

The Touch of the Present: Educational Encounters and Processes of Becoming

Sharon Todd

Maynooth University, Ireland

I am not already here

Before experience as such:

Seeing reveals just the seer,

Tasting just the taster,

Feeling just the feeler.

Nagarjuna, “Already”¹

We are all familiar with the momentary nature of sensual contact: a touch on the shoulder; a kiss on the lips; a whisper in the ear; a cool breeze on the cheek; the scent of a lily. Whilst these sensations connect to past associations and memories and whilst they might trigger longing or a desire for continuation into the future, the event of contact resides in the present. This is also the time, as Jan Masschelein claims, of education; a time where students can experience the world in the gap between past and future.² Education, on this view, is not merely about preparing students for an already imagined future, or about enculturating them into structures of the past (although this happens as well); instead, it is to offer the space and time for inquiry and experiment into the here and now that enables what Gert Biesta refers to as subjectification: the ability of the subject to come into presence and “to exist as a subject of initiative and responsibility.”³ Following Masschelein’s definition, this paper understands education as deriving from the latin *e-ducere*, signalling a “leading out” or “reaching out.”⁴ This reaching out implies a movement toward an encounter with something or someone in the world – an encounter that I am calling here the touch of the present. This paper explores how this time of the present is the time of subjectification

and how our embodied encounters with the world, as a ‘touching and being touched’ offer new modes of being in the world with others, new forms of subjectification. Specifically, I examine how our sensory experiences in those encounters play a part in these formations of becoming. To do this, I make a distinction between coming into the world as a process of enculturation and becoming through encounter as a process of subjectification.

Taking my cue from Isabelle Stengers’s work, my approach here is one of viewing education through an ecology of practices. For Stengers, an ecology of practices is a tool for thinking which “aims at the construction of new ‘practical identities’ for practices, that is, new possibilities for them to be present, or in other words to connect.”⁵ It enables us not simply to “critique” existing practices but also to see how they interrelate to create something new. Thus my own focus here on examining educational encounters as connected to sensory experiences challenges our conventional understandings of what encounters *do*. This gives rise to the potentiality of conceptualising education beyond any easy instrumentalism. It allows us to see how education, through its encounters, might take form differently, “fostering its own force, [and] make present what causes practitioners to think and feel and act.”⁶ Thus for Stengers, an ecology of practices is not simply a matter of describing practices “as they are,” but “practices as they may become.”⁷ In this, an ecology of practices as an approach to thinking education as a *network of practices* also echoes how I am understanding encounter itself here: encounters transpire in the complex time of the present⁸ – a time, as we shall see, involving gestures toward an unknowable future that one can neither fully pre-define nor be certain of.

TROUBLING ENCOUNTERS

Encounters are evident everywhere in education, if little discussed in detail. Educational discourse is rife with appeals to creating encounters: with nature; with art; with language and poetry; with digital and screen technologies; as well as with people across cultures and faiths. Etymologically, the word encounter refers to the meeting of adversaries; however, usage has become both more anodyne in terms denoting a ‘meeting’ or ‘contact’ (where

the adversarial aspects *seem* to have all but disappeared) and more malignant in terms of reference to colonial contact as well as to encountering acts of racism, homophobia and sexism. As geographer Helen Wilson has noted, encounter carries with it these historical codes, and the spatial concepts that are used when speaking of cultural encounters – such as ‘border,’ ‘boundary,’ and ‘margin’ – all derive from particular geographies of colonialism.⁹

What I seek to do here is to trouble this colonial usage, without falling into the trap of ‘neutralising’ encounter, as though face-to-face or other forms of encounter do not pose their own strangeness or challenges to one’s experience. Indeed, I move away from a notion of encounter that implies some innocuous meeting of two already existing subjects/bodies, and toward one that troubles these presumed borders and separations. I explore educational encounters, in the plural, as processes involving mutually changing contours of subjects/bodies when they come into contact with each other as well as with other elements in the world.

