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# 'Are we going to do *that now?*' Orientations and response-abilities in the embodied classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Asking 'How do spatial and bodily processes produce teaching as a phenomenon?' this paper approaches 'teaching' as a relational, spatial and bodily encounter. Findings from a video-based ethnographic account of everyday teaching situations in a Norwegian upper secondary classroom are explored using an analytical framework inspired by feminist perspectives on bodies. The argument made is that material organisations of social practices are politically and ethically charged. A series of pedagogical encounters are mapped and discussed by engaging the concepts of *affect*, *orientation* and *alignment*. The article demonstrates that one recurring material relation was the collective orientation towards a configuration of the boundaries for 'doing school'. The bodily and spatial practice of aligning with the local *configuration of response-abilities* is proposed as a material relation that actively contributed to producing teaching as a phenomenon.

## KEYWORDS

Classroom; teaching; video-ethnography; materiality; embodiment; spatiality; orientation; affect; spatial politics

## Introduction

This article approaches 'teaching' as a relational, spatial and bodily encounter. Following feminist perspectives on bodies (Ahmed 2006), the material organisation of a social space is always politically and ethically charged due to its influence on bodily relations. Drawing on data from a video-based ethnography (Grosjean and Matte 2021) of everyday teaching encounters in a Norwegian upper secondary classroom, the article centres on the following question: *How do spatial and bodily processes produce teaching as a phenomenon?* The analyses discuss the actions of bodies and their use of space in a series of teaching situations while engaging the concepts of *orientation*, *affect* and *alignment* (Ahmed 2006).

Prior research has approached the embodiment and spatiality of teaching and learning from a diversity of perspectives, including material phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2012), human geography (Massey 2004), sociomaterial approaches (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk 2011), and feminist and queer theories of the body (Butler 1988). In what follows, the article will present a brief account of some of these studies.

Teaching has been studied as embodied knowledge, for example in Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003) research on teachers' narratives of teaching as a physical endeavour. Students' experiences of embodiment have been given considerable focus in research

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on physical education (Aartun et al. 2020) and dance education (Anttila and Nielsen 2019), but also in other school subjects, such as social studies (Sund, Quennerstedt, and Marie 2019).

Several ethnographies have also approached teaching as a larger material constellation encompassing teachers' and students' bodies, objects, environment, time, relations and practices (Nespor 2004; Roehl 2012a). These works highlight the active role of space and time in everyday teaching and learning processes. For example, McGregor (2004) has shown how materially embedded relations (e.g. prior experiences, transport and timetables) exert a 'spatialising force' by locating bodies and curricula within the fluid boundaries of schools. Sociomaterial relations can also, as Vanden Buerie and Simons (2017, 116) found, temporarily fabricate objects (e.g. socks or sonatas) into 'pedagogical things', and co-produce a specific 'school time' and 'school space'. A similar argument has been made by Roehl (2012b), who suggests that for an 'epistemic configuration of school lessons to take place', the alignment of multiple elements is required, including 'educational discourse, pointing gestures, spatial arrangements, the symbolic order of material objects in the classroom, the direction of gazes and so forth' (Roehl 2012b, 67).

Research has also demonstrated how the spatial organisation of school produce different bodily and spatial constrictions for teachers and students (Holland, Gordon, and Lahelma 2007). The layout of a classroom environment can be understood as a technology for directing attention (Snaza and Sonu 2016), that guides its 'inhabitants' into relations of (in)visibility and (im)mobility. For instance, students are frequently described as choreographed into 'stillness, quietness and obedience', whilst teachers are often put in motion, both to survey and control the class but also to be 'available to fulfil students needs' (Taylor 2018, 161–162).

Furthermore, research on the materiality of teaching has accounted for how spatial organisation produces other types of social and bodily divisions, for instance gender (Prastardóttir, Jóhannesson, and Lappalainen 2021), class and race (Snaza and Sonu 2016).

This account of literature is by no means exhaustive, but illustrates the diverse and growing interest in how materiality influences what it means to be an embodied participant in everyday teaching situations. Meanwhile, many researchers continue to point to the lack of research on relations, bodies and movement in the 'living' practices of the classroom (Delamont and Atkinson 2021; Fenwick 2015; Hickey and Riddle 2021). Increased knowledge about the material and relational complexity of teaching practices can, for instance, be of particular value for the education and support of new teachers (Strom and Viesca 2020). This article is inspired by and shares these scholars' arguments that more research is needed to address teaching situations as relational, embodied and affective encounters (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk 2011; Zembylas 2007; Mulcahy 2019).

The article will first introduce the theoretical concepts of *orientation*, *affect* and *alignment* (Ahmed 2006), followed by a section about the research project and its methods. The article then presents a series of teaching situations in four vignettes whilst mapping their various bodily orientations and use of space. The final section discusses how a bodily practice of aligning with the local *configurations of response-abilities* can be understood as an active participant in the material production of teaching as a phenomenon.

