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EMBODIMENT AND AESTHETICS IN TEACHING AND EXAMINATIONS: POSSIBILITIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

In a democratic society, knowledge and research grounding play central roles. To support students' learning, it is necessary for teachers to be able to motivate and create challenging and stimulating learning opportunities. Questions regarding academic literacy often lack embodied and aesthetic perspectives (Carlgren, 2015), leading to challenges in bridging the gap between knowledge and teaching. Studies have shown that traditionally academic teaching methods and dualistic conceptions of learning can be identified within certain higher education contexts (Pastorek et al., 2021; Østern et al., 2021). The aim of this paper is to highlight and discuss the possibilities of embodiment and aesthetics in teaching and examinations in higher education. To enhance student engagement, a more holistic approach to education is required, where individuals are inspired and given space in various ways (Østern, et al., 2019). By paying attention to students' bodily communication, contact, and presence, the quality of the learning processes can improve (Winther, 2018). Based on research in preschool teacher education (Pastorek et al., 2021), a picture emerges where academic values, such as writing and speaking, take up a significant space in content, goals, and assessments at the expense of aesthetic and bodily perspectives. Instead, embodiment and aesthetic perspectives on knowledge and knowledge production in higher education can be a contribution to varied forms of teaching and examinations and a way to further development in the discussion around Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Keywords: Aesthetics, Embodiment, Higher Education, Teaching

Sammanfattning

I ett demokratiskt samhälle spelar kunskap och forskning centrala roller. För att stödja studenters lärande är det nödvändigt att lärare kan motivera och skapa utmanande och stimulerande lärandemöjligheter. Frågor om akademisk kompetens saknar ofta kroppsliga och estetiska perspektiv (Carlgren, 2015), vilket leder till utmaningar i att överbrygga klyftan mellan kunskap och undervisning. Studier har visat att traditionella akademiska undervisningsmetoder och dualistiska föreställningar om lärande kan identifieras inom vissa högre utbildningskontexter (Pastorek et al., 2021; Østern et al., 2021). Syftet med denna artikel är att belysa och diskutera möjligheter till kroppslighet och estetik i undervisning och examination inom högre utbildning. För att öka studenters engagemang krävs ett mer holistiskt tillvägagångssätt till utbildning, där individer berörs och ges utrymme på olika sätt (Østern et al., 2019). Genom att uppmärksamma studenters kroppsliga kommunikation, kontakt och närvaro kan kvaliteten i lärandeprocesserna förbättras (Winther, 2018). Baserat på forskning inom förskollärarytbildning (Pastorek et al., 2021) framträder en bild där akademiska värden, såsom skriftlig och muntlig kommunikation, tar upp en betydande plats i innehåll, mål och bedömningar på bekostnad av estetiska och kroppsliga perspektiv. Istället kan kroppsliga och estetiska perspektiv på kunskap och kunskapsproduktion inom högre utbildning vara ett bidrag till varierade former av undervisning och examination samt ett sätt att vidareutveckla diskussionen kring artificiell intelligens (AI).

Nyckelord: estetik, kroppslighet, högre utbildning, undervisning

Introduction

Overarching democratic goals in a society impact educational goals and methods. To strengthen students' ambitions and willingness to educate themselves, teachers at all levels must provide inspiring learning experiences that engage students and provide multiple ways to learn and communicate. In an academic context, this can be challenging as academic literacy often neglects embodied and aesthetic viewpoints (Carlgren, 2015).

Research has revealed that conventional academic teaching approaches and dualistic notions of learning are still discernible in specific higher education settings (Pastorek et al., 2021; Østern et al., 2021). Academization of professional education, such as preschool teacher training (Lindqvist, 2019) or nursing programs (Winther et al., 2015), has been ongoing for several decades. A similar trend toward academization has occurred in sports education, which traditionally included practical physical components (Wirén Åkesson, 2014).

In this paper, we want to highlight the embodied and aesthetic aspects of academic integrity. Academic integrity is a complex concept that involves authenticity and refraining from plagiarism, cheating, or engaging in unauthorized collaboration. One definition of academic integrity is "adherence to ethical and professional principles, standards, and practices of consistent value systems that serve as guidance for decision-making and actions in education, research, and academic activities" (Tauginienė et al.,

2018, pp. 7-8). Students provide various reasons when caught cheating in examinations. The cheating can be related to students experiencing stress and anxiety, leading to a positive attitude towards plagiarism (Wing Fu & Tremayne, 2022) or to being in a time crunch, resorting to plagiarism, for example, to submit the examination on time (Wallace & Newton, 2014). We will in this paper argue that by incorporating the body and performative elements into teaching and examinations, legal certainty can be enhanced. Since Chat GPT was made available to the public in November 2022, discussions about secure examinations have been actively debated at educational institutions around the world. Universities are demanding diverse forms of exams, where students, for instance, must include personal experiences and systematically reference various parts of the course material in the examination to prevent unauthorized use of AI. Academic integrity also encompasses embodied perspectives, which can be a tool for managing examinations in relation to AI. By incorporating the body and performative elements into teaching and examinations, legal certainty can be enhanced.

