

Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

1998 Conference Proceedings (San Antonio,
TX)

Adult Education and the Body: Changing Performances of Teaching and Learning

Valerie-Lee Chapman
Univeristy of British Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Chapman, Valerie-Lee (1998). "Adult Education and the Body: Changing Performances of Teaching and Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1998/papers/17>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Adult Education and the Body: Changing Performances of Teaching and Learning

Valerie-Lee Chapman

University of British Columbia

There is currently great academic interest in the body--what relevance does such work have for adult educators? My own interest in the body and its place in education, emerged from my Master's thesis, *"All this Talk!": Stories of Women Learning*. I asked women program planners how their lived experiences as women learning affected their practice. In individual and group sessions, they told me stories about their university adult education. Their metaphors for learning were *talking, opposition* (from what they all called the "old, male model"), and *confronting power* - that is, acknowledging the power-knowledge structures that disciplined and regulated their learning. In many of their stories, the "body" formed an intriguing subtext; for example, all the women mentioned that their best educational experiences were those where teachers and/or learners were "embodied". This seemed to mean those (rare) times in their education where they felt that the connections between cognition and emotion, affect and intellect, were recognized, where "bodily" knowledge was honoured as epistemically valuable, where both body and mind were welcome in the learning space.

It's about being embodied. In this environment that makes a difference. The professors that I work best with, that's the way I describe them, and I found the learning most transformative when they had that quality of being embodied. When you talk about an embodied learner, then you're talking about the integration of all things, an inter-relationship. Sonia, *All This Talk*.

I really live in my body, you know? Like I'm big, and my arms move and I move and so, for me, when I think of talking it's all of me that talks. Some people it's just their head, but I think my body is very much my grammar, it's how I punctuate things, and it's how I teach. Yolanda, *ATT*.

Most often, the stories were about learning how to become dis-embodied, dis-connected, about "creating distance", about becoming unemotional. Yolanda, laughing, said "In education we try to get emotionless. Bury! Repress! Make Freud happy!" Even as I concluded, that, yes, the women did carry their experiences of gender and learning with them into their daily practice, I kept returning to those stories about the body. Perhaps because there was so much passion, energy, even poetry in them?

Why the Body?

A preliminary review of literature led me to one immediate conclusion: Suddenly, it's chic to have a body again. "After Enlightenment, embodiment!", is the rallying cry from anthropologists, geographers, historians, sociologists, literary critics--even educational theorists. Scholars now see the body as a collection of physical facts, transporting social and psychological values, as an instrumentality, and as a category of cultural production. Recent studies indicate that the body is not only a biological phenomenon but a social construction (Turner, 1984); a site of state control (Foucault, 1990); the origin of transgressive capacities (Bakhtin, 1986); carries symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1991); is a text (Derrida, 1978); and in education it is a terrain of struggle, conflict and contradiction (McClaren, 1987). And at even the most sedate institutions of higher education, there are courses on the body, centres for the study of the body, degrees on the body.

Why this overwhelming interest? Shilling (1993) cites as one reason the feminist project to reclaim the political body; he also suggests that demographic changes and the consumer culture of high capitalism have resulted in the body becoming a site where the uncertainties of longer life in a post-modern world are displayed. To these I would add one of the paradoxes of globalization--while deterritorialization has resulted in the growth of consciousness of the globe as one place, one village, it has also heightened awareness of the political importance of the local, the specific and the particular. What is more local, more specific, more situated, than the body? In this age of Diaspora, the body has become the Home many yearn for. Also, feminists have rehabilitated what Foucault called subject knowledges, those derived from emotion and the body; one of the greatest impacts feminism has had on the disciplines has been the establishing of the viability of the situated subject, and the insistence that actually all knowledge is located and thus specific, that it is grounded. Specifically, and locally, what does this mean for educators in classrooms?

