Analysing students' experience of bodily learning - an autoethnographic study of the challenges and opportunities in researching bodily learning in own teaching practice¹

Trine Ørbæk

University of South-Eastern Norway, Norway

Abstract

This article explores the challenges and opportunities in trying to capture students' experience of bodily learning based on own teaching practice in teacher education. Applying a sensory autoethnographic approach, I study my bodily and emotional experience during the analytical process investigating my students' experience of bodily learning as part of their education in becoming teachers of physical education. I ask the following research questions: What was my bodily and emotional perception of analysing the students' experience of bodily learning? How can these bodily and emotional experiences illuminate the challenges and opportunities in researching students' experience of bodily learning in own teaching practice? In analysing the reflection notes through the concepts of embodied affectivity, embodied interaffectivity and body memory, this study shows that analysing students' experience of bodily learning from own teaching practice illuminates various dilemmas. First, my body memories of being in the same situation the students referred to, reactivated my memories of being the teacher educator in the same situation. Second, conducting a thematic analysis excluded dimensions of the students' experience of bodily learning. Third, a shared emotional approach enabled me to capture the students' experience of bodily learning in my own teaching practice.

Keywords: sensory autoethnography; body memory; emotions; intersubjectivity; embodiment

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Correspondence: Trine Ørbæk, e-mail: trine.orbak@usn.no

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Introduction

Embodiment and bodily learning in educational research are an emerging field of international research (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2021) that explores learning and teaching as a phenomenon with a mutual dependency between the body, emotions, movements, and reflections (Aagård & Lund, 2019; Antilla, Aartun, et al., 2022; Fugate, et al., 2019; Ørbæk, 2021; Ørbæk & Engelsrud, 2020; Østern et al, 2021; Sanagavarapu, 2018; Sani et al., 2021). Whereas research on embodiment and bodily learning includes a wide range of methodologies (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2021), research on researching embodiment and bodily learning is a nascent field of research. In research, embodiment and bodily learning are about developing knowledge of the importance of the body for perception, method development, analytical processes, and in the presentation of findings (Hunter & Emerald, 2016; Lustick, 2021; Stinson, 2006). Hunter and Emerald (2016) state that understanding embodied experience is challenging. They suggest that even though narrative research reveals complex embodied and emplaced social phenomena, there are still many questions about how researchers in an educational context might capture the subjective experience of the lived body (Hunter & Emerald, 2016). They explore sensory narratives as a way of richly capturing embodiment by moving beyond telling stories of having bodies to being bodies in the research process. They suggest that researchers can use emerging sense-focused epistemologies and methodologies such as sensory narratives to "capture, analyse and represent storied worlds in embodied ways and how to capture sensed and embodied experiences in narrative" (Hunter & Emerald, 2016, p. 28). Lustick (2021) suggests that it is essential that researchers recognise the role of bodily and emotional experience in qualitative analysis and in confronting bias in the research process. She also argues that qualitative research "rarely acknowledges the role of emotions in both data collection and analysis" (Lustick, 2021, p. 1), and suggests a framework for what she describes as emotional coding in order to identify the impact of emotions on researchers' positionality in relation to informants, as well as for the qualitative analytical process. Stinson (2006) argues that research is a way of sensing, generating, exploring, and forming, and involves both passion and the kinaesthetic sense. According to Stinson (2006), we can only think "with what we know in our bones,' and that attending to the sensory, followed by reflection, is as essential in research." Thus, reflecting upon bodily and emotional experience should be part of the researcher's reflexivity.

Reflexivity in qualitative research is about trying to answer the questions What do I know? and How do I know it? (Hertz, 1997), and What is important and How do I know that? (Stinson, 2006). The reason for asking these questions is that the researcher should be aware of, and ask questions about, how the research material has been produced, analysed, and discussed. In reflexive ethnography, researchers themselves constitute an important instrument necessitating a reflexive attitude and entrance to their own position in the research process (Aunger, 2004; Lustick, 2021). Autoethnography is a form of reflexive ethnography in which the researcher uses self-reflection and writing to explore personal experience and connect this

autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, or social meanings and understandings (Ellis, 1999, 2004).

