



Affect, alienation, and awkwardness: Why I sing to my students (a non-representational consideration)

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Alienation
Voice
Singing
Embodiment
Affect
Teaching

Dear reader: Please consult [Appendix A / Supplementary Data](#) to listen to the song I refer to in this opening paragraph.

We've been studying poetry, my students and I, and discussing the productive play of orality and meaning: the ways in which in breath and tone and rhythm can affect a speaker's experience and listener's engagement with the emotional and lived qualities of poetic material. As an example, we listen to Johnny Cash's recitation of Robert Service's poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee," and reflect on the warmth of his style of speech, and how his cadence contributes to an understanding of the poem as a social event, as if it was actually being shared with prosopos in the gold rush around a campfire. After listening to other examples of poetry embodied, such as readings by Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Ocean Vuong, I ask my students to consider if poetic meaning is something that exists in the words themselves, or if it is also somehow shaped through the unpredictable nature of human expression: *If expressed differently*, I ask, *does a poem mean differently?* I then distribute copies of Bertolt Brecht's "Let No One Deceive You," and after giving my students a chance to read through this poem on their own, I take a deep breath and sing the poem into song. However, this singing appears imbued with a fear that betrays the act: I feel a little shaky and momentarily lost, with a sudden rush of blood to my head, as if I'm not supposed to be where I am and shouldn't be doing what I'm doing. It's a feeling I cannot name and cannot grasp, which happens in the act of singing apart from thinking. Even though I've sung this poem before in similar circumstances, I'm never quite ready for the moment my mouth opens. I don't really know where to rest my eyes and my body feels unfamiliar, as the temporary break from the habitual patterns of classroom life is immediately unnerving. However, this decomposition in song also invites an opportunity to reconsider the emotional

vulnerabilities of educational life.

1. Part 1: The teacher's meaning is lost

As I sing to my students in literacy education, my performance appears to catch them unprepared and unaware, as their immediate physical responses often manifest a palpable sense of doubt, dis-equilibrium and uncertainty. For both my students and I, something is invariably disturbed. Despite the connections that may be made between my singing and the theories of learning that we are studying – for example, exploring how meaning shifts and trembles between expressive forms, problematizing text-centric narratives of literacy experience ([Leander and Boldt, 2012](#)), and recognizing the body itself as a site of multimodal formation ([Lenters, 2016](#)) – while I sing and accentuate the unrefined and undulating potential of a single, un-accompanied voice, my students react in a number of seemingly uncontrollable ways. They shift uncomfortably in their seats, appear to panic with eyes wide open, stare absentmindedly at their computer screens, make fleeting and awkward eye contact (both with me and each other), and unsuccessfully try to stifle nervous and irrepressible laughter. Reading these anxious and volatile responses, it appears that for many students their expectations of what my teaching is supposed to look like – whether didactic or collaborative – fails to correspond with the performatively unexpected nature of what I am doing. When I sing, it seems that my status as teacher is something different, something stranger, than what my students and I have come to know and expect. I wouldn't quite say my authority is called into question, but that the question of authority is altogether insufficient. When I sing, I take "a leap that is undoubtedly disorienting" ([Manning, 2016](#), p. 44), and I'm

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100649>

Received 27 May 2019; Received in revised form 21 November 2019; Accepted 25 November 2019

Available online 07 January 2020

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often left just as momentarily confused as my students. If I look at my fingers, I can see they're slowly shaking, and already my shirt is damp with sweat.

While Paula Salvio (2007) asks, "What pedagogic possibilities are made available when the teacher's meaning is lost ... and by the disequilibrium that is brought about by such losses of mastery?" (p. 7), I can respond by describing what occurs when I sing as not so much only a loss of mastery and perfection (my singing is always somehow *in error*, off-key, trembling, imbued with the imperfections of body) as also a sense of renewed and recovered mobility. As I sing, I seem to lose my psychic grounding and take up dizzily, momentarily in flight, which leads me to wonder if the ideal of pedagogic mastery, and its associated qualities of intellectual stability, can ever be said to actually represent the true condition of the teacher. Perhaps the teacher is always in flight and only ever hallucinates ground. Indeed, perhaps the loss of the teacher's meaning is all we ever had, the awkward glances we share a passing and clumsy recognition of this disheartening (yet also strangely liberating) fact. If this is the case, however, and the song a reminder of the persistence of the incoherencies of teaching, there must be something in my singing that is able to do this dubious work. Between body and language, I suggest this something is the voice, that part of the singer that surreptitiously "lurk[s] beneath the words" (Manning, 2016, p. 31).

