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PROVOCATION THREE

From Space to (Embodied) Place: A Manifesto for Sensory Learning in Site-Specific Practices

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Topophilia, a concept coined by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, which he defines as the ‘affective bond between people and place and setting’ (1974:4), is underexploited in everyday life. As humans we use only a fraction of our senses, usually privileging sight above everything else. In teaching we ask, ‘do you see?’ to ascertain understanding; seldom do we ask, ‘what do you feel?’ or consider touch as a way of thinking and learning. We neglect the smells of the teaching space and never quite ‘taste’ knowledge. I propose a move from the optic to the haptic using the tactile, olfactory and gustatory potential of site-specific practices; one in which the body ‘performs’ in response to the ‘performance’ of the environment. This performative site-specific pedagogy is a means of empowering learners to map their own physical and virtual learning journeys based on sensory responses and judgements.

Touch, smell and taste evoke powerful memories that can be summoned involuntarily. Philosopher Henri Bergson (1896) suggests that pure memory is involuntary, becoming deeper and richer each time it is evoked. When we touch, smell or taste we are truly embodied. It can be difficult to describe or decipher this experience, but it is profound and remains deep within our consciousness. How can the body be used as a performer in everyday life in response to our environment and what does this mean for sensory learning?

Learning in site-specific practices begins with the journey. Maps (like lesson plans) are made to be ignored, routes changed and veered away from. Your map or plan is like an improvisation, giving a ‘freshness and an immediacy to [your] performance’ (Stanislavski, 1990:78).
Deriving from his work on the *via negativa*, theatre director Jerzy Grotowski’s paratheatrical activities encouraged a process of being passive, although not inactive. In performative pedagogies we can wander, drift, dawdle, be late, or not arrive at all. It does not matter if we drift because we will always reach our destination. Walking emits a response to the undulation of the ground. Running hands across surfaces, allowing aromas and odours of the street to invade nostrils, letting sounds fill ears does the same.

The smells of a space are neglected in traditional pedagogies. In performative pedagogies we smell the space and adapt to its multifaceted atmosphere of odours. In his seminal text on actor training, Michael Chekhov suggests that an atmosphere inspires the actor and ‘deepens the perception of the spectator’ (2002:48). In curating a score of atmospheres from surrounding odours, orchestration of the many parts may not be possible, but learners will respond as an ensemble, supporting one another tacitly.

Finding liminal spaces and privileging a sense of touch charts the cracks and ridges; both teacher and student respond intuitively to smoothness and striations and ‘make judgements based on qualities that unfold during the course of the action’ (Eisner, 1985:175). Inviting participants to bring an item of food and taste a collective picnic at a site triggers pure memory and heightens corporeal presence in the present. Between each bite, your continued presence in the site will punctuate like a palette cleanser, making each mouthful the catalyst for involuntary memory. Deep memories equal deep learning.

**Form. Perform. Transform.**

As sensory responses are moulded into a form, its shape, and size connect to the ground. When you perFORM your form, you become part of the site; in this way, perFORMance transFORMs the site, sensor and sensed (cf. Jogschies, Schewe and Stöver-Blahak, 2019).
Becoming immersed a site, like in immersive theatre practices, ‘prioritizes embodied knowledge and the making-sense / sense-making processes of human perception and interpretation’ (Machon, 2013:142). Performative pedagogy uses the body. It stands barefoot and feels the ground. It listens to your heart’s rhythm. It touches the sounds, hears the views and sees the tastes. It makes sense and sense makes. Performative pedagogy unites the body and mind, tangles and untangles the senses.

Above all, performative pedagogy facilitates the teacher and student in empathising with the space, embodying it and carrying it beyond the learning environment. Site-specific performative pedagogies transcend classrooms of the school, college and university. Sensory responses are emplaced within bodies (of knowledge); we do not consciously attempt to remember them. Instead, we continue to touch, smell and taste; through this, pure memory becomes material and the past actualizes itself, letting ‘memory…proceed from the past into the present…dynamically…thinking in time’ (Guerlac, 2006:140). Sensory experience provokes involuntary memory that cites your site and creates sensory maps which can be overlaid on any location; bringing inspiring outdoor spaces to indoor places.

References


