

The embodied academic: Body work in teacher education

I am a lecturer in education, but entered academia because my experience in secondary school teaching was required for teacher education. As such I followed the traditional pathway of teacher educators transitioning from professional practice to become a lecturer in higher education (Boyd and Harris, 2010). Had I been asked two years ago if I considered myself an embodied academic, my answer would have been that I thought of myself as an embodied practitioner. This has more to do with my hesitation to identify as an academic than to describe myself as embodied. Even after several years in academia I would have considered myself a teacher and identified with that embodied teaching identity. Like the research participants in Boyd and Harris's (2010) study, I clung on to my "identity and credibility as [a] school teacher" (p. 10). My motto at the time – "once a teacher, always a teacher" – is proof of that. I would not have called myself an academic, but I was definitely embodied.

Over the last decade, the body and the sensory have become more of a focal point of public discourse, with the body now seen as an identity project (Freedman and Stoddard Holmes, 2003; Orbach, 2010; Shilling, 2012), a part of our selves that we can manage, mould and shape to fit the image we would like to represent. As such the body and the sensory have also entered the realms of teaching and teacher education and the practices of teachers and teacher educators. I, too, have developed a more nuanced understanding of embodiment and the role of the body – my body – within my practice as teacher educator. But what is it that makes me an embodied practitioner? What does my embodied practice look like? Is there a difference between being an embodied teacher and an embodied academic? Am I an embodied academic? In my contribution to this book I will explore my journey from a secondary teacher to teacher educator to lecturer, a journey that signifies for me the transition from a teacher interested in embodiment to an embodied teacher and finally to an embodied academic. I explore embodiment in teaching and teacher education. This leads to an analysis of body work in teaching and teacher education. I conclude my chapter with a call for bringing bodies into practice.

Embodiment in teaching and teacher education

Within teacher education the body is a tool; just like whiteboards, flipcharts, pens, paper, computers and projectors are tools. Teachers need to use these tools effectively to ensure their pupils' learning and progress, and teacher educators need to teach trainees how to do exactly that. This mechanistic, mechanical, functional view reduces the body to be subordinate to the mind, which dictates and directs the body. And yet, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962) the body is in the mind because perception is experienced through the body. This interconnectedness of the mind and the embodied experience of perception make it impossible to separate the mind from the body:

"The union between soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence." (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 89).

Mind and body are interconnected and interwoven in the sentient body-subject in such a way that meaning resides in the body and the body resides in the world. It is this relationship between meaning, the social and the sentient body – the unified entity of body and mind – that embodiment within teacher education needs to explore. This exploration is best conceptualised in the context of body techniques (Mauss, 1973) and body work (Gimlin, 2007). The basic foundation for both concepts is that as humans, we are bounded in our experiences by our bodily beings, and that our experiences are located in the moving body. This is because human learning and experience begin with the moving body (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). Therefore, human understanding is inextricably linked to physical experience and has a bodily basis (Johnson, 1987), which is reflected in our consistent, unconscious use of metaphors relating to the spatial and relational (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

In this respect, using the body to assert authority, control and power in a classroom is not so much employing a tool, but being human. We are bodies *and* minds, sentient body-subjects. However, within academia we often detach ourselves from these bodily experiences under the pretence of maintaining validity, reliability and objectivity. I believe that we need to acknowledge our embodied experiences and write and embed these into our teaching practice. As teachers, we need to make ourselves consciously aware of how embodied understanding shapes our teaching practice. Embodied practice in this context is not related to the discourses of control or social oppression, but a key aspect of reflective practice and reflexivity, the backbone of teaching and teacher education. And here I get to the root of the problem of embodiment in teaching and teacher education: despite calls for focussing on corporeal and embodied awareness when reflecting and teaching reflections (Leigh, 2016), reflective practice often relies on expressions through words, thus the workings of the mind. As part of their formation, trainee teachers are usually required to complete development portfolios demonstrating their ability to reflect in a systematic way. To this end, they are introduced to reflective models, which they apply to their personal teaching experiences. These reflective models call for an inquisitive, inquiring mind, analysing a situation, experimenting with change, exploring results and restarting this reflective cycle (see Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1988; Brookfield, 1995; Rolfe et al., 2001).

If, as we have seen, human experience is embodied then reflective practice and reflexivity ought to be equally embodied (Leigh and Bailey, 2013). In reality, teachers and teacher educators have been socialised into an academic world, where the critical, analytical thought prevails, and the body disappears into the reduced state of a tool to be used as described here.

