Creating Engaged Executive Learning Spaces: The Role of Aesthetic Agency

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of aesthetic agency in contributing to "engaged" learning within executive education. By analyzing digital audio recordings of teaching interventions by both authors, we draw upon musical terminology to develop a language for discussing and reflecting upon the aesthetics of the interactions and social spaces of teaching in action. Couched within the space of experiential learning and the concept of heterotopic learning environments, this study focuses on how educator-facilitators act in the moment to socially co-create learning spaces. In focusing on the moments of action, we attend to embodied aesthetic agency and reflect on how aesthetics can be brought into relief as a significant and researchable aspect of organizational and relational activity. In doing so, we are conceptualizing the body, and its inherent aesthetic sense-making capacities, as a teaching, relational and ultimately organizational technology.

This work is based on the assumption that engagement is a primary enabler of socially constructed learning and an indicator that learning is happening. We are suggesting the ability to do so is based on felt-sensory and emotional readings and actions – embodied aesthetic agency – of what is going on in the classroom.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Embodiment; Executive education; Socially constructed learning; Teaching design

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How do educators create deeply engaged learning spaces where conditions are ripe for participating actors to actively share and connect ideas, experiences and stories to enrich the learning of all? It is increasingly recognized that traditional "sage on the stage" learning environments have limited appropriateness for classroom spaces, particularly those populated by experienced managers and senior executives (Cross and Steadman 1996, Garvin 2007). Interactive, socially co-created approaches involving experiential learning (Kolb 1984, Kolb & Kolb 2005), action learning (Raelin 2009) and reflexivity (Cunliffe 2002, 2004) are proving more effective. Yet, we lack a focus on how educators work with participants to co-create an enlivened, empowered learning space that becomes a nexus of lived experiences, stories, theories, concepts and ultimately deep learning. Following from the work of Beyes and Michel (2011) we consider the ways in which executive education is invigorated by paying attention to the aesthetics of spaces teachers create to facilitate learning processes. Our focus is on practitioners developing socially constructed learning environments as they capitalize on the experience and knowledge present in the room.

Beyes and Michel's (2011) work attends to the ways in which physical space helps to create what they call "heterotopic" learning spaces, that is, learning spaces which encourage the diversity of viewpoints present in any teaching environment to be expressed and used as material for further learning. Others, such as Vince (2011) and Sutherland (2013) also note the importance of the way in which the physical space of the room, materials and diversity of participating agents and processes evoke responses that may be more or less conducive to different learning purposes.

Here, we focus on a more subtle and ephemeral aspect of the learning space: its auditory aesthetic and how educators are embodied, listening agents within that space. We start by considering how teachers committed to facilitating heterotopic learning spaces act in the moment to co-create that kind of space. Those who teach in classroom spaces know the sense of a classroom "buzz", when we feel like something is happening and it is almost possible to sense people "learning". What do we do to create this? How do we "shift" the energy of such spaces to create the possibility for more engagement in the classroom? In the moment, how do we create, as Meuser and Lapp have questioned, "conditions for exploration and discovery" (2004 p. 314) or the holding environments discussed in experiential learning theory (e.g. Kolb & Kolb 2005, pp. 205-209). To think on and describe this activity we borrow from the realm of music, listening to an unfolding learning space in a musical-sound way and leveraging musical terminology (solo, polyphony, counterpoint, pedal tones and punctuation) to give voice to the aesthetics of these social spaces.

A crucial starting point for working in this territory is to name ourselves when taking up the role of "teacher" or "facilitator" as embodied aesthetic agents (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994; DeNora 1999, 2000, 2006; Giddens 1991). Our argument is based on the idea that by attending to the intrinsic aesthetic (George and Ladkin 2008) of a learning space, we are reclaiming the instinctual processes of the human body as an aesthetic sensing, perceiving, and meaning making agent (Buck-Morss 1992; DeNora 2000). In doing so, we are conceptualizing the body, and its inherent aesthetic sense-making capacities, as a teaching technology. Our argument assumes that our bodies are our most fundamental and potent teaching technology – far more critical to learning engagement than slick power point presentations, case studies or in class simulations. It is through our bodies that we most profoundly communicate our intentions and through our bodies we comprehend the impact of our classroom actions. Our bodies tell us most directly "how an engagement is going". Ideally, through this knowledge we consciously and unconsciously shift what we are doing in order to better align action with intended purposes and outcomes. This paper brings attention to the need to restore our bodily instinctual power

for sensing and mobilizing the learning space. In doing so we highlight ourselves as sensing, perceiving, meaning-making and acting agents who operate best from what Heidegger (1971) referred to as dwelling.

In bringing our embodied aesthetic agency into the realm of research and debate, we are also addressing an important lacuna within the management and executive education literature. Despite an increasing focus on the benefits of (and processes of creating) experiential learning, action based learning and reflexive learning processes (Cunliffe 2002, 2004, Conklin 2012, Kolb 1984, Kolb & Kolb 2005, Meuser & Lapp, 2004) the role of the body as an aesthetic meaning-making interface is largely neglected. Similar to Taylor's (2002) findings on organizational discourse, there is a significant degree of "aesthetic muteness" around the real time, embodied action of executive education. Yet, despite the lack of theorization, practitioners *know* aesthetic comprehension to be an essential element of creating engaged learning spaces. We all engage in "reading" the feel of learning processes. We all *feel* when things are going well, or not, and act upon those feelings. In opening this black box, this paper joins recent developments in the field of organizational aesthetics (e.g. Carr & Hancock 2003; Gagliardi 1996; *Human Relations Special Issue* 2002 (55/7); Linstead & Höpfl 2000) to attend particularly to the sounds of a learning space, to highlight and improve our aesthetic, sensing and embodied capacity as educators; to overcome our aesthetic muteness.