But how these encounters shape a subject’s becoming can be rendered in two ways. The first concerns the ways in which the subject is given ‘form’ through the senses into the social orders in which we find ourselves. This is not so much about subjectification as it is about enculturation.¹⁰ The second concerns the generative, constitutive function of touch, and the senses more generally, in the becoming of a subject, inviting another notion of temporality and possibility. This is directly connected to subjectification and as such opens up another way of understanding educational encounters in terms of what they “might become,” as Stengers suggests. Through this, my aim is to discuss a different kind of space and time of educational encounters, based on viewing our practices as networks of co-emergence or co-becoming.

SENSES OF/AND THE SUBJECT

It might seem obvious to claim that we become human through our senses, as well as language; infants explore their world primarily through touch, smell, taste, and movement in general (as Sheets-Johnstone has dis-

cussed so well),¹¹ as well as more dominant modes of vision and hearing. As sensible creatures we come to form impressions, make relationships between and to things; we become oriented to the world in particular ways, forming feelings and affects through encounters in and with our environment.

Such an understanding of the centrality of the sensuous body to the constitution of subjectivity goes against the grain of much traditional philosophy. As Judith Butler remarks:

Just as philosophy founders time and again on the question of the body, it tends to separate what is called thinking from what is called sensing, from desire, passion, sexuality, and relations of dependency.¹²

Instead, Butler suggests that subjectivity is both passive and active; constituted and agential; sentient and thoughtful. Disrupting the dichotomous characterization of these qualities means having to investigate the ways in which bodily sensation is at once a reaching out and a receiving of the world. In this way sensory encounters with the world are sites both of impression and expression: one is not simply 'produced' through discourse, as if one 'produces' a thing or object; one also 'experiences' norms and discursive arrangements as felt sensations (enculturation), and one also experiences sensations that exist beyond these norms (subjectification).

COMING INTO THE WORLD: SENSES OF THE ENCULTURATED SUBJECT

From an anthropological perspective, Howes and Classen have argued that "[w]hat makes sensations so forceful is that they are lived experiences, not intellectual abstractions."¹³ For them, such sensations are central to understanding how social orders are lived through the body. It is through our senses that we come to inhabit certain ways of being; we viscerally experience social categories of inclusion and exclusion, for example.

Beginning with the hierarchy of vision and hearing, western societies are particularly adept at categorising certain groups as less visible or indeed invisible; they can silence and mute certain populations. On one level senso-

ry images constitute the discursive field through which such differentiation takes place. Howes and Classen write:

The use of sensory symbols to characterize groups perceived as potentially threatening to the social order is widespread. The first part of the process involves rendering a social group 'invisible' by keeping it sequestered, by restricting its opportunities, by limiting its representation and by simply ignoring its presence. The 'absent' group is then represented by simple and potent symbols: the beautiful but corrupt seductress; the coarse, malodorous worker, the greasy, slippery foreigner; and so on.¹⁴

However, more importantly, sensory images are not only discursively used to ostracize and denigrate, but they work with and on bodies in ways that actually *become* lived experience. That is, it is not simply a matter of naming, as though this weren't bad enough, but it is a matter of *embodying* the sensations that accompany an encounter. From the point of view of the 'perceiver,' the worker actually does become smelly; the woman is an object to be touched; the immigrant is experienced as repugnant.

On this view, cultures and societies make use of different sensory codes as political instruments; what might be identified in one set of cultural practices as a pleasant or neutral smell can be in another an unpleasant odour. How different societies create 'outsiders' takes on specific content and is not necessarily generalizable. In this way, our sensations are not entirely 'natural' but are part of a complex network of social and communicative strategies that police the senses.

Encounters, if seen from this enculturation point of view, thus create conditions through which social hierarchies, political values, and processes of racialisation and sexualisation become lived experience. From a certain educational perspective, this gives us pause for thought, since we must recognize how enculturation operates in and through educational encounters; and we must acknowledge that even the most liberating of educational practices

can lead to forms of enculturation. That is, our classroom choreographies frequently invite certain modes of sensation, comportment and expression that can contribute to sustaining or establishing certain social arrangements: such as circular seating arrangements, tones of voice in posing questions, acts of listening, eye contact and bodily proximity.