Body work as a teacher and teacher educator

This reduction of the body to a tool is best exemplified in the following memoir. It shows that I was consciously aware of my body as a tool in the context of a secondary classroom.

A French lesson – a memoir

I am in secondary classroom in the south-east of England. I am teaching French to thirty boys in Year 10. Most of the boys don't like languages, and have only taken French GCSE because they have to. I am explaining the past tense. Some boys listen and want to learn, but others have switched off. For many the concept is difficult to grasp, for others it is irrelevant. They will never travel to France, let alone talk to someone about what they did in their last holidays. Some boys start talking to each other, and Sam is swinging on his chair to be closer to his chatting friends. I click my fingers, step away from the whiteboard, walk into the room behind the chatting boys. They drop their voices. Fall silent. I now stand behind Sam who is still swinging on his chair. While I continue to explain and talk to the class, I gently push Sam's chair forward, and he stops swinging on his chair. I have not told anyone off. I didn't need to specifically say what behaviour I expect in my classroom. It works.

Although I may not have considered this as embodiment at the time, my body was an important classroom management tool in my teaching practice. I clearly used my body to assert my authority and my teacher identity as a person of authority. Within the social environment of the classroom, the body was pivotal to assert expectations, improve pupils' behaviour, manage the classroom. In this sense, the body's discursive role to communicate power and knowledge (Foucault, 1991) was fully exploited to establish a specific social order in the classroom. My body as described in that extract is a physical manifestation of shared classroom rules, shared expectations within the school community and shared understandings of a UK educational context. Clicking my fingers, standing behind the boys and pushing Sam's chair forward are all body techniques: "ways in which, from society to society men [sic] know how to use their bodies" (Mauss, 1973, p. 70). Mauss views body techniques as specific to historic-socio-cultural contexts that may not necessarily be shared in different environments, so that they could be irrelevant and ineffective in other settings. And yet, had anyone asked me about my use of my body, my understanding of embodiment or my embodied practice as a teacher, I would have responded that what I did was common sense and that using gestures is intuitive and natural, and that what I did as a teacher would work in any educational setting. It was not until I worked as a teacher educator that I became more consciously aware of my embodied practice.

When I became a lecturer in education I was deployed to work on a secondary teacher education programme, where the student base was fully international. Very early on, in conversations with the students, I started noticing how their bodily gestures took on different meanings. Some students demonstrated different concepts of personal space and bodily closeness. I felt like my personal space was being ignored or invaded. Other students shook their heads to indicate agreement. As a result, I became unsure if students meant yes or no, when they shook their heads in response to a question of mine.

These experiences with the international students shocked me into realising how strongly linked I was to my socio-cultural setting. I became more aware of my body and realised that my body was no longer a mere tool for teaching that I could refer to intuitively. I needed to use my body more consciously, as I started modelling practice. As my students required practical teaching strategies and coping mechanisms for their own beginning teaching practice, I started modelling learning activities, which my students would be able to adapt easily to use in their own classrooms. Over the years, I increased the modelling aspect of my work and taught full 45-minute lessons, where I would demonstrate questioning techniques, and how to use the physical space, as well as the ambience and milieu of the classroom (Watkins, 2007).

As a secondary teacher, I used my body to assert authority and control. I now tried to provide an insight into behaviours as a teacher. I wanted to make explicit the tacit knowledge and long-standing experience a teacher draws on subconsciously and intuitively when in a classroom. For me, this was a turning point. My previous intuitive embodied practice had become consciously embodied teaching. I started to consider myself as an embodied teacher, as I consciously demonstrated different teacher behaviours and in subsequent joint reflections analysed those teacher behaviours together with my students.

Extract from an interview:

I'm struggling with the concept of what is embodied practice. I see it as using my body as part of the teaching and within a classroom like we've got it here, if you've got all these children sitting there in the classroom, you've got your rows of chairs and tables, I wouldn't ever be standing or sitting here, I would always be all over the place, I'm really using my body as part of being a teacher, I always call it acting. So the teaching side is more to do with how I use my body to do anything and everything. [...] In the classroom where I'm teaching now, I'm teaching teachers to become or be better teachers, I'm still walking behind them lifting their chairs up, I'm still clicking my fingers, I'm doing all of that so in that sense, I would say that I'm very, very much somebody who uses the body, even in higher education, even if this maybe too teacherish but because I'm a teacher trainer, it's kind of accepted (Nicole Brown, 2016, interview).

