Affective encounters: The critical contribution of embodiment and emotion to ‘accomplished’ teacher subjectivities and professional teaching standards

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Abstract
In this paper, I draw on video case data of classroom teaching collected as part of a national study of professional teaching standards and teacher professional learning in which accomplished teachers (in this case, school geography teachers) and their students took part, towards tracing teacher subjectivities and teaching standards in situ. Particular attention is given to affective encounters which tend to be downplayed in standards development work around quality or accomplished teaching and teachers. In association with other concepts drawn from actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 2009a) and poststructuralist theory that invokes the work of Deleuze (Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008), the concept of socio-material practice is used to make an argument about the centrality of affect, as a socio-material process, to accomplished teaching and teaching standards. Exploring teacher subjectivities and teaching standards as practised affords a strong sense of the affective, embodied and emotional terrain of teaching and invites attention to the role that affect and emotion, as ‘unruly practices’, can play in challenging our currently established systemic concerns in education with (received views of) scientificity (eg. metrics, measures). My main interest in this paper is to examine how these embodied enactments create new spaces for thinking and ‘doing’ teaching standards and identities of ‘accomplished’ teacher and teaching, and augment existing knowledge in the fields of teachers’ work and standards research.

Introduction
Set within the context of neo-liberal education policy reform and sceptical about current manifestations of the discourse of the centrality of the teacher (Larsen, 2010) and teaching standards, where standards are assumed to exist in the abstract and capture the complexity of teaching, this paper investigates the role of the embedded, embodied, and affectively intensive in teachers’ work. ‘Evidence is building that indicates that the potency of quality teaching is not restricted to pedagogical techniques solely concerned with subject content and academic processes, but that its efficacy also lies in attending to the affective dimension of teaching and learning’ (Lovat, 2010, p.491). Attending to this dimension affords not only a strong sense of teacher subjectivity but also of materiality (eg. bodies, texts, objects) and practice, both classroom practice and beyond.

Writing in the context of contemporary teacher policy reforms related to teachers’ work, Larsen (2010, p.209) suggests that ‘we might rethink our fixation with the central importance of the teacher, and re-centre our attention to address broader societal contexts within which schools are located, and the complex, messy and contextualised nature of teachers’ work. Neglecting to do so will continue to prove troubling for teachers and their work, and for broader educational reform efforts’ (Larsen, 2010, p.209). In giving attention to the affecting, yet hard to name and discuss dynamics of affect, emotion and embodiment in teaching, and taking my lead from Larsen (2010), I bring a critical sensibility to bear. Firstly, by revaluing affective and emotional dimensions of teaching which rely on teacher subjectivity, and which have tended to be sidelined in contemporary processes of education reform such as the institutionalisation of the use of ‘reasoned and ruly’ objects like indicators,
benchmarks, standards and measures; and secondly, by rethinking the central importance of the teacher, towards bringing a greater range of understandings to bear when considering the matter of accomplished/quality teaching and ultimately complicating the binary oppositions that generally structure discourses of quality teaching: the power of the teacher versus the power of societal contexts (student demographics, social and economic disadvantage) to make a difference in student learning and effect change in student achievement.

Using data collected as part of an Australian Research Council project on (i) the relationship between professional teaching standards and teacher professional learning,1 and (ii) the development of a specific set of professional standards, standards for teaching school geography, I address the issue of the salience of affective encounters in classrooms for teaching and learning. Making a network or *assemblage*² account of accomplished teaching, I give attention to moments in classrooms that move and affect teachers and learners as embodied practices of assembly, which are often mundane, everyday, and seemingly trivial. Affectivity is taken to be a socio-material process, or better perhaps, intensity or energy (Navaro-Yashin, 2009), rather than a psychological condition or state. The assemblage approach affords a way of thinking about processes and objects associated with accomplished teaching, including affectivity, teacher subjectivities and teaching standards, which does not reduce this accomplishment to mechanistic and instrumentalist criteria and categories. Drawing on the semiotic perspective of actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 2009a) in which material agency is accented, and taking seriously its idea that material objects, like human subjects, can take different forms in different places and practices, I ask the seemingly simple question: ‘where is affect and emotion?’ and how might they be ‘trapped’ towards creating conditions for learning, such that learning, like these processes themselves, is contagious?

