

# A dialogical encounter with teaching practice-based subjects in higher education

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## Abstract

The intention of this article is from a phenomenological perspective to “unpack” the role of emotions when teaching practice-based subjects in higher education. When teaching practice-based subjects, educators’ embodied expressions and personal understanding affect both teachers’ and students’ knowledge production. The academic and the political worlds have a vested interest in understanding and improving methods of teaching and learning in higher education, and concepts such as accountability and performativity are used to indicate quality in education, whereas the affective and embodied knowledge tend to be unterminated. In this article, the authors investigate the teacher’s body as a knowledge producing and productive resource in teaching practice-based subjects. Analysis of the dialogue between two teachers shows how expressing the intersubjective and subjective dialogues in- and between them illuminates qualities such as daring to be a bodily perceptive and emotional being, listening within and the experience of teaching and learning simultaneously, trusting bodily sensations, and letting the students be who they are. By applying theoretical concepts to teachers’ descriptions of classroom experiences, this article contributes perspectives and sheds light upon human knowledge in professional relations.

**Keywords:** *embodied knowledge; perceptive pedagogy; educator’s experiences; dance teaching; intersubjectivity*

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## Background

In this article our intention is to build on the fundamental way the body has in gaining knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1989; Todes, 2001) and use one specific dialogue to ‘unpack’ and reveal new knowledge. Our interest is inspired from situations of teaching a practice-based subject in higher education. We aim at showing how embodied teacher expressions and teachers’ contact with themselves and the students have a

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significant impact on the students' knowledge production (Pröckl, 2020; Dahlberg, 2011; Berg, 2017; Dahlberg, 2011; Pröckl, 2020). Both the academic and the political worlds have a vested interest in understanding and improving methods of teaching and learning in higher education (Hermansen, 2018).

Teachers are expected to be responsible (and accountable) for the teaching they conduct and for enhancing the students' learning and active engagement, but as shown in the 2020 *Student Survey* ([www.studiebarometeret.no/en](http://www.studiebarometeret.no/en)), measurement of quality in higher education, quantities, and structures are given high value. Qualities, emotional, academic, and human bodily relations between teachers and between teachers and students are rarely visible as cornerstones of the teaching of practice-based subjects and in research. However, while we agree that documentation and the measurement of learning outcomes have an important political function, we argue that for this documentation to have meaning, it should be associated with qualitative approaches to learning. We suggest exploring actual situations and embrace an open-ended search for evolving qualities based on experience in the relationships between teacher and student. Hoveid and Hoveid (2019, p. 147) argue that paying attention to teaching means paying attention to what is *inside* the system of education and that student learning is connected to the "art of teaching," which they describe as having to do with "the student to become a free individual with knowledge who supports the living in a sustainable society respecting freedom and obligation." Inspired by Hoveid and Hoveid we base our 'art of teaching' on bodily perceptions and the intertwining of our senses in exchange with our students (2019, p. 147), and it challenges us to use the teaching situations to develop a theoretical framework for the teaching of practice-based subjects in higher education.

### **Method: Situating the article in material produced in a dialogue on teaching**

Our aim is to identify some of the forces that drive us as teachers and theorize our bodily experiences and practice. Through this work we highlight and develop a theory that is accountable for our bodily experience of teaching. Through textual analysis of our dialogue about experiences in the space we teach in, we aim to (re)discover some elements central to teaching. We are influenced by the increasing research engagement with practical and bodily ways of knowing (Gilje, 2017; Hermans & Bremmer, 2015; Molander, 2015; Østern et al., 2021), and researchers who address and use dialogue as an approach to create knowledge (Anttila, 2015; Damasio, 1999; Parviainen, 2003). Unpacking the qualities that make up the teaching is a precondition for the realization of students' meaning making as bodily learning subjects. Even if we do address our institutional frames, we would like to draw attention to the awareness of the quality of the bodily and interaffective relations between us and the students. We argue that without such awareness it would be hard to develop an institutional structure for active student involvement and self-organized learning experiences (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