We begin by positioning our ideas alongside others who are working in complimentary areas. Then we introduce an initial empirical study undertaken to explore how teachers use aesthetic agency, both explicitly and implicitly in their teaching. To start this line of exploration we recorded two of our own teaching sessions with experienced managers in which at least part of our intent was to create a heterotopic, experiential learning process that evoked the knowledge of those in the room. We then analyzed audio recordings of the sessions, paying particular attention to their auditory characteristics, and developed a music-metaphorical language to overcome our own aesthetic muteness. The implications for what we have learned, as well as directions for further research, are presented at the end.

Theoretical alignment

The nature of executive education

Teaching executives is different from teaching undergraduates or even post-graduate students in a number of ways (Garvin 2007). Executives bring a wealth of pertinent experience with them into the classroom. Although a strategy professor can conceptualize how strategy should be formulated and implemented, the executive in the classroom offers hands-on, direct experience of what actually happens when people strategize. Many executives note their co-students as essential aspects of their learning experiences – thus the oft-heard response that they learned the most from coffee breaks, dinners and informal chats. Having that kind of experience as a resource within the executive development classroom is one of its significant advantages, but those who "teach" in such spaces need to have skills that encourage executives to share their experiences in the "official" learning spaces.

Small discussion groups and group and individual presentations can be useful in evoking the experience and knowledge present in the classroom (Cross and Steadman 1996). However, here we focus on how teacher-facilitators continuously generate educational conversations in which executives exchange experiences, link theory and practice, and co-create learning in the larger classroom space. Such a space is characterized by a number of people offering their ideas, refutation taking place and the role of the teacher as facilitator. In such spaces learning occurs as ideas bounce and build off one another, the "teacher" becoming one voice of many, and where the learning emerges from the

transformation of the experience brought into the classroom and that happening within the classroom.

This requires educators to "open ourselves to new possibilities as meaning is co-created and recreated in conversation with our students" (Meuser & Lapp 2004, p. 314). To leverage these possibilities we must create safe holding environments in which learners experience "a climate or culture of support" which they "trust to 'hold' them over time" (Kolb & Kolb 2005, p. 207). Our purpose is to shed light on subtle aspects of how these processes are shaped – their aesthetic – not just the preparatory or activity techniques discussed in the literature. In doing so we suggest that although content and structure are important, there is something essential about the "feel" of interventions that create engaged learning experiences. We frame our pursuit by asking: what is the role of aesthetics in creating the kind of engagement at the core of social processes of learning and how do we, as learning facilitators, recognize, reclaim and exert the kind of aesthetic agency which helps to create such spaces?

Creating engaged learning spaces

Although educators can design learning events to achieve particular outcomes, how those outcomes occur is a result of many factors, including how the learning space is "conducted", that is, how engaged spaces are created through embodied intervention. These interventions, we suggest, contribute to the "intrinsic aesthetic" (George and Ladkin 2008) of a learning space – the moment-by-moment sense of a place, an interaction, a situation. Often, it is the "sense" of a teaching session that is remembered – whether it was enjoyable or dull, whether one's imagination was captured or the minutes dragged by – rather than its precise content.

This kind of "intrinsic aesthetic" has been studied in relation to the physical space in which teaching occurs. For instance, Vince (2011) writes about the psychodynamic affects of different room configurations, noting how the standard arrangement of traditional lecture halls creates an assumed power dynamic in its very arrangement. In their study of "heterotopic" learning spaces Beyes and Michel (2011) take their group of undergraduate students out of the classroom completely, into a city centre in order to disrupt the traditional ways of student-teacher engagement enabling more creative relationships to emerge.

There are others who like us are interested in aspects of the learning environment that affect learning outcomes. We claim that all of these factors contribute to the overall "intrinsic aesthetic" of such spaces. Our work focuses on how educators use their own aesthetic understanding (conscious or unconscious) to create these spaces through aesthetic agency.

The facilitator as "aesthetic agent"

By aesthetic agency we refer to how educators – as embodied, sense-making and reflexively acting social agents – invoke strategies of action based upon how they experience a learning environment unfolding. Picking up on cues from the fields of cultural and organizational sociology (e.g. DeNora 1999; Hochschild 1983; Tyler and Abbot 1998) we focus on how the facilitator configures her/himself as an appropriate agent within the social space of learning environments. Because of the highly subjective and complex interactions inherent in such an environment the facilitator is required to be an adaptive agent responding to the feel, energy and buzz of that environment. This moment-to-moment configuring and reconfiguring of action strategies to manage and encourage diverse viewpoints from many participants requires an agility of action beyond predetermined pedagogical plans and predetermined learning outcomes. It requires the near simultaneous reading of the room, adapting style, actions and even content in relation to the emerging social interaction.

This is accomplished as much by what is *felt* – i.e. what we notice in the moment as embodied agents about "what is going on" – as what we plan or intend to do. Plans and overall intentions are important, yet we need to focus on how such plans and intentions are carried out and adapted in the unfolding interactions of a learning environment.

In this way facilitating such interventions is akin to the work of musicians. For example, when a conductor enters a rehearsal s/he has a plan and a series of intended outcomes for the session. This involves the score and a carefully thought-out rehearsal structure. However, in the moment the conductor must listen intently to the whole ensemble: noting sections that need attention, instances of the unexpected, and views and inputs from the experienced professionals with whom s/he is working. In order to accomplish this, the conductor must be fully present as an embodied aesthetic actor. We are interested in exploring the extent to which a similar experience of adaptive aesthetic agency has applicability within executive learning spaces.

Emergence of method

In our own practice and our observations of other practitioners, we have noted that the relative success or failure of teaching interventions comes down to more than the preparatory work undertaken, the underpinning bodies of knowledge, or even the repetition of previously successful teaching designs. Implicitly we are aware of the need for a performative, adaptive and perhaps improvisatory ability in co-creating "learningful" spaces.

