Of Dog and Dice: Affective-Messy Posthuman Narratives Through Creative Pedagogies and Corresponding in the Classroom

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Abstract

Drawing on our work with children in education and with adults in Health and Social Care contexts, this paper presents two vignettes that demonstrate how the authors became “messy” researchers. The first features a primary school classroom with a dog named Ted and the second a Health and Social Care creative workshop. Through these narratives, the authors jointly present their process of “becoming-messy” researchers through a set of animated moments or events from their work. By using “cuts” or “slices” of events they give visual materialization to the constant state of “becoming” and possibilities of posthuman flourishing. This “messy” framework offered them the opportunity to view and understand the nuanced mechanisms of teacherly relationships as shared spaces and places of mutual discovery, well-being, and flourishing. In a time when COVID-19 presents challenges to classrooms in terms of touch and social distance measures, re-claiming the body as discourse has never been more relevant to learning and educational settings.

Keywords: Creative pedagogies, agentic cuts, bodies-without-organs, messiness in inquiry, co-responding

Becoming Bodies

Erin Manning (2013) provides an intriguing starting point when considering the way in which we use our body as a means of communication. She suggests it is through movement such as walking, that we become bodies. Thus, we “body” as Manning (2013) terms it. This “radical” notion assumes an entanglement in the world among material matter, humans, and non-humans (Barad, 2007). Taking this idea of entanglement further, we align with Manning and Massumi’s (2014) ideas about “messiness” being fundamental to the process of inquiry. We understand this messiness to be the liveliness and unpredictability of research and learning that is often down-played, even ignored, in studies with linear-based methods and outcomes. We adapt Macphie’s (2019) “Mr. Messy” metaphor to position ourselves as “messy” researchers while we attend to the liveliness and unpredictability in our own studies. In taking on this positionality, we propose a shift in thinking about research practices that “affectively” enlivens and animates research work. As Law (2014) argues, mess in our social practices of inquiry and learning is significant because we do not just engage in inquiry, we also create and produce messy findings. Law (2014) further
suggests that research and social practices in themselves can miss and even repress components of knowledge generation and new understandings, such as, not paying attention to intensities, forces, and affects. We suggest that creative methods not only bring clarity or precision to research work, but also add a degree of messiness that helps us understand our world as fluid, elusive, and dynamic. For us, mess (unpredictability) is beautiful. We came to appreciate this through our own performatively engaged with worldly messiness and we are not alone in thinking of the body as a site of messiness, learning, and knowledge production. Barad (2007) and Ingold (2016) write about it too. In this article, we take Ingold’s (2016) notion of “co-responding” and configure it with Barad’s (2007) notion of “intra-acting”. The diffractive result of this combining supports an idea central to this discussion, that human and non-human assemblages do not entirely pre-exist one another.

For us, traditional forms of inquiry, where learning is seen as primarily cognitive, means that learning is flattened and still. We prefer to re-configure and animate inquiry by paying attention to how the body, and thus affective experience, can be a site and space for new forms of knowledge. The body is also a focus for Sheets-Johnstone (2009) who re-configures embodiment as animation. The distinction she makes between “embodiment” and “animation” is a crucial one. For her, the body is not still, but a dynamic and moving force encapsulated with affects and intensities. Her writing aligns with the work of Daniel Stern (1977/2002), a renowned psychotherapist, who studied the interaction of mothers and babies extensively using close videoed observations. His work suggests that humans communicate in what he calls “steps in the dance” of reciprocity, an interaction of give and take, back and forth bodily and vocal conversations. Stern (2010) brings into sharp focus the need to understand the role of vitality as a component of encounters and interactions. He calls this component “vitality affects” (Stern, 2010, p. 41).