At this stage in my career, I was fully aware of how to move in my classroom, where I would be standing and sitting, how I would be holding my arms out or cross them in front of my chest. I created an embodied manifestation of teacher personalities, I was "acting". Through consciously controlling my body I consciously controlled the social environment of the classroom, the interactions in the classroom, the passing on of tacit knowledge, my students' learning. In my mind – ha – I had transitioned from an actor to a theoretician, from an embodied teacher to an embodied academic through theorising bodily interactions, reducing experiences from the classroom to analytical units and re-creating those as physical manifestations.

Active body work as a teacher educator was not about shaping and reshaping my body to fit a specific body image of what it meant to be a teacher or teacher educator or to meet particular social norms. Body work

here was to develop a meaningful, expressive, discursive body that is able to substantiate the messages the mind conveys and communicates. This is the kind of body work that according to Gimlin (2007) is missing from sociological literature. As she demonstrates in her review of literature, research into body work and sociological thought usually refer to one of four notions:

“(i) the work performed on one’s own body, (ii) paid labor carried out on the bodies of others, (iii) the management of embodied emotional experience and display, and (iv) the production or modification of bodies through work” (Gimlin, 2007, p. 353)

My body work as a teacher educator lies somewhere between Gimlin’s final two categories of “management of embodied emotional experiences” and “the production of bodies through work”. It would probably be best described as the production of bodies and emotion management of embodied experience. Using my own body in its existing form I produced an embodied representation of alternative teaching experiences and teacher bodies and subsequently was required to manage my emotions in such a way that they would be in line with the body on display, with the “performance” (Goffman, 1990a, p. 32). According to Goffman (1990a), successful body work results in the agent or actor being able to produce a coherent image that the spectator of that particular dramaturgical management believes. This body work is ordinary, everyday body work we undertake to create a coherent self-identity. As a teacher educator, I found body work to be more complex, because I sometimes embodied practices that I would not necessarily believe in by playing devil’s advocate. Successful body work for me meant the initiation of a deep discussion with the students or inspiring students to try for themselves what I embodied in their lessons. I see the teacher educator’s body work as consciously applying rules of impression management and situating myself somewhere on the performance continuum between being “taken in by his [sic] own act or be[ing] cynical about it” (Goffman, 1990a, p. 30). In any case, the teacher educator’s performance is for the benefit of the trainee teachers who as the audience decide whether “the impression the performer seeks to give may be true or false, genuine or spurious, valid or ‘phony’” (Goffman, 1990a, p. 66). Therefore, my body work as teacher educator links closely to identity work and producing a coherent professional self, but to some extent also leads to questioning, doubting and challenging exactly that professional identity. After all, where is the difference between the teacher and an actor, between the acting teacher educator and a liar, between an academic and an impostor?

The body enters

While as an embodied academic I consciously bring my body into the classroom discourse, for the students my body does not necessarily enter the classroom to that same extent. Occasionally, I reveal my true colours and explain the differences between my personal, real identity, and the acted identity of the teacher educator. It is then that the role of the teacher’s body comes to the fore. The other times that the body as a biological and social entity enters a classroom are exceptional circumstances, such as when the teacher’s body indicates pregnancy or disability (Freedman and Stoddard Holmes, 2003). This is because in

its difference from the ordinary, the teacher's pregnant or disabled body stands out and therefore enters students' awareness so they mind – ha – it. This disappearance from awareness of the body is typical of our Western interpretation and understanding of the body (Leder, 1990). The body commonly re-enters our consciousness, awareness and action when we are uneasy with our body, when we are at dis-ease, when the body becomes problematic, dysfunctional, when it "dys-appears" (Leder, 1990, pp. 69-99). Let us just imagine we are supposed to be giving a lecture, but on the day of the lecture we have a sore throat and lose our voice. Suddenly, now that we don't have our voice, we become painfully aware of how much we usually rely on it and how much we usually take it for granted.