## Conceptual framework

In her book 'Queer Phenomenology', Sara Ahmed (2006) connects phenomenological theories of embodiment to feminist materialist theories of the body. She engages with phenomenologist thinkers such as Husserl (2012) and Merleau-Ponty (2012) who emphasised how the perception or experience of the 'living body' is directed and shaped through its engagement with the world. Rather than the experiences of objects having a 'general essence' that is the same for everybody, Ahmed (2006) underlines that different bodies will meet and be met by objects in different ways. In the development of this argument, Ahmed draws on feminist, queer and antiracist theorists who articulate how material relations are productive of power distribution and social differences. For example, according to Butler (1988), bodies and their possibilities are constructed and maintained through a legacy of sedimented bodily and spatial acts. In line with feminist calls for a 'politics of location', Ahmed (2006) argues that our perceptions and experiences are never neutral but always partial and positioned. All bodies, things and environments carry distinct histories that allow space for some actions rather than others.

Following this perspective, the material and relational arrangement of a pedagogic encounter plays an active role in distributing its participants' capacities to act. To explore how spatial and bodily interactions enact directionality in teaching situations, the following sections will present the concepts of *orientation*, *affect* and *alignment* (Ahmed 2006).

### The orientation of bodies

The term *orientation* refers to bodies' spatiality and directionality in two ways (Ahmed 2006). First, a body is always orientated by inhabiting a specific location so that it is 'facing' in one direction and away from others. Taking one direction over another will make some things visible or reachable and others not (Ahmed 2006). Deciding how to inhabit a space is thus an exclusionary process. Things that become (un)reachable are understood here in a broad sense and include, for example, not only physical objects or other bodies but also ideas, emotions or practices. Second, a body is also orientated by inhabiting a specific location in time. Events in the past, as well as anticipations about the future, will give direction to a body's orientations in the present. Orientation refers not only to a body's spatial direction in its movements towards or away from an object but also to the *way* the object is approached. In other words, a body's orientation includes the 'quality' and historical, sedimented 'angle' with which the body directs its attention and energy towards that object. Importantly, since an embodied encounter entails a meeting, it is to be considered a relational encounter where multiple orientations meet (Ahmed 2006).

### The affective capacity of bodies

In an embodied encounter, such as a teaching event, the meeting of multiple orientations can be understood as an *affective* process. Affect has been conceptualised in multiple ways but refers here to the reciprocal, inter-corporal process of affecting and being affected (Blackman and Venn 2010). 'To affect' refers to the process of a body directing attention and energy to 'impress' on others, whilst 'to be affected' refers to a body being 'impressed' upon or engaged by other bodies' actions (Ahmed 2014, 6). When one body

enacts a particular spatial orientation, it entails a mutual relation of both affecting and being affected by other bodies and their orientation. A body's capacity to affect and be affected is an ongoing negotiation, and it can be amplified or diminished as a result of this process. In other words, affect refers to both the relational *processes* that produce capacity, and the *product* as the affective capacity itself (Clough 2007). What a body can do in a situation is thus always contextualised by its inter-corporal location. In a school setting, one example can be how affective capacities are produced differently depending on the relational structure of the situation. As Gunnarsson (2020) found, the relational affordances during the break created intense discussions about the same theme that during a whole-class teaching situation generated tense silences.

### **Material arrangements: aligning bodies**

When bodies orientate their attention and actions in the same direction, for example, towards the same object, they can be said to be *aligned* (Ahmed 2006). Bodies enact a particular spatial relationship by aligning with the direction of other bodies or towards the same object. Being in alignment can entail a social agreement being affected in certain ways and moving in certain directions. The alignment of bodies can also mean that they share an emotional association or a historical angle with an object (Ahmed 2006). Orientations to 'shared points of alignment' thus temporarily enfold bodies in specific spatial relations: 'Depending on which way one turns, different worlds might even come into view. If such turns are repeated over time, then bodies acquire the very shape of such direction' (Ahmed 2006, 15).

Since bodies are different, one set of spatial relations will appear more familiar or comfortable to some bodies than others. Specific material constellations therefore enable bodies to inhabit space in some ways rather than others. Recurring spatial and bodily relations distribute possibilities differently, and are therefore inevitably tied to power dynamics.

Repeated orientations may result in anticipated ways of 'being in line' with others and accumulate into bodily practices. Bodies habitually 'gravitate' towards paths or actions that align with shared, familiar or valued directions and objects (Snaza and Sonu 2016). Such recurring orientations contribute to establish what emerges as the legitimate or *compulsory* orientations (Ahmed 2006). The spatial processes of orientation and alignment are, in other words, tied to the production, distribution and stabilisation of bodily capacities to affect and be affected in social practices (Reckwitz 2017).

