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“Performative play“ as a didactic track to the corporality of children

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Introduction

Our corporality is constitutive for our reference to the world. We perceive not only the objects given to us in our perceptions, we also relate ourselves to our environment by means of our body. It is been empirically demonstrated that children in their first year of life use their corporal faculty of expression in a communicative way to reach a certain aim (cf. Dornes 1993). Up to late childhood, and more or less in the years after, too, human beings appropriate objects primarily in a corporal way. One and the same sensation is interpreted differently, depending on the actual corporal state of the individual. Each of these interpretations is an expression of an individual way of cultivation; we could also say an individual’s mode of learning. The manifold activities of our bodies and corporality as a primary medium of learning can be considered only by understanding corporality not as a mere device but also as an agile and living body. Unlike the currently widespread differentiation between “having a body” and “being a body”, introduced by Helmuth Plessner (1982), the conception of corporality introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) provides shelter for the body as a substance on one hand and as a sensitive and vivid organism on the other hand. The interdependence of materiality and sensation carried out by corporal means create the modes of a corporal self-perception. We call them modes of a self and world constituting corporality.

The “self and world constituting corporality”

The concept of a constituting corporality includes, similar to Merleau-Pontys (1968) concept “flesh”, the conditions of perceiving one’s own body and the world as well as the inner and outer conditions of individual comportment and also the ways to have an effect on oneself and others by one’s actions. Bernhard Waldenfels shows how our corporality is engaged in concrete situations even before we begin thinking with its efforts to arrange things and to pick them out as a theme. Michael Polanyi (1966) showed that corporality as “tacit knowing“ constitutes our reality as such. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: „Behind thy thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a mighty lord, an unknown sage—it is called Self; it dwelleth in thy body, it is thy body.“ (Nietzsche 1968: 61)
That is to say corporal constituting, (from the Latin constituere), signifies not only ways of establishing or creating something, but also ascertaining, appointing, initiating, constructing and, as
Nietzsche points out, deciding and determining something. – What is the meaning of deciding in the context of corporality? What is decided by corporal means? What are such decisions like?

As a coherent and “permanent” (Waldenfels 2000: 31) organism our living body is resistant against attempts by others or ourselves to influence it. Even though our body, viewed as a natural thing, can be gazed, cultivated, controlled, disciplined and tortured, the self and world constituting corporality is in its entirety and in its “idiosyncratic sphere” (Eigenheitssphäre, Waldenfels 2000: 43) an impregnable bulwark against assaults from outside, functioning independently of our volition (cf. Waldenfels 2004: 120). This is mostly understood by others without words (see e.g. descriptions given by Emanuel Lévinas, 1986, and Michel Serres, 1985). Corporal ways of constituting go beyond conscious ones. This is apparent especially when a body shows in a preconscious, pretheoretical and, in an inexpressible way, that it has itself under control.

At the same time we partake of the world by means of our corporality. The states of constituting corporality are in a symbolic way preformed by social and cultural meanings, practices, restrictions, and possibilities (Bourdieu, 1987). An individual adopts these in a mimetic or constructive fashion. In this sense, our corporality is, according to Dietmar Kamper (1973) an “outcome of history“(Resultat der Geschichte). We imitate corporal practices and attitudes, we learn them and they are taught to us. Therefore, corporal practices and attitudes can be acted out in a conscious or in a semiconscious way. They are perceived and accounted for corresponding to social requirements and measures in a mainly corporal way. In a brief period of time, constituting corporality is autonomous as well as it is individually coded and culturally prefigured. It has natural and artificial facets and it embraces passive and active aspects.

**Corporality of children and adolescents**

With the onset of puberty, at the latest, and individual’s body is recognised as an easily available, exciting and contradictory field for experiments of creativity and self-awareness. In accordance with Jacques Lacan (1977) we could speak of a second “mirror stage“, in which one again enters into an imaginary order. In the first instance, the new dimensions of one’s own corporality are apparently appreciated, as children and adolescents exhibit their consciousness of not only their “being” but also of their bodies in well pronounced ways. By doing this they obviously refute the image of being in their salad days of their youth. In the second instance, for the first time they bow more or less consciously to the mechanism of “panoptism“, according to Michel Foucault (1981). Thus, some children and adolescents react with discomfort and some through positive or negative escapism.

