Learning, Culture and Social Interaction 45 (2024) 100808

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Learning, Culture and Social Interaction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lcsi

Full length article

The many forms and functions of touch in educational settings: Shared attention and appropriate engagement

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Although the significance of multimodal resources for the organization of human interaction is widely acknowledged, it is only more recently that touch practices have received systematic attention, by developing an interactional approach to touch as experienced in a distributed collective way (e.g., Cekaite & Mondada, 2021). The special issue represents a welcome contribution to this line of research by bringing together a selection of papers focusing on a variety of touch practices with the shared circumstance that they occur in educational contexts, in and out of classrooms. In the introduction to one of the articles, Burdelski sets what could as well be the agenda of the whole special issue in a telling way, stating that "[interpersonal touch] is central to processes of socialization, including the acquisition of language, knowledge, and skills, and the development of emotion, identity, and morality" (p. 1). In the following, I will discuss two themes that emerge from the collected papers that I find particularly relevant to the understanding of socialization and learning through interaction. First, the interactional work accomplished by touch practices for attention management, in light of the fundamental role of shared attention for teaching and learning. Second, some of the moral dimensions of touch within the social relations that are characteristic of educational settings.

1. Shared attention as ground for human communication and learning

Several articles of the special issue operate against the backdrop of Goffman's (1957, 1963, 1967) work on the relevance of joint attention for shared engagement in activities. A recent chapter by Bergmann and Peräkylä (2023), notes that the topic of attention, "its selectivity, its granting, its withdrawal, its avoidance, its distribution", in fact runs through Goffman's entire work (p. 299). The primordiality of shared attention to the organization of human language and intersubjectivity has also been demonstrated by among others Tomasello (1999), who argues that "the simple act of pointing to an object for someone else for the sole purpose of sharing attention to it is a uniquely human communicative behavior" (p. 63). The triadic framework of joint attention in which multiple actors attend to the same event or object in the environment is moreover central to processes of learning and teaching. As a case in point, Goodwin (1994, 2007) has demonstrated, in a long line of work that has inspired many others, that arrangements for joint attention are especially important for processes of apprenticeship and education. However, interaction analyses have so far mainly focused on the role of visual displays of attentiveness in and for social interaction. As stated by Bergmann and Peräkylä (2023), attention is however also communicated through touch, body activities and gestures – it is "deeply interwoven with all our senses and actions" (p. 319) – something that has not been explored to the same extent. As such, the studies of the special issue constitute an important contribution as they illustrate how teachers use touch to accomplish triadic frameworks of attention in a variety of ways, in interactions between teachers and individual children as well as with groups of children. The identified touch practices are multidimensional and multilayered, and cover a variety of touch formats involving more or less of the body: from taps, strokes and manipulations of hands and bodies, to leanings, embraces and shielding using the whole body.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2024.100808
Received 22 December 2023; Accepted 9 February 2024
Available online 11 March 2024
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Tyagunova and Breidenstein's study of teaching activities in German open classrooms, shows how the teachers use touch to organize the children's bodies and objects such as text books, in order to create separate and bodily framed interaction spaces for instructional activities, in the midst of a classroom where the children work on their individual tasks with no collective focus of attention. The teacher organizes this space by touching a child's wrist and arranging the material environment in ways that facilitate a shared focus of attention to a task in a workbook. This space within a larger space is treated as exclusive, as shown by how the teacher protects it from another child's introduction of his text book into the participants' shared visual field. In contrast, Burdelski explores education "in the wild" as groups of preschool children in Japan move through urban environments together with their teachers. In this context, the preschool teachers use touch to, on the one hand, direct the children's attention to traffic and on the other, protect them from dangers by shielding them with their bodies or hurrying them along. The touch practices contribute to shaping the children's bodies into one as they move through the busy landscape, tuning them to a continuously shifting environment.