### **The study**

The article draws on data from a video-based ethnography investigating bodies' actions and use of space in a Norwegian upper secondary classroom. For the inquiry, I followed a class and their teacher during their lessons in a subject called 'The Media Society' for three months in 2018. The research participants were one class of 23 students and their teacher. The students were aged 17 and 18 years old, and they were halfway through a three-year-long upper secondary education. The study followed ethical guidelines for research in Norway (Klykken 2021; NSD 2020; NESH 2016).

The research material was generated by recording approximately 40 lessons during day-to-day classroom practices. I used two pocket-sized cameras and one separate audio recorder, and I moved the equipment around in response to unfolding actions and spatial arrangements (Luff and Heath 2012). In line with a ‘focused’ approach to ethnography (Knoblauch 2005), the recorded material was contextualised by the situational knowledge gained from being in the field, including field notes and debriefing group interviews with the participants.

The qualitative analysis was conducted by combining the interpretive video analysis (Knoblauch and Schnettler 2012) with the analytical approach of ‘thinking with theory’ (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). In this analytical strategy, I engaged the theoretical framework with the empirical material by moving between three different modes of ‘reading’. In the first reading, the audio-visual material was viewed and organised into broad and descriptive categories using video coding software. Categories were constructed by emphasising contrasting spatial arrangements and bodily movements (e.g. bodies arranged in groups or separately), including key themes of conversation and non-verbal expressions (e.g. of emotional character). I then selected video fragments that represented a broad variation of bodily processes and spatial arrangements, and made transcriptions of verbal, non-verbal and spatial activities and movements (Knoblauch and Schnettler 2012).

In the second reading, to investigate and make sense of the bodies’ actions and use of space, theoretical concepts of affect, orientation and alignment were ‘plugged in’ (Jackson and Mazzei 2018). The concepts were used to disrupt and unsettle habitual thinking (MacLure 2010), and they aided the focusing of the analysis by bringing the material flow of spatial and bodily interactions to the ‘front’, rather than gravitating towards a more ‘hard-wired’ or familiar focus (Delamont and Atkinson 2021), for example, by prioritising individual or verbal aspects of teaching practices.

In the third reading, I compared the transcribed and analysed accounts to look for connectedness across the empirical material. The reading of these accounts centred on the relations between human and non-human ‘participants’ in the teaching situations. Approaching the data with the above theoretical concepts resulted in the articulation of one recurring material relation that ‘held’ the teaching practice together: a collective bodily and spatial orientation towards the local and temporary boundaries for ‘doing’ school. The fragments that are presented in the vignettes below were chosen because they illustrate this recurring orientation.

### **A mapping of bodily and spatial trajectories in the classroom**

In this section, I map the actions of bodies and their use of space in a series of teaching situations. The vignettes below were constructed from a series of different spatial and bodily arrangements that occurred in one afternoon lesson. Each vignette represents a mapping of how bodies direct their actions, attentions and interests and encounter other materialities through *orientating* and *aligning* their responses in the classroom teaching situations.

## The aligned classroom

Before the situation in this first vignette, the class had been working individually for some time. The teacher had just told the students to finish the assignment and submit it via the school's digital learning platform.

### *Vignette 1*

The dimmed ceiling lights allow daylight to fall into the room from two large windows. A soft glow from individual laptop screens lights up the concentrated faces of bodies sitting in rows of desks. Their hands and eyes are resting on the laptops opposite. Most desks and chairs in the room are organised in rows, all facing the same direction; however, one set of furniture – a desk, chair, a TV screen and a whiteboard faces the other way and is located at one end of the room, near the exit. In this area, one body is standing, eyes panning the classroom. Slowly, the standing body walks down an open passage in the middle of the room, between the rows of desks, before approaching the seated bodies with a low-voiced enquiry: 'Have you handed it in?' Some bodies answer, but the replies are too quiet to reach my ears. A thick silence continues to fill the room, accompanied by the sound of keystrokes. From the back row, one seated body's eyes also pan the room whilst stretching both arms up into the air, as if just having awakened from a deep sleep. The rest of the seated bodies' gazes and hands remain directed towards the laptops.

In the situation described above, most of the seated bodies were engaged with their laptops. Their attention appeared to be orientated in a similar direction, thus collectively aligned, as they dwelt on reading and writing on laptops. With its dimmed lights and the stillness and silence of the bodies, the whole spatial arrangement facilitated individual thinking and concentration and thus contributed to this alignment. The placement of the rows of desks and chairs also put the seated bodies into alignment. The attention of the standing body, however, was differently directed. This body moved around, observed and approached the seated bodies by engaging with them verbally, waiting for their replies. The open passage between the rows in the middle of the room enabled the standing body to move closer to the seated bodies and their desks and laptops. To sum up, the standing body's attention was directed towards the seated bodies and the activity they were doing, while the seated bodies' attention was given to their own 'doing' of the task at hand.