Being attuned to vitality affects means, for us, a willingness to connect and co-respond to one another’s corporeality in embodied encounters. For Ash and Gallacher (2015) “attunement” is the term they use for an embodied approach to research methodology. Manning (2013), drawing on Stern (2010), suggests that attunement can also be thought of as a relationship between non-human things which she calls somatic attunement, an attunement of inside and outside affects. As she argues:

[A]ffective attunement need not be solely located on a human scale. If conceived beyond human interaction, affective attunement might well describe the relational environment co-created by movement and sound … Affective attunement: an open field of differentiation out of which a singularity of feeling emerges and merges. A tuning not of content but of expression-with. (Manning, 2013, p. 11)

Manning’s (2013) reading of the term attunement expands the scope and reach of the concept. Attunement, for her, is something that emerges as humans relate socially to other humans, but also as objects, humans, and non-humans relate to one another. Manning (2013) emphasizes the materiality of the environment here and the role of sound and movement (tone, vibration) in it. Further, she suggests that attunement resonates as an “affective tonality”, a concept like Stern’s (2010) vitality affects.

Affect attunement is, as we understand it, an understanding of the transmission of energy between material things. Co-responding and being with an-other happens by way of affect.

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attunement and a shared vitality and dynamic flow through movement. Considering affect attunement alongside of Malloch and Trevarthen’s (2009) notion of “communicative musicality” also orients us to the musicality and rhythm in these encounters. Movement, sensation, affect, and emotion are felt in the dynamics of bodily experience (Polanyi, 1962). In terms of this musicality or Stern’s (2002) dance steps, experiences and learning might also be framed to include a pre-linguistic narrative in which human and non-human co-responsibility develops as relational connection in dynamic and vital ways. As well, there is a spatial element to the dance that is one of proximity. How much space there is between the intra-actors is significant as is the space itself which holds a sensuous knowing—a knowing of oneself in relation to the other. The co-responding in this space is shared and it is a process of entanglement with the outer and inner realms of life (Barad, 2007). Shapiro (1990, 2019) calls this “kinaesthetic empathy”.

In this paper, we put concepts of touch (tactile communication), embodied knowledge, and kinaesthetic empathy to work practically. Vignette 1 takes place in a primary school setting with children in a Year 6 (age 10-11 years) class with their classroom dog, Ted. In Vignette 2, a dice game shows how the intra-action of practitioners with a dice facilitated the emergence and mapping of social service delivery, innovation, and collaboration processes.

**Ingold’s “Dance of Animacy”**

For Ingold (2013) and Sheets-Johnstone (2009), embodiment and animation can be differentiated. Embodiment, for them, happens only inside the body, whereas animation involves forces both inside and outside the body where dynamics are at play. For example, with animation, a body might correspond with rhythms from the emergent sights, sounds, or the temperature of the environment and mix with it. This mixing is what Massumi (2002) terms a “doubling” echoing how Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 2013) describe becoming as “always double” (Massumi, 2002 p. 13; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2013, p. 355). Ingold (2013) explains this doubling and its dynamics with an example of a human-kite assemblage. In this assemblage, the kite and human intra-act (are entangled or co-respond) in ways that create a “dance of animacy.” Each affects the other dynamically and cannot exist separately from each other while in flight. The ability to affect and be affected through correspondence is not only mutually affirming and defining, we feel it also plays a significant role in research that is not always accounted for in the findings. Our research vignettes acknowledge these affective, animated, and embodied correspondence.

**Moving in the Classroom: Places and Spaces**

Classrooms are beguiling places to observe. They have unique rhythms. Each setting is distinctive. As researchers, we have seen and felt the rhythm and atmosphere of place and space in various classrooms. It is hard to define, but it is real, and it is felt. It is affective and non-representational. It simply is the space, full of dynamism, vitality and cacophony of sensory affects, atmospheric, and kinaesthetic (Griffenero, 2010). The mere bodily presence of an object or subject in these spaces changes and alters it. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that rhythm and learning practices are in themselves productions of space. Deleuze and Guattari (1987/2013) might figure such spaces as bodies-without-organs that can be affected by differing degrees of
movement and flow.\footnote{The varying flows produce either “smooth” spaces (liberated/deterritorialised) or “striated” spaces (controlled/territorialised).} However it is defined, we have observed students being transformed and enhanced by opportunities to move, touch, and connect with one another through the affordances the classroom environment offers (Gibson, 1979).

