International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Seeing Musically Agentive Voices: Tracing to Make Transparent

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Abstract

In this paper, I share an analysis process that emerged from and evolved during my efforts to study children's musical learning from videorecordings of choral rehearsals. Because written transcription would not adequately represent nonverbal data within social interactions, I developed a technique that (a) enabled me to disseminate understandings from these data and (b) simultaneously served as a multi-layered method of analysis. I describe this analysis technique here in hopes that other researchers may find it useful as well, particularly as they seek to story experiences of children as research participants.

Introduction

In this paper, I share an analysis process that emerged from and evolved during my efforts to study children's musical learning from videorecordings of choral rehearsals. Because written transcription would not adequately represent nonverbal data within social interactions, I developed a technique that (a) enabled me to disseminate understandings from these data and (b) simultaneously served as a multi-layered method of analysis. I describe this analysis technique here in hopes that other researchers may find it useful as well, particularly as they seek to story experiences of children as research participants.

A Story Begins

In an effort to contribute to the literature on collaborative learning processes in music ensemble settings, I engaged in a qualitative study of a choral ensemble of children and teens aged 6-16 that included opportunity for collaborative learning (Hogle, 2018a). As a teacher-researcher with a desire to sensitively and interpretively understand contextual experiences of each learner (Bresler, 1992, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Eisner, 2008; Kincheloe, 2003; Peshkin, 1994), I sought to understand the nature and development of the learners' musical agency (Wiggins, 2011a, 2016) through this learning/teaching experience. Data included my own recollections and impressions from having been the teacher of the ensemble and a participant in all rehearsal sessions, videorecordings of every session, my own reflective journal and lesson plans, and student and parent artifacts.

During video analysis, I focused on musical sound and systematically transcribed both verbal and nonverbal data, such as facial expression, eye contact, gesture, posture, proximity, and other observations surrounding social interaction (Robinson, 1994). I also wrote in a journal, in which I sought to synthesize literature reading, personal experience and reflection, and recursive data analysis. I organized, described, and interpreted the data, making inferences through inductive analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Desiring an *emic,* thick description (Geertz, 1973), I chose to write specific narrative accounts of educational experiences as narrative emplotment through analysis (Barone, 1995; Clandinin, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Cooper & McNab, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995). Yet, as I continued to work in these ways, written narratives derived from transcribed videos began to feel like an inadequate layer of analysis. I knew that more was happening in the data than I was representing.

In this multiage ensemble, learners increasingly engaged in peer scaffolding. As I transcribed the videos, I noticed many instances of children attuning to one another's musical agency, seeking to foster others' learning with positive emotional responses. Young children often do not use words to express emotions, but small changes in facial expressions, gestures, eye

contact, or body movement can reveal their inner, unconscious thoughts (Goldin-Meadow, 2000). I began to seek an alternative approach that would enable me to capture and analyze what was happening in the nonverbal interactions.

In an effort to create a resonant, ethical work, I sought to care for both the participants and the setting, "portraying them with complexity and dignity" (Bresler, 2006, p. 65). Bogden and Biklen (2007) emphasize the importance of "shar[ing] in the meanings that the cultural participants take for granted and then…depict[ing] the new understanding for the reader and for outsiders…concerned with representations" (p. 31). Plowman and Stephen (2008) refer to representation as "the ways in which images and text reconstruct the original sources" (p. 542).

I knew that representations of data and possible meanings were critical to sharing the voices of learners in this study. Equally important, I sought *verstehen* or "empathetic understanding" (Bresler, 2006, p. 23) with what Leavy (2018) describes as a public audience of music educators and learners, desiring my work to be useful, impactful and understandable as "vicarious experience" (Bresler, 1992, p. 76), perhaps inspiring empathetic, dialogic reflections and problem-solving in their own classroom contexts (Bresler, 2018; Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). I hoped to follow Bresler's (2009) suggestion of "making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange" (p. 12), perhaps then fostering multiple understandings of a music classroom and ultimately, transformation. But, with these foci in mind, I faced an ontologically ethical problem.

How Can I Share Their Story?