Taking a series of words (a poem) and giving them musical form, "voice puts matter into circulation ... that is more or other than language" (Duncan, 2004, p. 303), indicating – ineffably, through the teacher's body, my body, which lingers in song – that the partnership of singing and teaching transforms the poem *and* the teacher into something more than words and body, and in always unpredictable ways. As Judith Butler writes of the performative nature of the speech act, this is "a doing at odds with an intending, in persistent divergence from itself" (p. 121), persistently splitting and multiplying the various meanings and non-meanings of language. New ideas that are not ideas but more like dreams before they are remembered, images that are more like flashing colors than any single thing, suddenly spark and just as suddenly disappear into oblivion. This inability to latch well onto things means that when I sing, the situation plays out like a kind of joke, but one that nobody gets, least of all myself. However, despite this graceless sense of humour (or whatever it is), each time I sing the classroom becomes – even if for a brief, uncapturable moment – a thoroughly defamiliarized space; for teacher and student alike, we look at each other anew following the awkward interruption of the aural spectacle of song.

In this paper – regarding the myriad effects of my quivering voice, a volatile transformation of words to flesh to shared vibration, a performance whose meaning is many and always at least a little bit out of tune; breathy, scratchy, and imperfect – I consider how singing disrupts the production of meaning in the classroom, and how such disruption may encourage collective experiences of defamiliarization. While turning to Brecht's notion of alienation in the theatre, I also make a move to nonrepresentational theory, and while these conceptual frameworks may appear at first glance as methodologically incompatible (and certainly, some of Brecht's more explicitly didactic formations, such as found in his *Lehrstücke* or Learning Plays, are certainly at odds with the posthuman, Deleuzian concepts that undergird nonrepresentational thinking), they nonetheless share a concern with "forms of experience and movement that are not only or never cognitive" (Nash, 2000, p. 655). In fact, as Thorsteinsson (2017) notes of Brecht's later writing in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, the "affirmation of pleasure goes hand in hand with an equally resolute rejection of instruction" (p. 62), as Brecht's theory of dramatic pleasure is also positioned "against the didacticism of representation and cognition in favor of a bodily mechanics of the affective" (p. 75). Read as a theorist of pleasure production, the Brecht of the *Short Organum* argues for as-yet-unknown forms of revolutionary affect and desire, against the identifiable categories of private and personal empathy.

As an irreproducible practice whose meaning is inextricably tied to the ephemeral contexts of practice and performance, I also conceptualize my singing as a thoroughly "slippery text" (Fleckenstein, 2003), whose knowledge can never be safely apprehended, but instead, like a fugitive energy on the lam, is "invented in the escape, in the excess" (Manning, 2016, p. 38). As Fleckenstein (2003) notes, a text that is slippery encourages "students to straddle the shifting boundaries among bodies, places, and language" (p. 113), while also implying the "floating worlds" between ostensibly stable categories of meaning. More than just slippery, though, I also position my singing (after Shoshana Felman) as a scandalous device, which – similar to the disquieting commitments of nonrepresentational work – "aims to rupture, unsettle, animate, and reverberate rather than report and represent" (Vannini, 2015, p. 14). In what follows, I discuss the affect-laden nature of embodied composition in singing, and how the consequences of adopting this indeterminate practice allows me to productively estrange the classroom space.

2. Part 2: Though I may be the singer, we are all being sung

In her discussion of the operatic, Michelle Duncan (2004) focuses on the inescapably transgressive and indescribable nature of the singer's voice, which though it may initially appear as connected to the conditions and functions of language, also "participates in the creation, disruption or dissolution of registers of meaning independent of linguistic signification" (p. 284). "As anyone who has ever heard opera knows," Duncan insists, "the singing voice has moments where it tears language apart, or tears itself apart from language" (p. 294). As such, it can be understandably difficult, if not impossible, to actually describe *through language* what it is that the singing voice does *to language* and all that language is not, since what it contributes is always more or less than that which language can ever know: "the body," Duncan tells us, "imposes its own agency on the linguistic act ... inserting its own 'knowledge', 'meaning' and 'intent'" (p. 293). Since it cannot be owned or captured by language or narrative form, the radical edge of live, embodied singing – like other precarious techniques of art whose meaning is in the making – is its fragility and vulnerability, which as Snowber (2016) indicates, is also "what makes us human, what deeply connects us to each other" (p. 50). Though our bodies may appear as boundaries, they are also permeable portals to shared experience: an intersubjective threshold that functions both as "limit and ... opening" (p. 66).