As Hargreaves (2017) points out, if children and young people are to progress and thrive in specific settings, educators need to understand how they experience the classroom or meeting place. For educators and researchers, this means acknowledging the classroom as a place where all are “…pulled and pushed … [in] a world that is forever escaping, and yet seductively demanding, our comprehension” (Vannini, 2015, p. 320). Thus, we are not only part of the environment we are the environment, entangled and intertwined with it (Manning 2007).

**Re-Claiming Touch and Correspondence**

Linking environment and space with touch, Manning (2007) says that “the body is a space and touch is its articulation” (pp. 58-59). Even so, simple human touch in classrooms between students or between teachers and students is discouraged (Johnson, 2000). Owen and Gillentine (2011) have suggested that teachers consider restoring the nurturing practice of touch to the classroom by adopting a perspective that reduces fear of touch and sees it more as value added. Teacher practitioners may have a fear of touch due to “no touch” safeguarding policies, however, touch and bodies cannot be ignored in classrooms. Touch is a basic need, and it has been removed from classrooms and continues to be absent in many ways despite the introduction of many beneficial projects aimed to redress it. One such project was the “Massage in Schools Programme” (MISP) introduced by Hetu and Elmsater (2010) in Canada which sought to reconstitute the missing discourse of bodies at school. Another way touch has been returned, almost universally, to the classroom is through the use of digital media that demands haptic engagement through scrolling, swiping, flicking, and clicking. While this touch is not between humans, it still animates classrooms (Ingold, 2020).

**Dangers and Privations of COVID-19**

The global pandemic and coronavirus re-shaped the ways in which we all interacted, changing not only the social landscape but also the classroom “sensory-scape” (Manning, 2007). Re-claiming human touch in the aftermath of COVID-19 has been challenging but perhaps more crucial than ever. The impact of losing touch in social interactions because of COVID-19 could be greater on children than anticipated, especially when coupled with “hands off” pedagogy and policies. To address this concern, some schools have proactively introduced animals to the classroom. Our first vignette features one such classroom where the classroom dog and art materials increase instances of touch and create an atmosphere of learning.
Vignette 1: Enlivened Narratives Through Making and Creating a Comic Book Story

In Vignette 1, we share a story involving primary school children aged 10 and 11. The images show how bodies and stories come alive through child-dog encounters and the making of a comic book. The comic book was the medium chosen by the children to tell their story about having a classroom dog, named “Ted”. Through a series of classroom-based workshops the children and Ted co-respond with craft and art materials. It is a mixing of the senses (synaesthesia) as they interact and take part in a shared endeavour together. Synaesthesia is distinguishable from mere visual and auditory functions; it is one that involves kinaesthetic activation through stroking, touching, and movement. In the context of animal companions, Haraway (2016) calls these enactments and connections “multispecies muddles” (p. 31).

When the children and Ted are together, making and co-responding, they create what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) understand as a de-territorialized space. This space is not static. It is always becoming in what Ingold (2013) calls the “dance of animacy” (pp. 100-101). It is a creative space for knowing through, in, and of the body.

Figure 1

Enactment 1: Blank slates we are not. Comic pixilating, dot, dot, dot. Cutting-apart-back together. Illuminating is our endeavour.

Multi-media and visual devices enlivened this comic book-making activity by animating material-discursive practices through the body. This animation and its intra-action is suggestive of Barad’s (2007) onto-epistemology. The correspondence between children, book-making, classroom, and dog enabled all involved to have a “fleshy” embodied learning experience in the classroom (Page & Sidebottom, 2022). As Vannini (2015) reminds us, because correspondence is non-representational, it can unfold in varied modalities, such as, photography, drawing, dance, poetry, video, art, and sound installations. As this vignette unfolded, varied image-based mediums attuned participants’ sensibilities and our sensibilities to the world.