Following an inductive approach we focused on the acoustic elements of the learning spaces. Our past experiences led us to focus on the sounds of the executive education setting and how they signalled the performative adaptation we observed in these settings. We hypothesized that in creating engaged learning spaces to leverage the collective knowledge and experience "in the room", teachers operated as aesthetic agents attending to the sounds of the interactions created to develop an open, inclusive and rich, polyphonic tapestry of relevant conversations and emergent learning; a heterotopic learning environment.

This kind of exploration and approach to understanding executive education is new. There are no tried and trusted research design methods. To explore real time, *in situ* interactions we began to collect recordings of colleagues and ourselves in action. As we thought about and interacted with this data a method emerged. Fundamentally we worked from a grounded approach in the sense of letting the data speak, but the method developed more organically; a socially constructed design arising from our own experiencing of the data.

In what follows we describe the emergent method employed by discussing our "interactions with the data" versus our "experiencing the data". Under "interacting with the data" we highlight how initial ideas and analysis tools created before we interacted with the data proved inadequate. Once we let go of our preconceived notions we began to experience the data. Under "experiencing the data" we discuss the two levels of analysis that developed: 1) individual observation 2) observational dialogue.

Interacting with the data

The data used included two 3-hour long audio recordings of executive education sessions conducted by each of the authors.

Before the data analysis sessions we created four categories for analysis based upon our preconceptions of what was occurring aesthetically in executive learning spaces:
  1) Tempo: the rhythm and pace of engagement and interaction
  2) Tuning: the degree to which those involved in a learning intervention were aligned

3) Timing: how long certain passages were "held"
4) Dynamics: the relative levels of participants' vocal performance in the classroom and how the learning "volume" was managed.

Derived from music terminology, we believed these would provide an appropriate analytical framework for understanding the sound aesthetic of the classroom.

Since we were working with recordings of ourselves the emphasis was first on the other's interpretations of the data; as we listened to the recording of one author the other led the analysis, making notes of what s/he was observing and then discussing observations in the analysis session. In this way the analysis was informed through an open-ended interview format as well as a grounded approach to analyzing the data. This was an invaluable tool as it allowed us to discuss ideas immediately as they arose rather than check ideas after the fact.

As we proceeded with our pre-determined categories, we found the categories impeded our work. They caused frustration and did not reflect what we were hearing. After some time we decided to abandon the initial plan and work from a wholly grounded approach of iterative listenings and conversations to develop categories and codes.

This first interaction with the data highlighted the inefficiency and contrived nature of imposing presumptions on the data. In *"interacting with"* the data we lacked an *"experiencing of"* the data. We were not letting the data speak.

This is a key methodological point in this new study. While we began with a predefined analysis method, our first session was used for establishing a workable method itself. As Corbin & Strauss (1990; 2008) highlighted we were hindering our ability to perceive the data by imposing things upon it. Once we were able to suspend, as much as is possible, our preconceived notions of what might be there, the process moved forward in new and exciting ways.

Experiencing the data: emerging method

After our initial interaction with the data the method that emerged was a two-fold process moving from a) individual observation to b) observational dialogue. These initial sessions were themselves recorded to capture the richness and processes of the analysis conversations.

1) Individual observation. The first stage of analysis involved our listening to the recording and taking notes of our own reactions. Whenever something seemed relevant to the social interaction of the group processes we were hearing (e.g. long stretches of the practitioner talking – "soloing"; increased levels of participant interactions – "polyphony and counterpoint") we noted our observations. Attention was paid primarily to the sounds of what was happening, not to the content (i.e. not concepts, ideas, etc.) of what was captured.

While the process began with individual observation, when listening to the tapes together the method became highly interactive as the author leading the analysis engaged the other in discussion about what s/he was hearing and feeling. We were able to leverage our co-presence to engage and develop this dialogue. This fell into two categories a) with recording dialogue b) paused recording dialogue.

2a) Observational dialogue: with recording. At certain points which seemed particularly important we would often make a comment to the other such as "oh wasn't that interesting?" or "did you notice...?". These interactions tended to be relatively short, not continuing into conversations, but serving as points to identify and clarify what we felt were significant moments. These were not verbal communications alone but encompassed

our bodily presence. When one physically moved towards the speakers, or hurriedly scribbled notes, it indicated a feeling of importance. In most instances these were simultaneous connections. It was not that we were simply encouraging the other to see something as important, but rather as the process moved along our observations became increasingly synchronous.

This is central to the emergence of method; within this process we were paying more and more attention to the felt, sensory-emotional aspects of the analysis process itself. We came to understand that what we were studying in the recordings was also happening in our own interactions. In a socially constructed analysis space our visual and audible reactions to the data indicated how we were experiencing the data. At "intense" points we engaged in the second form of analysis 2b) paused recording dialogue.

2b) Observational dialogue: paused recording. There were points where we engaged in intense dialogue and debate around what we were observing. During these periods the recording was paused and we listened to the pertinent sections multiple times. Whenever this occurred it began with visceral, embodied levels of excitement brought about through our experiencing of the data. In a sense, we had entered the learning space we were studying, experiencing the aesthetics of the learning space as participants. During these discussions we were able to recount what we had been hearing (by referring back to the notes we were taking) finding points of commonality and disparity, discussing these in real time, temporally close to our initial observations. Additionally we were able to go back and forth through the recordings to revisit sections and analyze them multiple times together. This provided a point of continuous comparison of our analysis. During these periods we began to develop a new, more grounded list of open codes.

Throughout the course of our discussions a musical vocabulary emerged which we began to use to describe our observations. This vocabulary gradually coalesced into axial and eventually selective codes, supplanting our original categories. As they emerged through our collective experiencing of the data they felt more robust and connected to the observed phenomena:

> - Solos
> - Polyphony/Counterpoint
> - Pedal tones
> - Punctuation

Using these music-metaphorical concepts we began to name what was happening in the learning environments. In both recordings there was a movement between soloing (beginning with the facilitator, but including participant solos) and polyphony (many voices interacting) towards counterpoint (a rich dialogue of two or more voices bouncing off each other). Subtler interventions were captured with the ideas of "pedal tones" and a range of ways in which "punctuation" was created[1].