We have chosen to use dialogue both as method and form; in the central part of the article we present and elaborate on a dialogue between us as teachers, and parallel to this our writing is based on dialogues between us as authors. We have met and worked with talking and writing, and once performed our dialogue as a conference presentation. In addition, we have done independent individual work on the text, and e-mailed it back and forth. Thus, we have gradually constructed the main part of the article through dialogue and in the form of dialogue in which our actions, motions, and thoughts come alive. As phenomenologically oriented researchers we are, in line with Todes (2001), aware of that we are the creators of the dialogue and the analyses of it, and the spatiotemporal field in which our dialogue takes part is produced by way of the body's specificities that constrain and enable our understanding. Based on these conditions we intend to share this dialogue further and in spaces such as classrooms, dance studios, and workshops, and in this way to recreate and share teaching and learning experiences. We are inspired by MacLaren, who claims that "dialogical questioning can motivate one to take a new perspective on, and to clarify, the orientation that one currently has, in all of its systematic implications and contradictions" (2020, p. 132), and we chose this structure because we believe it creates relationships between teachers and students in the teaching and learning space. Through dialogue based in and upon lived experience, we hope to make the argumentation come alive and be accessible.

Our collaborative inquiry into teaching is intended to stimulate the peer review and collaborative aspects of teacher experience. We have wide-ranging experience from teaching bachelor's and master's degree students in PE-teacher education and dancer education, and we have encountered and reflected upon many different concepts, philosophies, and phenomena, some of which we share in this article. We dig into the practice of dance teaching and try to figure out how we understand what happens there, as well as in other bodily practice teaching situations. In the process, we lay out the conceptual framework and theories that we believe to be helpful and to some extent necessary for understanding teaching bodily practice today.

Another reason to choose to use dialogue in this presentation is that the form replicates one of the most common ways that knowledge is produced and transferred in everyday life. In the book *Reflective Conversations* (2011), Tom Andersen describes dialogues as both "inner" and "external," and makes the argument that within every dialogue, several sub-dialogues are simultaneously ongoing: a verbal dialogue between the two participants, and an interior dialogue explicit. Our belief is that there must be space for more than one voice in any such debate. For this article, we have constructed a dialogue based on real conversations and writing, in which we have included a recreation of the inner dialogues that each of us has had with ourselves concerning former teacher experiences. In other words, in addition to the dialogue going on between us we invite a questioning and reworking of our own understanding through "inner dialogue by virtue of inhabiting

another's story or perspective alongside one's own (MacLaren, 2020, p. 132). In this way we use dialogue as a meaning-making process, in which we have experimented with how to verbally formulate thoughts and experiences and connect them to theory in ways that the other person can understand. The setting of the dialogue is in the corridor of an academic institution where we as two educators, meet right after one of us has been teaching dance to bachelor students in PE teacher education.

### **Teachers' dialogue and reflection on the dialogue**

Gunn (G): Hello Hilde (H).

Hilde: Hello Gunn.

G: How did your class go today, Hilde?

H: It went really well!

G: Oh, how nice! ... But, wait a minute – what was it that went well? What is your idea of a class “going well” based on?

H: Thank you for asking, I need that question.

Today the students were working in groups, and their task was to make dance sequences and combine them into shorter choreographies, and they should focus upon how to use the space, direction of the body and the movements, and relations between them. Students immediately engaged themselves in working with these ideas. They started moving right away, exploring and elaborating on the task with and through their bodies. From the very beginning and throughout the class, they were engaged in movement. I think that when I said the class “went well,” I was referring to the students' immediacy, the way they proceeded, and the positive atmosphere and energy in the room.

The students were able to get in motion and keep moving, and to do the task they were given. I think this success was borne out of a mutual expectation and trust between us that is related to previous work we have been doing in the class. My point being, the students were not sitting down and starting their work by thinking, talking, and writing, but by bodily exploring the tasks through movement.