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The production and creation of a comic story was animated and enacted by the children, alongside their classroom dog. Consistent with Priego’s (2010) materiality framework, we found that the children here clearly co-responded with the physical and material aspects of the comic-making process as a combination of tactile, cultural (intertextuality), and sensory experiences. Their use of speech bubbles indicated how they initially processed text and words and articulated the use of colour and image.

As the children demonstrated with their use of photographs and speech bubbles, they connected in a tactile and an emotionally embodied way with their story, using the images as a storyboard. As their story developed, they added more layers of colour and text, building up their own storying prowess in a way which connected them to the material entanglements in which the narratives took place (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). When the children’s tacit knowledge was given a vehicle for expression, we were reminded of the emotional potency of materials and non-human objects, including Ted, in facilitating thinking (Turkle, 2007).

Figure 2

*Enactment 2: Cutting, pasting, animating. Sequential narratives we are making.*
Figure 3

All in a huddle and “multi-species” muddle.

Vignette 2: Dice Game

In Vignette 2, we present an expression of material knowing by educators and child welfare practitioners. Like the moments with the children and a dog, the expressions in this vignette were a set of re-animated events. We push these moments into action again, like kinetic sculptures, so that we might look once more at explosive moments of material knowing in-between people and things.

In this vignette, we identify four such moments that we call agentic cuts (Barad, 2007). Each cut is an observation of a movement or an enactment in time. As the researchers and observers of these cuts, we acknowledge that we were also entangled and implicated in them too. Further, we note that the four cuts were impossible to completely disconnect from the flow of the event, a review and planning workshop for educators and child welfare practitioners. During this workshop, a diverse group of participants were asked to create statements about their collective work with infants in a northern England city, aged from birth to two-years old. They were then asked to roll one of several themed dice, each with six questions written on them; one question was written on each face. The question that landed face up on the die was the question that would direct the inquiry about the specific statement.

As we enter at the corner of this large room, our eyes were drawn to a table some distance away. On the table was a stack of large painted dice. Each die was themed, for example, one die was “inclusion”, another “power”, and there were others including one for “gender”. The face of each themed die contained a question relevant to the theme. The dice were created by Ian, so it was Ian who described to the group how the dice would work as part of the co-created inquiry they were about to engage in.

The workshop event was held in a large civic space. The room contained familiar artifacts of formal learning and public administration. Picture a large room with purple carpet,
wooden panelled walls, windows overlooking part of the civic building and city centre. Imagine tables and screens scattered across the room, each with objects and artwork.

The four cuts (observational events) that were significant to us as researchers were as follows: **Cut 1:** Entering the space, **Cut 2:** Touching the dice, **Cut 3:** Throwing the die, and **Cut 4:** Landing. The first of our four cuts, described below, was concerned with entering the event/space (Barad, 2007).

**Cut 1: Entering the Room**

We enter a room set up for some activity with objects. The threshold of the door allowed bodies to fan into the room and pool in various locations. We sensed uncertain anticipation. The space was without formal seating or the familiar objects of a meeting. Bodies moved and circulated but they appeared uncertain of what was expected of them. As the researchers in the room, we observed and listened. We noted hesitancy, curiosity, and changes in movements and stances of bodies. We drew on our notes to notice the range of responses. We re-present the participants’ responses in square brackets below.

[Where do you put your hands? How loud can I be? Do I hold a notepad? How do I stand, and with whom?]

Participants begin to spread out in the space, like ink drops on water, as they are drawn to objects of interest.

[Moving—bags-arms-fingers-voices]

Bodies and matter find new configurations in the room, particularly in the space between the door and dice table.

[How do we do this? How do I move? Should I put down my bag?]

