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# What can bodies do? En/gendering body-space choreographies of stillness, movement and flow in post-16 pedagogic encounters



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## ABSTRACT

Bodies do inventive, dynamic and productive work in classrooms. This paper argues that bodies are vital players in pedagogic encounters, informing how gender identities are shaped, how power operates, and how pedagogies are enacted. It uses a range of theoretical resources – on space (Massey, 2005), corporeal geography (McCormack, 2013), material feminism (Barad, 2007) – to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of body-space choreographies in Sixth Form College spaces. Empirically, the paper is grounded in six close-up ‘material moments’ of stillness, movement and flow, which indicate that pedagogic encounters are conditioned by routine bodily enactments which happen at speed and often go unnoticed but which do important pedagogic work.

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyses what bodies do in Sixth Form College education. It draws on empirical data from a UK case study to develop a feminist argument regarding the entangled, material and embodied nature of pedagogic encounters. The paper proposes that bodies matter as vital players in classroom pedagogic practices. It considers the role bodies play in the formation of gender identities, in how power operates and is regulated in classrooms, and in how learning habits are recognized, routinized and enacted in pedagogic practices. The paper is interdisciplinary in analytical orientation, drawing on a range of theoretical resources from a variety of different disciplines to explore body-space choreographies in post-16 student-teacher educational encounters. The value of such interdisciplinary research is that it enables conceptual contributions from different disciplines to be combined in ways which produce new insights on educational events (Tibble, 1966; McCulloch, 2002). My aim in this paper is, therefore, to do some conceptual cross-pollination between disciplines and knowledge domains as a means to generate some new interdisciplinary insights.

A focus on body matters is important in shifting arguments away from outcomes, outputs and metrics-oriented accounts of the purposes of post-secondary education, and in illuminating how pedagogy gets done through dynamic and performative practices of bodily mattering. This enables us to attend to what bodies can do in pedagogy as a lived, embodied and emergent event. I elaborate this argument through six empirical examples of pedagogic interactions. These interactions are mundane, routine and unsurprising instances of what goes on in Sixth Form College classrooms and, as such, are likely to be familiar to those working within classrooms in any educational sector. Yet it is their very ‘unsurprisingness’ which makes them exemplary in illuminating the pedagogic work bodies do in constituting gender, space and power relations in classroom assemblages.

The next section outlines the study, defines ‘material moments’, and explains the methodological approach. The section after that provides the context of Sixth Form College spaces and learning in the UK. Section 4 outlines the interdisciplinary theoretical framework of the analysis, and Sections 5, 6 and 7 put this theory to work in detailed exploration of six material moments. The conclusion returns to the question – what can bodies do? – and encapsulates the main arguments.

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## 2. The study

The data were gathered in a qualitative case study in two UK Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs). In the UK, students between the ages of 16–18 study for A Levels (Advanced Levels) in order to gain entry to university at 18. They usually study three or four A Levels and either choose to stay in their secondary school, go to a Sixth Form College, or Further Education college. I focus primarily on data from interviews, classroom observations and my fieldwork diary and use this data to hone in on six ‘material moments’. I define ‘material moments’ in this paper as instances, occurrences and interactions which inhere in, and are enacted through, the materiality of bodily relations; they are moments which are materially dense and specific; and they are time-bound and spatially-located. Material moments are ‘felt’ and registered bodily, their instantaneousness a part of the ongoing sensorial flow of embodied experience. Methodologically, I deploy the concept of material moments to grasp the body-space details of micro-level classroom occurrences and interactions and thereby aim to analyse ‘the force of the material in its speed and evanescence’ (Taylor, 2013). The six material moments selected are analysed as data ‘hot-spots’, that is as instances of data which ‘jumped out’ and ‘grabbed’ attention as I looked over transcripts, listened again to recordings and re-read my research diary. In pursuing this line of data analysis, I follow MacLure’s (2010) advice to tune into those fragments, splinters and nodes of data – which she refers to as ‘data hotspots – that seem to ‘glow’ and ‘glimmer’, which stay with you, touch you, and seem to spark connections with concepts. Following MacLure (2010, 282), then, the six material moments I analyse below are about putting conceptual development to work ‘at the level of singularity and specificity’. As such, they eschew usual modes of data analysis which seek generalizability, replicability and comparability. The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee and all names have been anonymized.