The closely interlinked alignment of the bodies in the room is an example of a collective enactment of a specific spatial relation. Together with the room's physical setup, the standing and seated bodies enacted a material arrangement with an orientation frequently seen in contemporary classrooms. The direction of the furniture constructs a 'front' and a 'back' of the room, which is typical in schools. The enacted orientations make the standing body recognisable as a 'teacher' and the seated bodies as 'students'. This spatial arrangement is an example of established sets of relational alignments, such as how to sit and where to look, that emerge as familiar and contribute to what makes the situation intelligible as a 'teaching' situation.

## Bodies changing direction: 'Are we going to do that now?'

The vignette below shows that the collective direction of attention and action was put into motion. After investigating the students' progress, the teacher requested the students' 'change of gaze' and told them, with some evasiveness, what they were going to do next.

### Vignette 2

The teacher returns to the front of the classroom and speaks louder, addressing the whole room: 'Is there anybody who has not handed it in yet?' Some students quietly reply, 'Yes' and 'Just a minute', whilst most continue to type and gaze silently at their computer screens. A few moments later, a more decisive uttering cuts through the room: 'When you have handed it in, close the lid of your laptop and direct your gaze this way'. Now, a wave of movement spreads through the room, as one by one the laptop screens are lowered and seated students shift their gaze to look up and towards the front of the room.

The standing teacher smiles and says, 'Er ... Next, we are going to do something a bit ... awkward, [...] but I also think it might be interesting and fun. [...] But I'm going to show you. [...] We are going to do something similar to this.' The teacher touches the computer on the 'front desk' and then walks to the side. Next, a video<sup>1</sup> is projected onto a large screen at the front of the classroom. A narrator's voice and music fill the room. The video shows several groups entering a large room. Each group is visually portrayed and labelled as, for example, high or low earners, teenagers, pensioners, different professions and so forth. Next, a person calls out different criteria and asks individuals with experiences meeting those criteria to step forward; for example, 'Who in this room was the class clown?', 'Who has been bullied?', 'Who has bullied others?', 'Who had sex this past week?' and so forth. Individuals then walk out of their 'original', seemingly homogeneous group and create a new, heterogeneous group in the middle of the room. The new and more diverse groups display various emotions, for example, amusement, sadness or pride. Some groups bond or receive applause or other forms of non-verbal recognition from the others. At the end of the video, the narrator's voice states that despite their superficial differences, people share many experiences. A logo at the end makes it clear that the video is a commercial for a national TV station.

Throughout the screening, the teacher leans on the wall, next to the first row of desks, whilst the students remain seated, with their gaze directed towards the large screen. As the video plays, the faces in the room switch between thoughtful expressions and smiles, corresponding to the events in the video. After a while, some students turn their heads towards co-students and the teacher to exchange wide-eyed looks and discreet smiles.

The very second the film finishes, one student asks aloud, 'Are we going to do *that now?*' There is an emphasis on 'we', 'that' and 'now' that expresses a combination of disbelief, eagerness, and curiosity. The teacher replies with a smile: 'Yes.' The student follows up: 'With *those* questions?' The teacher replies that the questions will be different and more oriented towards 'the subject' (curriculum).



In this vignette, the teacher introduced a new activity for the class and connected it to the content of the video, and the students shifted their gaze from individual laptop screens and towards the large screen at the front of the room. This event initiated a bodily and spatial shift in the material arrangement of the room. The bodily relations first aligned with the video, as the concentrated, relaxed and sleepy facial expressions gave way to large, surprised eyes and smiles. The atmosphere of the room appeared to 'warm up' and change in line with the music and unfolding narrative in the video. The change in the students' facial expressions was followed by a discreet exchange of looks and smiles, showing an interest in seeing how others responded to the video and communicating something about it to the other bodies in the room. When the students' attention to the video began to weave together with an interest in the other students' responses, they were in the process of aligning with each other.

The video screening and the subsequent embodied engagement produced a different spatial and bodily arrangement than the one depicted in the first vignette. Compared to the actions described in the first vignette, this series of actions and gestures showed a different set of spatial relations. One change was that the room for relational engagement was differently 'shaped', as seen in the subtle but increased non-verbal exchanges as the students looked for others' expressions. The material arrangement, on the whole, was thus modified, with a different collective enactment of the whole group's capacity to affect and be affected. Thus, the new 'room' for social connections represents a different *configuration* of the bodies' capacity to act, which, as the following vignette will illustrate, continued to alter.