While travelling, walking, and dancing through the space, and in between my students today, I was paying attention to what was going on, and I had a strong feeling that I was sensing through and with my whole body. We were all participating together in the same space, and I felt I was continuously moving and being moved. I believe my moving dancing in this way, at the same time as my students move dancing, makes them feel at ease, as dancing and being watched by the teacher tend to make some students feel exposed and uncomfortable. While moving I sensed the atmosphere in the class as positive while the students were dancing, as their bodies moved through space and created space in quite chaotic and creative ways. I felt their bodies as actively participating and involved, and at the same time I could feel my own body as present and as being “here.” I understand this “here-ness” as related to what Husserl called the ground zero of orientation (Behnke, 2015, p. 70). I realized something that I already knew in theory, but never really experienced before: even when they are moving,

the students do not move away from themselves. They are always 'here,' and I as well had a strong sense of being 'here.' In a strange way I felt as if I was both at one with the students and separate from them. According to Jan Bengtsson (2001), 'phenomenological ambiguity' indicates that the kinesthetic experiences of the teacher from her first-person perspective are intertwined with her appearance as 'a visual object' from the perspective of the student. As a teacher I perceive and feel the visual and kinesthetic information simultaneously, and this simultaneous and double feeling is exactly what creates meaning and informs me about how the students are doing in class. In other words, I conceive understanding through my body, and what I perceive, gives me an immediate understanding of what is happening, and of what to do next. This style of teaching, that allows me to be with and among the students, is the opposite of the more traditional idea of the teacher as an observer watching, controlling, and instructing the students to move in certain ways determined by her.

G: And when it comes to the class "going well," do you think your students share your assessment?

H: I ask myself whether I might be wrong – maybe I'm totally on another planet than my students. I sometimes wonder if I can trust my own perception, and if I can, then what is my trust in myself based on? To understand the students' assessment, I often engage my students verbally in the middle of and towards the end of classes. However, in my experience, even when students obviously have enjoyed their work and my expectation is that there would be a lot to be said, it is often quite difficult to involve them in fruitful and deeper conversation, and consequently I need to trust my bodily knowledge together with verbal information.

I believe that in the actual teaching situation, as well as the student's experience, my personal 'teacher-history' shapes my understanding. Merleau-Ponty tells us that there are several ways for the body to be a body (Merleau-Ponty in Behnke, 2015, p. 155). He argues that, our perception of the heart beating, the body breathing, is shared. For me, this connects with a shared feeling that has to do with a distinct individual and personal feeling of me teaching. I believe this feeling illuminates my experience of being together in a shared world. As I share the world and space with my students, I am interchangeable with all of them. One part of this is a deeply felt and persistent mood of self-organization, similar to what Deane Juhan (1987, p. 34) writes: "Every time I touch something, I am aware of the part of me that is touching as I am of the thing I touched." In the classroom, I am touching the floor, touching the skin of others who are present, and I understand that my sense of myself grow out of interaction with the students, as well as with the floor and the objects in the room. I think also of how Merleau-Ponty (1968, 1989) clearly has stated that the body is our way of existing in the world. He writes that we are never separate from the world we inhabit. We are existential – affective and intersubjective. Merleau-Ponty shapes my understanding of my experience in the classroom – it is as if I, or we, could feel subjectivity and intersubjectivity at the same time.

G: Yes – it makes sense to think about these issues, and I agree that asking oneself and reflecting is a very important way of understanding. Nevertheless, your description also tells us something about how

teachers position themselves in relation to their students. Often, I feel there is not enough time to teach. Most practice-based subjects require a certain amount of time for just that: practicing! In these disciplines, we cannot stop practicing. It doesn't work to practice dancing for a semester and then switch to a new subject. Practice-based knowledge is something we must carry with us. We need time to practice keeping the knowledge alive, to let it breathe, and to be able to discover new aspects and movements that feed our theories and our reflections. In some ways, I understand the new philosophy of higher education in Norway to be "faster is better." But we need to ask, what happens to the quality of teaching when teaching and learning happen faster and faster? I believe that quality in higher education is unconditionally bound to learning something new, not to learning something quickly.