There are, in addition, a number of theoretical reasons for focusing on material moments. First, pedagogic processes are, by their very nature, ephemeral, fleeting and happenstance. Pedagogy is an ongoing occurrence, a happening in the here-and-now, something that does not sit still but changes moment by moment, group by group and class by class. It is never the same thing twice. Material moments, therefore, enable a focus on how pedagogic processes are precisely manifest in context, time and space: they enable attention to be given to what happens in *this* classroom, with *these* particular people, in relation to *this* curriculum ‘content’ and knowledge, and *these* specific learning processes. Second, pedagogy takes place as an event in which bodies, spaces and materialities converge. Pedagogy is a process in which meaning and matter are entangled together; learning is a body-mind act, intrinsic and inseparable. However, because it is often difficult to see the importance of those pedagogic processes which are both close and mundane, a focus on material moments brings to the fore the quiet work body-space choreographies do in enabling the routine business of pedagogy to continue. Paying fine, close-up and detailed attention to material moments in pedagogic relations can, I suggest, produce some fresh insights into the questions of ‘what can bodies do?’ As a context for this paper’s analytical engagement with that question, I now briefly outline the nature of SFC spaces and learning in the UK.

## 3. Sixth form college spaces, learning and built pedagogy

In England, Sixth Form Colleges, along with Academy sixth forms, and school six forms, are considered to be the ‘academic’ route to university for 16–19 year olds who do A Levels. There are currently 90 Sixth Form Colleges in England with 162, 541 students (22%), out of a total of 592,884 sixth formers in the whole country. Despite the fact that sixth formers in England are now only funded to receive around half of the tuition time as sixth formers in other leading economies, Sixth Form Colleges help their students to achieve better exam results (higher A Level scores) than the two other sorts of non-selective UK providers. My case study involved two Sixth Form Colleges in south-east England. The first is Seaside Sixth Form College with a student population of 1150 and an excellent pass rate of 97.5% at A Level (above the then national average 96.9%) with 71% students achieving A – C grades. The second is Grainger Sixth Form College, slightly larger than Seaside SFC with 1350 students. Grainger College students also achieved A Level grades above the national average at 97.1% with 74.3% of students gaining A – C grades at A Level.

The institutional and pedagogic dynamics of Sixth Form College spaces differ from the more formal spaces of compulsory schooling. They provide for more ‘relaxed’ and informal ways of being and behaving than schools and often acts as a halfway house between the hierarchical regimes of schools and the adult freedoms student can exercise at university. Thus, one Grainger College student characterized their college culture as:

*College is a place with spaces where you can avoid surveillance, that makes it very different from school, I am now a totally different person since I came to college (Religious Studies Focus Group).*

While a Seaside College student commented on the freedom and independence they enjoyed: ‘school is like a prison camp, you have to do what you’re told.’

This informal spatial geography of SFCs influences learning and teaching. Many A Level subjects emphasise participation modes of inquiry, although some subjects work within a mixture of both ‘acquisition’ and ‘participation’ (Sfard, 1998). SFC pedagogies emphasise students’ active role in learning, their agency in knowledge construction, and their creative reflexivity as agents (Bruner, 1996).

This context is important to the argument I develop below. SFCs are a specific example of ‘built pedagogy’ (Monahan, 2002) in that the design and use of space influences the pedagogic action and feelings of those who learn within those spaces. As I illuminate below, students’ bodies do not simply enter and ‘take their place’ or ‘take up space’ in the built pedagogies that precede them. Rather, students use their bodies to inhabit, occupy, move and claim spaces, and do so in ways that both conform to and subtly shift the nature of those spaces.

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