The Embodied Way

I think there are two directions that adult educators can take. In one, what I'll call the Embodied Way, we see the body being "brought back into" educational theorizing and practice (hooks, 1994). As Madeleine Grumet says, the body has been absent in curriculum and in schools. "Silent too, was the language of the body, the world we know through our fingertips, the world we carry on our weight-bearing joints, the world we hear in sudden hums and giggles" (1988, p. xv). Educators are urged to take a more holistic approach to curriculum design, to teaching, to learning, and to research--we read, and hear, about the embodied mind, affective and somatic knowledges, and how best to incorporate the "whole person" into pedagogical and andragogical practices. This is welcome and offers us much more authentic and holistic opportunities for teaching and learning in non-unitary ways (Clark, 1997). But I don't think we need to "bring the body back", because the body is already there in the classroom. It is true, the body is an absent presence, the Orientalised Other of the mind, representing the antithesis of reason and objectivity. Devalued in Enlightenment ideology, the body lingers, languishes in our educational geography.

Body Projects

So, I am concerned to not just allow room for the senses, the spirit, the physical, in planning curriculum, or instructional techniques, or learning, but that we should also explore a second path, what I call the way of the Body Project. For the new scholarship claims that the body is a project. Bodies are unfinished, malleable, plastic, multiple. There are social bodies, bodies at work, consuming bodies, political bodies, educated bodies, gendered bodies, sexed bodies, medical bodies, disabled bodies, identifying bodies... If you have ever lifted weights, run a marathon, had a face-lift, had your hair cut, coloured, straightened or permed, had your ears, nipples, or nose pierced, if you have dieted, tried to get a tan, had sun spots and age spots lasered away, bought a face cream guaranteed to remove wrinkles, or used Grecian Formula, you've been involved in your own Body Project.

As adult educators, perhaps we should be asking what part education has played in making the bodies that come in the door with our adult students, and what part we can play in remaking them, because:

It is not bodies alone, but more crucially, individuals and their identities, that are constituted through the social shaping of bodies. There come to be individuals (subjects) with particular identities, genders, characters, joys, understandings and the like--largely through bodily transformations that result from the immersion of bodies in the field of social relations and power. (Schatzki, 1996, p xx).

We need to not just recognize that the body has a place in the classroom, but that classrooms, teachers, fellow learners, institutions (structural and social) have a place in the body--for they construct that body as gendered, raced, diseased, disabled, sexually oriented, encoding categories of social inequity, perpetuating what Tisdell (1993) has called interlocking systems of oppression. Unfortunately, much of the literature on Body Projects is dense,

inaccessible and largely theoretical, and there is a dearth of empirical studies; I offer below brief outlines of two theoretical frameworks. The first, Theodore Schatzki's, draws together work from sociologists of the body. The second, Judith Butler's, stems from postmodern and poststructural feminism.

The Sociological Body

Schatzki's (1996) model of corporeality, (the embodiment of socioculturation), is composed of four dimensions. These are: Firstly, *physicality*, the actual physical ensemble that supports and makes possible the other dimensions; secondly, *bodily activity*, which "bodies forth" the mental conditions of mind, gender, character, of "individuality into the public world" (p.5); thirdly, the *lived body*, the body as experienced by the person, "the home of the distinction between self and body, the theme of embodiment, with its Cartesian overtones and resulting dangers" (p.5); and fourthly, there is the *surface* of the body, "the slate upon which is inscribed the marks of culture, human coexistence, and social toil...the flesh that is symbolically and meaningfully punctured, incised, decorated, clothed, done up, disguised, stylized" (p.5). The body is *socially molded* through *techniques*, which conflate discourses and practices with political and social institutions such as the school and the family. Practices are diverse; they can include family eating patterns, daily transportation practices, personal grooming, banking practices and social negotiation.

Social molding often works on several dimensions; for example, social activities affect physicality, resulting in clogged arteries, or cirrhosis of the liver, but the diagnosis or interpretation of these bodily activities, and the social aspect of the lived experiences of drinking or eating, are imprinted through family, media, conversations with friends, engagements with institutions. Power, embedded in these techniques, is thus articulated on the body (Foucault, 1990) through *discipline* (as in training, teaching, sanctioning, punishing), through *normalization* (conscious or unconscious self-attending and molding), through the *establishment* of signifying activities (hand gestures, crying, sadness, good or bad posture) and through **surface** expressions. Specific signifying conditions, such as gender, character, mental capacities, are thus produced--for "the body is a style of the flesh" (Butler, 1990). Schatzki's theoretical framework offers a useful starting place for de-constructing the part educational discourses and institutions play in constituting bodies, and, through them, identities. It is not, however, a theory that leaves much room for agency or for resistance.