In the analysis of advertisements or journalistic texts the phenomenon of corporal staging is made a subject of discussion in school lessons. However, the markedly elaborated corporal ability of perceiving and reacting acted out by children and adolescents is not considered sufficiently in
pedagogical and didactic concepts, not even in the differentiating accounting for different types and tempos of learning.

The didactic principle of „active learning“

The hypothesis of a vivid corporality as a medium of learning is connected with the didactic principle of “active learning” (“Handlungsorientierung”), which has been shown to be a prominent modus of learning in a series of studies (cf. Clark, Nguyen, and Sweller, 2006).

However, a short theoretical excursus shows that the constituting moments of corporality are abandoned by the naturalistic interpretation\(^1\) of the didactic principle of “active learning”:

Johann A. Comenius in his “Didactica Magna“ (1638) pleaded for the spontaneous development of nature (“Naturgemäßlichkeit”) as the main principle of instruction in school. Autopia, living sense-impression, should be combined with Autopragmasia, self-activity (“Selbsttätigkeit”). With the education reform movement\(^2\) (“Reformpädagogik”) the idea of “active learning” found access in several concepts of instruction. Here it was deduced mainly from principles stemming from Jean J. Rousseau’s paradigm of a natural display of infant facilities; for example, the idea of a holistic education beginning “from the child” (vom Kinde aus), an accentuation of movement education, the didactic principle of perception (Anschauung) as well as the concept of self-responsibility (“selbstverantwortliches”) for learning. Today the principles developed in the course of the education reform movement are on the whole pedagogically and didactically approved. Beside the didactic principle of “active learning”, the previously mentioned principles form in particular the instructional repertoire of so called “open instruction” (“Offener Unterricht”). Hypothesizing the mere body and its development as a principle of education reveals inconsistencies between the education reform movement with respect to Rousseau’s theory of education. Franz Bockrath (2006) works out the contradictions and limits of natural understanding (“natürliches Verstehen”) in the development of Rousseau’s thought. He shows that it culminates in the concept of a common moral body (gemeinsamer sittlicher Körper), the moral and constitutional equality replacing the notion of a natural conditioned physical inequality. Meike Baader (2002) has discussed how the reform pedagogue Isodora Duncan\(^3\) based her educational principles of forced self-control on the principle of naturalness. Disciplinary actions affecting the body by the logos are possible, because humans gain control over their bodies and the bodies of others by training their perceptiveness. By reducing the body to its visible aspects it becomes symbolic (cf. Masanneck 1999), a reduction that is nowadays performed in manifold variations. An example is the view of the human body as a problem of encoding (“Kodierungsproblem”, cf. Masanneck 1999) or its interpretation as a multimedia-based instrument of communication (Schneider 2000: 25f).

\(^1\) To the criticism of childhood research (Kindheitsforschung) that argues in a naturalistic manner cf. Reich 2002
\(^2\) One dates the reform-pedagogical movement to the period from 1890 until 1930.
\(^3\) See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isadora_Duncan. (date: 23.3.2007)
In the context of current theories of teaching and learning the body plays a central role in the maxim of “active learning”, but also here it figures in an instrumental way. Decisive for didactics today the cognition-psychologist Hans Aebli (1991, 1993, 1994) worked on “active learning” according to Jean Piaget as a constitutive principle of learning. In the sense of didactics training the ability of thinking “active learning” is focused on students’ reflecting their own actions with the aim to mold corresponding cognitive structures (Rousseau 1996). Against the background of phenomenological theory it is obvious that one´s own body and that of others is not conceivable in a reflexive way. The body reacts to new experiences on the basis of its experience repertoire. In this respect it is self and world constituting and in a sense takes an ethical responsibility of its action based on sensitive and empathic mediation processes. Often these constituting processes remain unconscious and often seem random. Starting from this theoretical background we will consider Aebli´s concept of “active learning”. Thinking derives from acting (Aebli 1993: 26), is Aebli’s frequently quoted (multiply interpreted) basic assumption. According to Aebli acting is the source of corporally constituted concepts of actions, so called operations. Operations derive from our body, which deduces from its incorporated experiences adequate modes of reaction for each situation it experiences. From our phenomenological point of view we interpret operations as aspects of the constituting corporality. The moment of constituting the self and the world is located in a correspondence of perception and reality that causes corporal knowledge. Though there is no responsible acting just blind happening without an antecedent Logos and without the capacity to understand (Waldenfels 2000: 152), corporal knowledge (an operation) cannot be transferred into conceptual thinking by processes of symbolization, as Aebli supposes. In this respect it cannot be assured by being conveyed to a conscious verbalisation, that is to say by being comprehended in a cognitive way.