During analysis of videorecordings of children engaged in collaborative music learning, I realized I needed to share their pervasively interactive and dialogic nonverbal and socially constructed meaning-makings, to enable their voices to be heard. Nonverbal, visually observed communication within complex social interactions seemed to be vitally important data. As a teacher-researcher, I aimed to bring pedagogical tact (van Manen, 1991, 2002, 2015) and care (Noddings, 1984) into each analysis technique chosen, as a "passionate scholar…connect[ing myself] emotionally to that which [I was] seeking to know and understand" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 64). With this careful and affective attention to detail and to my particular learners, I knew I needed to protect anonymity of each child, yet simultaneously share storied, visual images of their nonverbal, socially mediated musical agency (Karlsen, 2011, 2014). In researching possible approaches to video analysis (e.g., Erickson, 2006; Flewitt, 2006), I realized that sharing written transcriptions and narratives alone would not suffice for this study.

In hopes of generating a new layer of data analysis, I took screenshots from videos, essentially

producing photographs that I could not share because they would not protect participant identity. I considered using technology to blur or pixilate the images (Flewitt, 2006; Nutbrown, 2010; Plowman & Stephen, 2008; Rogoff, 2003), but was faced with tension in my ability "to be true to the participants' stories as well as to the scholarship and integrity of the report, acknowledging [my] inherent presence within it" (Blair, 2012, p. 215). To blur faces in screenshots would blur away the very nonverbal meanings each child was offering, often through their subtle changes in facial expression or eye gaze.

As a result, I stumbled onto a technique of tracing video screenshots with thin tracing paper. In the process, various psychological and social complexities within the setting also became transparent. In seeking to illustrate common, central phenomena within and storied between each image, I chose to only trace and foreground certain photographic elements of screenshots I had created in my previous layer of analysis. As I traced specific elements, I began to undergo another layer of analysis to understand meanings present in the chosen screenshots or photographs.

The act of tracing, of making visible, of representing, yielded new themes that had not emerged through my earlier analysis techniques. Through analytically taking away or making space around salient details, leaving essence, my process was similar to that of Picasso in "The Bull" (Lavin, 1993), to found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Richardson, 1992, 2002; Wiggins, 2011b),[1] and to design thinking (Do et al., 2000). After the fact, I discovered that my process was similar to that taken by Kendon (2004), who sought to disseminate findings about gesture as utterance.

My multi-layered data analysis process served to protect the children, yet preserve their multidimensional, meaning-filled, nonverbal voices, perhaps inviting educational dialogue. I offer this technique as a possibility for other researchers who seek meaning-making through interconnected storying, especially when a holistic view of interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions is empathetically and interpretively vital.

Tracing to Make Transparent: Mimetic Intersubjectivity in Re-storying

As I traced images of learners working toward shared understanding or intersubjectivity, I realized that tracing became a tool for my own intersubjective narrating of the participant's emotional experiences. I sought to enable resonant, emotional connection (Bresler, 2006; Dewey, 2005; Rolling, 2018; Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008) across logocentric

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[1] Wiggins (2011b) notes the comparison between found poetry and Picasso's "The Bull."

boundaries (Watson, 2009). The results are not intended as fine art, but as a simple mimetic realism, creating a likeness that imitates lived experience (Dalwood et al., 2013). I never considered the product to be creatively applied work within the discipline of visual art but, rather, simply acted as a researcher, working with a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (van Manen, 1990).

Yet, although more praxial than aesthetic, my process seemed to share characteristics of arts-informed educational research. Cole and Knowles (2008) articulate the central purposes of arts-informed qualitative research: "to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible" (p. 59). A researcher could share literary or visual representations to evoke an emotional or imaginative response in others. Eisner (2008) explains,

> Art is present in research when its presence enables one to participate vicariously in a situation. Experiencing a situation in a form that allows you to walk in the shoes of another is one way to know one aspect of it. Empathy is a means to understanding, and strong empathic feelings may provide deep insight into what others are experiencing. (p. 6)

Readers of the study have likened the traced images to dialogically communicative cartoons (Galman, 2009; Maggio, 2007; Plowman & Stephen, 2008). Galman (2009) states, "Comics do not belong to the 'fine arts' (p. 199) [but comic] graphic representations…can make use of systems of symbols, texts and images that allow multiple—even contradictory—interpretations to occur simultaneously" (p. 200). Maggio (2007) describes "cartoon art [as the] perfect vehicle for individual cognitive interpretation" (p. 238) because we cognitively fill in and construct individual meanings from missing details within and between sequentially storied cartoons.