The aim of this paper is therefore to highlight and discuss the possibilities of embodiment and aesthetics in teaching and examinations in higher education. The following research questions are posed:

1. How can university teachers and students use movement and their own bodies as resources for learning, leadership, and professional communication?
2. What opportunities does higher education provide for students, using the example of preschool teacher education, to produce knowledge through aesthetic expressions and the body?

Bodies as resources for learning, leadership, and professional communication

In professional teaching, there are some fundamental qualities, such as having a good structure and a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom. The teaching content should be meaningful, and the teacher should have positive expectations of the students. The teacher also needs to practice their subject-specific teaching competence and create good relationships with their students. In many ways, both university teaching and school teaching may also be compared to a creative and artistic process in the area between the previously planned and the improvisatory opening of possibilities (Winther, 2020). This process requires pedagogical tact, which is conditioned by the teacher's sensitive insights and ability to act in the immediacy of the moment (van Manen, 2016). Here, involvement and curiosity are included in the ongoing process to create a meaningful and lively teaching atmosphere, which also fosters trustful relationships between teacher and students. In these relationships, the language of the body is an ever-present phenomenon. The body is always speaking through eye contact, touch, timing, rhythm, and sensual communication (Winther, 2012, 2020). The body also communicates and carries life experiences, something which includes societal norms and culture, while being present in the moment (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2012).

Even if bodily communication is of great importance in the meeting with students, it is the university teacher who has the primary responsibility to create a resonant relationship. The concept of resonance derives etymologically from the Latin *resonantia* and means reverberation. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2019) argues that resonance is about the good life. When our relationship with someone vibrates, resonance occurs. It is about sensitivity when we listen and hear the echo. Rosa suggests that humans are touched by resonance and can simultaneously touch other people. In the modern Western world, we often lose touch with resonance, even though we need it to thrive. When we stand upon our feet, Rosa (2019) argues, we stand upon the world. "The subjects always experience themselves as being situated

in a world in which physical, social, emotional, and cognitive significances fundamentally overlap” (p. 47). The skin functions as a membrane to other people and to the world. For example, Rosa pinpoints breathing, voice, gaze, walking, standing, laughing, and crying as examples of basic expressions of bodily relationships to the world. The opposite to resonance is self-alienation. Then the body becomes an enemy, and we lose the vibrating connection to the body. We fail to understand the body’s answer and the body has become mute to us. Laughing and crying are not only potential expressions of a resonant relationship, but they produce such relations. Rosa (2019) emphasizes that a person “with no tears left” or a person that “has nothing more to laugh about” is truly in an existential crisis. The body is connected to the world, and vice versa.

In higher education, the ability to stand in front of a group and deliver a presentation or to meet, lead, and gather a group is also included. These are embodied competencies that all students need to practice. They encompass being able to sense and interpret body language and establish contact in interpersonal encounters. To become professional, these qualities are integrated as part of one's personality and an embodied aspect of professional skills (Fibæk Larsen, 2012).

At the same time, each profession has had its own choreography (Winther, 2012). Teachers must be able to hold a room and be visible, *see*, embrace, and motivate many children and young people at once. A preschool teacher must be able to sit on the floor and make contact with the spontaneity and joy in the play of small children through synchronized expression in their own body. For nurses, it is important to be able to read the patient's body language and contain other individuals' vulnerability while being present in a respectful way (Winther et al., 2015). The significance of the body for professionalism is especially clear in professions in which bodily communication is important for leadership, creating trust, resonance, and attention through the senses. In higher education, students are future professionals. Therefore, it is important that both teachers and students are aware of their own bodily communication. Here the awareness of embodied leadership competence can be a navigation tool. Embodied leadership competence is a close-to-practice, research-based, holistic concept developed through movement and psychological and phenomenologically inspired research (Winther, 2012, 2013, 2020). It is defined as a concept combining three interrelated principles, which are always visible and felt in various professional spaces:

1. **Self-contact and somatic awareness**
2. **Communication reading and contact ability**
3. **Leadership in groups or situations (Winther, 2012, 2013)**

Self-contact and somatic awareness is defined as the ability to “being in contact with one’s own body and personal feelings; the ability to be focused and present; the ability to include one’s heart and still keep a professional focus and a private boundary” (Winther, 2012, p. 80; 2013, p. 223).