However, as Butler suggested above, the senses, like the subject, are never entirely co-opted by the social. They are not only ‘determined’ by discourse but are also capable of ‘acting’ upon it. Indeed, a number of philosophers such as Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Brian Massumi and Erin Manning confound the passive/active depiction, seeing the radical potential of sensation as a process that both can challenge the social order and through which the becoming of the subject emerges.¹⁵ While I will not be going into the specifically political dimensions of the senses in this paper, it is important for my purposes here to note that we *can experience* something beyond what is given symbolically: something that resists dominant sensory codes, that resists what Davide Panagia has called “regimes of sensation.”¹⁶

In this there is something educational about our sensations insofar as they can constitute new formations of subjectification that rub against the grain of the scripts we are given; such formations can, I want to suggest, harbour possibilities for generating sensations through which one can transform those norms – and indeed ourselves in the process. Not by defining some *future image* of society that then becomes the basis upon which we design our current educational practices but by attending to the very possibilities of becoming *in and through our present encounters*.

BECOMING THROUGH ENCOUNTERS: TIMES OF UNFOLDING

I begin this section by returning to the idea of “reaching out” raised in the introduction. Reaching out not only captures the idea of education, in the sense that education is a gesture of extending toward new experiences of the world, but also captures the dynamic interplay of touching and being touched that is inherent to all sensory encounters. As the architect Juhani Pal-

lasmaa in his book the *Eyes of the Skin*, observes, skin is not only responsible for the sense of ‘touch’ but as that which is connected to all the senses: “The senses are specialisations of skin tissue...” The eye, ear, nose and tongue are made up of cutaneous matter. Thus “our contact with the world takes place at the boundary line of the self through specialised parts of our enveloping membrane.”¹⁷ As membrane, the skin is ambiguous in character: it is, one might say, a porous limit or limitless threshold. As such, our sensory experiences of the world are all variations of ‘touch’ and ‘feeling.’

For Erin Manning, touch reverberates with a relationality that is both porous and liminal. She writes, “I reach out to touch you in order to invent a relation that will, in turn, invent me. To touch is to engage in the potential of an individuation. Individuation is understood... as the capacity to become *beyond* identity.”¹⁸ There is thus a state of anticipation without predictability engendered in touch and in the very movement of ‘reaching out’ to touch. Encounters of touch are those within which bodies both relate and individuate; they are encounters both of togetherness and singularity. I do not ‘feel’ the same thing as you do in an encounter; each is a one-of-a-kind event. Yet, I can only feel because of you. As Manning writes, “When I touch you, what I cannot know is what *infra*(sensual)language our reciprocal touch will create. Nor can I predict how my touching you will provide spaced times and timed spaces.”¹⁹ In this, encounters create the time and spaces of our educational practices and not the other way around. How we relate to each other creates unforetold potentialities of (mutual) becoming. Subjectification on this view is very much about an embodied becoming that is never achievable as a solo project but is only possible through a network of relations of reciprocal touchings.

Reaching out is thereby a quest, a foray, into uncharted territory, into processes of becoming that are not amenable to prior knowledge but constitute the very possibility of knowledge itself. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone understands how all animate beings create “nonlinguistic” understandings of their environment through their skin, membranes and coverings. Indeed, for Sheets-Johnstone, “surface sensitivity” is not “cutaneous stimulation,” but

is something much more vital. It is an “animate sensitivity, a sensitivity that by turns may express itself in curiosity, explorations, recoilings, quiverings, affections, hastenings, hesitations, accelerations, avoidances, persistences, and much more. Surface sensitivities resonate dynamically precisely because they are alive with meaning.”²⁰ For Sheets-Johnstone, it is through our environments that meanings are generated as well as given. That is, as animate beings, we are not simply receivers of cultural imprint, or solely subject to impingement from our environment, but also create ourselves through our sensitivity to and with that environment. We *become*, in other words, through our attunement to our surroundings.