### A familiar direction on unfamiliar ground

As the situation unfolded, the students continued to look for direction and give each other and the spatial arrangement direction through a process of orientation and alignment.

#### Vignette 3

After the screening, the teacher asks everybody to gather at the back of the room. Some students stand up quickly, others more hesitantly. As they navigate between the rows of desks, some students engage in low but energetic conversations. Some students assist the teacher in moving some of the desks and chairs to the side of the room. The sound of furniture scraping the floor mixes with the low buzz from talking. After freeing up floor space at the back of the room, the students gather along the back wall in a jumbled line. Some students look enthusiastic, some indifferent and some nervous, with arms crossed. Some exchange looks with their eyebrows raised, and others exchange smiles.

Meanwhile, the teacher walks to his computer at the front of the room, then smiles and states, 'These things do not work without good "hero-music".' A loud guitar solo bursts out of the speakers (an instrumental action-movie soundtrack called 'The Top Gun Anthem'). Some students burst out laughing, while others groan. The teacher smiles in reply to the students' vocal outburst and joins the row of students at the back of the room. The students and the teacher now face the same direction, looking towards the empty, makeshift 'stage', while the room is saturated with 'heroic' music, excitement and tension.

The teacher holds a smartphone and reads from a list on it. As the teacher begins to speak, some students look towards the floor, as if listening with concentration. Others look directly at the teacher. All seem to be fully 'tuning in' to what the teacher is about to say. The teacher's voice is loud over the background music: 'I want those who are technically skilled to step forward.' One student replies with hesitation: 'In . . . erm . . . this subject?' Some appear confused and look around to gauge their co-students' reactions. The teacher replies: 'Yes.' Another student requires further clarification: 'Like cameras and stuff?' The teacher replies, 'Cameras and stuff, yeah.'

All the students appear to be in the midst of considering whether to move forward or not. Some students are almost glued to the floor; others appear eager and ready to 'go forward'. Finally, two students decide to break out of the line and move slowly forward. When they reach the middle of the cleared space, they turn to face the students remaining in the line. Moments later, another student grabs the arms of two other students, forcefully dragging them along to the 'front'. Others hesitantly join them, with hands in pockets, arms crossed. In the end, a total of eight students go forward. The group stands there for some moments, as the music plays, while receiving a look of recognition from the teacher and the co-students. The teacher nods and says, 'Ok! Come back.' The group of students returns to the line.

Then, with a smile, the teacher announces a new criterion: 'Next, those who define themselves as "technically backwards".' This request sparks laughter and receives even more theatrical or animated body language from the students. Some move forward with arms demonstratively crossed, or hands in pockets, while one student 'hops' playfully forward. A group of five students walk to the 'front stage' and turn to face the others. One student remaining in the line claps in support of them, as in the video. The teacher looks at them with a warm smile and says, 'Yes . . . And return. Thank you.' The teacher looks again at his phone and then looks up. 'And next, those who feel that they are good at writing.' Again, several students look towards each other as if silently seeking assistance with deciding, or to get approval for their decision, of whether to 'move forward' or not.

The activity continues in a similar pattern. Depending on the teacher's criterion, relating to skills required for the subject, smaller groups of students gather in the middle of the room. Other examples of criteria were 'those who call themselves creative', 'those who find it hard to write', 'those who are good at analysing' and 'those who struggle with concentration'. Towards the end, the students request another round, and the teacher asks the students to come up with criteria. After the activity, the students and the teacher rearrange the layout of the room. The students return to their seats, and the teacher returns to the front of the room.

In the activity described above, bodies stood up and left their desks. Furniture was moved away from an area of the room, and the 'traditionally' structured classroom lost its shape. The students connected with one another while they were on 'the move'. Some students chatted cheerfully and laughed, while others exchanged worried looks as they gathered in the line at the back of the room. The students orientated towards the new situation with a mixture of emotions, including tension and anticipation, excitement and unease. The increased social interaction and heightened emotional intensity that emerged during the video screening depicted in the second vignette seemed to spill

into and grow in this situation. On the whole, the situation, including the 'heroic' music, the physical setup of the furniture and the social energy and emotional displays, can be said to align with the atmosphere in the video mentioned in the second vignette.

During the activity, each request from the teacher brought on an intense social and corporeal exchange. The students orientated towards the teacher's request, by listening and by asking the teacher to clarify the criterion for moving forward. The teacher orientated towards and responded to the students' requests and choices by giving them clarifications, smiles and looks of recognition. The students appeared to be continuously gauging the situation by making non-verbal alliances and agreements or looking for approval or support from other students before they walked to the front. After having made their choice, some students turned around whilst walking to see the others' responses. Thus, the students moved in and out of the jumbled line in alignment with the teacher's requests and with the responses gathered from the non-verbal dialogue with other students' bodies.