The teacher’s self-contact and somatic awareness are constantly in process. This is felt in the movements of the breath and the emotional tone in the body. If self-contact and somatic awareness is attuned, it can be experienced as a present, free, and grounded state. In difficult or unpredictable situations, even experienced professionals can feel that they lose their own grounding.

Communication reading and contact ability is defined as “[t]he ability to see, listen, sense, and notice; the ability to ‘read’ both verbal and bodily communication; the ability to create trustful contact with others; the ability to contain and manage conflicts” (Winther, 2012; p. 80; 2013, p. 223).

Communication reading and contact ability is thus about being able to be in a professional space with an open and confidence-inspiring body language. As in a dance, it reflects the ability to constantly create a resonant atmosphere. Here, especially eye contact, synchronicity, mirroring, and in some professions also physical touch, are important communication tools.

Leadership in groups or situations is defined as “[p]rofessional overview, radiation, centering, clear leadership of the group or situation; the ability to enter or hold a space or room with a healthy and body-based authority.” (Winther, 2012; p. 80; 2013, p. 223).

The situated leadership is about being able to create, enter and hold a room or space in a bodily visible and noticeable way and at the same time being aware of both self-contact, communication reading and contact ability (Winther, 2012, 2013, 2020; Winther & Højlund Larsen, 2022). These physical actions provide authority through authenticity and integrity, and create professional credibility. By practicing the creation of relationships with oneself, with others, and with the physical reality, both in movements and reflections, and sensitivity to oneself and to other people can be increased (Heikkinen & Mattsson, 2022).

The principles of embodied leadership competence can be trained through movement, reflections, and dialogues, and thereby provide self-insight and professional development (Winther, 2020; Winther & Højlund Larsen, 2022). At the same time, these factors also comprise a collective learning phenomenon in that many professionals may recognize situations which others too experience (Winther, 2012, 2020; Winther, 2020; Winther & Højlund Larsen, 2022). Moreover, by practicing techniques from embodied practices such as martial arts, drama, and dance, students in higher education can be assisted in developing communication skills and a healthy authority that encompasses presence, focus, and balance in demanding situations during their education and examinations –as well as in their future professional practice.

Knowledge through embodied and aesthetic expressions in preschool teacher education - a Swedish case

To understand the role of embodiment in higher education in a more complete way, more research would be helpful. However, a study of the presence and position of dance in twelve preschool teacher training programs in Sweden can work as a case study to picture and problematize the marginalized role that the body, movements and dance have in higher education. The preschool teaching profession involves daily interaction with other bodies and communication with small children, who often use their bodies to express themselves (Fredriksen, 2015; Svendler Nielsen & BurrIDGE, 2015). In preschool practice, learning, play and care form a unity, and to provide care one needs to involve the body and communicate with the body, for example by touching in a kind way (Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2017; Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018). Dance is a way to communicate and express oneself through embodied interaction and imagination (Antilla 2019/2013; Sansom, 2011; Svendler Nielsen, 2009).

In the aforementioned Swedish study, Pastorek Gripson, Mattsson and Andersson (2021) examined how often words such as “dance,” “movements” and “body” were mentioned in content, learning outcomes and examination forms in twelve Swedish preschool teacher education syllabi. Seven of twelve preschool teacher training programs did not mention dance at all in the description of the course content. As dance is an aesthetic form of expression that preschool teachers should work with (Lpfö, 18), both as a content and as a method, the lack of dance in preschool teacher education stands out as problematic and raises the question of how the students will be able to obtain knowledge of dance. Only four of twelve preschool teacher educations mentioned dance as part of the course goals, and only two mentioned dance in the examination forms that students need to show knowledge or awareness of in order to pass the examination. This shows that embodied knowledge, to have skills “in your own body,” is even more rare. The body was mentioned in six of twelve preschool teacher educations, and movement was mentioned in seven of twelve preschool teacher educations. This indicates that movement and the body have a weak position in preschool teacher education. As young children often communicate nonverbally, by using their body, gestures and movement, this is striking. In immigrant-dense areas, preschools are multilingual. As the preschool teachers might not understand all the language spoken in everyday practice, body language that can be seen as rather universal can be helpful in communication, both with children and also with their parents. When looking closer at course goals, the capacity to involve one’s own body is not always emphasized as the students are required to reflect, report, and explain (with words) rather than using skills that involve the body and dance movements. One can pass examinations by writing and reflecting on dance and dance education, while lacking the bodily knowledge to perform dance movements. To be able to teach, and to show children dance movements, preschool teachers need to have embodied knowledge in dance and be confident in using their own bodies to express themselves and to communicate.