In this article, I will explore how my bodily and emotional experience influence my analytical process in trying to capture the students' experience of bodily learning based on my teaching practice. The research questions are: What was my bodily and emotional perception of analysing the students' experience of bodily learning? How can these bodily and emotional experiences illuminate the challenges and opportunities in researching students' experience of bodily learning in own teaching practice? The first question will frame the analysis of the reflection notes, and the last question will be explored in the discussion.

The theoretical framework of this study includes the phenomenological concepts of *embodied affectivity*, *embodied interaffectivity* and *body memory* (Fuchs, 2016a, 2016b, 2017).

Theoretical perspectives

According to the phenomenological philosopher, Fuchs (2016a, 2016b), as humans we are always mutually involved in bodily and socio-emotional interactive situations with the environment and other human beings. In this embodied approach to being and interacting, bodies create affect and are created in affective encounters (Fuchs, 2016a). For Fuchs (2016a), the emotional impression of being in a situation triggers a specific bodily resonance, which both creates affects and prepares the body for movement – the affective and emotive component of emotions. He uses the concept of embodied affectivity to describe this sort of circular emotional interaction that the subject is part of with the environment (Fuchs, 2016a, p. 197). Another form of circular emotional interaction occurs when subjects meet. Fuchs (2016a, p. 198), in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's concepts of intersubjectivity and intercorporeality, describes this interaction as *embodied interaffectivity*. Such intercorporeal interaction takes place quickly, and people are not able to control it either cognitively or rationally (Szanto, 2020). For example, in the classroom, the teacher educator and students become parts of a dynamic sensorimotor and interaffective system that connects their bodies by way of reciprocal movements and reactions, in what Fuchs (2016a) describes as interbodily resonance. This intersubjective bodily experience forms the existential basis of the class culture and the learning environment for each student.

According to Fuchs (2017), human bodies are largely shaped by culture; this includes how bodies in a specific culture sit, stand, walk, and dance. This intimate connection between culture and bodily learning is bound to a specific kind of memory—body memory—which Fuchs (2017, p. 333) describes as follows:

Through repeated and typical interactions with others an individual habitus is formed, and with it the norms and rules of culture are inscribed into the body, yet in such a way that the resulting memory corresponds to an embodied and implicit knowing how, not to a knowing or remembering that.

For Fuchs (2017, p. 335), our bodily and implicit knowing "is not made accessible to us in retrospect but is re-enacted through the practices of everyday life." He defines the entirety of established dispositions and skills as body memories that become current through the medium of the lived body without the need to cognitively remember previous situations (Fuchs, 2017). For Fuchs (2017), body memory comprises "all those habits, manners, skills and practices that are performed pre-reflectively" and includes "habitual bodily interactions with others" (Fuchs, 2017, p. 335). According to Fuchs (2017), close relationships between two persons, such as a teacher educator and a student, can create dyadic body memories that are memories of how the two move together in different contexts in the teaching situations. It manifests itself in shared patterns of interaction that are actualised every time the two persons meet again (Fuchs, 2017). In such a mutual incorporation, the interactors will experience a specific sense of being bodily connected with the other. Collective body memory is a sphere of pre-reflective mutual bodily attunement that enables the formation and tradition of collective patterns of bodily interaction (Fuchs, 2017). Repeated patterns of interaction create affective-interactive schemas that become familiar and result in pre-reflective, practical knowledge of how to get along with others, such as in a classroom setting. For Fuchs (2016b, p. 107), this embodied interaction with others is the basis for developing language:

The acquisition of language is then conceived as resulting from embodied interactions with others, starting from expressive or interbodily resonance, then proceeding to iconic gestures and finally leading to symbolic modes of communication. This development is essentially based on understanding others as intentional agents, which in turn is enabled by grasping their intentions as embodied in expressive, goal-directed, and pointing gestures in the context of shared practices.

In this article I use the concepts of *embodied affectivity*, *embodied interaffectivity* and *body memory* to investigate and discuss my bodily and emotional experience during the analytical process and how my experience illuminate the challenges and opportunities in researching students' experience of bodily learning in own teaching practice. First, I present the sensory-autoethnographic methodology I applied to this study.