Even though the individual bodies enacted the activity by displaying different emotions, the collective orientation described in the third vignette was, on the whole, characterised by increased social and bodily connectivity, movement and energy. This spatial quality becomes evident when compared with the quiet and calm (almost sleepy) individual computer-, desk- and whiteboard-based activities that had taken place only a few minutes earlier, as described in the first vignette. Thus, the relational structure depicted in the third vignette shows a new spatial and bodily configuration of the classroom's material arrangement.

### **A material encounter in the embodied classroom**

The differing spatial and bodily figurations in the series of teaching situations described above draw attention to the changing material conditions within the classroom. They highlight how bodies performed different sets of orientations and alignments with multiple others. The movements and atmosphere of the classroom were utterly transformed from the first to the third vignette. The second vignette shows a transitional situation, as one configuration of the groups' engagement with co-inhabitants and the environment was replaced by another. Together, the contrasting spatial and bodily arrangements in the three accounts illustrate how the materiality of the classroom unfolded with a variety of social energies and paces. In the following, I will discuss this continuous process of orientation and alignment of bodies in the classroom more closely.

### ***An affective inquiry into the boundaries for 'doing' school***

The material arrangement described in the third vignette was differently structured from the two other vignettes and from most of the other teaching situations I observed during fieldwork. The reactions of the students indicated that the teaching situation was significantly different or unexpected for them too. Despite the unfamiliar situation, I was struck by how the students' bodily responses were somewhat familiar. What emerged as familiar in the third vignette was the collective direction of attention. The students responded to this surprising arrangement with an embodied

display of interest and inquiry, actively seeking to understand which responses were currently expected and allowed. The students engaged in an intense evaluation of the whole situation, including the actions of the teacher and the co-students, as they were looking to adopt the 'right way' to do the activity at hand. In the third vignette, the strangeness of the situation and the responses of the students, which nonetheless remained aligned, highlighted the students' orientation of actively listening and attuning to the requests for action in the encounter in question. Such embodied attunements are also present in the second vignette, as the students appeared to orientate towards the content of the video as well as towards other students in the relational exchange accompanying the video screening.

The vignettes above have thus illustrated how, through a complex set of movements and interactions, the students continuously orientated towards the requirements of the activity, looking for clarity, while at the same time evaluating their own ability to respond in the ongoing event. The students' enactment of aligning directions thus represents how they collectively navigate the continuously changing capacities for action in a teaching situation. The activities during and right after the video screening can therefore be understood as a shared affective inquiry into the relation between the video and the group's future actions. The expressions of anticipation, tension and excitement depicted in the third vignette emerge as aligned responses to the energy, pace and intensity that the video brought to the spatial and bodily arrangement in the second vignette. The material arrangement of the situation in the second vignette, including the screening of the video and the exchange of smiles and eye contact, thus affected the configuration of bodily capacities in the situation in the third vignette. One effect of this altered configuration was articulated in the emotionally charged, verbal request when one student asked the teacher, 'Are we going to do *that now*'?

The students thus appeared to return to a position of observing and listening to words and gestures and then responding by performing different bodily and spatial arrangements. In this case, they moved from a teaching situation composed of individually working, silent and seated bodies looking at laptops, through an emotionally moving video screening, before joining the jumbled line of standing bodies, while intensely exchanging looks, laughing, and moving in and out of groups to the sound of an 80s movie soundtrack.

Throughout the fieldwork, I identified similar inquiries by the students into the local conditions of each situation for how to act and respond. This interest came to the fore as both explicit and vocal questions and comments and more subtle and implicit bodily negotiations. For example, when entering the classroom in the morning, the students often immediately asked the teacher, 'What are we going to do today?' The students also frequently asked if they could amend the conditions or rules of the given assignments (e.g. to be allowed to work in groups rather than individually). As shown in vignette three, these inquiries also took the shape of more subtle and non-verbal negotiations. Through an embodied routine of orientation and alignment, the students thus appear to seek out and negotiate over the boundaries for the current activity: What are the current possibilities for action? What 'doings' are expected or allowed? What 'doings' are not legitimate?

The action of orientating towards or 'tuning in' to the requirements, expectations or obligations thus occurred on multiple occasions and seemed like a constant material relation throughout the ethnographic material. The student bodies appeared to routinely

direct their attention and actions in response to the relational requests of other bodies and the environment. They habitually directed their attention to the 'right way' to act in the situation by active listening (with eyes and ears), identifying, understanding, interpreting, negotiating, mimicking, changing and adopting the current 'rules'. The students thus appeared both expected to and expecting to adjust to the body possibilities of the classroom, negotiating new as well as established boundaries, restrictions and affordances to move and interact. The bodies' possibilities to act and respond were thus shaped by the situation's material distribution of allowances and restrictions to respond.