Having engaged in this recursive and dialogic process of analysis and method building we not only analyzed the data, but we simultaneously built an integrated method. Through this we became intensely aware of the aesthetic of the analysis/method-building process itself. When we released our preconceived notions our own felt-sense of the process changed markedly. We shifted from feeling hemmed in by a structure of our own making, to an experience of excitement and synergy. Our dialogue itself moved from solo to polyphony to counterpoint through crescendos and punctuations supported by pedal tones to a point where things "felt right". In this way we sensed when a code emerged and robustly represented what we were observing. Our analysis work highlighted the role of aesthetics in the research process itself.

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[1] These musical terms are defined and explained below under the section "Auditory aspects of engaged executive learning spaces"

Below we elaborate on the four categories that developed and speculate about their role in creating engaged executive learning spaces.

Auditory aspects of engaged executive learning spaces

Solos

Solos are a familiar part of the human experience, present in organizational life, musical settings, learning spaces and more. These are points when a single individual commands "the stage". Within music they are a key feature of many ensemble performance environments. In much jazz music there is a constant move between tutti (the ensemble playing together) and solo sections when one musician leads and the others support through comping (accompanying harmonies and rhythms). In orchestral settings soloing is also key. Pieces like Ravel's *Bolero* are built on solo after solo. In the traditional solo concerto a soloist is pitted against the full orchestra. In these instances it is the interplay between soloist and "the group" which enlivens the experience.

In many respects the traditional paradigm of education is based upon solos, but solos lacking interplay between participating individuals. For centuries educators have inhabited a dais, soloing to a passive audience expected to sit, listen and learn. While this paradigm has its benefits, it is a paradigm that limits the learning potential by curtailing the collective knowledge and experience present. This is particularly problematic for executive education spaces.

Within our study's data, soloing was an important aspect of the work of the facilitator. However, its intrinsic aesthetic was more akin to what happens in a jazz ensemble or an orchestral concerto. Throughout the recordings "solos" were performed by facilitators and participants, but rather than the "traditional" pedagogical solo described above, soloing was used to develop interactive dialogue. Thus the recordings revealed movement from facilitator solo towards participant solos, duets, trios, and occasionally tuttis.

For example, in the recording of an executive PhD class on research methods, the facilitator gave a lengthy 4'36" (4 minutes, 36 seconds) opening solo. With the exception of a brief period of laughter, the facilitator spoke more or less continuously, with a few periods of brief silence, as the framework of an assignment and an overall discussion around research ontology and epistemology was provided. The solo began as follows:

> Facilitator: "Okay! So, the assignment [brief silence]. It's an essay [brief silence]. Okay, it needs to answer three questions: what are the ontological and epistemological assumptions which underpin your approach to undertaking research. Okay, so! I know that at this point in time you should all still be a bit foggy in terms of what your actual research topic is…alright, so…
>
> [Participants laugh]
>
> Facilitator: "What?"
>
> Participant [Female]: "Correct assumption"
>
> Facilitator: "Yeah! So, there is a bit of uncertainty around in terms of what the actual study or the actual research question is. Even so! At this point in the course you have..."

In this brief excerpt key characteristics of the solo and its purposes are evident.

Solo purposes. Here the facilitator is taking the lead by laying out some key points and a framework for the session. This is a form of direct communication from soloist to ensemble. In the musical sense it is the soloist providing the principle tune or melody around which the ensemble will work. There were two other types of facilitator-led solos. The first was to jump in and extend a discussion, to build upon what a participant(s) had said by adding content and/or questions to expand and enrich the learning conversation, clarify a point or answer a question. The second was to contain a conversation that seemed to be going in an unfruitful direction. This was more about classroom management and was far less present in our data.

Facilitator solos have a central purpose to inject content and general frameworks. Like the beginning piano solo of Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto, the soloing facilitator provides the underlying content upon which the learning event will be based, and utilizes the solo technique to facilitate the process as it emerges.

Solo characteristics. Looking at the aesthetic construction of what the facilitator was doing, we find several subtle ways in which engagement is being encouraged within the soloing role. The solo is constructed first with pointed or punctuated statements (e.g. "Okay! So...") which have no meaning in terms of the content of the discussion, but indicate the facilitator is soloing. Spoken in a louder, slightly higher pitch than the rest of the content, they are a sonic punctuation[2] to gather the attention of the participants to focus upon the soloist. Significantly, silence follows the first "Okay! So…" exhortation. This seems to indicate a "listen to me" direction, but also creates an opening for everyone to listen and participate together. It was clear that the participants understood this as soon afterwards collective laughter occurred when the facilitator pointed out they might be "a bit foggy" around their research topics and questions. This tutti laughter was acknowledged and brought into the learning space by the facilitator who interjected "what?" at which point a female student said "correct assumption". Here, even in the middle of the opening solo there is a brief interaction, a brief moment of polyphony. The developing intrinsic aesthetic is one of interaction, not passive reception. However, the facilitator knows the solo is not finished and immediately carries on with "Yeah! So…" This positively acknowledged the participant's involvement but also indicated that the solo would continue.

The completion of the solo is also important. Solos tend not to simply stop, but to gradually involve more interaction: a gradual increase in polyphony. In this example this gradual shift from solo to polyphony began with drawing the head nodding of students into the learning space. This happened as early as 2'36":

> Facilitator: "I see nods around the place… so… that… they are nodding"
> [Participants laugh]

While the facilitator is only a little more than half way through the opening introductory solo (which totaled 4'36") there is already a focus on actively bringing participants into the discussion. In developing a heterotopic aesthetic, the facilitator is fully present using the body (hearing, seeing, feeling) as a teaching technology. The solo then begins again but with increasing focus on interaction from the whole group.