Methodology, data material and analytical approach

Autoethnographic studies, also called *self-studies*, have a long tradition in educational research that focuses on developing teachers' and teacher educators' self-understanding of the nature of teaching in order to enhance their teaching practices (Jokstad et al., 2013; Macintyre Latta & Buck, 2007; Postholm & Madsen, 2012; Ulvik et al, 2016). There is a scarcity of studies that explore how educational researchers research their own teaching practice with a focus on bodily learning (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2021). In this study, I have chosen to apply a sensory autoethnographic

research methodology (Ellis, 1999; Pink, 2015) that paves the way for exploring how my embodied, emplaced, and multisensorial experience influenced the analytical process in researching my students' experience of bodily learning. The focus of sensory autoethnographic studies is about accessing areas of embodied knowing and using embodiment as basis for understanding "human environments, activities, perception, experience, action and meaning" (Pink, 2015, p. 54). This phenomenological methodology understands senses as a route to forms of knowledge and knowing that are not accounted for more traditional forms of ethnography, such as things that tend to be felt or sensed rather than spoken about (Pink, 2015). The data material comprises extracts from 1,674 pages of reflection notes I wrote during the analytical process in my Ph.D. dissertation between April 2011 and May 2014, and the reflection notes included in my Ph.D. dissertation (Ørbæk, 2018). These reflection notes include material that illuminates various situations in the analytical phase, and descriptions of my bodily and emotional experiences of analysing student teachers bodily and emotional experiences of creating dance and teach in creative dance. Several researchers consider reflection notes to be a suitable method to access researchers' reflections on their research practice (McCormack, 2001; Stinson, 2006; van Manen, 1990).

The four steps in the thematic analytical process started by reading the reflection notes and searching for descriptions of bodily and emotional experience during the analytical process in my Ph.D. project. In order to recognise those experiences, I included my affective and emotive experience of reading the reflection notes, as an analytical tool (Fuchs, 2016; Ørbæk, 2021; Stinson, 2006). Such emotional coding (Lustick, 2021) included both paying attention to descriptions of my bodily and emotional experience in the reflection notes, and being aware of my affective and emotive experience that occurred when reading these reflection notes. In this way, I used my emotions as a felt evaluation, as Szanto (2020, p. 33) describes it, to illuminate situations I experienced that were specifically relevant and prominent in order to explore the challenges and opportunities in researching students' experience of bodily learning based on my teaching practice. This second phase highlighted three situations in the analytical process that I named: "Reactivation of experience," "Moving with the data material" and "Shared emotions as an analytical approach." The third analytical phase included a dynamic process in which I alternated between re-activating the bodily and emotional experience of the three chosen analytical situations and the embodied writing process of trying to capture those experiences. In this phase, the time perspective, and the rewriting process in such an embodied analytical approach, as referred to by Chadwick (2017), was important in creating both a distance and a proximity to the three situations. The final analytical phase involved writing scenic descriptions (Berg, 2018) of the three situations that I further analysed through Fuchs' (2016a, 2016b, 2017) concepts of embodied affectivity, embodied interaffectivity and body memory.

Results

Reactivation of experience

Scenic description:

I am sitting in my office, reading my observation notes, transcribed interviews, and students' reflection notes about their experience of bodily learning as part of their education in becoming teachers of physical education. I am trying to distance myself from my bodily and emotional experience of being their teacher in this subject, trying to capture the students' experience from my classes. It is frustrating that everything I read activates my own bodily and emotional experience of being in the same situations that the students talk and write about. When they talk about their anxiety about going to my dance class, I remember the tension I felt when meeting the students for the first time, and how I acted when I met them. When they talk about the challenge of expressing emotions through dance, I remember how I had to change the content and methods of creating dance in order to make the students move. When I read the observation notes from the students' teaching practice in their practicum, I remember where I sat in the room, how I felt about their teaching practice and what their pupils did during the class. Even though I cognitively try to focus on the students' experience, my bodily and emotional experience of reading the data material change my focus during the analytical process. Instead of exploring the students' experience of these situations, I start to analyse how I can use my experience and the students' experience to improve my teaching practice. I realise that I must find another approach to the analysis.

This scenic description illuminates a challenge I experienced at the beginning of the analytical process when researching my students' experience of bodily learning in my classes. When I started reading the data material, my aim was to conduct a thematic analysis. The challenge was that my collective and dyadic body memories (Fuchs, 2016a, 2017) of my relationships with the students, and my subjective affective and emotive experience in teaching situations, were reactivated, as I was still there in the situation, as Pink (2015) describes it. I was not far enough away from my own bodily and emotional experience of these teaching situations to analyse the *students*' experience of bodily learning. The challenge was to change the perspective of being a teacher educator focused on how to develop classes in creating dance in physical education teacher education based on the students' experiences, to becoming a researcher in own practice focusing on developing themes based on the students' experience in order to capture their bodily learning experience. This challenging shift is well described by researchers who research on own practice such as Ulvik et al. (2016), Jokstad et al. (2013), and Postholm and Madsen (2012).