As I face my students in the classroom, my speaking voice is always inflected with body, and is always an intimate engagement between the world of ideas and the world of breath, blood, and guts. In fact, the teacher's embodied presence illuminates the inherent inseparability of these worlds, as thinking, feeling, and sensing are part of an unbroken current, where lived experience in all its facets (cleaving dualities of body/mind, self/other, affect/cognition, etc.) spiral and intermingle despite our frequent "emotional need to imprison objects rigidly within themselves" (Milner, 2010, p. 19). Even if apparently motionless, the body is always moving, as skin regenerates and blood flows and muscles contract and electrical signals travel from one part of the nervous system to another. The body is always unstable and always a part of the teacher's life. Even if teaching is sometimes erroneously figured as a strictly cognitive and emotionless affair (for example, I've repeatedly heard new teachers being told to check their emotions 'at the door'), the body persists as an irrepressible screen on which the movements of emotion, despite their seeming illegibility, are nonetheless made manifest. As Eugenio Barba (1995) describes in his *Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, "When we are standing erect, we can never be immobile" (p. 19), as the "micro-movements" of any embodied performance (including teaching) ensures the performer is forever in a state a "permanently unstable balance" (p. 18). Singing just seems to accentuate this relationship in newly unpredictable ways, while forcefully undermining the idea of straightforward intentionality in language; as a

performative event, singing apparently “generates or disrupts levels of meaning by *doing*” (Duncan, 2004, p. 288, emphasis added).

Since body feels out of (my) control while singing, I cannot help but act nervously and with trepidation, offering my students a newfound vulnerability that they may in turn choose to respond to (or otherwise choose to react against). When I sing, it therefore seems that my body – trembling differently and more expressively than usual – becomes a *scandalous* subject, reorienting our shared participation in the inherent vulnerabilities of education as something definitively other than habitual. Since singing potentially emphasizes the teacher's body apart from the intentionality of the teacher's language, for both my students and I, thought itself appears especially elusive when I sing: “It is,” Duncan (2004) underscores, an instance of “corporeality out of control, awkward bodies that disrupt the priority of thought” (p. 293).

Most importantly, however, the issue here is not just that the singer's body is somehow involved in singing (this much is obvious, as is the fact that the teacher's body is always a deviation away from intentionality), but that the singing voice is where bodily effects are both created and dispersed. In singing, the virtual presence of my body does not merely sound then disappear, but also reverberates and echoes – and thus further fragments itself within, while inviting a reaction from – the vulnerable bodies of others. The body that hears is thus the body sung. “Vocal resonance seeps through porous bodies” (Duncan, 2004, p. 304), which indicates that – as a singer – I can never predict *what* my students will hear, nor can I assume the psychic or bodily effects of such hearing: “things,” as Nigel Thrift (2008) so straightforwardly indicates, “can have a potent afterlife” (p. 9). Similarly, Walter Gershon (2018) describes the inescapably physical nature of how sound travels: despite its invisibility, “waves ... hit our bodies regardless of whether they are noticeably felt or exist within the range of human perception” (p. 11). “The sonic,” he emphasizes, “is always vibrational affect that carries information that does something to you” (p. 54). As a carrier of affective traces, whose “disturbances ... open experience to new modes of expression” (Manning, 2016, p. 2), the singing voice (or the voice that has been sung, as with the resounding vibrations of a tuning fork) thus embodies the inescapable interdependencies of social life, including the classroom: the “deep co-determination of what appears to be *inside* and what appears to be *outside*” (De Toffoli, 2011, p. 596). In this moment of shared resonance, the bodies of singer and sung are newly as one, reaching towards what Thomasson (2017) calls “a reciprocal act of vulnerability: to be open to receive that which is being offered” (p. 156).

As a threshold to an atmosphere of relational fragmentation, the resonant possibilities of singing in the classroom also speaks to the methodological projects of nonrepresentational theory, including its focus on emergence, relationality, movement, routine, performance, practice, diffusion, embodiment, contingency, and novelty. Moreover, as Lorimer (2005) notes of the phenomena generally of interest to nonrepresentational theorists, as with my singing, they “may seem remarkable only by their apparent *insignificance*” (p. 84). Though I certainly don't want to suggest that singing is somehow exemplary of a nonrepresentational style of thinking or teaching (as if such a thing were even possible), my student's reactions nonetheless indicate, as Erin Manning (2016) writes, “the uneasiness of an experience that cannot yet be categorized” (p. 39). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis, Whitehead's speculative pragmatism, and James' radical empiricism, Manning further considers that since the force of affective experience – that which “moves us” (p. 20) – is often “irreducible to definition” (p. 20), we need to remain wary of the ways in which language imposes and presupposes meaning upon experiences that simply cannot be understood or categorized by the level of conscious awareness that language requires. Given its faltering sense of definition, I suggest that one of the productive effects of singing involves a shared experience of estrangement in the face of a literacy-related activity that, while it references language, also throws traditional notions of stable meaning and form irrevocably into question.