In discussing forms of authentic data representation that might foster empathetic involvement and understanding of particular learner experiences, Eisner (1997) suggests that we choose "one tool rather than another because it does the job that you want done better than the others" (p. 8). In my case, I realized a need for a multipurpose tool that would simultaneously enable generative analysis, representation of children's interactions, and ethical dissemination of findings to researchers and practitioners. Perhaps those who view the tracings experience them with their own empathies, viewed from within their own contextual experiences. Leavy (2018) offers, "With respect to the aesthetics or 'beauty' of the research product itself, the beauty elicited by [arts-based research] is explicitly linked to how it fosters reflexivity and empathy" (p. 5).

In my layered, cyclical, hermeneutic phenomenological process, as I interwove analyzed visual tracings with participants' words and my words as researcher, describing participant experiences, a thickened temporal narrative seemed to develop, perhaps similar to a picture storybook (Golden & Gerber, 1990) of insights into the socially constructed learning experiences of the participants. In choosing to analytically re-story through interrelated, multimodal word and image, I chose dialogue with teacher/reader/viewers as we seek to make meaning through both nonverbal spaces of communication (Kondo, 2015) as well as verbal. Just as music learners enter into multimodal, socially semiotic ways of learning (Flewitt, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), audiences of this work might enter into a similar process (Watson, 2009) as they fill in their own responsive ideas. Golden and Gerber (1990) suggest, "A picture book narrative, then, has the potential of generating multiple interpretations depending upon what the symbol offers, what the reader brings, and how the text is mediated by participants in a social context" (p. 205). As I have shared this work with other music educators, some have displayed emotional responses such as tears; others have smiled, leaned forward to see better, or looked to one another, reflecting resonance, thinking, and verisimilitude. Many have immediately begun to share similar stories.

Tracing Makes Their Story Transparent: An Example from the Study Data

Here I share a short thematic, temporal picture narrative that emerged in the study data (Hogle, 2018a). From my analysis of these data, I would title this narrative, "A Choral Ensemble Normalizes Mistakes: A Positive *Perezhivanie*." Conceptually related to music performance anxiety and musical agency, Mahn (2003) explains Vygotsky's use of a Russian term, *perezhivanie,* as "the way children perceive, emotionally experience, appropriate, internalize and understand interactions in their environment" (p. 129). Through tracing to make transparent, the story depicts selected moments in which some learners offered and others contagiously absorbed musically agentive, positive *perezhivanija* or emotional reactions to performing mistakes.

This story includes six-year old Jane and twelve-year old Malaika,[2] with pictures shared in the sequential order in which they occurred through the series of rehearsals (Figures 1-4). Jane and Malaika were two learners who seemed to experience a progressive release of music performance anxiety. As learners increasingly offered assistance to others, they also pervasively sought scaffolding from one another. In their own words, each member of the ensemble served to "help" one another. Positive reactions to mistakes became normalized, perhaps through the community's pervasive *learned helpfulness* (Hogle, 2018a, 2018b).

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[2] All names are pseudonyms.

Figure 1. "I'm afraid I will make a mistake."

This is six-year old Jane. "I'm afraid I will make a mistake. I'm afraid I will forget the words." Six-year old Wesley shrugged, "Let's just do our best." Six-year old Asha smiled, "I just want to have fun!" Experienced high-schooler Nanji offered, "We will have fun. We've got this and people will love us."

Figure 2. "I made a big mistake."

Meet Malaika, a 12-year old, standing next to Jane in Session 5. As she rehearsed one piece, Malaika discovered a place in the music where she was having difficulty. "I made a big mistake," she exclaimed and put her head in her hands. For a moment, Jane's gaze immediately centered on Malaika and her face fell. Malaika looked to Jane, who was strongly singing their shared

voice part. She then looked to the teacher, seeking even more scaffolding than Jane's vocal leadership. The teacher gave her Curwen hand signs as a conducting gesture, she smiled, and then joined Jane strongly.