The didactic principle of “constituting corporality”

The following theoretical implications are to be pointed out: Consciousness is originally not an “I think” but an “I can” (Merleau-Ponty 1978: 138). (“Das Bewusstsein ist ursprünglich nicht ein ‘Ich denke zu´, sondern ein ’Ich kann´.” Bernhard Waldenfels has explained: “The acquirement of general abilities means that we are enabled by variable means to react to typical situations that are not identical in a material sense, it means not to do again and again the same and slowly to learn this.” (Waldenfels 2000: 167)4 Matters take on other meanings in the course of the learning process in the modus of habituation. That which is being learned is incorporated as structures. In this way the body pattern itself is reorganized by learning (Waldenfels 2000: 173). If one stresses the corporal anchoring of learning processes, a broad spectrum of interpretations of how to conceive a phenomenon is

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4 Dt.: „Ein Erwerb genereller Fähigkeiten bedeutet, dass wir in die Lage versetzt werden, auf typische Situationen, die nicht materialiter identisch sind, mit variablen Mitteln zu antworten, also nicht immer wieder dasselbe zu tun und uns dies langsam einzuprägen.“
connected with learning how to proceed. Waldenfels calls them types of rationality (Rationalitätstypen), interpreting rationality in a broader sense as “[. . .] the epitome of significant and scheduled, comprehensible coherences that are spread into diverse fields of rationality and styles of rationality.” (Waldenfels 1990: 192)\(^5\) Regarding learning as a corporally arranged process, one has to take into account multifarious processes of constitution – of exercises that are to a certain degree consciously controllable up to the “flow“ (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) as the experience of a mere affiliation with one’s own body. Waldenfels clarifies his learn-theoretical considerations in the following way with an example: “[. . .] it depends on qualitative differences. The child uses language and interprets its perception more contextually than an adult, so that for example an engine that moves backwards (a >backward-engine<) is not the same as a >forward-engine< that in fact drives forward”. (Waldenfels 2000: 178)\(^6\) In its differentiation between >backward-engine< and >forward-engine< the child expresses the complexity it perceives in a corporal modus by studying the specifics of an engine. The distinction between >backward-engine< and >forward-engine< proves a type of rationality that is mainly relevant for the child at the very moment. Normally such a distinction for a pedagogue is supposed to be no central learning target. Waldenfels assumes that adults have already forgotten (unlearned [verlernt]) the childlike view of an engine and its kind of movements. Two main conclusions can be drawn:

1. Learning includes processes of unlearning.
2. The childlike mode of perception has its authorisation and obviously in certain even existential situations it has its everyday life-practical relevance.

Waldenfels has argued that “One should take care not to introduce a one-sided ideal of rationality into the processes of habituation and learning“. (Waldenfels 2000: 179)\(^7\) Merleau-Ponty radicalizes the fact stressed here that the constituting corporality is age-specifically different,\(^8\) when he writes that filial learning has to be proved correct against the opinions of adults.(Merleau-Ponty 1978: 407)

The concept “performative play“ should be elaborated here as an instructional method that allows bringing age-specific constituting moments of corporality literally into play. Since the education reform movement\(^9\) the topos play is connected with a large number of common pedagogical and didactic intentions, as for example:

\(^5\) Dt.: „Dabei verstehe ich Rationalität im weitesten Sinne als den Inbegriff sinnhafter und regelhafter, verständlicher Zusammenhänge, die sich in verschiedenen Rationalitätsfeldern und Rationalitätsstilen ausbreiten.“

\(^6\) Dt.: „[...] es kommt auf qualitative Unterschiede an. Das Kind gebraucht die Sprache und deutet die Wahrnehmung kontextueller als der Erwachsene, so dass z.B. eine Lokomotive, die zurückfährt (eine >Rückwärtslok<) nicht dasselbe ist wie eine >Vorwärtslok<, die eben vorwärtsfährt.“

\(^7\) Dt.: „Man sollte sich hüten, ein einseitiges Rationalitätsideal in die Gewöhnung und in das Lernen hineinzutragen.“

\(^8\) Merleau-Ponty distances himself decidedly from Piaget’s concept of learning (cf, Merleau-Ponty 1978).