I guess it is at this point that I ought to reveal my true self and admit that throughout these previous sections of my contribution I have not been completely open and honest about my experiences with embodiment. I am hearing-impaired with a moderate to severe hearing loss in both ears, so I wear hearing aids. I have also been diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a complex condition of unknown cause that is characterised by varying and variable levels of symptoms that most commonly relate to pain, sleep disorders, psychological issues and cognitive dysfunctions (White and Harth, 2001). There is currently no test to confirm physiological bodily changes with fibromyalgia. Diagnosis therefore is through excluding other diseases, which makes fibromyalgia a contested, invisible illness (Ehrlich, 2003; Wolfe, 2009). It would be a blatant lie if I was to say that these bodily experiences did not influence me as an academic. If I am honest with myself, my interest in embodiment and the use of the body as a teacher educator stems from my personal experiences of and with a body that betrays me, unannounced:

Extract from personal diary from 2012 (names have been changed):

For the first time in months, I feel like writing in my diary. Last weekend I was in London to teach on the practice-based enquiry module. It's been a long time since I have done a session and I was really looking forward to it. Chris was going to look after Simon, so I'd be able to go and be an associate tutor. I was scheduled to do my presentation on my own research module experience when I was doing my master's degree, to do something on writing up and then to pitch in with whatever else was going on in the face-to-face session to support students. Kerry [another associate tutor] was going to be there, too. And because we hadn't seen each other in quite a while Kerry, Sheila [module leader] and I had agreed to go out for lunch together afterwards to debrief and catch up. I was so looking forward to it all. But what happened was quite different from what I had expected and had looked forward to.

When I was in the class doing my presentations, suddenly, brain fog [fibromyalgia cognitive dysfunctions] kicked in. I somehow continued doing my part, but I was constantly worried that people would notice that I wasn't actually coherent. Well, I must have been coherent, because nobody had reacted in any way. But I felt like I started becoming incoherent and slow. My hearing went odd and off, and what I did hear I couldn't process, so didn't understand. At one point, there was this one student who asked a question, which I just didn't get. So I asked her to repeat it. And she did. Through a wall of white I could see her lips moving, and I could make out a faint voice, but I just couldn't make sense. I have been a teacher long enough to have my strategies. I just asked other people "how would you answer this". And that sparked a good debate with many people commenting afterwards on how good I was at running a discussion and therefore allowing them to learn for themselves rather than me imposing my views on

them. But funny enough, that was not what I had actually wanted to achieve. I just don't want this to happen again when I am teaching. Losing control of my brain is bad enough, but it happening in that situation in front of everyone, this is awful.

The funny thing though happened later, when Kerry, Sheila and I sat in the park over lunch. I was tired, and in pain, but by that time my brain functions had returned to normal. So I had decided to stay for lunch. Anyway, at some point during the conversation Kerry said that she had just recently been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Sheila was sooooo empathetic, "Oh my God, Kerry. I am so sorry to hear that. What are you going to do? What's going to happen?" I felt sorry for her, too. But at the same time, I was wondering where this would leave me – after all MS and fibromyalgia are quite similar in their symptoms. We all get that feeling of hair on the arm, when there isn't one, or pain, or tiredness combined with insomnia, or that brain fog that I had literally just come out of... But with MS there are lesions on the brain that are visible in X-rays. With fibromyalgia there is nothing visible. I just thought about how MS is in the brain, but fibromyalgia is "in your head".

Keeping this excerpt in mind, I return to the concept of body work, as living with an unpredictable, but somehow damaged body requires a re-evaluation. Managing symptoms, keeping bodily experiences in check to ensure nobody notices differences in one's behaviours, is certainly a conscious dramaturgical intervention to pass off as something or someone one is not. This active work on and control of the body mirrors the "management of embodied emotional experience and display" (Gimlin, 2007, p. 353); the actor attempts to present a picture that is socially acceptable or expected, as is shown in Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants. In the excerpt presented here, the body work I undertook was similar: I continued to behave and move as would be expected of a good teacher or teacher educator. However, the focus of this management of display was not so much intended for the benefit of others, as would be with the flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983) but for my own. Body work here was intended to cover up my personally felt deficiencies, to make me appear normal, able bodied, competent. Body work as a concept therefore ought to be redefined. Rather than seeing body work as a framework for describing how we can manipulate, reshape or enhance our bodies (Gimlin, 2007; Shilling, 2012), body work gains value as a tool for managing stigma, the discrepancy between one's virtual and actual social identity (Goffman, 1990b, pp. 11-55). Goffman (1990b) does not specifically refer to body work in the context of managing stigma and controlling information about one's stigma. However, his examples of how the stigmatised attempt to cover up their deficiencies or seek to pass as unstigmatised and normal, mirror the active body work I described in my diary. This demonstrates the trend of what Johnson and McRuer (2014) term as an "endemic crisis of ability and disability" (p. 131). In their view our society is shaped by the separation of the able and the disabled, whereby the knowledge and experience of the disabled is seen as less valid and inferior to those of the able; it is the able body that is assumed as basis (Johnson and McRuer, 2014; Patsavas, 2014). In order to counteract this tendency, they call for cripistemology within disability theories and studies. Cripistemology is an anti-ableist stand-point and epistemological understanding of knowledge that seeks to value the disabled view and experience. Instead of seeing disability as deviance from normality, instead of viewing the world from the perspective of the able and normal, instead of undertaking the kind of body work we do to cover up our deficiencies to fit into normal society, we are

