight. I will explore how yoga as a practice of embodiment is transmitted.

Yoga is a practice of embodiment where embodiment is achieved through allowing energy, or *Prana*, to flow through the body (Rea Bailey, 1997). Yoga teachers have developed various ways of showing students *Prana* and I mainly draw on Rea’s understanding of *Prana* as transmitted in her teacher training courses (Rea, 2009; 2010). *Prana* is an abstract concept that is often hard to grasp for Westerners. Yet the understanding of *Prana* is central for doing yoga. Without awareness for *Prana* yoga is just another physical exercise.

Yoga teachers use different ways to transmit the idea of *Prana*. A yoga teacher might encourage his/her students to visualize energy or a color in a yoga class. A typical instruction would be to imagine a white light shining through your forehead, the energy centre *ajna chakra*. Another way of transmitting this knowledge is through sustained focused on the breath in yoga. Every *asana*, or pose, is practiced in synchronisation with inhalation and exhalation. Focusing on inhalation and exhalation is a way to experience *Prana*. A third way of developing this awareness of how energy flows is through adjusting the student. Hands-on assists or adjustments are given by the teacher who gently shows the students how the position can be performed. Normally students stretch much deeper once they understand how the energy flows. These adjustments can be gross or subtle but are always experienced through the interaction between the embodiment of the teacher and of the learner (Smith, 2007). Yoga teacher trainees usually practise these hands-on adjusts with partners during their training to experience how it feels to
give and receive these adjustments. Rea (2009; 2010) adds another method of feeling this energy. This is done through the vinyasa, which here means to flow. This concept is based on the teachings of Sri Krishnamacharya and his son T.K.V. Desikachar (1999). The student is encouraged to experience the energy of a pose through flowing between two poses, pulsating in one pose or using a movement of a body part to enhance the energy flows the posture.

In order to encourage student’s advancement, a vinyasa krama system is used (Rea, 2009; 2010). In this system poses are structured in a progressive way. This is very similar to the concept of scaffolding used in education studies (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976; Yelland and Master, 2007). However rather than appealing to cognitive and problem solving skills, this type of scaffolding means to teach the body rather than the mind. Vinyasa krama means that a pose is repeated at various points in the class with increasing difficulty. Through sequencing a yoga class to include various poses that help with a particular peak pose, students will not only see the connection between the poses, their bodies will also learn how to move from one to the next. If a teacher initiates the flow of the yoga class in such a way, the student will be able to achieve a much more advanced position than she/he normally would. For example, I can achieve many positions only when working directly with my yoga teacher who prepares my body for this pose through a specific sequence. I know how it looks and I received instruction of how to get into it various times, but only when following this sequence I am able to perform the pose. This is often combined with surprise and shock when my mind literally tries to catch up with what my body does. This is really where the power of embodiment lies: the body is suddenly able to perform a pose that the mind would not think is possible. For this, a person who really understands yoga and can sequence yoga is needed, which highlights the role of the teacher in initiating embodiment.

This means that the body becomes a source of knowledge. In his review on an ancient Indian material art, that shares much with yoga, Zarrilli (2000) shows how practising this material art creates a heightened sense of awareness of the body. The whole body becomes a sensing instrument. Similarly, in her exploration of yoga, Irigaray (2005) shows how breathing, so essential in yoga, creates embodiment and an awareness of the body. The body is seen as divine and treated as such is able to unfold its spiritual and knowing potential (Irigaray, 2005). Interestingly, Irigaray also talks about learning and teaching stating that:

“[e]ducation in the West is then assimilated to apprenticeship or to the reading of texts...[i]t makes the teacher an aseptic and supposedly neuter vehicle of the culture that he/she transmits...to learn, in the best of cases, is to learn from someone’s experience. To teach is to transmit experience...[f]or the transmission of culture to be correct, it is necessary to notice the differences between what women’s experiences can teach us and what men’s experiences can teach us.” (Irigaray, 2005, p.58f)

Overcoming the body/mind dualism is to practise embodiment and this is best learned from someone who shares his/her experience on embodiment in a gender differentiated way. While I would not entirely subscribe with Irigaray’s différence view (Kelan, 2009), I think it is important to consider which bodies and experiences are normalised in education. As teachers, we can transmit the importance of embodiment through the teaching tools we use and the learner will learn from our experiences of embodiment and incorporate and integrate this with his/her learning. This learning is of course also shaped by other elements.

Towards an Embodied Teaching and Learning
In this article I looked at management education and yoga to explore embodiment in teaching and learning. There is a scarcity of research that would go beyond seeing students and teachers as minds rather than bodies. In this concluding section, I would like to offer a research agenda for areas that need further exploration.
A first area of research could explore the effects embodiment has on learning outcomes. There is some research that suggests student acting as a way to bring the body into the classroom (Matthews, 1998; Meyer, 2001). I have shown that in most cases students are not encouraged to be embodied in the management classroom. However, in management education improvisational theatre is said to increase students creativity and ability to work in teams (Moshavi, 2001). Small enacted group exercises are also used to develop reflexive potential in management practitioners to help them to understanding how inter-subjective realities are constructed (Cunliffe, 2004; see also Meyer, 2001). However, research evidence on actual learning outcomes of embodied approaches to teaching are currently scarce.

Second, there is the assumption, particularly in relation to the case method, that an embodied teacher will lead to embodied learning. However, a teacher can theoretically deliver a very embodied performance without students sharing this experience. In my own teaching practice, I have noticed that students are almost reluctant to take their embodiment seriously. When I ask students to change seats in class or if I ask them to do some stretches very few students do this. Many of them seem to believe that education means to sit still, which is of course what they are told from primary through to higher education. Students are trained to focus on the mind. However, there are ways to incorporate embodiment. When I ask students to deliver presentations, I share breathing exercises with them and I tell them how to stand and where to look. Students are keen to take that up. By breathing properly they are much easier to understand and like with other somatic approaches (Beaudoin, 1999) students also relax more. Further research needs to explore if an embodied teacher leads to better learning outcomes and how an embodied teacher can encourage students to be embodied.

Thirdly, using the body as a type of scaffolding in yoga might be a novel approach of bringing the body into teaching. In my own teaching practice I have used recurring concepts meaning that students would meet a concept I introduce three times over the course of the module in different variations with increased complexity. I use for instance the concept of inclusion in the theoretical part of one of my modules on diversity offering a definition. I then come back to the concept in the second part of the course when I discuss the concept in relation to specific areas. Finally, students meet inclusion again when we discuss practice-based examples at the end of the course. A concept like inclusion can be easily understood through dramatising it and I ask students to develop short scenarios based on inclusion and exclusion that I ask them to enact in class. While complexity would not increase, I would at least offer an alternative access to the rather cognitive approaches used in higher education. Such approaches are similar to the well-researched area of role playing in education. Further research needs to explore how the body can be involved through scaffolding in learning.

If embodiment is taken seriously, what does this mean for teaching strategies in higher education? Much of higher education teaching and learning has focused on transmitting knowledge through lecturing and reading. Recent approaches have started to re-invent higher education by focusing on the visual through videos or concept-maps. Another avenue for higher education might be to explore embodiment in teaching and learning. Whilst the benefits of such an approach have not been well-documented, anecdotal evidence and some pilot studies have suggested that more embodied approaches like including theatre can enhance learning. Bringing the body into higher education allows using the body as a source of insight. It could be a way for sharing experience in a new way. Such approaches will assist students to make sense of an increasingly dynamic economy and society.
References


