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Thinking Learning Events
with the Immanence of Concepts

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2,585 words

> "[N]ew concepts must relate to our problems, to our history,
> and above all, to our becomings."
> –Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 27)

The motivation for this Commentary originated within the context of a panel that I co-organised with Dónal O'Donaghue and Brooke Hofsess for the annual meeting of the Art Education Research Institute hosted at Teachers College in September 2019. The panel was titled *Concepts for Art Education Futures*. In it, I sought to imagine art education as a practice that engaged concepts more open-endedly, as a way of slowing judgement, and widening the ways, we artist/teachers/researchers map possible relations between art, education and learning events.

In continuity with the panel's aims, the present commentary examines the notion that concepts are *becomings*. As the epigraph above by Deleuze and Guattari (1994) notes, thinking concepts as becomings involves immanent modes of thought, including the assumption that concepts are not fixed but proliferate historically in the ongoing worldly encounters that make up the texture of our lives. Using an example from my own research in the primary classroom, I argue that concepts as becomings make us attune and respond to the problematics shaping the teaching-learning events in which we are immersed as artists/teachers/researchers. In the concluding passages, I propose an ethics that cares for involuntary and unexpected aspects shaping learning events. These are aspects that precipitate uncertainty, messiness

and that can undo who we are as artist/teachers/researchers. Such an ethics of care relies on the ontological nature of art and the affirmation that in art there are multiple possible approaches, sensibilities and responses to a project or problem, and that we as art educators have an ethical responsibility to support such diversity (Atkinson, 2017). An ethics of care functions as an alternative to the current institutionalization and economization of education and its demands for curricula that pre-emptively establish how learning events come to matter. As Atkinson notes this generates "an inherent blindness of education to the untimeliness of events of learning as manifested in the different ways in which children and students learn" (p. 3). I propose that one possible way to resist such blindness is for art educators to open up the concepts guiding their practice to multiple and transformative encounters and to a heterogenesis of meaning.

Deleuzo-Guattarian Concepts

In the article "On the Nature of Concepts", Smith (2012) affirms that "concepts, from a Deleuzian perspective, have no *identity* but only a *becoming*" (p. 62). Smith continues describing how the Deleuzian concept of *intensity* holds different becomings through different books, and escapes having an identity within the context of one person's work. This notion of concept heterogenesis was not limited to Deleuze's own work. Deleuze (2006) noted that in *The Anti-Oedipus* he and Guattari had different understandings of what the concept of a *body without organs* meant. The becoming of this concept or its ways of existing in connection to other concepts and practices varies if one reads it in relation to Guattari's or Deleuze's trajectories. This is so, because Deleuze and Guattari did not conceive that their collaborative work together had to generate just one way of understanding. Instead,

they intently intentionally? generated conceptual proliferations, bifurcations and complications. In *Negotiations*, Deleuze (1995a) affirmed, “Félix Guattari and I, we are intercessors of one another” (p.125), which means that their relation was not about understanding each other but “producing creative interferences … requiring an openness to the other’s different understanding of a concept, and a subsequent development of understandings through a mutual undoing of each other’s initial understandings” (Bogue, 2007, p. 14). Thus, the Deleuzo-Guattarian proposition that concepts are becomings reveals that concepts function and expand in the context of their encounters with new objects, problems, practices, other concepts and conversations that seek to open up the concept to generative interferences or intercessions.

Another important aspect of Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts is that they are *creations*. Deleuze (1992) discussed concepts not as pertaining to something that already existed but to something that the concept created. He argued that the concept of the Baroque was one that was created, meaning that it could not exist without the material, expressive and affective components that made something Baroque. The concept grouped the components but without the components the concept could not exist. Additionally, Deleuze was especially interested when concepts expressed themselves as *singularities* rather than universals. He provided the example of the straight line being a universal because all straight lines look the same and suggested that in contrast the concept of the fold was a singularity, because every fold is different.