Hands traced the edges of interesting objects and surfaces, bags were placed at the edge of the room, participants seemed to become more comfortable and moved in the space in new ways that were less formal, but with curious purpose. Eyes seemed to connect with the dice table first, but feet were already moving bodies towards it. As researchers, we no longer saw participants and dice as subjects-objects. They were entangling in a people-dice assemblage.
In this first cut, bodies started freeing up and forming new material assemblages when compared with the disconnected bodies they entered the room with. Analyzing this cut, we suggest that the room, changed for participants from a “space for expression” to an expressive-space where things started working together: bodies, objects, spaces, atmospheres, etc. Braidotti (2019) might characterize this transformation as “alternative modes of becoming subjects” that also allowed “different ways of knowing” (p. 124). Said differently, participant’s bodies were in a process of becoming with other things, as they connected with them and formed new body-thing machines. As Manning (2012) suggests, these machines were not waiting to act, they were alive with “potential movement” and were already acting.

Cut 2: Touching the Dice

Body groups of one, twos, or threes pushed up against the edge of the dice table. The surface tension that drew them across the room to the table now forms between their hands and the dice.

[Where to look first? Can I touch? Are these painted?]

There is a change of scale, and hands that were uneasy at the threshold of the big room, are fitted for these dice.

[Reach, careful fingertips]

Participant bodies arrived at the table with their statements related to infant learning and social welfare in mind. One statement was, “We will support teachers to become attachment-aware in their practice.” How the participants will later engage with their statements will be determined by the question that comes up when they roll the question-die.

As bodies arrived at the dice table, one could feel the energetic potential of the statement each body carried with it. That energy changed when they connected with the dice and read the questions. Reading the dice meant physically turning the dice to each of its six faces where the questions are written on the painted surfaces. Turning the dice with their hands initiated a mental
process of turning the questions over in their minds—a process of considering and comparing and wondering if the questions they read could lead to a meaningful engagement with the statement.

In this cut, participants examined the questions on the dice for their potential to investigate a specific statement. One might figure their examination of the dice questions as a way of rehearsing the potential each question had to “test” their statement. Grasping the die was a decision to engage with and rehearse one or more questions on the die.

[Ha ha!…Have you seen this one?]

The questions become formed only when the weight of the die presses into the palm and stretches the fingers.

[What am I holding this for?]

Body-dice machines are turned by a multiplicity of potentials. In the moment of grasping, they are all there as potential in the turning hand-dice.

As we cut into this moment, the machinic articulation of bodies and materials, we see an “expression-with”. Erin Manning (2012) might call it a “foldings-into” (p. 78). Foldings, like our expressions-with-dice, are less about what something means than what it can do. For us, a key question was: what does the machinic couplings of bodies and dice produce? Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), we suggest that dice-bodies produced rhizomatic knowledge that allowed connections between “different milieus and registers, between areas that are usually thought of as distinct and discreet” (O’Sullivan 2006, p. 17). Dice-bodies were moving-connecting assemblages of affective expression and knowledge production in terms of potential rehearsal.
Cut 3: Throwing the Die

Preparing the throw was a performative act. Bodies took on new stances, as if anticipating the result, a sort of page turning, the dice-carpet-question would bring. As they were about to throw the dice, there seemed to be a tension between the statements the participants held and the question that would test, poke, and prod it. At the moment of throwing, the physical die was a set of questions whose agency was determined by the strength of the throw, the carpeted floor, and the surrounding obstacles that influence its trajectory. Left to themselves, participants hovered and floated with arms dangling. With each throw there was movement and a gathering momentum towards a resolution—which question will be decided.

In this cut, the virtual/potential unfolds: a statement bounces across, near, other bodies. Bodies turn, eyes look.

[What’s their statement? Let’s see what happens.]

There are multiple throws. Each time the statement is reanimated.

Figure 6

Unfolding the body-dice.

Throwing extends the productive activity of the body-dice machine. The body-dice machine bounces across the carpet as it throws and is thrown. It works with the carpet, the space, and the furniture it hits to produce its bouncing. Manning (2012) might say that the bouncing is significant because it is unpredictable, and it is this unpredictability that carries productive possibilities. By way of contrast, and alluding to Deleuze and Guatarri’s (1987) smooth and striated surfaces, she states “smoothness does not carry within itself the possibility for change” (Manning, 2012, p. 57). The body-dice machines here would be considered striated because they produced new things, as it “agitate[d] inventively in an open field” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 93).
Cut 4: Landing

The die lands. It is heavy. It carries the weight of several pairs of eyes, for a start. Quickly, the multiple/potentials that traverse the air are actualized into one upward facing side of a die. It produces and resolves to a single question. It is impossible not to rush to look. The statement is chasing the question that has bounced away. Throwing has added to the statement and it is now in a different place. Until the participant reaches it and despite having already landed, the die continues to unfold for the body-dice machine. Only when the body sees the question presented is the body-dice machine, actualized.