Figure 3. Teacher-helper

In Session 11, Jane seemed confused. In an immediate empathetic response, fifth-grader Abby took on the role of peer scaffolder. "We're right here? Do you need help?"
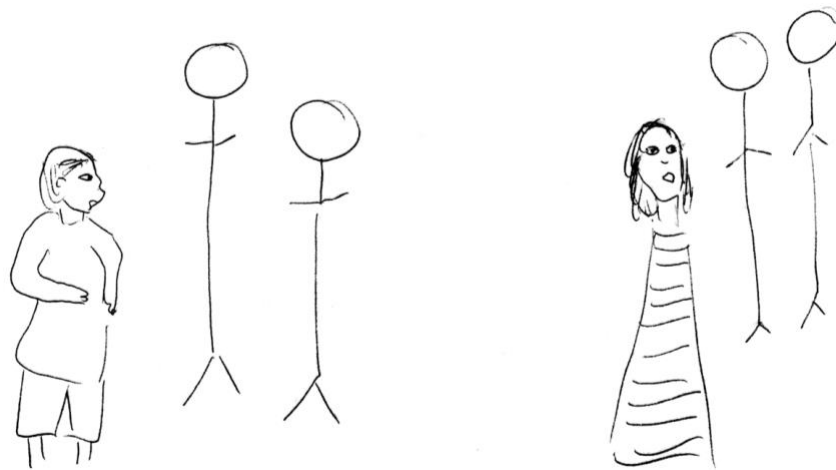

Figure 4. Learner-helpers

Later, while singing a polyphonic piece, as three separate lines joined into an extended partner song, six-year olds Wesley and Jane looked to the older peers in their section, away from the teacher. They sought scaffolding, initiating body movement, eye gaze, and nonverbal, musically intersubjective communication, enabling their own vocal success in part-singing.

In the process of tracing video screen shot drawings of older girls acknowledging their own mistakes in Session 13 (Figures 5-7), I noticed Jane's face as she observed their varied reactions. Tracing made transparent; a theme and ensuing findings emerged.

Figure 5. "Whoops!"

During Session 13, after twelve weeks of peer scaffolding and learned helpfulness (Hogle, 2018a, 2018b), 16-year old Nanji missed the first pitch on the second phrase, bent over, brought her hands to her face, laughed, said, "Whoops!" and smiled. Others smiled at her and reacted with "Whoops!" or an empathetic, "It's OK, Nanji." Next to Nanji, Mailaka smiled, staring forward, but Jane actively looked away.

Figure 6. "I did it again!"

The group tried the piece again, yet Nanji hit another obstacle. "I made a mistake! I did it again! I need help right there!" This time, Malaika and Jane both smiled broadly and turned to Nanji, making eye contact with her.

Figure 7. Normalizing mistakes: A positive *perezhivanie*

> *A third time, with scaffolding, Nanji was successful. At a later point in the piece, Malaika smiled, laughed and threw her hands up when she swayed from her part. "I made a mistake too!" Jane and Nanji both smiled and continued to sing as Malaika sought scaffolding, constructing a pathway around a musical obstacle or mistake. Jane raised her arms to match Malaika's nonverbal response. Malaika seemed to have contagiously appropriated Nanji's musically agentive response to making a mistake, a socially mediated response, a differing perezhivanie than in earlier sessions. Could Jane be contagiously learning an agentive approach to obstacles, through more experienced learners?*

Dialogues of Care Through Pedagogical Tact

Perhaps it really is children who teach music educators about emotion-laden ideas such as musical agency. Sometimes young children cannot or do not use words. Yet pedagogical tact (van Manen, 2015) allows teachers to *see* and feel their musically agentive voices beyond their words and sounds alone. When teacher-researchers seek to see within and beyond a child's silence, pedagogical tact can extend to analysis of socially constructed, nonverbal, and contextually interactive meanings. I join Nutbrown (2010) in seeking to care for children as unexploited, valued research participants, needing to share images of their ways of knowing with deep respect for their identities and selfhood, particularly as they nonverbally communicate psychological vulnerabilities inherent in constructs such as musical agency. Just as these children co-constructed musical agency during their learning experiences (Hogle, 2018a, 2018b), we as educators co-construct meaning through their visually transparent nonverbal narratives.

In viewing representations and thereby constructing semiotic meanings, we seek to fill in our own understanding, our own personal meaning, our own remembrances of particular learners, our own experiences. As teachers, we dialogue with ourselves, these research participants, and learners in our own classrooms. We ponder and inquire about our own musical agency as musicians, our own emotions in response to inevitable learning mistakes, emotional responses of our learners, and our own positionality and practices as researchers. We engage in our own critical reflection, allowing children to teach and to help us. As education researchers, tracing to make transparent might allow voices unheard to be seen and therefore, to be heard.

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