### *To 'do' or not to 'do school': at the thresholds of alignment*

The vignettes above illustrate how, with each new material arrangement as a new 'room' for action unfolded, the bodies sought out its shape and responded by adjusting their activities to its boundaries. This section presents examples of a different kind of situation in which students appeared to move back and forth over thresholds of alignment.

One example of *realignment* to the 'room' for action was when one student, following her group's 'off-task' conversation, attempted to refocus their attention on the required activity by asking the others: 'Ok, now . . . should we *do* something?' Another example was when one student explicitly reassured the teacher and co-students that he was, in fact, 'doing school', despite being in the midst of using a social media app on his mobile phone. In these situations, 'to do' was contrasted with 'not doing' and thus seemed to refer to aligning their 'doings' with the present situations' required spatial and bodily orientation.

There were also several situations in which the students avoided or restricted their engagement with the obligatory direction of attention. For example, in the situation described in the vignette below, a group of students negotiated the legitimate boundaries for 'the school doings' amongst themselves during a group-work situation.

### *Vignette 4*

Four students sit around a round table, each facing their own laptop. One student takes the lead and allocates different tasks to the three other students. They have planned to interview a specific person, a YouTube blogger, and have to prepare by collecting information about that person.

Student 1 looks at students 2 and 3, and says, 'It's your job to find previous videos. Enter what you find in this document.' Student 1 then shares the link to the online document with the group, then points to Student 4 and continues, 'You can find facts elsewhere. OK, let's start the research.'

Next, the students work individually on their laptops. Student 2 was told to look at YouTube videos made by the person they are planning to interview, but instead, he begins to look at irrelevant videos while chatting cheerfully with Student 3. The topic of their conversation reveals that their on-screen activity is off-task. This makes Student 1 look up and stare at Student 2.

Student 1 says, clearly annoyed, 'What are you doing? Read about the YouTube interviewee instead!' Student 2 answers, with a teasing smile, 'But, these would be better guests!' Student 1 reacts to this reply by leaning over the table and physically grabbing Student 2, play-fighting him for a few moments. Then Student 1 stands up and dramatically puts his hands up in the air, saying, 'That was the *one* task that I thought you'd be able to do. Looking at YouTube videos, like you *always* do anyway. And *this time*, you are *actually allowed* to do it!'

The three other students smile but do not comment on Student 1's frustrated reaction. Student 1 sits down again. He repeats the instructions for the group, and they continue to work individually.

Here, two students' disagreement over the required activities caused both emotional and embodied friction. Their conversation revealed that watching YouTube videos was normally not a legitimate 'school doing', but here it was considered part of the task at hand. Nevertheless, even when looking at YouTube videos was 'actually allowed', Student 2 chose to look at the 'wrong' videos. Student 2's actions thus did not align with Student 1's rules or conditions for the 'right way' of 'doing school'. While their responses seemingly fell out of alignment, Student 1's expressed frustration suggests that he embodied a sense of duty tied to the group's activities. The above vignette thus demonstrates an ongoing negotiation over what 'doings' were situated 'outside' and 'inside' the boundaries of the obligatory orientation of that teaching situation. In other words, in this case, the students negotiated over a shared point of alignment and disagreed about the current shape of the 'room' for action and movement.

A different example of the continuous movement of bodies back and forth over thresholds of alignment was when the students' actions were performed to look 'as if' they were 'doing school'. For example, during lectures, students' bodies were sometimes positioned as if facing the talking teacher but were wearing earbuds and discreetly peering down on the screens of their half-closed laptops. In this example, the students were performing the required spatial and bodily alignment, since the bodily orientation was constructed to imitate the required direction of attention (e.g. body facing forward, staying silent). In other words, to some degree, the students aligned with the current configuration of bodily demands and possibilities, but they also *non-aligned* by subtly creating a different 'room' for their own attention so that their ears and gazes could move in a different direction. Even if the students were not fully aligning with the orientation demanded by the activity at hand, these situations illustrate the embodied effect of the classroom's spatial politics. The feelings of duty and the sense of responsibility that the students expressed demonstrate how implicit rules for 'doing school' appear to have been effectively 'attached' to the students' bodies.

### **The local 'configuration of response-abilities' as a shared point of alignment**

The four vignettes illustrate how the bodies taking part in the classroom teaching situations collectively orientated towards the materially configured opportunity for responses. By 'thinking with' the concepts of orientation and alignment, the above account has highlighted that each of these teaching situations represents an enactment

of a different set of rules or boundaries for what counts as a legitimate school activity. The vignettes show how the material arrangements were differently structured, whilst the shared point of alignment was to seek out and adjust to the present situation's possibilities, duties and constraints. A recurring material arrangement can thus be seen in how the students engaged in a spatial and bodily process of aligning their actions to the local and temporary boundaries for 'doing school'.