The Feminist Body

Feminists have long been engaged with the body as part of their political project. Whether radical, liberal, cultural or post modern, most agree that the body is frequently the arena where gendered inequities, among other constructions, are played out, but feminists remain divided over how to bring the body into their agenda, alternating between celebrations of the female body and fears of biologism, naturalism and essentialism. But most believe that "Body stands along with Woman, Native, Other as a neglected subject of inquiry", and that study of the Body easily becomes the means of articulating marginalization through the question, "What body is being constructed here?" (Foster, 1995). Grosz argues that "feminist conceptions of the body are unlike those of their male counterparts (Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan and Foucault) insofar as the bodies are always sexually specific and may well entail different regimes of power and their associated knowledges" (1993, p. 196). She distinguishes between theories that are "inscriptive", that focus on the body's surface as the site where social, legal, moral and economic norms are inscribed, and approaches which focus on the interior, or lived body.

Judith Butler's work takes up inscription, rejecting any "natural" determining characteristics. She claims no prediscursive, ontological status for the body, but says that gender and sex are parodic performances of that interior absence, expressed on the surface of the body. "The various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all" (1990, p.140). Acting gender, or "performativity", is a fabrication for public regulation, displayed in response to the "truth effects of primary and stable identity", all deployed in the service of a compulsory heterosexuality and/or whiteness, ethnicity, class (1993, p.136). In a construction that

conceals its genesis from self and society, the body performs its regulating, assigned, roles. "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (1990, p. 140). But the body doesn't always get it right. Performance slips. Here is the opening for agency, for resistance, for although "agency is always negotiated within a matrix of power" (1990, p.140), I believe that if constructions of the body are performative, we might be able to elicit voluntary performances - from learners and from ourselves as teachers - that challenge inequitable identity constructions. Butler rejects such a voluntary construction, claiming that "gender is performative, an effect of a regulatory regime where genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint...a compulsory and forcible production". But, "in self repetition, gaps open up in regulatory norms." (1993, p. 21-22).

Butler's work has been criticized as being too idealistic, too theoretical, but it resonates with me, and with the experiences of the women in my study. For example, all spoke of the difficulties they experienced with evaluation and assessment of their work. They hated being marked, for marking is a technique of power that embeds the discourses and practices of being a "good learner", in a process of normalization and self-regulation. In the public spaces of the classroom, and the private spaces where all "turn to the last page to see if I'm ok", the women learned how to discipline their own writing, their research, their presentations of themselves, their work and their practice-- and it wasn't a disciplining that led to an embodied education.

Probably that's where my writing falls down, because I can't let that emotion come through anymore. Lana, *ATT*.

The milieu is to be cognitive and to stay in the head, most of the courses were very head courses...but most people aren't living in their heads, they're living with their guts. Lee, *ATT*.

Well, it's not just the D, the mark. I wrote a poem after, I was so devastated. Something like, Herr Doktor, or Herr Professor, your grades are mutilating marks on my face! And that's the thing, they're marks, like, they are marking me, like the Star of David, I mean that's a positive thing, but in the Second World War it wasn't. Like, to stigmatize, a stigmata. Sonia, *ATT*.

The body has six states of consciousness. Deep sleep, light sleep, drowsy, alert, agitated and flooded. When the body senses fear and moves into an *agitated* state, hormones flood the blood stream, giving energy, digestion stops and the body begins to use its own tissue. The/my body uses and consumes its/my tissue. The/my blood literally stops, reverses its direction in the/my veins, moving to hands and feet, breathing becomes shallow and the heart pounds. If terror is felt, the/my body moves to a *flooded* state, feelings narrow and intensify. Anger becomes rage, sadness becomes despair. It is impossible to process thoughts calmly and thoroughly. My/the body is ready for survival. When I/we sit in classrooms and feel fear, when I/we are terrorized by bullies, or when my/our hearts pound as we wait for the marks to come back--we are eating our bodies, cannibalizing our flesh. What are we learning? What are our bodies learning? Valerie.