> Facilitator: "Now this is really important! All right. Criteria for validity, what is your understanding of that term. When I say criteria for validity what do you [laughs] what does that mean? What is a criteria for… okay, let's just talk, what's validity…okay… this is absolutely critical when you're thinking about research design…what's validity?"

> [Brief silence]

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[2] For a further discussion of "punctuation" see below.

> Participant [Male]: "Well isn't it something around believability?"
>
> Facilitator: "Yes! Believability! Okay so validity is something about believability, can you build on that?"

At this point three different participants join in and offer their thoughts. Here the facilitator has effectively transitioned from the introductory solo to a polyphonic section. This was done gradually with requested interaction from the participants and by bringing the solo to a key, focused point for moving forwards – the topic of "validity". At two previous points the facilitator, who is present and reading the room, actively brings participants into the space by acknowledging laughing and nodding. Now the facilitator begins to seek active engagement with direct questions and statements like "okay, let's just talk". However, the aesthetic of this is essential. While there has been a lengthy solo, albeit with brief interactions of the group, that solo is now "breaking down" in search of increased participation, of polyphony. How solos end is also indicative of the facilitator's aesthetic agency as the flow also "breaks down" devolving into short, choppy phrases with brief pauses and "okays". The more fluid solo speech is itself slowing and becoming fragmented. In addition to direct questions and saying "let's just talk" the facilitator is indicating space for the participants to "jump in" by how one aesthetically "gets out" of the solo and "gets into" polyphony.

We found moving from solo to polyphony integral to developing a holding space for learning exploration and discovery. In the next section we focus on the purposes and characteristics of polyphonic, contrapuntal sections of learning interventions.

Polyphony and counterpoint:

The discussion of solos above left off where the solo transitioned into a polyphonic section. Polyphony literally means many sounds and refers to an interaction of multiple voices. Of particular interest here is a kind of polyphony called counterpoint. Counterpoint is an intricate overlaying of voices interrelated harmonically and/or melodically (i.e. they have some commonality) but are independent in terms of rhythm and shape. Principle examples include the fugues of composers such as J.S. Bach, pieces in which three or more independent voices take the same theme or related themes, develop these and interact with each other to create a multi-layered soundscape. The resulting composition is more than the sum of its parts as the interacting voices (counterpoint) combine with each other to develop music rich in melodic, rhythmic and harmonic complexity (dissonance and consonance, agreement and disagreement). This provides an evocative metaphor for the overall intrinsic aesthetic of an engaged learning space.

As seen in the examples above, moving from a solo type interaction to a multi-layered interaction can be accomplished through subtle aesthetic cues (e.g. pauses, silences, fragmentation) that encourage the interaction of others. Across the data we noticed a movement from solo to polyphonic counterpoint. This was not one movement from beginning solo to sustained counterpoint but a movement back and forth with shorter and longer periods of both types of textures.

The following illustration comes from a leadership development session focusing on how an orchestral conductor works (see figure 1).

Polyphonic counterpoint purpose. This intervention involved the participants watching and discussing a video interview of an internationally recognized European conductor describing his practice. At one point in the video the conductor discussed how he deals with "stars" (high achieving professionals within teams and organizations). One of the planned goals of the session was to follow this theme to explore how to manage people who are similarly accomplished but present social difficulties within groups. To do this the

facilitator sought to develop a contrapuntal conversation, based initially on the video, which would harness the collective experience of the participants.

Time index	Total time	Voices	Brief excerpt	Purpose
35'21" – 35'26"	5 seconds	Facilitator Participant 1 [Male] Facilitator	"I'll come to you [participant 1] in just a second. Is it something about the stars?" "Yes" "Okay, go ahead."	Conversation management
35'26" – 35'48"	22 seconds	Participant 1 [Male]	"There was one statement [from the video] which I tend to disagree with…[continues] there are divas and are difficult to manage"	Dissonance and development
35'49 – 39'00"	191 seconds	Facilitator (Solo)	"We have divas in music too…[pause] we call them sopranos." [Laughter] "I think in music you find instances of both…um…I'll tell you a story [continues with anecdotal story about a difficult musical diva]…but how do I as a leader deal with that? I need to recognize their abilities and their contributions BUT [punctuated] not in a way which makes them hugely different from the rest"	Development
39'00"- 39'34"	34 seconds	Participant 2 [Male]	"There was one sentence where he [conductor] started…and I expected him to say but he didn't…[continues]"	Development
39'35" – 39'41"	6 seconds	Facilitator	Brief summary of comment	Summary
39'41" - 39'47"	6 seconds	Facilitator & Participant 2 [Male]	Quick back and forth and overlapping exchange clarifying and agreeing	Harmonising/ consolidating
39'48" – 39'52"	4 seconds	Facilitator	"What do you think about that? Let's take that as a premise."	Development
39'53" – 40'17"	24 seconds	Participant 3 [Male]	"That particular one [example from video]…"	Development
40'18" – 40'29"	9 seconds	Facilitator	"So what you do on the one on one level, or in private, or outside the organizational space will impact perhaps that person's behavior in public?"	Summary and development
40'30"- 40'52"	22 seconds	Participant 4 [Female]	"They cannot stay resistant…"	Development
40'53" – 41'02"	9 seconds	Facilitator	Seeks clarification	Clarification
41'01" – 41'06"	5 seconds	Participant 4 [Female] Facilitator	"Yes…" "Okay…good."	Harmonising/ consolidating
41'07" – 41'25"	28 seconds	Participant 5 [Male]	Participant 5 [Male]: "But I think that…"	Dissonance and Development
41'26" – 41'42"	16 seconds	Facilitator & Participant 5 [Male]	Quick back and forth and overlapping exchange clarifying and agreeing	Harmonising/ consolidating
41'42" – 42'32"	50 seconds	Participant 6 [Female]	Participant 6 [Female]: "I agree with the situation…I have an [employee] who is very	Development

			aggressive…very successful… [continues with anecdotal story]”	
42'32" – 42'52"	20 seconds	Facilitator	"Sure, sure, yes [briefly summarises anecdote]…what do you think about [Participant 6's] approach?"	Summary and development
42'53" – 43'56"	63 seconds	Participant 7 [Female]	"I would say that more or less its correct…[continues]"	Development