However, even though the undomesticated elements of this brief encounter will remain necessarily outside of language – for Leander and Boldt (2012), “Our own narrative processes get in the way” (p. 35) – the affective uncertainty that my singing encourages allows my students a moment in which to do something else: to forestall the demands of decision making, to linger in the place before a decision is made, “where [the event] has not yet fully become this or that” (Manning, 2016, p. 2). Is my singing a teaching, a creation of art, an improvisation, a communication, an invitation, a gesture of nonsense, a game, a literary act, a performance, etc., etc., etc.? Whatever it is, before its defined as such, there must be a moment in which it may be absolutely anything at all, where “the potential for variation is almost infinite” (Leander & Boldt, p. 29). Nurturing values of experimentation, restlessness, and deliberate immaturity in literacy education, my singing strives to invite students, as Thrift encourages, “out to the edge of the cliff of the conceptual” (Vendler, 1995, p. 79. Cited in Thrift, 2008, p. 12). “To see what will happen,” he continues, “to *let the event sing you*” (Thrift, p. 12, emphasis added). In this stimulation of the experimental I am therefore also moved, as a singing teacher, to participate in the relational conditions of being sung, and to risk an attitude of unknowing, contemplation, and wonder towards my own pedagogical efforts: to teach and to sing without presupposition, turning “the ordinary, which is already recognized, into the extraordinary” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 179).

3. Part 3: Riding the trembling lines that compose the everyday

In the otherwise formal space of the classroom, the teacher's performance of an aesthetic interruption such as singing can thus inspire collective feelings of estrangement and defamiliarization that, even though nothing is ever promised or fixed in advance, may allow teachers and students alike to develop notions of curiosity and speculation towards themselves and towards each other. Shifting my focus, I will now briefly consider how singing relates to certain distancing devices from the world of theatre, and how these devices may be used to invent and imagine new forms of existence in the classroom.

As part of his efforts to move theatre away from the Aristotelian objectives of identification, empathy, and cathartic release, German playwright Bertolt Brecht described his socially progressive theatre as one that explicitly hindered the development of such conventional objectives. Instead, through activating what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt*, often translated as the Alienation or A-effect, his theatre actively provoked the audience toward a suspicion and questioning of the familiar and habitual. Rather than accepting the world as *is*, Brecht challenged his viewers to adopt an attitude of critical curiosity regarding the world that *could be*. Writing at a time of acute social change, Brecht criticized the tendency of bourgeois art to place its viewers in a powerless and complacent mental state, which he described as an ideological process of “emotional infection” (Brecht and Willet, 1964, p. 95). In opposition to this, he encouraged an art of estrangement, which makes perception unusual and uncomfortable, thus disrupting the tendency to automatically accept what one sees on stage as necessary, normal, and natural. As Kumagai and Wear (2014) indicate, this is a “disruption [that] causes a momentary pause between thought and action” (p. 976).

Though Brecht's argument may at times appear as exceedingly dualistic, especially regarding his enthusiasm for rational criticism, I nonetheless appreciate how his “aesthetics of alienation” (del Rio, 2008, p. 70) aim to disturb the ways in which certain narrative art forms appear to compel patterns of emotional passivity and deference. I also value the fact that Brecht's efforts to disturb his audiences are not merely an end unto themselves, but a means of enabling people to approach the familiar with a newly suspicious and often-uncomfortable curiosity. Following Brecht, my desire for the aesthetic intrusion of singing is not merely that it ends with a simple, transient feeling of awkwardness, but that its reverberations inspire students to question

the possibilities of what a teacher could be, while also developing an attitude of suspicion about overly prescriptive theories of language, literacy, and learning. Using singing as a method of alienation in teaching, the sorts of questions that I hope my students begin considering are: What is happening? Why does this feel weird? How does this new way of seeing, hearing, feeling, and understanding relate to habits of reading, teaching and learning?

Brecht's theory of estrangement also includes suggestions about how actors might identify (or really, dis-identify) with the characters whose experiences they are portraying. Though acting is markedly different than teaching, Brecht's ideas about the purposes and methods of distancing in theatre illustrate how the choices that teachers make on the stage of teaching – as with acting – are never transparent or naturally self-evident. To put it otherwise, thinking about teaching through the Brechtian lens of alienation involves considering the particularities of teaching as choices rather than inevitabilities: the things we do, the ways we move, the clothes we wear, the texts we use, the words we speak (or sing) – they can all be shown differently as a way to experiment with and express different articulations of teaching.