The notion that concepts are becomings carries consequences for how we pose questions connected to concepts. Deleuze (1995b) argued that there is a philosophical tradition stemming from Plato that has articulated the question of the

concepts as a '*What is…?'* However, Deleuze saw such a question as presupposing an essence or what he called a pre-philosophical *image of thought* that created dogmatism. In contraposition to this, Deleuze proposed *thought without an image*. Grosz (2008) notes that for Deleuze philosophical thought is always creative, it always addresses novel problems and processes. Thus, thought is neither the outcome of following a pre-decided plan, nor is it the result of an individual will, but it is instead provoked externally by certain unexpected encounters that pose new problematics and force us to think (Smith, 2012).

Conceptual Becomings in an Art Education Project

In this section, I try to bring the philosophy of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept to think with moments and data from a collaborative art project centred on practices of dwelling and sensing that I developed with a group of fifty 5th graders and the trees on their school block back in 2014. This group of children attended a bilingual primary school in a large city of the American Midwest. The project used art-based methods such as drawing, rubbing, printing, video-making and science-fiction writing and extended for the period of a school year.

In the first months of the project (September-November), the children and I spent time outside with the trees one morning per week. During this period, a small group of black children never came outside to work directly with the trees and chose to stay in the classroom. These children joined the project when we returned inside during the months when the cold was more intense (Mid November-April). Their contributions and artwork differed from the contributions of children in the class who had experienced the trees directly. Their methods of relating to the trees more than ethnographic were speculative, and included personal memories, fiction as well as

elements brought from other concurrent projects, such as reading young adult urban fantasy books assigned by the school librarian, or a science project led by one of their teachers involving research on a case of an endangered animal. Encountering the work created by the children who did not come outside affected me deeply, in the sense that it made me think without an image (Deleuze, 1995b). I struggled to see how this work connected to the leading concepts shaping the project. It involuntarily forced me to think the project's concepts more creatively and differentially in the sense proposed earlier through Deleuze.

Key concepts in the project included Ingold's (2000) concept of *dwelling,* which is the opposite of observation. Observation makes humans think of themselves as separated from place, whereas dwelling requires *embodied thinking* or thinking with the senses. Drawing from Pink's (2009) *Sensory Ethnography,* I was interested in how these ideas of thinking with the senses proposed a reconceptualization of media traditionally thought of as eminently visual (a print, a drawing, a rubbing, a video), and invited more multisensory modes resonant with the affective dimensions of being and moving amongst bodies, things, spaces. I was interested in promoting and exploring these multisensorial uses of media with the children and the trees and how they helped us to create a sense of place. Clearly, if I held to these concepts in an orthodox manner to guide my understanding of the work by the children who did not come outside, I would have concluded that these children did not engage with the project's concepts and processes.

However, as noted earlier, the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept invites us to think of concepts not only in terms of application but in terms of invention as an encounter with new problematics that emerge from practice. Conceptual application assumes that the world can only be interpreted based on what appears to be the knowledge that we

already have rather than what appears by itself beyond our capacity to know inflecting a difference in thought (St. Pierre, 2016). When joining the project inside, the aforementioned group of black children displayed poignant connections with the trees and the outside. This made me problematise my own images of thought about place and children and whether a sense of place is engendered only by experiences of being in the place. It was recommended to me that I read about ideas of place and space in black radical studies. I soon noticed that the literature problematized the binary outside-inside that was at the centre of my project, and that it worked with a more speculative and imaginative concept of the outside (Nxumalo & Ross, 2019). Black radical studies approaches the outside as something that is envisioned from the inside, from situations of enclosure (Hartman, 1997; Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 2016). Learning about this not only moved me away from images of thought that essentialized the relation of children with the outdoors (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017), it opened up the concept of dwelling, that was central to the project to a certain level of conceptual heterogenesis and proliferation. I began to think that dwelling, in the context of this project, was not only connected to the experiences of being placed outside, but that the outside was a place that could be sensed/thought/encountered from the inside.