\(^9\) Play is a basic type of filial learning and the fulfillment of filial motives. As such in the frame of the education reform movement it is established as a method of instruction (cf. Fröbel, Makarenko, Montessori, Schleiermacher et al.).
(a) the direct actuality of children often neglected in school learning could be respected by playing in school and well-being as a condition for learning;
(b) playing arouses curiosity as a possibility to develop an intrinsic motivation attitude;
(c) by playing it is possible to get involved in a certain reality and to accept it for a while by respecting certain temporary rules by acting on a trial base. In doing so the mental and the emotional distance to one’s own emotions is rehearsed which permits realistic, reflected, and empathic acting. Hereby it is possible to stabilize one’s own perception and one’s own view of reality by playing;
(d) rules make it possible to reorganize certain circumstances in a creative way and to support the independence of a person by stimulating his or her own initiative.

All these pedagogical and didactic intentions should be deepened by the concept of performative play aiming at corporal constituting processes.

The didactic directive for our endeavour is the somewhat ambiguous concept of so-called open instruction (cf. Peschel 2003), whereby we accentuate the notion of “active learning” in terms of a certain freedom of action related to lifestyle. In this respect the guiding ideas include the integration of theoretical and practical learning, process-learning, equality of opportunity, assistance for students to help themselves, the individualisation and differentiation of learning contents, reaching as far as possible and the initiation of lifelong learning processes. A model for processes of open instruction are processes artistic creation. The core thought of open instruction is that the instructor makes him or herself unnecessary by means of pre-structured settings of learning. It is possible to interpret this as far as physical absence. The concept of performative play is in the following marked out by the concepts of (1) performativity, (2) simulation, (3) intermediate area and (4) rule.

“Cultural performance“ (Geertz 1973) is meant to be a “performance of community“ (Aufführung von Gemeinschaft) by means of application and interpretation of key symbols and of significant verbal or nonverbal notes in the medium of gestures and expressivity. Corporal practices can be understood in the frame of a play as a declaration of socialisation and at the same time as a framing of social processes (Goffman 1956). In playing, symbols possess a sensual presence (Gebauer/Wulf 1998). Under the sign of performativity, play and its connected symbolizations do not come from outside the actor but are generated by means of laying down rules, using action patterns learnt through playing and adapting representation modes of the environment (Lebenswelt) (cf. Krämer in Krämer 2004: 17). Displayed at the point of intersection between the abstract structure and the situative, the material

10 Already Comenius emphasized the significance of physical well-being for successful learning processes. Meanwhile this interrelationship is empirically supported by brain research (cf. Braitenberg 1998).
11 “Learning setting“ (Lernsetting), “learning environment“ (Lernumgebung), “learning improvisation“ (Lernimprovisation) etc., are developed in the context of constructivistic learning theory. Also, action-oriented instructional methods referring to instructional principles such as “pupil orientation“ (Schülerorientierung), the “integrative approach“ (Ganzheitlichkeit) of learning, “independent“ (selbstständig) and “self-active learning“ and the maxims of action learning appear in a new light (cf. Voß 2002). Here we do not actually take into consideration constructivistic learning theory. Thus we do not carry out the worthwhile translation work that is required to present phenomenological thoughts about learning processes and the constructivistic learning theory in relationship to each another.
context and the regulation of the participating individuals is a self-logic of mimetic assumptions and construction.

According to Natasha Adamowsky (2000) the play is the action directive par excellence to deal with simulations (From the Latin simulare to pretend, to lead another person to believe something, to affect). In a play not just a process of information but also a transformation of this according to the wishes, interests and action patterns of the players, simulations, takes place. In terms of simulation, specified training as well as the orientation to an open goal can be linked with possibilities of staging and with an integration of corporal learning during lessons. The phenomenon of quest in its double meaning as physical movement as well as an intentional activity not necessarily leading to an explicit deed, functions according to Adamowsky, as the goal orientation of playing simulating reality.