Changing Performances of Learning and Teaching

I want to suggest that we explore both ways of working with the body in our practice, theorizing and research. The first step is becoming bodily conscious. Heshusius and Ballard (1996) suggest that an embodied form of personal experience is an integral part of the process of doing educational work and research, but that objective social science has little time for what is personal, regarding it as subjective, particular and unreliable. In the process of achieving

replicability, all personal marks (bodies) are removed from the methods, frameworks, theories that constitute such research, and individuality is lost. But postmodern denseness can just as easily remove individuality. I have tried, in this short space, to move from the abstract, non-specific, third-person textual representations of sociologists and postmodern feminists, to "my body", or my participants bodies, taking "a plunge into lived experience and particularity" (Rich, 1986).

Where are the bodies in the classroom? Many of us adult educators encourage our learners to "start with themselves", we say "the personal is the political!", but stop short of including ourselves in that exposure. Look at who has control of the space in the classroom--the teacher, presenter, educator, professor. Watch how they use that space, the possibility they have to come out from behind the desk, to move among the learners, to use their body... to be a body of knowledge. Or, do they never move into the learner's space, the space of those who sit imprisoned in chairs? Imprisoned in minds and discourses, where it is impolite to notice rumpled clothing, cowlicks, bellies, breasts. Do we even imagine sexuality while we talk so eruditely of gender, never noticing that genitals and gender might be connected? Does an immobile body denote an active mind? Could an active body erupt, disrupt, refuting the immutable truths, virgin concepts, immaculate theory an imprisoned master represents? Or do we have to apply:

-

The Cartesian litmus test

Is this knowing untouched by human hand?

Is it contaminated by relation, or constructed cleanly, in isolation?

Were any bodily fluids exchanged in the production of this theory, this learning?

Any at all, tears, blood, sweat, snot, semen?

Any discharges at all?

When we have begun to notice the bodies in our classrooms, when we are aware of techniques of power, of normalization and regulation, then we can begin to see how we as adult educators continue to construct, often unwittingly, political and social identities. We can begin to see what is written on learner's bodies, perhaps find room there to write a different story. As an adult educator I (have to?) believe we can inscribe new stories. But we have to ask first how our own teaching and learning practices elicit 'performative' identities from our students. For me, this is the value of Butler's theory. For if we "perform" gender, race, class, then we can learn to perform differently. Can we put some (performing) body into our work?

When my students have to put a needle in somebody, they're really scared, so when they do it, I rub their backs. I think that's part of conversation, you know? Like they can feel my hand on their back. I'm right there, You're ok, You're alright, while they push the med. in I just kind of rub their back and then I leave. And they're fine and I know they're fine. Yolanda, *ATT*.

My goal for the next year is to get out of this body so I can move on. Lee, *ATT*.

References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. (Tr. Vern W. McGee; Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist. (Eds.), Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1991). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender trouble*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Butler Judith. (1993) Critically queer. In *GLQ*, 1, 17-32.
- Chapman, Valerie-Lee (1996). *"All this Talk!": Stories of Women Learning*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.
- Clark, M. Carolyn. (1997). Learning as a non-unitary self: implications of postmodernism for adult learning theory. In *Proceedings of SCUTREA*. Birkbeck College: London.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1978). *Writing and difference*. (A. Bass, Trans.) Chicago: U. of Chicago Press.
- Foster, Susan Leigh (1995). *Choreographing history*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. (1990). *The history of sexuality*. Vol 1. New York: Vintage Books.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Grumet, Madeleine R. (1988). *Bitter milk. Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Heshushius, Lous and Ballard, Keith (Eds.), (1996). *From positivism to interpretivism and beyond: Tales of transformation in educational and social research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- hooks, bell (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. London, New York: Routledge
- McLaren, Peter. (1987). Schooling the postmodern body. Critical pedagogy and the politics of enmeshment. In Henri Giroux, (Ed.), *Postmodernism, feminism and cultural politics*. (pp. 144-173) Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. (1986). Notes toward a politics of location. In *Blood, bread and poetry: Selected prose, 1979-1985*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Schatzki, T., & Natter, W. (1996).(Eds.). *The social and political body*. London: Guilford Press.
- Shilling, Christopher. (1993). *The body and social theory*. London: Sage.
- Tisdell, Elizabeth. J. (1993). Interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression in adult higher education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43 (4), 203-226.
- Turner, Bryan. (1984). *The body and society. Explorations in social theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.