Clearing some definitional ground: Emotion and affect

Unlike popular discourse where the terms emotion, affect and feeling often overlap and refer to inner psychological states of being, in academic discourse, the term *emotion* is used ‘to refer to an interpretive experience of how one feels, as this experience is embedded in a particular cultural context and its social codes’ (Zembylas, 2007, p.xxx). In other words, it is a social rather than psychological construct. The term *affect*, in turn, writes Thrift (2008, p.116), ‘is not simply emotion, nor is it reducible to the affections or perceptions of an individual subject’. Invoking Deleuze (1995, p.137), Thrift (ibid) continues: ‘affects are not feelings, they are becomings that go beyond those who live through them (they become other)’. They go beyond ‘the inner world or interiority of the human subject, coined “subjectivity”’ (Navaro-Yashin, 2009, p.12). They are intensities, sensations or energies that can be discharged through objects and spaces ‘making it possible to read many other things, such as space and the environment, as affective’ (ibid). They are encounters with other bodies (semiotically) that infect all of experience so that one affects and is affected by other bodies’ (Zembylas, p.xxx, original emphasis).

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1 Spanning 2007-2010, this Linkage Project is being conducted in association with the Australian Geography Teachers’ Association with affiliates in five major Australian states, including Partner Investigator status for the Geography Teachers’ Association of Victoria and the teacher registration authority in Victoria (Victorian Institute of Teaching).

2 The concept of the assemblage forwarded by Deleuze and Guattari denotes the ‘amalgam of places, bodies, voices, skills, practices, technical devices, theories, social strategies and collective work that together constitute ... knowledge/practices’ (Watson & Huntington, 2008, p.272, citing Wright, 2005, p.968). As Law (2009a, p.146) comments, there is little difference between the term *agencement* – translated as “assemblage” in English – and the term actor-network (heterogeneous network). Thus, I use these terms, or better perhaps, analytical metaphors, largely interchangeably.
Here, emotion and affect are relational terms rather than predominantly individual and private. Emotions do not reside in individuals, they circulate in relationships, most particularly embodied relationships. And, like emotion and affect, embodiment is not exclusively a matter of individual human bodies. As Thrift (2008, p.276) has it, it is ‘a linked, hybrid field of flesh and accompanying objects, rather than a series of individual bodies, intersubjectively linked’ and importantly for the purposes of this paper, he adds: ‘I take the presence of objects to be particularly important because they provide new means of linkage … new folds, if you like’ (ibid).

Affect in the Deleuzian sense, according to MacLure (2010, p.284):

is not feeling or emotion. It is a kind of “prepersonal intensity” which may be “captured” and “qualified” (i.e., given qualities) as emotion (Massumi, 2002). It does not reside within individual subjects, nor in an “intersubjective” commingling of meanings or consciousnesses. It precedes, and exceeds, language, biography and cognition. Affect registers on the body. It is carried by facial expressions, tone of voice, breath and sounds, which do not operate as signs, yet are not mere epiphenomena. And, precisely because affect “affects” bodies, it can be transmitted, and is intimately social (Massumi, 2002).

And, one might add material: it ‘registers on the body’; it “‘affects’ bodies’. Furthermore, affect is political in the sense that ‘power is an inextricable aspect of how bodies come together, move, and dwell’ (Zembylas, 2007, p.xiv).