43'57"- 45'31"	34 seconds	Facilitator	"I just want to pick up on what [Participant 7] said…as managers and leaders you need to be very reflexive and ask why is this person acting this way…you have to get into their headspace…[continues]"	Summary and conclusion
45'32"- 46'32"	60 seconds	Participant 8 [Female]	"I just wanted to comment that…"	Development
46'33" – 46'51"	18 seconds	Facilitator	"So if I can interpret what you're saying…[continues]"	Clarification and summary
46'52" – 47'13"	21 seconds	Participant 8 [Female] Facilitator	"I was thinking more like…" "Yes, exactly"	Clarification, summary and conclusion
*at this point the facilitator moves the discussion to a new topic				

Figure 1: Contrapuntal Conversation

Polyphonic counterpoint characteristics. This contrapuntal section was characterized by a constellation of inputs involving the facilitator and eight participants (4 male, 4 female). Over the course of this twelve minute exchange the facilitator took an auditory step back to provide the participants space while holding a supporting/accompanying role of summarizing, clarifying, seeking thematic development and harmonizing the threads of the conversation's theme.

There are three key characteristics to how this was achieved: 1) direction 2) support/accompaniment and 3) harmonizing and concluding.

Direction: entering the contrapuntal space. The facilitator began by giving concise indication that the conversation was being guided towards the topic of managing "stars", a topic that had already briefly arisen. Noticing that one of the participants (Participant 1 in Figure 1) wanted to contribute, the facilitator said:

"I'll come to you [Participant 1] in just a second. Is it something about the stars?"

When the participant said yes the facilitator gave him the stage:

"Okay, go ahead"

This brief exchange effectively indicated the thematic focus of the discussion but also highlighted the desire for this to be participant led. Originally planning a solo to get into the conversation, the facilitator adapted when realizing one of the participants wanted to do this and instead gave him the floor.

Participant 1 began by introducing dissonance:

"There was one statement [from the video] which I tend to disagree with [continues]… there are divas and [they] are difficult to manage"

The facilitator picked up this dissonance and provided a story about a difficult musical star (a soprano) as illustrative of the problems that can arise in organizations with what might be called "diva" behavior. This story, told through a three-minute facilitator solo[3], was a useful bridge from the musically focused video towards organizational life more generally. At the end of the story the facilitator interrogatively abstracted key points turning them towards a more generic discussion of management and leadership of high performers within organizations:

> "…but how do I as a leader deal with that? I need to recognize their abilities and their contributions BUT not in a way which makes them hugely different from the rest."

In this way the underlying topic of "how do we deal with stars?" was reinforced, but additional structure was provided: how do we balance recognizing abilities and contributions above the norm without elevating individuals on pedestals?

To enter a contrapuntal aesthetic, room was created to leverage participants' experience to move into the topic at hand. Similar to the end of the soloing example above, the facilitator was present and attuned to the potential engagement of participants and bringing them into the conversation.

Following this directive entrance the facilitator moved to the auditory background, taking up a supporting/accompanying role within the learning space to leverage the collective experience of the group.

Supporting and accompanying: developing the contrapuntal space. Over the next seven minutes seven other participants offered mini solos (20-63 seconds in length) of their thoughts and experiences around managing high performers. Following each contribution the facilitator made a brief summary, comment or clarification on the participant solo that acknowledged the contribution and encouraged further thematic development. When listening to this the overall effect of these interchanges is of increasing tempo (speed) and the creation of a rich overlapping tapestry of ideas and inputs. Throughout the facilitator provided positive reinforcement with words like, "Okay, good, sure, yes, exactly" and furthered the discussion with non-directive questions like "what do you think about that?" As the discussion progressed the facilitator also introduced harmonizing/consolidating activity which brought different threads of the overall theme together.

Harmonizing: consolidating the counterpoint. Towards the end of this contrapuntal section the facilitator began to reinstate a more soloistic and directive role. At about three minutes from the conclusion of the discussion the facilitator said:

> "I just want to pick up on what [Participant 7] said…as managers and leaders you need to be very reflexive and ask why is this person acting this way…[continues]…you have to get into their headspace"

This picked up a key point developed through the counterpoint. Here the facilitator summarizes, harmonizes and moves towards a concluding point. This was the longest period the facilitator spoke (34 seconds) since the earlier solo in the direction-setting phase.

Here we see key aesthetic characteristics that comprise the development of interactive, contrapuntal discussions within an executive development session. The facilitator begins by asserting a theme, a direction for the conversation, but in a way that provides space

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[3] This solo is of the second type identified above, where the facilitator jumps in to extend discussion, build upon what a participant has said and inject further content and questions.

for participants to engage. Then the facilitator audibly moves to the background to capitalize on that space, offering only short interjections of summary, clarification and development comprising positive affirmations and non-directive questions. Finally, as key points emerge from the counterpoint the facilitator gradually re-emerges as a soloist to harmonize and move the discussion to a conclusion.

One key element requires further exploration here; why the facilitator used continuous interjections following participant mini-solos. There were two explanations, the first specific to this situation, the second more generic.

In this development space the participants came from a variety of countries. The facilitator was the only native English speaker present. As such some of the mini-solos of the participants were difficult to follow and some participants spoke quietly. The facilitator decided to engage in short summaries and clarifications to make sure all understood what was being said.

The second reason was more generic. In the moment, the facilitator *felt* the need to be present in a background-supporting role to create a safe holding environment for learning. In developing an engaging interactive, polyphonic, contrapuntal aesthetic, the facilitator was able to use the body as a teaching technology to *sense* and *feel* what participants seemed to need. As the intervention progressed and the group and facilitator spent more time together this need diminished.