![Image of a die with text]

Figure 7
Actualised statements produced as dice land.

**Statement:** [We will support teachers to become attachment-aware in their practice.]

**Question:** [What are the practical implications of this?]

The body-dice assemblage produced and encountered a state change, but not only because of the question. The question, written on the side of a dice and thrown by a body was just another fold in the productive process. This kind of knowing was not especially concerned with “the answer”, in this care the question, or with “how the initial conditions for unfolding [were] set” which in this case was the statement (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 89). No matter how many times the body-dice machine threw and was thrown, it makes new over and over again. The body-dice machine ensures that the “event’s relational force cannot be reproduced. It remains, always, a singular movement” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 115).

**The Act and Performance of Knowing:**
**Material Encounters and Embodied Knowledge**

The material dimensions of teaching, as it relates to this work, are significant for us as educators and educational researchers. Like de Freitas (2015), we see the potential for including the body and sensation in teaching. Like de Freitas and Sinclair (2014) we also see the need to “rescue the body, so to speak, from a theory of discourse that denies its materiality in order to grant the body some measure of agency and power in the making of subjectivity” (p. 40).
Thus, the question, “what can a body do?” is a pressing one for us. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the body is always in a process of becoming, therefore, the future of a body is unscripted, and its senses always open to reconfiguration and dispersal. With this in mind, we take up de Freitas’s (2015) calls for us to re-think “micro-sensory practices” such as, whiteboards, projectors, iPads, etc., in our teaching to open new directions in education (p. 201). Such insights suggest that the very process and act of learning might be understood through a vitalist/materialist ontology or as a vital force of kinaesthetic experience that includes all the senses. For example, the act of reading is not just performed through sight (seeing words on a page/die) but also by touching the page or book, by its smell, its texture, its power to stimulate emotion or embodied memories (Gibson, 2015). Learning is not an isolated process. The place and space where we learn also influences our learning experiences. Our vignettes demonstrate that being attuned to where the learning takes place creates intimate co-respondences that are worthy of notice.

As both Manning (2007) and Lefebvre (2004) suggest, the body not only moves in space, but its movement produces space. For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), movement is an essential element. In our view, Ingold’s (2016) concept of co-respondence has great potential in helping students attune to the biosocial, in posthumanist and new materialist ways, as does Fairchild et al.’s (2022) view of knowledge production in material spaces.

**Discussion: Becoming-Messy Researchers**

Becoming-messy in social science research means, for us, being open to the experiences of senses and being vitally attuned to the affects in and of the body. It also means, for us, an emphasis on researcher uncertainty, fragility, and playfulness is what Law (2004) suggests makes researchers better equipped through “unknowing” (p. 2). Like Ellison and Sotirin (2020), our “messy assemblage[s]” described in the two vignettes, were generative and heterogenetic, where we brought together different, multiple parts to see what they produced.

We take encouragement from other scholars who have employed a sense of “messiness”, such as, Mcphie (2014). Becoming-messy researchers afforded us visual-material methods of knowledge production. They were pre-linguistic and manifested in a “visual vocabulary” as shown by the children and their classroom dog, Ted (Vignette 1) and practitioners in health and social care intra-acting with dice (Vignette 2). We found that being messy facilitated creative possibilities for new forms of learning. Further, we found that through a generative researcher process of “messiness” we were able to document lived experience without, as Back (2007) put it, “assassinating it” (p. 164). We have shown how “doing data” can bring vibrant possibilities for data joy in posthuman times.
References