Manning takes this a step further to suggest that such generative capacity is not only about the surface of the body touching something in its environment but is explorative in its very reaching out. As she puts it, “[t]o touch is always to attempt to touch the incorporeality of a body, to touch what *is* not yet. I do not touch the you that I think you are, I reach toward the one you will become.”²¹ Thus following Deleuze here, Manning discusses this gesture of reaching out as occurring in the time of the future anterior (the ‘will have become’). This strange tense allows us to imagine the openness of the not-yet: there is always a gesture of movement to the touch and the relation it creates. However, it is also ‘conditional’ in the sense that the future anterior is constructed from a ‘will have + a past participle.’ ‘I will have become’ implies that something will be accomplished when a condition of passing time is met (e.g. I will have read this by the time you hear these words). And this, even though what I will become cannot be categorised, is not an identity. That is, becoming is a process that transpires over the time of the present, not an assumption of a pre-given identity. This temporal conditionality, it seems to me, is something to welcome from an educational point of view, since it enables us to think about the contextuality of our practices that inform our encounters in the present without assuming context ‘determines’ becoming; context instead is the practical environment out of which the possibility of becoming emerges.

For instance, think of an everyday gesture of a teacher touching

a student on the shoulder: signification is not guaranteed, neither is the alteration of how these two bodies will move or not together. The touch is a reaching out, but it is also received. It is encountered by both teacher and student differently as a sensation in the present, but its effects are not 'known' until the present of touch has become the past. It is not just that the present 'sets the condition for' or 'prepares for' or 'causes' becoming based on any value assigned to the touch (it was welcomed, repudiated, violent, soothing, etc. and *therefore* a certain becoming transpires) but its very momentariness (its instantiation, its presentness) allows something to transpire – allows something to occur (or nothing much to occur, as the case may be). That is, one does not decide prior to the touch on the shoulder happening that it is inappropriate or not; that can only come about when it has occurred (a point I return to below). It is a happening or event that is contained within the future anterior itself.

Thus the time of the present is not incidental to encounters of becoming (which are processes always open to the not-yet of the future). The present is not merely, as Arendt would say a 'gap between past and future' but is itself involved in a complex time of unfolding to what might come. This is a far cry from the recurrent logic of how education is often conceived, where an image of a certain future becomes its own past, its own justification, its own evaluative measure of the educational process. Instead, the momentariness of the present allows us to think about what we *do* in education: how we touch, feel, experience both *with others* and *singularly* at the same time.

In this sense, encounters are not 'borders' so much as they are unfoldings of becoming through sensations that are not always available to signification. Encounters are emergent events of subjectivity; touching and being touched are enactments of relation. This does not mean that there is no differentiation between me and you, but rather that processes of individuation are only possible through relation. The touch on the shoulder draws the teacher and student into a new relation that has never taken place before (even if it might feel similar to previous ones). Like the breath, each touch

is unique, each sensation it produces is a potentiality. Without going into the micro-phenomenological details of this, these singular sensations together create a relational matrix of emergence.

On this view, touch ‘creates time’ as relational unfolding. As a ‘reaching out’ it is a movement that cannot be fixed or intelligible within given systems of meaning, since it itself is the very movement of signification. Touch binds, separates and blurs, sometimes making establishing the borders of where my body ends and yours begins hard to distinguish, just as the borders between ‘my body’ and the ‘environment’ cannot always be easily fathomed. Does my body’s encounter with the air involve the air I breathe? The air I move through? The air I feel as cold or hot? The air that whispers in my ear?

But what are we to do with this way of thinking of encounters? And how does this lend itself to the educational purpose of subjectification? It is to these questions that I now turn by way of conclusion.

AWAKENING TO THE TOUCH OF THE PRESENT

Part of what the focus on encounters as a time of unfolding reveals is that there is no fixed and unitary ‘self,’ no determinant being, just “vectors of intensity that emerge through contact,” as Manning puts it.²² The epigraph to this paper is an extract from one of the poems penned by Nagarjuna, a second-century CE Buddhist monk and philosopher. He, too, along with Buddhist philosophy more generally, echoes this understanding of emergence and suggests that awakening to this time of present unfolding is actually to accept the transient nature of encounter and the ‘I’ that emerges within it. It is not that there isn’t something that ‘experiences,’ ‘senses,’ or ‘feels’ but that the ‘seer,’ ‘feeler,’ and ‘hearer’ only emerge in the encounter with its surroundings as it produces sight, touch, and hearing. In awakening, one becomes aware of one’s emergence and the changing “vectors of intensity” of our self in relationship. Thus awakening is here understood not as a matter of ‘bringing something to consciousness’ but as attending to something, both in the sense of drawing our attention to it and in the sense of tending to it with curiosity and affection. It is not about ‘enlightenment’