I often hear teachers talk about teaching as if they are 'outside,' observing their students, as though nothing new can happen between teacher and student.

- H: I know. In dance and dance teaching education, objectification or even over-objectification of the body is a normative discourse that will continue to exist. However, when I said that the class went well, it was because I perceived self-organizing effortless and unpredictable movements that I felt 'belonged' to the students—a perfect example of what Zanner calls "possibilizing" (Zanner in Morris & MacLaren, 2015, p. 78). I perceived and sensed the quality of their work as a kind of continuous evaluation of how the class was doing, how the students participated and engaged with each other, how they moved their bodies individually and together, and how they eagerly communicated both bodily and verbally. I understood them as fully available for the emerging needs of unforeseen situations, which is what I consider creative dance group work to be all about. I have extensive personal, professional, and pedagogical experience with improvising dance, in which new movements can emerge at any time—and where movement rooted in personal bodily history and memory is of central importance. Today, the students' movements amazed me, they had their own individual ways of moving, clearly because of their personal history and memory, while at the same time displaying their learned and developed dance skills. Not only that, but I could see how they were able to easily share their bodily knowledge with each other, something which I interpret to illustrate the synthesis that I have tried to build into my teaching. They were trusting their bodies and showed an attitude of opening themselves towards the other students, as well as towards new knowledge.
- G: What you describe illuminates your experiences of teaching in a personal and affective manner to me. What you're saying indicates a basic understanding of your students as kinesthetically open subjects. I wonder whether you could tell me more about your experience of being in a shared space with the students.
- H: Today, and a few times before as well, I felt my teacher-body was sponge-like. While the students were working, I moved through the room in and out between them—trying to feel, with all my senses, what was going on in the different groups as well as individually. I concentrated on being open and responsive, and to somehow sense the questions they were asking nonverbally. The questions concerning *how* to work with their task and what to do to make dance arose in the shared space.

- G: Are you saying that the bodies involved in dance communicate questions? Does that mean that you somehow can feel which questions the students' bodies ask? Does this mean you believe that moving bodies communicate meaning?
- H: Absolutely, I feel I can somehow sense at least some of the questions the students have, because the students and I are interacting in a shared space. We could be both 'here' in our own bodies, and 'there' inhabiting other persons ways of experiencing, and in some way, we may say that others become part of our embodiment and are "already at work in us" (MacLaren, 2014, p. 57). Teaching is relational and intersubjective. I and my students participate together in the class, of course, and sometimes afterwards as well, when all of us have the chance to reflect on what happened and try to understand it together.
- So far, I have tried to give language to my experience by describing some of the bodily phenomena that operationalize my assessment that my class "went well today." Now it's time to hear what you think, Gunn, can I ask you to elaborate on your ideas about the relationality and intersubjectivity of teaching dance?
- G: Well, my goal in teaching students is always to problematize—I want to teach them to be critical of body objectification and equip them with language adequate to describe their experience. My overall view is that when I teach dance students, or teacher students, I'm building on an understanding of the body as exploratory and impulsive, and tapping into deep reservoirs of instinct, receptivity, intuitions, and perception.
- My reading of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1989) about the body's general grip upon the world and how we at a pre-personal level are part of the same 'flesh of the world,' has led me to emphasize the body-world-other relation and my teaching practice assumes that there are connections rather than boundaries between us, as we all are bodily beings. Another major influence of mine is Thomas Fuchs (2016, p. 195), who wrote, "It is mainly bodily resonance which conveys an intuitive understanding of others' emotions in our embodied engagement with them." I like the concept of "participatory sense-making" (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009) that describes a fundamental way of being in the world that is both subjective and intersubjective. Participatory sense-making is a way of understanding how people participate in each other's lives with their own subjectivity expressed through the body, action, and talk. Put another way; we use our own bodily subjectivity to produce knowledge in interaction with others.
- H: Do you mean that in teaching dance there needs to be a mutual openness, interest, and curiosity for what is going on between teachers and students, in order for all to produce relevant knowledge together? And do you always experience the shared situation you're describing when you're teaching?
- G: No, not always. But, on an ontological level I always regard the situations as shared, even though some people with a more individualistic viewpoint might object. From the moment we are born (and possibly even before that,) we are engaged in human relationships where we can sense when we are recognized and made to feel welcome, and when we become inconvenient and unwanted. This human knowledge lives and is expressed in the body and in language. It is also manifest in the classroom. I have noticed in my teaching that it is important to thematize