Since the purpose of Brecht's theatre is for audiences to recognize the questionable and potentially unnatural nature of activities taking place on stage, his actors need to develop a similarly unnatural style, which swerves sharply away from theories like method acting that require actors to enter, as much as possible, into the identities and psychological temperaments of their characters. Instead, Brecht proposes that actors must never forget that they are playing a role: "Once the idea of total transformation is abandoned," he writes, "the actor speaks his part not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation" (Brecht and Willett, 1964, p. 138), and through the use of "a definite gest of showing" (p. 136), the actor needs to remember and rearticulate first impressions, for instance, "what he felt astounded at and where he felt compelled to contradict" (p. 137). "In this way," Brecht emphasizes, nothing that the actor does is to be seen as natural or necessary, and "every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision" (p. 137). Playing my song as a gesture of teaching that punctuates my own inarticulate feelings of hesitation – about the appropriateness of what I'm doing, what it means, and whether it is teaching or whether it is actually something else entirely – thus disrupts the very idea of teaching as a self-conscious and self-knowable event, and as I perform this unspoken interrogation (collapsing the edifice holding fast the mastery of the teacher), this loss of meaning invites my students into a similarly questioning frame of mind.

As a cut in the classroom's habitual fabric, my singing thus appears to fall between the dynamic tension of Brecht's "gest of showing" – which, as Barthes (1977) indicates, "takes up the idea of the pregnant moment" (p. 73), an elastic and unsettled interval, where indecision and uncertainty inspires a search for answers and alternative forms – and a gesture that is more deeply indeterminate, similar to Manning's (2016) "minor gesture," which she describes as "the force that makes the lines tremble that compose the everyday" (p. 7). Immersed within and also co-creating these trembling lines, the students that I sing for and with, in the ways that they respond (or fail to respond) to the interplay between my body's movements and their own (the laughing, the staring, the awkward panic), then consider how and whether to tune my inconclusive vibrations of singing to forms that they can recognize: whether to ignore me or to continue laughing, and whether to categorize this surprising gesture as teaching, as antithetical to teaching, as something between, or as something that may be teaching, but perhaps is not yet.

4. Part 4: A lingering sense of weirdness

Despite the potential for practices of defamiliarization to open up new meanings and novel insights, the specter of the familiar always hangs threateningly over the figure of that which it is not. Even now, as I commit these words to voice, my mind may wander, and wild orchestrations of feeling may tingle between my fingers and toes, and then – like the moment following a hypnagogic swing – I am suddenly captured back and thrown into the relatively perceptible nature of an

ordered world. Likewise, my song will end and in the silence following, students usually feel compelled to join each other in applause. In this applause, I personally experience a feeling of warmth and appreciation, while I also recognize that it signifies the tuning of "force ... to form" (Manning, 2016, p. 15), the resolution of meaning that had been, up to that point, radically indefinite. There may a lingering sense of weirdness, but already the teacher's sense of mastery and meaning is being re-focused and re-found. The question that I am left with, then, is whether the affect, alienation, and awkwardness of my singing may continue to vibrate past the tangible moment of song, or whether its "failure to thrive" (Manning, p. 2) is the very detail that I should be celebrating. To "close without bringing closure" (Boldt and Leander, 2017, p. 422), I choose to leave this disorderly line of questioning unresolved.

On the floor where I work, I often walk by a series of framed children's paintings, and though I don't actually know the history of their placement, I appreciate being able to repeatedly glimpse their errant lines and colors, and their playful and impetuous designs. In my teaching, I sometimes ask my students to choose a painting, and to craft an aesthetic response that addresses what they understand as the energy – narrative or otherwise – of the piece.

As a provisional ending, this is a song that I wrote in response to one of these paintings, and which I hope contributes to a feeling of holding "the communicable in fruitful tension with the incommunicable" (Taussig, 2011, p. 100).

Dear reader: Please consult [Appendix A / Supplementary Data](#) to listen to my singing of this song.



He's just a clown under the streetlight
Downtown never looked so bright
With his mother and his lover
And the night, it is his cover

He's just a clown, the trees are shining
They're saying hello to him
Purple, blue and yellow
Are the colors of his rainbow

He's a clown, there is no other
His name is Mister Brother
He laughs, so silly dreaming
His smile is a beamin'

He's a clown, life is for livin'
His mistakes, they are forgiven
Because clowns are better than everything
In this goddamn world

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100649>.

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