This supporting, accompanying role, emanating from the aesthetic *feeling* of a need for it, is carried out in various ways. One identified way was "pedal tones".

Pedal Tones

In classical music, particularly of the Baroque and Classical periods, compositions often include "pedal tones", sustained or repeated notes forming the foundation for the harmonic scaffolding. The typical musical example is an organist holding a low pitch (literally played by a foot on the organs pedals) on top of which more intricate material is played on the manuals (keyboards). Pedal tones play a supporting, accompanying role. They ground a piece or section of music providing a sense of "familiarity" or "comfort", acting as an "anchor" for thematic meanderings.

In listening to our recordings, we were surprised to hear a similar sort of effect occurring. An example comes from the above discussed executive PhD session:

> Participant 1: it's in the method
> …………….   Participant 2: It's in how you code
> ……………………………………….General hub-bub
> Facilitator: Yes,…. Yes,…. Uh, huh…. Yes

On the recording what is heard is a general sense of people putting out half-formed sentences together, odd words stick out, and a kind of polyphonic thematic meandering. Underneath the facilitator interjects "Yes, Yes… Uh-huh" at regular intervals.

Purpose of "pedal tones". Similar to the musical purpose, the pedal tone of "yes, uh-huh" provides a kind of foundational energy above which ideas constellate. The pedal tone was used most often when the facilitator was trying to encourage participants to vocalize ideas they were grappling with, as in the above example, with ideas about "validity". The pedal tone encouraged students to put half-formed ideas into the space – to provide a possibility within which the group could learn together.

Interestingly, the pedal tone affect was not just the province of the facilitator:

> Participant [Female]: One thing I'm worried about, I don't actually have my research question yet…
>
> Facilitator: Okay, that's fine, but you do have a research area…
>
> Participant [Female]   Yeah, Yeah, Yeah
>
> Facilitator: And you do have the kinds of research questions…
>
> Participant [Female] Yeah, Yeah Yeah (increasing in speed)

It is interesting to note how the vocal pattern of the facilitator is imitated in the vocal pattern of the participant in this passage, and how soon after, a series of "Yeah" "Yeahs" are exchanged between facilitator and participant. This seems to hint at something else that is going on within a broader sense of the engagement between the facilitator and participants – they are "syncing" with one another through this shared pattern of vocalizations. This is also seen in the earlier example of polyphony and counterpoint. In figure 1 there are two points of harmonizing/consolidating (39'41"-39'47" & 41'26"-41'42") in which the facilitator and participant engaged in similar vocalizations to "sync" around a particular idea.

Structure of pedal tones. The pedal tone is used as a technique for encouraging vocal engagement in the classroom. It is the use of the body to provide subtle, audible cues "under" participants, keeping people connected and supported. It bears a number of similarities to "Punctuation".

Punctuation

Within the musical world, punctuation occurs in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most common form of punctuation is the silence at the end of a musical performance, signaling that the piece is finished. Yet, silence within a piece of music provides moments in which audience and musicians rest, reflecting on what has occurred, pausing, before continuing.

On the other extreme, music can be punctuated by loud and sudden sounds: crashing cymbals, the "rat-a-tat-tat" of the snare drum, loud blasts from the trumpets, hunting calls from the French horns. Each particular sound is there to draw attention, to make listeners notice something standing out from the soundscape, either to emphasize what is heard or to bring attention to some different feature of the musical terrain.

Similarly in the executive learning space, punctuation is used as a way of drawing attention, as well as of marking endings, beginnings and key moments.

For instance, prior to one of the sessions used for this study, the group had been listening to an overly extended "solo" introduction of the facilitator, performed by another faculty member. Sensing the need to shift the energy, the intrinsic aesthetic of the classroom, to bring more life and engagement into it the facilitator used a "call and response" punctuation:

> Facilitator: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen
>
>   Participants: Silence, one female voice "Hello"…Group laughter
>
> Facilitator: Try that one more time, Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen
>
>   Participants: General mumble, one female voice "Hello" on top

Facilitator: Try that one more time with gusto, Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen

Participants: A louder general mumble

Facilitator: That's not gusto, ladies and gentlemen, one more time: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen

Participants: Good afternoon (together, loudly, with some laughter)

There are a number of informative aspects of this aesthetic strategy. Firstly, the facilitator does not "give up", persisting by repeating the punctuation "Good afternoon…" until the desired response emerged. In musical terms, this is a "call and response" form of punctuation where one individual or group makes a statement to which another responds. This is often found in music such as "work songs" to align groups of people engaged in a common task.

The intervention serves to raise the energy in the classroom and bring it to one point of focus. This progression is apparent on the recording – in response to the first punctuation, there is one person who responds, hence one person engaged. In the following response, there is a more general mumble, with one voice standing out amongst the others. In the third response, there is no longer the one voice standing out, but the general response is still mumbled, an increasing general engagement. Finally, in the fourth attempt, participants are united in their attention, everyone says "Good afternoon" together, the collective energy brought to one point.

Here the facilitator as aesthetic agent feels the need to adjust the intrinsic aesthetic and acts, using the bodily possibilities of voice and hearing, to adjust that aesthetic and align the participants through a punctuated, energetic call and response activity.

Discussion

Methodological learnings

This project breaks new ground in its attempt to develop a method and language for exploring the aesthetic dimension of the classroom experience. Given the nature of an aesthetic experience itself, as an embodied, felt phenomenon, it is difficult to find ways into researching and describing this aspect of social space – of overcoming our aesthetic muteness. Certainly, there are limitations to our work, discussed below, but our foray into this territory revealed a number of aspects of significance for those aspiring to research phenomena from an aesthetic perspective.

Firstly, we discovered that in order to research this process, we needed to let go of our preconceived ideas about what we would find in the data. By starting with pre-determined categories developed from our own experiential knowing, we were not able to engage fully, aesthetically ourselves, with what we were hearing. It was only when we engaged all of our own aesthetic facilities – by letting go of our cognitively constructed categories – that we were able to really "experience" what was going on.

