Practitioner Researcher

“Can I have a new game?” Allowing multiplicity in children’s art experience

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Arts education increasingly attracts examination in light of contemporary cognitive science, social psychology, philosophy and sociology. In this essay, some philosophical concepts introduced by Deleuze and Guattari will be examined within an understanding of children’s arts learning. The first part will be focused on an observation of a dancer working with a group of children. In the second part, a critical analysis will be conducted with reference to philosophical concepts of learning (Sellers, 2013).

Observation

Before describing the observation of the dance learning session, it should be said that it involves teachers, a dancer and children who work with body movements and language. As for the process of the whole learning session, it could be divided into two sections. The first part is, to some extent, similar to the traditional ‘mat time’ of early childhood education. All members of this group, sit in a circle, are encouraged to present his or her body movement one after another. When it comes to the second part, the previously isolated activities of each member naturally evolve into a collective form of action performance involving the whole group.

In the first section, the activity was initiated by the artist showing body movements, accompanied by mouth sounds. This was followed by each child creating actions, one by one. During this process, one type of change could be noticed from a boy who hit the ground to make a sound, which, in effect, was a de-territorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), a small beginning on the part of the children to make their presence known. Another change was led by a girl who chose to stand on a chair to present her actions – gradually, the ‘striated’ space of the circle started to shift. From this point on, members of the group stood up and began to use their whole body to show actions or gestures. One of the girls even exhibited a relatively complex dancing action and the rest of the children were interested in imitating her. The group, then, as an assemblage, went into the second part, a transitory stage, when a boy suggested the artist create an action for car driving. When it was his turn, the action of car driving was conducted by all the group members beginning to drive cars freely in the whole area, which meant that the first stage, acting within one’s own small area, was transformed.

During the second section, a collective form of activity became the main feature of the children’s dancing. When the artist introduced a basic principle of connecting through imitations of car driving activities, with the “freeze” action at
the beginning of this stage, some children suddenly began to engage in articulating their ideas, creating a story line within the game activity:

Girl A: Can I have a new game? When you turn me on, and then you stop, and others next stop to freeze.

Artist: Yeah, this is just like that. If you listen to me, you have to look at everyone else, then other people (can) look at you to start.

Girl B: But if you do that, it has got to go to be me.

Thereafter, the same form of combination with different body movements and “freeze” actions were proposed by both the teacher and children. New actions and a game emerged with the rule of sequential movements, one after another, created by suggestions from different children. As a group, they de-territorialised the original game to re-territorialise their new game, formalising their new territory.

Lines of Flight

Obviously, the observation can be seen as a resource for furthering our understandings about children’s learning in the arts. Instead of employing theories about children, such as developmental theory, a series of philosophical concepts from Deleuze and Guattari constitute a way in which learning and teaching are realised in the arts.

Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘lines of flight’ allow us an entry point into (re)considering children’s dance learning. Lorraine (1999, as cited in Parr, 2010), sees lines of flight as an unpredictable transformative path forming, along with virtual connections among bodies in this process. New powers of these bodies are activated. Based on this concept, we see the effect of lines of flight gradually emerging with the progress of the dancing. This is seen especially when the children start to suggest story lines or a different context for their dancing games; various ideas become mutually and reciprocally interactive. It is not difficult to see the lines of flight as the actions cut across existing frameworks. In Adrian’s free style teaching session, children lead the dance learning and freely experimenting with lines of flight that all occur at once.

When children create their own world, they are contextualised within their own understanding. ‘Becoming’ (Sellers, 2013, in reference to Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), is about the dynamic and continual changes that happen ‘in-between’, where there is no fixed form and ending point. It is the ever-changing status of becoming that matters as it challenges and disrupts any form of dualism, such as good or bad, this is right or wrong (Sellers, 2013). A ‘milieu’, in the philosophical understanding of Deleuze and Guattari, connects to the concepts of ‘surroundings’, ‘medium’ and ‘middle’ (Massumi, 1987, as cited in Sellers, 2013). The milieu emphasises the intermediate status without sequential development and implies the interrelation and intermingling among all the milieus present (Sellers, 2013). In relation to becoming, not only does becoming need a framework, a milieu(s) to become, but a milieu can change to becoming within a milieu(s) and becoming milieu(s) – becoming, as in the shift that occurs
within the imaginary. Based on the two concepts, here we have another entry point to look into what occurred for the children. If there is no formal curriculum of dancing and the children introduce elements, the diverse milieus existing in their learning process interact, evolve and ‘become’ the curricular milieu(s). The children did not just change to a certain status of mastering dancing steps in which they were no longer (in)complete bodies, but continually changing, developing and integrating the elements of body, dance, language and previous life experiences.

Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical concepts of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation can be understood in connection with the assemblage constantly coming into play in early childhood settings. With reference to Parr (2010), an assemblage refers to “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning” (p. 18). In this sense, each assemblage indicates the existence of not only an establishment of a territory but also the removal or fracture of a territory, which forms a new deterritorialisation (Parr, 2010). Within the process of de/re/territorialisation, lines of flight become the force to drive transformation among and within the territorial assemblages, which can be described as lines of deterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, as cited in Sellers, 2013).

**Assemblages**

In relation to becoming, the assemblages of forces of de/re/territorialisation are not constant, but dynamic and ever-changing. By integrating territorialisation into the analysis of what happened to the children, we can recognise the frequent de/re/territorialisation in the children’s learning process. When one of the boys suggested a car-driving context and the two girls clarified the story line of their dancing game, the assemblages of forces validated the territorialisation and following reterritorialisation as the children formalised their new territory into a new milieu. When some children lead the dancing game to the final stage, which was constituted with different game rules, the collective assemblages of lines of flight drove the deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Similarly, the effects of de/re/territorialisation can be manifested in the ‘seemingly’ free style teaching of Adrian taking apart his own rules or striations, to use Deleuzean terminology.

After applying the philosophical concepts above for analysis separately, we still need a theoretical idea to bring them together. Here, I prefer to apply a Deleuzo-Guattarian analysis, namely the rhizo approach. Rhizomes, are composed of and compose incessant correlational movements among countless virtual or implicit links that share similarities and differences (Sellers, 2013). Within this theoretical base of rhizomatic thinking and the integration of the above concepts, an unconventional tool is available for us to explore children’s art learning presented in the observation and interview.

With respect to the dance session, in the first section, children were allowed to show their own body movements, which are the foundation of the lines of flight, and the original milieu being formed, which is a relatively simple teacher led exercise. As the session progressed to the transitional point, the boy who suggested a new game context became an assemblage of force to empower a line of flight. Accordingly, the de-territorialisation appeared and the new milieu(s)
gradually emerged. After that, the second part with different story lines took shape in their dancing game, led by the children with various assemblages of forces from children that took effect with web-like interactions among children interconnecting and intersecting. This caused dramatic and multiple lines of flight, resulting in the frequent de/re/territorialisation of the milieus in their dancing games. At the same time, various milieus related to different game contexts that not only changed in themselves, but also interrelated and intermingled with each other, becoming the rhizo curriculum of children's dance learning with abundant resources inside the game. The children in the whole process were in a continual and dynamic milieu of becoming, experiencing and changing with the ebb and flow of energy and interrelationships in this rhizomatic dancing curriculum (Sellers, 2013).

Another concept that we may observe in this critical analysis is that of emergence. According to Holman (2010), emergence is about the complexity of a higher level that develops and derives from chaos. In this process, new and consistent structures are correlated by interactions among varying entities of a system (Holman, 2010). In education, emergence can be linked to the flexibility of a learning environment that contributes to spontaneous and autonomous involvement of students in the learning process, as well as the sensitive recognition of students’ differences and changes in the learning process (Osberg & Biesta, 2008). Regarding Adrian, there are two aspects for us to reflect upon. First, the free style teaching testifies his attention to provide children with an environment for play and shows him as someone sensitive to realising children’s transformative powers. For example, during the learning session, he leads mainly by allowing the children to create an environment of emergent learning, as well as continually promoting the natural exuberance of children’s making.

**Conclusion**

The arts demonstrate the importance of emergent learning in children’s engagement. As in the process of natural and spontaneous emergence, children continually produce sense by working with their ideas and experiencing their practical environment. This can be related to the philosophical ideas of Deleuze, namely the event, which is the continual attempt to make sense within an event, by formulating and constructing questions and problems (Olsson, 2013).

Children, the artist, and teachers in the observation and interview provided the resources for their own arts learning with the teacher. By employing the philosophical concepts derived from Deleuze and Guattari, we can further our understanding within the context of children's art learning. Under the higher-order concept of rhizomatic learning, an understanding of children's learning starts to form through the collective lines of flight, becoming, milieu, de/re/territorialisation and assemblages. With the assistance of a teacher’s perspective and experience, the children provide insights for not only educators but also parents educating the wider community. Accordingly, we see how Adrian had an understanding about the inventiveness of children that has to follow their understanding of their imaginary, which means being resourceful and achieving a close connection to the imagined (Sellers, 2013). By contextualising the process of children’s art learning, we can develop, in my view, a better understanding, with the help of Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas.
References