In my keenness to capture the *students*' experience of bodily learning – inspired by Stinson's (2006) choreographic-analytical approach to qualitative research – I began to literally move with the data material.

Moving with the data material

Scenic description:

I am standing in my living room and looking at my observation notes, transcribed interviews, and student reflection notes, which I have placed either on the floor, the table, the sofa or on the walls. In this way I am trying to invite the data material into my home as new friends with whom I would like to engage in dialogue. First, I categorise the data material according to the first two research questions. I am moving among the data material observing the text from a distance or sitting very close to the floor. By looking at the texts up close, I am trying to focus on the experience and actions of the individual student. By looking at the texts from a distance, I am also trying to gain both an overview of all the material and build connections between the students' various experiences. This way of moving with the data material includes being aware of what I sense fits together, or not, when trying to organise the material into themes. I try to read the text intuitively while noting the parts that call for my attention. I also start writing what I sense and believe the students' experience are about. I read the data material over such a long period of time, and so frequently, that I experienced the students – through the texts and myself – entering into dialogue. The more I read the texts, the clearer the themes and sub-themes become.

Organising the data material into themes is manageable; analysing them challenges me. I do not manage to capture the complexity of the students' experience of bodily learning. I feel that their written and spoken words are just a *representation* of their experience. When I try to write, the words disappear before my thoughts emerge. I try to paint a picture but lack the colours and the brush. I do not believe in what I write. Nothing works. I neither find the words nor the structure for the analysis. I realise that my challenge is to capture what can be read in between the words and the lines. But how?

This scenic description illuminates how, in applying a choreographic approach to the thematic analysis, I was able to create a *closeness* to the students' experience and *distance* from my own experience. First, moving with the data material helped me to engage in dialogue with the *texts* that the students had written. I experienced what Armstrong (2000, p. 99) describes as follows: "When we keep our attention fixed upon an object which attracts us, two things tend to happen: we get absorbed in the object and the object gets absorbed into us." In this phase, I also used my bodily resonance (Fuchs, 2016a) as an analytical tool when reading the different types of written data material, which involved paying attention to my affective and emotive experience when reading the texts. In line with Szanto (2020), I used my emotions as a key to become aware of what interested me in order to further explore the research questions. According to Brinkmann and Tangaard (2010, p. 198), such *tacit knowledge* as well as intuition and sensitivity to the data material, is part of qualitative research and is vital in order to manage to analyse what is written in between the lines.

However, even though I managed to categorise the students' experience in various themes, I did not manage to illuminate the complexity of the students' experience of bodily learning. When I read the data material from the individual students, my

dyadic body memories (Fuchs, 2016a) of the relationship with the respective student and the situation were reactivated. Once again, I lost my focus on researching own practice. My focus was on my bodily resonance when remembering those relationships. This prevented me from reading in between the lines in order to capture the complexity of the students' experience of bodily learning.

During my third attempt, inspired by studies of Fuchs' (2016a) and Szanto's (2020) understanding of emotions as a bodily, intersubjective phenomenon, I applied shared emotions as an analytical approach.

Shared emotions as an analytical approach Scenic description:

I start to re-read all the data material, focusing both on my affective and emotive experience of the situations I read about and my affective and emotive experience while reading the data material. I am sensing, moving, thinking with the data, re-living the teaching situations. When I read about the experience of situations in which the students and I were engaged and happy, my body reacts by lowering its shoulders, breathing deeply, and sitting "forward" while writing. When I read about situations in which the students or I were scared and restless, my body reacts by becoming tense. I breathe faster and I want to run away from writing.

Trying to catch the nuances in the students' experience of bodily learning is a hesitant, subtle, intuitive, and emotional process, a slow dance in which I alternate between listening to the interviews, reading the transcribed interviews, reading the field notes and the analytical notes, writing meta notes of my field notes and data material, moving, and sitting in complete silence. Both short and long periods of thought need silence and time to find a language. I am patient and curious while reading the material, until I feel the data material "in my bones" and no longer sensed further new themes or nuances in the students' experience of bodily learning. Becoming aware of my bodily and emotional experience of the various situations and in working emotionally with the data material, enables me to distinguish between my subjective and intersubjective experience of those situations, and what differs or is in line with the students' experience of bodily learning in the same situations.