Two discourses were visible in the results: an academic discourse and an aesthetic discourse. In the aesthetic discourse, dance is mentioned *as* something, not only *about* something else in the examination forms. This occurs at two universities only, and those have teachers that are skilled in dance themselves. This indicates that institutions that have qualified dance teachers can provide examination forms that require the students to involve their bodies in dance movements, and not to only write and talk about dance. That qualified dance teachers are rare in preschool teacher educations in Sweden highlights that even in a program that educates for a profession where embodied knowledge is crucial, embodied knowledge is lacking.

In the academic discourse, dance is often pictured as an ornament to decorate other academic areas and make them more interesting and colorful, for example mathematics and language; and dance is often replaceable according to Pastorek Gripson et al. (2021). The weak position of dance in preschool teacher education syllabi can also be understood in relation to gender perspectives. Dance is regarded as linked to femininity (Gard, 2003, 2006, 2008; Risner, 2009; Stinson 2005a), and has a marginalized position in many educational contexts.

With the preschool teacher education as an example, we have shown the marginalized role of the body and movements in higher education. Similar tendencies can be seen in professional training, for example teacher training for physical education (Wirén Åkesson, 2014) and nursing programs (Winther et al., 2015). Here research also shows the innovative potential dance can have for training somatic awareness, bodily communication, and embodied professional competence in nursing education (Winther et. al., 2015; Winther & Gröntved, 2022). Academic knowledge, such as reading and writing texts, often limits

other resources for knowledge production due to lack of resources and competence. In an educational landscape where the legal certainty regarding examinations is challenged by artificial intelligence, and where the teacher cannot be sure of who might have produced written examinations and tasks, the use of one's own body has an underutilized potential. Knowledge that is expressed and produced in one's own body can be used to a larger extent in examinations and tasks to prevent students from copying texts produced by, for example, Chat GPT. Embodied knowledge also provides possibilities to understand a specific content in a multimodal and more in-depth way as the knowledge is incorporated in one's own body (Antilla, 2019/2013).

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have highlighted the embodied and aesthetic aspects of academic integrity. As a result of the Bologna process, working with constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) by organizing and measuring knowledge in an academic landscape, university education tends to reinforce the role that oral and written communication have. At the same time, it limits other communicative resources such as bodily movements, gestures and dance that can contribute to richer and more multiple ways to communicate (Kress, 2010; Pastorek Gripson et al., 2021; Winther, 2018). By using one's own body, a resistance towards a dualistic perspective can be shown, and at the same time a multimodal communicative practice can be created. As Rosa (2019) argues, the importance of resonance with the world is a solution for the quality of human life. The speeding up of modern life does not make humans any happier or more content. The body's relationships with the world are crucial in creating vibrations; it is important, therefore, to listen to one's own and other people's reverberations. It enables humans to be touched and to touch others.

Anxiety regarding the role of the body, movements, dance and embodied learning in higher education can be limiting in the present educational landscape. In relation to the discussion about AI and academic integrity, dance, embodiment and movements have possibilities to provide learning opportunities and examination forms that cannot be replaced solely by AI-provided texts. When embodied leadership competence is consciously included in higher education, it can facilitate resonant communication and deeper learning opportunities (Winther, 2020; Winther & Højlund Larsen, 2022). Also internationally, there is a growing interest for including embodied, experiential, and aesthetic activities in various educational and professional contexts (Biehl, 2017). Here the importance of the felt, sensual and emotional body has become increasingly relevant (Biehl, 2017; Winther, 2020; Winther & Grøntved, 2022; Winther & Højlund Larsen, 2022). By tending not to let words dominate in higher education, but also by integrating embodied learning, a wider communicative practice can be facilitated that could act as a counterweight to AI in teaching and examinations. This can also contribute to more in-depth learning for students and facilitate resonance and meaningful relationships in the academic landscape. Moreover, awareness of the language of the body and embodied professional competence can be important for the students' future practices. Despite cultural differences, embodied communication is a primary language for all people in the world.

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