According to Donald W. Winnicott playing is located in an intermediate area of phenomena of transition and transition objects (Winnicott 1971). In this area a symbolical order between the “I” and modes of “Non-I”(Ich und Erscheinungsformen des Nicht-Ich) is displayed which creates the experiences in the arts, imagination, and science. Understanding culture as an amplification of playing in terms of an objectified connection between subjective and social interests, Winnicott localizes cultural experience in playing. The same could be true for play and art instruction at school. In playing, the intermediate area of transition objects is characterized by the potential, the indeterminable, “Not Yet” (Bloch 1985). In the intermediate area, the play is detached from topoi as the “real” world and other directives and guidelines. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), it presents, temporarily, a drifting serenity between dreaming and mere functioning. Even if differences such as today and tomorrow, seriousness and non-seriousness, convention and innovation, authenticity and deception, meaning and absurdity, and so forth, seem to be suspended, they get at the same time a new validity that structures the play (Bateson 1972). Because events happening during play become fictionalised in a paradoxical way and staging becomes reality with a character of its own, it is possible that designation functions are variable and “new orders of associations and relations” (neue Assoziations und Beziehungsordnungen) are produced (Sutton-Smith 2001). In addition, playing facilitates wider experiences in different directions such as “Agon” (competition), “Alea” (coincidence), “Mimikry” (masking), “Ilinx” (enthusiasm) according to Roger Caillois (1961).

According to Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf (1998), play is linked to the phenomenon of daydream (cf. Freud 1997). These experiences open up a particular reality (in play) and they are thus also moments of constituting corporality.

Acting in terms of playing is not at first subject to (moral or ethical) limits. Agreements and rules that structure the environment and the practices of the participants of play take their place. According to Richard Sennett (1974), a structure of rules can be read as a protection for individual leeways, because it ignores the impossible and at the same time it decides what should pass for impossible and

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13 From the perspective of development psychology („Entwicklungspsychologie“) the rules of play, according to Piaget, take their beginning in rites and they emerge as rules of self delimitation and self determination.
what for possible options. Key phrases such as “perspective taking” (Flavell 1975), “to act in between identities” (Schechner 1990), “projections of the ‘I on the ‘Non-I’, on “experiences on the ‘extraneous’” (Fremder) (Waldenfels 1990) refers to possibilities of intersubjective processes in playing (cf. Bateson 1972). For example, varying concepts of role-taking and lifestyle (Moor 1971) can be acted out as well as models of the individual corporality.

In order to place constituting corporality into the centre of didactic considerations, we set up performative play as a teaching concept. To explain this we translate didactic concepts into metaphors of the corporality. Learning is thus a performative acquisition of knowledge. Learning contents are handled like a stage setting or scenery. The lecture functions as the choreography which guides the room to “move” to a certain common topic. It does this according to the unique topology of the classroom. Our concept is a continuation and further development of the concept model testing that has taken place in Bremen >schools as a three-dimensional stage - corporality in the age of media< (Schule als Raumbühne - Körperlichkeit im Medienzeitalter). Its basic idea is that the classroom offers leeway for self testing and can be transformed into a space for movement. Learning is demonstrated by students in different and multi-perspective ways. By means of newspapers, books, interviews, picture search, and so forth, they acquire knowledge in a self-active way. This knowledge they display in a scene played in front of the class. The applied evaluation criterion is the degree to which the particular form of representation reflects knowledge (what has been learned) and whether it is represented in a realistic way. Thus, it is not the acquired specialized knowledge that is decisive; more important is the script, which provides the base from which the acquired knowledge is enacted in front of the class. In this way students rehearse and practice professional competences that are indispensable in the particular mimed occupational field. According to the different learning contents it is decided whether the learnt contents are best represented by showing them in the frame of a newscast or in that of a play, a scientific lecture, a demonstration experiment, a PowerPoint presentation, a quiz program, a discussion forum, an artistic happening, a music-show, a gymnastic demonstration, a still life, a freeze image, a treasure hunt, an exhibition, an imaginary journey, a story, a worksheet, and so forth. There has to be decided whether the matter comes off best by means of learning stations, a journal, an audit trail, a wall newspaper, a homepage, a guided discussion, a film sequence, a setting of tasks, or an architectural plan. All these are forms of representation in which a hermetic experience area following certain rules or codes is expressed. By working out the most coherent result the materiality of a certain happening of representation gets its own weight and the body becomes the primary medium of learning at school.

**Bibliography**