This scenic description illuminates how I used my body memories as an analytical tool to capture the students' experience of bodily learning in my class. Initially, in the analytical process, I was concerned about how I had experienced the situation and the students myself, and instead of seeing this as "a problem," I learned from Fuchs (2016a) and Szanto (2020) that emotions are shared in situations. Using their understanding of emotions as an intersubjective bodily phenomenon, I used my affective and emotive experience as a key to exploring the students' experience. This enabled me, as Postholm (2004) encourages, to shift my perspective towards the students' experience, which gave me the opportunity to critically appraise the data material, more independently of my subjective understanding of the situation, and more inspired by the general aspects of analytical processes in qualitative research on similar fields of practice.

The process of describing the students' experience in words derived from my embodied interaction with the students in our shared practical teaching practice. I used my body memories of our shared emotions to reactivate the teaching situations in order to capture the students' experience in words. This writing process is in line with what Fuchs (2017) describes as an *embodied development of language*. In trying to find the words that best captured the students' experience of bodily learning, I shifted between sensing, thinking, writing, and resting using bodily metaphors and sensations as an analytical tool in the writing process, in what Hunter and Emerald (2016) describe a sensory narrative process. Such an embodied and interaffective analytical approach was possible because I had been in the same situations that the students' talked and wrote about. I used my body memories of my subjective and intersubjective experience to create narratives that illuminated the students' experience. As such, researching the students' experience of bodily learning based on my own teaching practice requires an ability to reactivate my body memories of my embodied affective and interaffective bodily connection with the studied students.

Discussion

Applying Fuchs' concepts of embodied affectivity, embodied interaffectivity, and body memory enabled me to reflect upon my research practice, focusing on my bodily and emotional perception of analysing the students' experience of bodily learning in creative dance. In line with Szanto (2020), I developed an understanding of body memory and emotions based on cultural conventions, norms and values that shaped what was emotionally relevant and salient for me, guided my emotional regulation, and defined what constituted an appropriate emotional response to the data material. As such, I used emotional coding as a tool to understand the students' experience through my subjective body memories of the situations I shared with the students. In addition, focusing on my subjective body memories also made me aware of the collective body memories that was present in the classroom. This shift between reflecting on my subjective and intersubjective body memories enabled me to navigate between what I personally felt, what the students felt, and what, considering our class's norms and values, we ought to feel. Such emotional sharing not only restricted but also increased my opportunities to explore the students' experience. The limitation of such a shared emotional analytical process is constricted by my own understanding and experience of bodily learning. Hence, this analytical approach does not grasp all dimensions of the students' subjective bodily and emotionally experiences of the intersubjective experiences. In addition, researchers in other practical fields and theoretical perspectives would have understood the students' experiences differently.

In this study, I illuminate how I succeeded in shifting my focus from being a teacher to researching own practice by changing from a subjective to an intersubjective, intercorporeal and interaffective understanding of emotions. This meant that my embodied and emotional experience from the same situations that the students' talked and

wrote about were a prerequisite for understanding the students' experience of bodily learning. In this process, I became aware that my own bodily and emotional experience is also included in the students' experience, and vice versa, as we are always connected to each other bodily – as humans in shared situations. Instead of making this bodily and emotional connectedness an issue, I used my body memories (Fuchs, 2017) of those situations as an analytical tool in order to capture a more complex picture of the students' embodied and emotional experience, which enabled me to use my body memories as a way of knowing. These experiences show that researching the students' experience of bodily learning is a phenomenon that has a reciprocal intersubjective dependency between bodies, emotions, movements, and reflections. According to Lustick (2021), such an awareness of bodily and emotional experience in the encounter with the data material is significant in capturing the researchers' positionality in relation to the informants, as well as for the qualitative analytical process. This study also illuminates how qualitative research on bodily learning is a way of sensing, generating, exploring, and forming, and involves both passion and the kinaesthetic sense, as Stinson (2006) also suggests. According to Stinson (2006), we can only think "with what we know in our bones" and, in this study, I argue that reflection on affective and emotive experience is crucial in research on bodily learning in own practice.