Toward the end of the project (May-June), I spent several hours per week co-editing short video-essays of the trees with groups of three to five children. These brought other striking encounters. Some of the children, who did not come outside and did not generate any video-footage of trees, utilized sound filters, voice and free sound libraries to edit sound over the images, re-appropriating and re-materializing the existing footage. Again, while I thought this was a very salient gesture, I did not know how to think with it. Going back to the literature on black radical studies, I began to

notice the significance of sound in black history and culture and how this connected to a conflictual relation with language. Moten (2003) has noted how black aesthetics are constituted as a practice of dissent and critique of the Enlightenment and its civilizatory valorization of the written word, which degraded speech and sound as illiterate expressions. Moten (2003) argues that black sound's origin in rupture and break, but also in sensuality and lyricism, carries a surplus that turns blackness into a resistance towards the universalizing forces of the written word. More broadly, the centrality of sound in black performance seeks a re-articulation of sense in which something else is added to hegemonic systems of language, vision and their connection with knowledge and power.

Black sound as a resisting gesture made the concept of embodied thinking take flight in new ways. It helped me imagine the voices and sounds (drones, chain-saw engine, rattle snake, animal grumbles, footsteps, bells, and others) that children edited onto new and existing footage as if they were speculative re-materializations of the trees. It helped me to feel and appreciate the difference that these videos introduced, and how they generated an imaginary of the trees that those of us who did research outside could not have ever mused, seen, felt. The children who did not come outside did this by feeling the video and the images aurally rather than narratively and with the ethnographic artifacts accumulated by being outside (notes, drawings, rubbings, footage) as many of the others did. This experience expanded my own sense of the outside and helped me to revise the relation of outside-inside in less oppositional ways.

I am not trying to affirm that black studies and Moten helped me to explain or to find the truth behind children's learning behaviours and their artwork, if that is ever possible. Nonetheless, it helped me to attune (feel) the resistant and unexpected

qualities of their learning, and to see these children in capacious ways, beyond wearisome narratives of deficit that marginalize children who do not behave according to the plan. Thinking concepts as becomings contributes to the cultivation of research practices rather than interpreting learning behaviours whose goal is to map differential, frictional and resistant moments that bring heterogenesis and singularity into how artist/teachers/researchers conceive projects and learning events. In the final section of this Commentary, I discuss how appreciating the involuntary and unexpected aspects defining learning events can help artists/teachers/researchers valorize their students' creative practices and existential motives in deeper ways.

An Ethics of Caring for Learning's Immanence

Art educator Dennis Atkinson (2017) notes that following and responding to unexpected aspects of learning events is important because "real learning" (p. 2) is not just the successful acquisition of knowledge or the assumption of ideas divorced from their materials, contexts and problematics. On the contrary, "real learning is an existential event … conceived as a leap into a new or modified ontological state whose affects and relations produce an expansion of acting and thinking" (p. 2). Nonetheless, the current educational climate driven by economic motivations seems to focus more on *what* students should know rather than "how children and students should learn and the pedagogical obligations and values for supporting each individual 'how'" (p. 3). Atkinson argues that caring for and responding in different ways that take into account student's how's can involve a confrontation with the new that "may expand our understanding of learning in art and what art is" (p.5). This process can avoid the marginalization of modes of learning and creativity that do not fit the standards, concepts, criteria.

Additionally, focusing on the how's of learning, may tell us something important about the nature of teaching and learning art, that the art class could be an alternative space to articulate resistances, refusals and dissensus in relation to inflexible and dogmatic modes of knowing where concepts are presented as fixed and transcendental. The art curriculum along with the immanence of learning could center on "building a life … as a process of invention and creation involving the emergence of the new within local processes of learning" (Atkinson, 2018, p. 6). In lieu of being instrumentalized as a technology of human capital, the arts could play an important role in reconceptualizing learning as connected to singular encounters and teaching which listens and considers the evolving social and historical sensibilities of students.

Thinking learning events with a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective based on concept's becomings could contribute to the formation of the alternative teaching-learning space proposed by Atkinson (2017). This is so, because as I have articulated through this piece, Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts open up to the movement of life and do not tame the differential, problematic and emergent qualities of learning events, but instead seek to recognise and map these problematics in capacious and creative ways. I end here with an invitation to engage in immanent and dissensual studies of concepts and learning events in art education that expand the limits of our field's imaginary and how local learning events come to matter.

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