In what follows, I conceptualise how these spatial orientations within the classroom reproduced one shared point of alignment, namely the *configuration of response-abilities*. The hyphen in the word 'response-ability' underlines the double, reciprocal affective capacity of bodies to respond as well as to be open to receiving responses (Healy and Mulcahy 2020; Plauborg, Stine Adrian, and Malou 2020).

The boundaries of each teaching situation were configured so that it was open to some responses and closed to others. The configuration of the collective's compulsory orientation afforded and restricted the students' actions in a specific way. As each configuration of bodily capacities to respond unfolded, some spatial and embodied relations were amplified, while others were diminished. It made some actions emerge as legitimate and 'in line', and some as 'out of line' with the class' collective direction. Examples of such aligned responses are when the students were seated and quietly typing, as portrayed in the first vignette, and when they were standing and moving, as in the third vignette. Each set of boundaries 'called' differently on the students and teacher and put them into a local and temporary 'contract' of response-abilities, and the pedagogic encounters were thus opened and closed in particular ways for bodies to move and act.

Thus, each of the vignettes show one set of alignments and a temporarily resolved local configuration of a situation's distribution of affective capacities. In this process of aligning with the configuration of response-abilities, the students were opening for, engaging in and enacting sets of rules, duties and demands. The orientation and alignment influenced the capacity of students and the teacher to take part in a relational circuit of being affected and affecting others, thereby also in the production of the 'room' for responses, hence the configuration of response-abilities, in each encounter. Furthermore, this distribution of affective capacities can be understood as an *affective practice* (Wetherell 2012).

The recurring collective evaluation of the situation's response-abilities appears as a crucial spatial and bodily process in the classroom. As bodies sought and responded to the local response-ability, the affective practice itself guided or 'moved' its student and teacher bodies into established trajectories and thus shaped those bodies' perceptions, actions and directions. Thus, the practice appears to be a shared point of alignment, with the ability to move and bind the participating bodies into particular spatial arrangements. The vignettes demonstrated how the practice recruited the students' and teacher's bodies and attentions and played a key role in producing its inhabitants' obligatory orientation and alignments. The affective practice of orientating to the local and temporary 'configuration of response-abilities' can thus be seen as an active 'participant' in the material arrangement of the classroom and contributing to the production of the teaching encounter.

In each of the vignettes, some spatial and bodily enactments, such as the direction of attention and alignment of responses, 'came to matter' as legitimate ways of doing school, whilst others did not. The collective orientations thus made some responses appear as aligned and 'inside' the boundaries (e.g. doing school the 'aligned' way), and

some responses appeared non-aligned and 'outside' the boundaries (e.g. not 'doing' school, or 'doing' school the 'non-aligned' or incorrect way). Such affordances became particularly clear in the cases of non-alignment, where the students adapted their actions to appear to be 'inside' the boundaries whilst directing their attention elsewhere than to the required object of orientation (e.g. the teacher). This adaptation demonstrates how the practice is directing and '(re)working' the spatial politics of the embodied classroom.

### **Conclusion: The spatial and bodily production of 'teaching'**

This study's focus on materiality has made prominent the central role played by the spatial and bodily processes of alignment and orientation in classroom situations. The vignettes show how possibilities and restrictions for action were temporarily and collectively configured in each teaching encounter. Through collective enactments of orientation and alignment, the students sought and responded to the local configuration of response-abilities. Each configuration produced a set of limitations and affordances that determined what activity fell under the legitimate category of meaningfully 'doing school' and what did not. The practice of collective alignment with required orientations thus made bodies adhere, move and use space in specific ways. The practice of (re)configuring response-abilities can therefore be seen as an active contributor to classrooms spatial politics. It distributed powers to act and feel in that situation by creating boundaries for legitimate orientations and alignments in each pedagogic encounter. The way that the bodies align over time, as part of the material and relational arrangements of teaching encounters, can be understood as prohibiting and reinforcing certain directions of investing one's body's energy, interests and attention.

I thus propose that *the practice of aligning with and (re)configuring response-abilities* can be seen as another material 'participant' or 'body' that co-constitutes teaching as a phenomenon. The teaching situations, as material arrangements, were simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the ongoing distribution of response-abilities. One implication of approaching teaching as a material entanglement of multiple bodies working together is that the shared orientation enacted through the classroom's spatial and bodily arrangement, matters. This position prompts ethical discussions about the trajectories of teaching that we align with, and how we direct our orientation towards responsibility and accountability for our teaching's iterative production of corporeal exclusions and inclusions.

### **Note**

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc>

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