On affect, embodiment and emotion in teaching: Poststructuralist perspectives

The theories with which I particularly engage in this paper are poststructuralist in orientation and include non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008) and material semiotics or, more commonly, actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 2009a). Invoking Thrift (1997, 1999), Nash (2000, p.655) maintains that non-representational theory is inspired by Benjamin and de Certeau, and draws together: attention to the technologies of being apparent in the work of Foucault; the emphasis on nonhuman agency and relational networks – the signature theory of actor-network theory; and the language of heterogeneous fragments, flows, assemblages and linkages as used by Deleuze and Guattari. Accordingly, it is about:

practices, mundane everyday practices, that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites. … It is concerned with practices through which we become ‘subjects’ decentred, affective, but embodied, relational, expressive and involved with others and objects in a world continually in process. … The emphasis is on practices that cannot adequately be spoken of, that words cannot capture, that texts cannot convey – on forms of experience and movement that are not only or never cognitive.

Over recent years, non-representational theory ‘has become an umbrella term for diverse work that seeks better to cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds’ (Lorimer, 2005, p.83). Proposing the notion of more than representational theory, Lorimer (ibid., see also Carolan, 2008) claims that what matters most in the ‘more than’ is ‘multifarious, open encounters in the realm of practice’. That is:

The focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements,
precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions’ (p.84).

Actor-network theory (ANT) can be understood as an empirical version of poststructuralism (Law, 2009a). More formally, ANT is ‘a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located’ (ibid., p.141). Instead of asking why things happen, the material semiotics of actor-network theory asks ‘how they occur. How they arrange themselves. How the materials of the world (social, technical, documentary, natural, human, animal) get themselves done’ (Law, 2008, p.632, original emphasis).

Central to actor-network theory is the notion of performativity. In keeping with developments in cultural and human geography, most particularly non-representational theory (Thrift, 1999, 2008), actor network theorists use the term performativity to accent practice – to indicate that reality is brought into being: is enacted, fashioned or done. It does not exist outside its ‘doing’ in various and different practices. The assumption is made that nothing has reality, or form, outside its performance in webs of relations with performances being defined as ‘material processes, practices, which take place day by day and minute by minute’ (Law & Singleton, 2000, p.775).

Law (2009b, p.1, original emphasis) continues:

If we think performatively, then reality is not assumed to be independent, priori, definite, singular or coherent. Rather the logic is turned upside down. If reality appears (as it usually does) to be independent, prior, definite, singular or coherent then this is because it is being done that way. … Practices enact realities … This means that if we want to understand how realities are done or to explore their politics, then we have to attend carefully to practices and ask how they work.

And practices are?

For my purposes, practices are detectable and somewhat ordered sets of material-semiotic relations. To study practices is therefore to undertake the analytical and empirical task of exploring possible patterns of relations, and how it is that these get assembled in particular locations. It is to treat the real as whatever it is that is being assembled, materially and semiotically in a scene of analytical interest (ibid., original emphasis).

The turn to performance has been taken in various disciplinary fields (eg. human geography, cultural studies, contemporary political theory) including education. As Zembylas (2003, p.112) argues, the character of emotion is performative ‘which makes it a particularly affective and direct way of knowing’.

Various criticisms have been levelled at actor-network theory the most significant of which, for present purposes, concerns its apparently flat ontology: ‘ANT has a flat view of human agents, reducing them to effects and denying the embodied, emotional nature of human existence’ (Mutch, 2002, p.487). When working the empirical material, part of my purpose here is to challenge this view. In holding to the

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1 As developed by the human geographer and social scientist, Nigel Thrift, nonrepresentational theory, or the theory of practices, takes as its leitmotif movement and, like actor-network theory, emphasises practices understood as material bodies of work. Thrift acknowledges the many affinities of NRT with ANT in *Non-representational theory: Space, politics, affect* (2008, p.110).
notion that reality does not precede practices but is made through them, ANT attends to the idea that practices have a political life. ‘Practices organize and reproduce the distribution of power, knowledge, and the inequalities that go with them’ (Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003, p.24). They have built-in normativities, contributing to ‘some worlds-in-progress but not to others’ (Moser, 2008, p.99). The question becomes which worlds we want practices to make? Do we want to build our programs of school education around pedagogies that disavow emotional investments and affective connections between teachers and students?