being conscious of the choices I make, and how this might affect the students' emotional responses. If something unexpected happens, I must dare to be receptive, act and handle the situation in an honest and respectful manner.

If we want to give this personal, subjective perception room to breathe in the classroom, then we as teachers must remember to "let others be." However, "letting the other be" (MacLaren, 2002) is not the same as not caring. On the contrary, it shows a deep respect for each student's bodily behavior. A teacher who lets her students be is well equipped to notice and respond to student behaviors such as retreating, not moving dancing, not answering a question, and thinking about the next breath. One student once said to me "I am always a little ahead of myself, it's hard to be here and now." Gaining insight into the nuances of the students' world opens the teacher to a deeper understanding of each student as a unique human being in a specific context. This kind of knowledge goes beyond learning goals and assessment criteria.

H: I understand your teaching as embedded philosophically in phenomenology. In my classes I often let the students carry on without interfering, if I see they are involved and working well with tasks I have given them. Does this correspond with your understanding of "letting the others be"?

G: Along with researchers such as Hanne de Jaegher, Elisabeth Behnke and Kym Maclaren, I am very concerned with "letting the students be" when I teach. "Letting the other be" means simply seeing other persons as they are, instead of seeing them the way we would like them to be or trying to transform them into a homogeneous group (of students or generalized others). "Letting others be" means letting students get peace of mind, allowing them to be recognized in all their differences. It means that we as educators 'take them in,' which requires receptivity and is more of a physical state than an intellectual one. Education understood as interaction consists of a continuous tension between opposing attitudes: 'letting be' and 'enacting'. This is an important point; I think that the importance of "letting the student be" has been relatively overlooked both in practice and in much of the scholarly literature about education, when compared with the more enactive aspects of teaching. By overemphasizing the teacher's role as enactor, the point of experience is often lost as it tends to hide 'under the radar.'

When teachers overemphasize their role as enactors by seeking to control student movements and expressions, we risk losing sight of the sensing, sensory, somatic, and perceiving body, as well as humans' self-organizing potentiality. I try to avoid situations where students and teachers reduce movement to fixed and predetermined patterns (MacLaren, 2002, p. 77). I have observed that the current politics of higher education has a strong tendency to overemphasize teachers' role as enactors, and correspondingly neglect the necessity of letting students be.

In my experience and background as a physiotherapist, teaching is to touch and be touched; touching another body opens for a myriad of ways of articulating the joints, the fascia, and the plasticity of bones. Ideally, all the qualities of movement are present in the classroom, balancing solidity, and liquidity in movement. My goal is to let the body itself become educational and dynamic, and not to 'use' the body as



an ‘instrument’ or as a static object for instructing and moving in predictable ways. Instead of steering students towards defined skills, I try to encourage expressivity, spontaneity, and the freedom to move in all sorts of ways.

H: How would you describe what happens *in between* the educator and student in a shared teaching situation? Does the teaching ‘work’ in the sense that the students are engaged in the shared project that you’re hoping to achieve?

G: To be honest, I must say that it is very hard to figure out what it means to my students that I try to “let them be.” I’m always seeking a balance between more neutral, observant behavior and being enactive. I believe that the tension between ‘letting be’ and ‘enacting’ creates engaging, dynamic interactions between students and teachers. There is a significant absence of theories of intersubjectivity concerning dance in PE-teacher education as well as in higher dance education and other practice-based subjects. Hopefully, thanks to their experience in your class that “went really well,” when your students become teachers, they will be able to understand their own teaching as anchored in the body, and as unfolding inextricably within shared spaces.