As we listened to the recordings, both on our own and together, it became clear that attending to our own felt response was essential to comprehending what was going on aesthetically in the recordings. A learning from this is about the extent to which the researcher must engage "aesthetically", that is – in the moment, with his or her own senses open in analyzing data of this kind.

As with any qualitatively based research study, the process of making sense of the data is an iterative and cyclical one. For example, aspects of the first recording we listened to which seemed insignificant became more significant after listening to the second. We are certain that in listening to more recordings this will become even more apparent.

It was vitally important to listen together as well as separately – it was in our observational dialogues that we were able both to hear the significance of what we were hearing as individuals and make sense of it together.

What we learned about the aesthetics of the classroom: a practical perspective

The paper originated from the desire to understand more about how we can construct engaged learning spaces in the moment – particularly with executive learners coming back into the classroom with a wealth of practical experience. We began with a "hunch" that there are things that educators in such spaces do which lead to more (and also less) engaged spaces. We were focused on the "how", the aesthetic feel of how educators create such spaces, and how we use our own aesthetic sense to make choices about what we do, how we act as aesthetic agents. As such we joined questions posed by others: how do we create conditions conducive to group exploration and discovery (Meuser & Lapp 2004), how do we hold such learning spaces (Kolb & Kolb 2005) and how are heterotopic learning environments constructed (Beyes and Michel 2011).

There was much that surprised us about the recordings. This itself was surprising, given that each of us was actually involved in the making of one of the recordings. We learned that there were things we were doing in the classroom that we were not aware of. Until listening to the recordings there was no conscious awareness of the use of "pedal tones" or "musical" techniques such as call and response punctuation. They were things we just did, tacitly.

This speaks to our underlying focus on the aesthetic agency of facilitators in this kind of learning. In these spaces we have pre-determined plans, processes/activities and goals, but the way these are enacted, the ways we achieve desired outcomes are highly subtle, in the moment, often tacit actions responsive to an ever unfolding learning environment. To deal with this moment-to-moment unfolding we are relying upon our abilities to read, understand and act in response to aesthetic stimuli that we pick up in real time. We are using our bodies as teaching technologies replete with instinctual processes of aesthetically sensing, perceiving, and meaning making to inform action within the sphere of the intrinsic aesthetic.

In soloing we may operate from the feeling of the need for direction within a learning intervention. While this is usual and traditional, we found that there was a subtle awareness of how the solo would eventually lead to polyphonic counterpoint. We heard how attention was given to the engagement of participants, noting and acting upon laughter and embodied interaction, gradually transitioning towards increased levels of group interaction. More subtle cues such as fragmenting the fluidity of solos are also aesthetic cues encouraging inputs from others. When entering polyphonic, contrapuntal dialogue the facilitator creates audible space for participants by moving to the sonic background. Yet it is not just a case of being silent. We have experienced how the facilitator *felt* the need to maintain an accompanying/supporting role with short interjections of clarification, summary, harmonizing and consolidation. This type of activity is also carried out through actions like "pedal tones". Across the recordings we heard ourselves and participants using our vocalizing bodies to support the inputs of others with comforting and reassuring "yeahs", "uh-huhs", and "sures". These tended to encourage, sync and consolidate thematic threads increasingly offered from diverse participants. While pedal tones served as subtle, regular punctuations, we also heard the use of exhorting punctuations. The call and response "Good afternoon…" was a key example of this. When the facilitator "took the stage" there was a felt lack of energy and unity. To

alter the intrinsic aesthetic the call and response punctuation was used persistently until the *feeling* changed.

The in-the-moment attention to and acting upon the sounds and sights (the aesthetics) of the social space lying behind these actions and practices are examples of the aesthetic agency to which we are calling attention. They evidence the subtle, embodied, sense-making and consequent strategies of action as we recognize our bodies as teaching technologies to experience unfolding learning environments. They evidence the facilitator as an adaptive agent responsive to the feel, energy and buzz of that environment, an agility of action beyond predetermined pedagogical plans and detailed learning outcomes.

While our identification of solos, polyphonic counterpoint, pedal tones and punctuations are helpful in categorizing and abstracting elements of this agency, the practical benefit lies within the recognition of the practitioner's aesthetic agency itself. By naming this and describing some of its characteristics we offer a practical insight into developing the effectiveness of socially constructed learning spaces by identifying the embodied technology of aesthetic agency in such formats. This adds a level of reflexivity to the practice, of noticing how we construct these kinds of spaces, reflecting upon these actions and their outcomes, and using such reflections to impact future interventions. Aesthetic agency is, to a degree, individually specific and therefore eludes a comprehensive typology of actions and practices, but the awareness of it, the claiming of its importance and the attention to it will pay dividends not only in understanding and heightening pedagogical practice but the centrality of the aesthetic in organizational and relational activity in general.

Limitations and further research

The research we have conducted has significant limitations, the most marked of them being the inclusion of only two recordings, one of each of the authors. It would be helpful to extend the research by recording a number of educators, operating in a variety of cultural contexts, who are experienced in working in the executive development space. It would also be helpful to extend the research to take into account what educators are actually trying to do within the executive learning space, and the extent to which they are conscious of how they engage participants.

Significantly, a key element to the system is also missing, inputs of participants. While we had a sense of this from our experiences of leading these sessions and our interpretations of the participants' recorded engagement, it would be invaluable to have participants also involved in the analysis of these social spaces to provide their perceptions of what is happening.

In some ways, we believe the most fruitful area for further research concerns the experimentation with a method for exploring the aesthetic dimensions of relational processes. Perhaps the most significant aspect of our research is the way in which we have begun to create a means by which aesthetics can be brought into relief as a significant and researchable aspect of organizational and relational activity. With further recording data and the involvement of participant stakeholders we believe this will be a significant venture in further aesthetics research.

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