Classrooms constitute complex environments for mutual and joint attention, as they characteristically are built in and through multiparty participation frameworks. Even when establishing an interaction space including two people, this space is created the way it is *because* it occurs in the midst of a larger participation framework (Tyagunova & Breidenstein). The touch practices thus often become part of the management of layers of participation frameworks and mutual or shared attention. As the teachers in a Swedish preschool in Cekaite and Bergnehr's study use touch to mitigate the imposition of disciplining actions, they simultaneously orient to certain activities as relevant for the children's attention, such as for example listening to a book together with the other children rather than playing with a car. Touch not accompanied by talk is used to reincorporate a child into a collective activity and constitutes a way of managing the multiparty participation framework without interrupting the progressivity of the main course of action carried out through talk. The touch practices hence become powerful parts of attention management as they can be used to manage layers of activities in ways that minimally disturb the main activity. Heller points out that students' bodily alignment and observable displays of engagement are treated as important aspects of appropriate and mutual attention in learning activities. The student, in her study of a German classroom, that withdraws from the embodied participation framework is hence directed, through taps and strokes, to reengage in the instructional activities by repositioning his body. A 'haptic link' is established between the disengaged student and the institutional agent (the assistant) where the assistant's embodied actions work to remind the student of relevant actions and appropriate engagement in the instructional activities. The studies thus vividly illustrate that and how a choice of main focus of attention in learning activities is also a moral question, or in Goffman's (1967) words, that "the choice of side-involvements and of intensity of involvement, become hedged with social constraints, so that some allocations of attention become socially proper and other allocations improper" (p. 115).

2. Moral dimensions of touch in educational settings

The act of touch presupposes particular intercorporeal configurations with bodies in proximity to each other. Tyagunova and Breidenstein remark that the touching and very small distance between the teachers' and students' bodies in the open classrooms that they have studied, may constitute an intrusion into a student's personal space but that this intrusion is made possible and legitimized by its institutional framing. Similarly, the preschool teachers in Cekaite and Bergnehr's examples, who discipline the children while embracing them and showing affection in ways that work to mitigate the valence of the imposition, rely on teachers' institutional rights and responsibilities to foster appropriate conduct. In the triadic framework in Heller's study, encompassing an autistic boy, his assistant and a teacher, it is most probably not a coincidence that it is the assistant who touches the student whereas the teacher does not. The assistant comes to function as a mediator between teacher and student, where the assistant and student in some ways become one within the larger ecology of the classroom.

Emphasizing that touch differs from other multimodal resources such as talk, gesture, facial expressions, etc., Meyer and Streeck (2021) remark that touching activities are characterized by an essential reciprocity and inherent privacy that is not available for visual observation. They state that touch involves a "whole lot of ever-changing reciprocities, mutualities, and co-experiences that are sensed by those who co-participate in the situation, while they often remain invisible from the outside" (Meyer & Streeck, 2021, p. 313), or in simpler terms, that touch is designed to be felt and not primarily seen. However, two of the studies show how a moral order of touch concerning who can touch who, how and when is made relevant by participants in interaction, thus revealing something about the reciprocity and experience of touch. In both cases, this pertains to unwelcome or unwanted touch between peers. The students in Karvonen, Routarinne and Tainio's study set in Finland, who object to a fellow students' touch draw upon a general moral order of integrity and the right to decide over one's body, but also make relevant classroom-specific moral orders of not disturbing another's engagement in learning activities. In the classroom context these norms are treated as legitimate to stop unwanted touch without further explanations. Moreover, it is the person who is touched that is treated as entitled to describe the touch and to decide whether it is appropriate or not. The authors note that sometimes the linguistic formulation of the touch does not necessarily correspond to what could be seen, but that the participants treated the verbal description as legitimate and sufficient to stop the touching. In a slightly different vein, the children in Japanese preschools studied by Burdelski, orient to an institutional norm of holding hands while walking outdoors. However, within this overall norm, the children negotiate the way in which hands are held and express their personal opinions and preferences on the matter. When a child does not like the way in which a peer holds her hand and complains to the preschool teacher, the teacher thus makes relevant that the complaint should be attended to by the other child, although within the limits of an institutional description of how to appropriately hold hands. The children thus align with a group norm that hand holding is necessary when walking outdoors, but also as an individual preference that can be contested and negotiated.

3. In conclusion

Touch is a fundamental dimension of the way we interact with other humans as well as the material environment. The papers of the special issue show how touch practices are highly sensitive to the local and social context, and to the goals and aims of the various activities in which the participants engage. Touch is used to show affection, to instruct and to control. It is used to encourage certain kinds of participation in learning activities that display engagement and attention to particular objects or events, while condemning others. Touch is used to manage layers of activities. Participants draw on different norms creatively and flexibly to accomplish their goals and institutional norms of touch concern not only appropriate engagements or conduct, but are deeply embedded in the social and embodied relations between categories of participants that populate educational settings.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Helen Melander Bowden: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

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