### **Extended meanings of the dialogue**

This dialogue we have presented above illustrates how we as colleagues and teachers exchange and negotiate experiences connected to actual teaching situations. It shows how we make inquiries about our own experiences as teachers, how the activity of perception gives bodily knowledge central to teaching practice-based subjects, and how letting our theoretical interest guide us through discussions about how we learn from our experiences as teachers. Through this analysis, we discovered a gap between our experience of how students respond to our teaching and their relative lack of feedback. In order to be able to share experiences, statements, and bodily understanding with our students, we must encourage them to express, reflect and dig into their experiences verbally and in writing; this will allow them to dive into and explore bodily subjectivity and intersubjectivity, as well as verbal articulation. Being present, together, and open to experience, are primary requirements for both teaching and learning, and neither state is entirely predictable or controllable. Instead, we believe a successful teaching environment to be dynamic, interactive, and shared, with a carefully balanced and necessary tension between enacting and letting be. We discovered this fruitful tension through unpacking one specific teaching situation.

As the philosophers and knowledge theorists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987) pointed out, “Anything said is said by an observer”(p. 151). This is a reminder that saying something about others highlights the position from which it is spoken. Additionally, we have addressed theorizing *intersubjectivity* and the meaning of *letting the other be* and *being enactive* in teaching practice-based subjects in higher education. We have brought the teaching body and bodily knowledge in dance teaching practice, and other practice-based subjects, back to its humanistic roots where thinking, acting, and moving *live* in interactions.

Furthermore, we show in this article that due to our perspective of teaching and learning, mutual, undereffective, bodily unpredictable processes occur in shared spaces, and the teacher sometimes risks unintentionally offending and even damaging students by exposing them to knowledge they would prefer to avoid. In other words, bodily learning is not necessarily always experienced as positive by the learner. We believe in human qualities such as daring to be a bodily perceptive being, listening within and fully experiencing the mutual teaching and learning situation. Trusting bodily sensations, and “letting the students be,” should be given priority and serve as guidelines, in teaching and learning practice-based subjects. In addition, teaching and learning about how to teach practice-based subjects, need to be understood from ‘inside’ the practice of actual teaching. Our starting point was lived experience and our own encounter and academic dialogue about what we discovered in the intersubjective teaching and learning spaces. Our dialogue and dialogue-sharing might resonate with educators in dance and PE-teacher education, as well as with educators in other practice-based subjects.

### **What can be learned from the dialogue?**

Given the extended role student active teaching methods play in higher education, we agree with Damsa and de Lange (2015), who write that teaching should be conducted in a way that includes students in engaged participation. Engaging more with the students themselves is a consequence of what we discovered in our dialogue, and this is easier said than done. In engaging from and with the sensing and perceiving body experience and learning become ‘visible’ for us as teachers. By examining the dialogue of bodily experiences occurring while teaching, and reflecting on bodily experience, we have illuminated how knowledge sharing between colleagues are important in order to expand the theoretical framework for letting bodily sensation count as knowledge resources within a chosen theoretical context. By unpacking teaching situations through presenting a dialogue between us as teachers, on teaching, we have shown a way of consciously bringing the teaching experience in front as lived and shared reality. As criteria for judging the validity of our work, we have tried to be transparent, communicate, question our interpretations, and positioned ourselves as open for criticism as well as tried to use our freedom of speech. However, one critical point is that for the phenomenological subject transparency is not possible, we act as subjects who at the same time make our dialogue as object for reflection and analyses. This is the research context and condition, which also is ambiguous. As Maclaren (2002) so clearly expresses: “The condition of all free play between people, then, is a shared of, or a trust in, the ways in which we are fundamentally situated in relation to each other” (p. 198). This situatedness is bodily and showed, perceived, and enacted in our ways of being with ourselves and the students. These perspectives should be more visible in the expanding amount of literature concerning quality in teaching in higher education.

## Author biographies

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