called to redefine normality and disability. Where does this then leave us? What does this mean for me as an embodied academic? What can I do now and in future?

The embodied academic: reality and future

What I hope to have shown through my extracts and experiences is that embodiment and body work do have a place in academia: on a conceptual level, as topics of research, and as personal experiences impacting academics' work. My personal, lived experiences have also shown that there is a strong link between the embodied self and the reflective, reflexive self. Active body work as I demonstrated requires a reflexive exploration of self. To understand what I do in the teaching situation, I need to experience, feel and be grounded in my body. I then begin to use this body as a tool for certain purposes, and subsequently need to take a bird's eye view of myself to see if I achieve what I am setting out to do. The danger with and critique of this line of thought is the same as with autoethnography: that academic work becomes too self-centred and indulgent (Coffey, 1999; Soyini Madison, 2006). But then, if we ignore the bodily experience of an imperfect body in the context of work as a teacher and researcher our understanding of embodiment is perhaps not well enough developed and presented. This in turn, brings me back to the problem of transcending dualisms like body/mind and object/subject. My understanding is that body and mind are two parts to one single entity, like two sides of the same coin. They are interconnected and mutually influence and impact each other, but there are times where one presides over the other, where one slips into our unconscious. I have shown that active body work provides the links between the two. And this is where my future lies as an embodied academic. I think it is necessary for social science researchers and teaching academics to use embodied methods to explore embodied experiences, to introduce reflective activities for research participants, to foster others' understanding of their bodily experiences and make sense of their body work, to become an advocate for writing the bodies back into practice, as ultimately, we all undertake some form of body work.

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In response to Ian Wellard

When I was asked to comment on Ian Wellard's chapter on sport and movement cultures, I thought that this was fate playing some wicked trick. After all, I am the bookish one, not sporty. But as I read through the chapter I realised that I was actually more at home with what Ian says than I would have anticipated. I guess this really is the beauty of an interdisciplinary book like this one: we get to see that we are all struggling with similar issues irrespective of where our area of expertise or research interests may lie.

In his contribution Ian talks about mind/body dualism and the mind's dominance over the body in what most would interpret as an embodied discipline. It appears that even within "embodied disciplines" embodiment is perhaps not openly practised, and I am taken by and fully agree with Ian's call for a more bodily reflexive research approach. Researchers need to become more aware of the role of their bodies and the message they are sending out through their bodies. In my view, this also applies to teaching academics, therapists, practitioners, whose bodies also influence the relationships to those in their care. But I am left wondering if "remaining mindful of the embodied aspects" is enough, or whether we need to ask for even deeper reflections and considerations. Ultimately, human understanding develops through and with and in the body as much as in the mind. I am not going to pretend that I can truly understand, feel, relive or relate to what it means to "carry on until I noticed my legs bleeding", as movement of the sporty kind is not something I do. But I do know what it feels like to be bodily involved. We all have experienced a moment where, when we read a book, we hear a speaking voice, we picture the fictional character or imagine the setting. This is why we are often left disappointed by the films based on books, because our imagination has set expectations that are not met. I think this is also what happens in the process of a research investigation, where we put sounds and images to contexts and people, we imagine voices for people we may read or hear about.

In actual research contexts, such an in-depth engagement with emotions, thoughts and bodily responses will probably not be practicable or sustainable. And of course, there is the danger of the research then becoming a form of navel-gazing that is often critiqued in auto-ethnographic approaches. However, like Ian suggests, by reflexively focussing on the

embodied we transcend the mind/body dualism and will therefore be able to “fuse what have previously been considered separated realms and also move back and forth between ideas”. So, with hindsight, Ian’s chapter has provided me with another impetus to reconsider my role, positionality in and embodied response to research. He has yet to convince me of movement of the sporty kind to be a pleasurable, desirable experience.