but about a ‘feeling awareness.’ Attending to the space and time of encounter alters not only our relationship to it, but also changes the very nature of the encounter itself. For education, places such as classrooms are composed of multiple spaced times and timed spaces, each contributing to a complex matrix of relationality and touch. The point is not for us, as teachers, to be able to attend to each and every one simultaneously (an impossibility, to be sure), but to create a holding environment for such encounters to manifest and to awaken to the potentiality they hold in the educational project of subjectification.

As we have seen, enculturation of the senses carries with it a mixed bag of both benign and malignant sensory experiences that align and are imbued with social and cultural meaning. For this reason, it is useful to think about the ways in which educational practices are formative in participating in systems of oppression while they also participate in creating more life enhancing experiences. However, in proposing a generative view encounter as unfolding I do not mean to suggest that all encounters always lead to what we might recognise as ‘socially desirable becomings.’ Relations of touch are never wholly innocent but circulate within networks of other relations: the teacher’s touch might circulate within a host of other gestures and histories of signification, including care and tenderness as well as violence and abuse. But what we cannot know beforehand is how *this* particular touch will initiate new possibilities; the point is that we need to evaluate, decide and judge processes of becoming based on the relationalities they afford and not because they fulfil (or not) a predefined image of what we think the future should or should not be, what we think a subject is or is not. There can be no guarantee about the potentiality of generating new subjects, new bodies, precisely because it is its potentiality which cannot be defined. Being awake to the possibilities this entails is not easy. Nonetheless it is precisely this radical uncontainability of touch that can re-frame, I think, *how* we attend to what we do in/as education.

- 1 Stephen Batchelor, *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000).
- 2 Jan Masschelein, "Philosophy of Education as an Exercise in Thought," *European Educational Research Journal* 10, no. 3 (2010): 356-366.
- 3 Gert Biesta, "What Is Education For? On Good Education, Teacher Judgement and Educational Professionalism," *European Journal of Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 77.
- 4 Jan Masschelein, "E-ducating the Gaze: The Idea of a Poor Pedagogy," *Ethics and Education* 5, no. 1 (2010): 43.
- 5 Isabelle Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2005): 186.
- 6 Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," 195.
- 7 Stengers, 186.
- 8 The present is thus not simply a time of an instant, but is itself complex or 'thick,' involving traces of the past and openings to the future. Due to the scope of this paper and its attention paid to touch, I have focused here on the inflections of the future. The past deserves a far more extensive treatment than space will allow here.
- 9 Helen F Wilson, "On Geography and Encounter: Bodies, Borders, and Difference," *Progress in Human Geography* 4, no. 4 (2017): 452.
- 10 By the term enculturation, I am referring here to both processes of socialization as well as those processes of "translation" through which a subject comes to inhabit specific cultural practices, values, and beliefs. The latter is a more active engagement than the former often implies. Although the two processes are distinct, for the purposes of this paper I am capturing them under the same umbrella. For a fruitful discussion on translation, see Lovisa Bergdahl and Elisabet Langmann, "Time for Values: Responding Educationally to the Call from the Past," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37 (2018): 367-82.
- 11 See Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2009).

- 12 Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 15.
- 13 David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 7.
- 14 Howes and Classen, *Ways of Sensing*, 7.
- 15 As Rancière has pointed out, political change happens through “a sensible or perceptual shock caused ... by that which resists signification.” *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 63.
- 16 Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 17 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin* (Oxford: Wiley, 2012), 12.
- 18 Erin Manning, *The Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xv.
- 19 Manning, *The Politics of Touch*, 57.
- 20 Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn*, 137.
- 21 Manning, *The Politics of Touch*, xix.
- 22 Manning, 136.