The sensory autoethnographic research methodology paved the way for exploring how my bodily and emotional experience influenced the analytical process in researching my students' experience of bodily learning (Ellis, 1999; Pink, 2015). This methodology also enabled me to include my body memories as a route to forms of knowledge and knowing that, according to Pink (2015), are not accounted for in more traditional forms of ethnography. The challenge was that previous experience influenced what I understood in the analytical moment. Researching own research practice made me aware that I have to focus more on what I know, and how I know it, in order to improve my research skills in capturing bodily learning experience based on my own teaching practice, as Hertz (1997) also suggests. This self-reflection is vital in connecting personal experience of analysing qualitative data to the discussion of how the body and emotions influence the research process (Aunger, 2004; Ellis, 1999, 2004; Lustick, 2021).

Through the three scenic descriptions "Reactivation of experience," "Moving with the data material," and "Shared emotions as an analytical approach," I have illuminated the challenges and opportunities of researching my own students' experience of bodily learning derived from my teaching practice. In "Reactivation of experience" I show how my body memories of being a teacher educator in the same situations that the students talked and wrote about prevented me from taking the students' perspective in the initial phase of the analytical process. "Moving with the data material" illuminates the challenge of capturing the students' experience of bodily learning through the text material. Even though I succeeded in conducting a thematic analysis, I did not manage to read in between the lines in order to capture the bodily and

emotional dimensions of the students' experience. Like Hunter and Emerald (2016) state, capturing subjective experience of the lived body in an educational context was challenging. The theme "Shared emotions as an analytical approach" sheds light on how I used my body memories as a key to understand the students' experience of bodily learning based on my teaching practice.

Conclusion

This study offers knowledge about how we can value bodily and emotional knowledge in qualitative analytical approaches when trying to capture students' experience of bodily learning based on own teaching practice. The findings show how intersubjective bodily experience forms the existential basis of the class culture and the learning environment for the students and the teacher educator. Establishing close relationships between the teacher educator and the students creates body memories that enable the teacher educator to analyse the students bodily learning. Hence, reflection on affective and emotive experience from own teaching practice is crucial in research on students' bodily learning in own teaching practice. In this way, we can develop knowledge of how the students' bodily and emotionally experiences influence the students' practical knowledge of how to get along with each other, and with students and other teachers in their practicum.

This sensory autoethnography methodology illuminate how researchers can become more aware of how they can use their body and emotions as an analytical tool to research students' experience of bodily learning in own practice. In order to understand a broader range of the students' bodily and emotionally experiences, it might be useful to involve multiple researchers when exploring bodily learning in various practical fields, and to include the students in the analytical phase. It might also be useful to explore various forms of data material, such as video, audio logs, retrospective interviews, and research circles. However, as Hunter and Emerald (2016) state, understanding bodily learning experience are challenging. Thus, developing knowledge about the importance of the body and emotions for perception, method development, analytical processes and in the presentation of findings (Hunter & Emerald, 2016; Lustick, 2021; Stinson, 2006) will shed light on how the researchers' body and emotions always influence the research process.

The result of this study offers experiences that may be valuable to further autoethnographic studies in educational research in general, and in researching bodily learning, in particular. The study also reveals the need for more research on how embodied affectivity, embodied interaffectivity and body memory can be relevant concepts for research on bodily learning based on own teaching practice in an educational context. As Pink (2015, p. 158–159) also suggests, there is also a need for further research on how (auto)ethnographers develop an awareness of how "different types of research materials might facilitate ways of being close to the non-verbal, tacit, emplaced knowledge that a sensory analysis seeks to identify." It may also be relevant

to explore how reflexivity is a key element of sensory ethnography research in relation to the ways in which we organise and analyse our research materials (Pink, 2015). In accordance with Hunter and Emerald (2016), more studies are needed on how to capture bodily learning in rich ways by moving beyond telling stories of *having* bodies to *being* bodies in the research process. In order to capture and analyse embodied ways of knowing, it might be an idea to include a shared emotional approach.

Author biography

Trine Ørbæk (Ph.D.) is a professor under qualification in the Department of Educational Science at the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN). Ørbæk is part of the research groups Embodied Making and Learning (USN) and Bodily Learning (NTNU) and the research programme "You will become a teacher ..." (USN). Her research interests include embodiment in learning, teaching, and research.

Disclosure statement

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