The project in question: Data and method assemblage

The project described here was concerned to study what 'accomplished' geography teaching is by documenting what geography teachers, who are deemed accomplished, do. Data were sourced from teachers and students via video recordings of accomplished teaching with identification of accomplished teachers being made by way of purposeful sampling. Thus, members of the Australian Geography Teachers’ Association and its affiliates, the peak professional associations for school geography in Australia, were invited to nominate teachers who are widely regarded professionally, using various criteria including reputation for accomplishment within the field of geographic education, years of experience teaching school geography, teaching qualifications, etc. In an effort to ‘capture’ the specificities of practice, including the flow of teacher action and embodied judgement, the approach adopted used technically complex methods for video recording classrooms. These video records were supplemented with post-lesson video-stimulated interviews with students and the teacher. Pre-lesson interviews with each teacher were also conducted.

Altogether, eleven case studies (22 lessons altogether) were conducted in eight schools (government and non-government; metropolitan and non-metropolitan) in three major Australian states. In all cases, video recordings were made over the course of a sequence of two lessons, each lasting for approximately fifty minutes. The two fieldwork tales told below concern two of these case studies. Set within a large, metropolitan, private boys’ school and a medium size, rural, private, co-educational school, the classes comprise a Year 9 geography class and a Year 8 geography class. Taking practices of assembly as the locus for analysis, I explore moments in classrooms that move and affect teachers and learners and the contribution of these moments (these affective flows) to notions of accomplishment in teaching and standards of accomplished teaching. Place locations and names of teachers and students have been altered for reasons of confidentiality.

Affective encounters: ‘Doing’ subjectivities and standards

Sandra’s story: ‘Miss, is that really necessary?’

Sandra teaches at an all-boys’ Catholic school where sport, most particularly football, has a large and fanatical following. In the lesson which propelled writing this paper,

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4 For each of eleven classrooms in eight schools and three major Australian states, two lessons, each lasting around 50 minutes, were videotaped using three cameras. One camera focused on the teacher, a second on individual students as part of a working group, and a third on the whole class as seen from the front of the room. Using as catalyst the video record from the whole class camera, with the teacher camera image inserted as a picture-in-picture image in one corner of the display, teachers were invited to make a reconstructive account of the lesson events deemed critical to student learning. Similarly, students were invited to make an account of lesson events, using as stimulus the video record from the teacher camera, with the individual students’ camera image inserted as a picture-in-picture image in one corner of the display.

5 These case data have been worked in other papers prepared and published recently. The inquiries made in these other papers have not concerned affectivity however.
she aims to introduce her Year Nine geography class to Geelong, Australia’s largest regional municipality and ‘Home of the Cats’, an Australian Football League (AFL) team which, in 2007, and after forty-four years of struggle and ‘failure’, won the AFL premiership. Capitalising on the boys’ enthusiasm for football, Sandra aims to take ‘geography a little bit to a different level, so looking at the geography of sport and then we are going to actually map where the goals were kicked and the behinds were kicked using the choropleth technique and then we are going to do a ray diagram (looking at) where the players come from, to go to play for Geelong’.

Accomplished teaching and learning is a social practice and a very particular material matter: ‘So we’re going to do lots of skills but through something that hopefully will appeal to the boys because, with them, you’ve got to have something interesting. They don’t like going into classes where they have textbooks so they just read through it and answer questions’. Textbooks do not serve apparently, as objects of interest and appeal (affective objects). They are neither expressive nor induce the sort of affect that might make the boys further ‘catch’ learning.

The ‘hook’ that Sandra settles on (or enters into relationship with) to get the boys negotiating the terms of their engagement with learning is a laminated ‘data broadsheet’, on which an image of a premiership poster appears (see respectively, Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Data broadsheet
Figure 2: WEG premiership poster

Triggering what I will call an affective encounter, Sandra delivers the datasheet to a desk at which a pair of boys sit. An intense exchange around the datasheet immediately follows. Pointing at the image of the poster on the broadsheet, David says to his partner at the double desk – ‘She had to put that in, didn’t she’.

Commentary on the poster continues:

**David**: Miss, is that really necessary?

**Sandra**: Absolutely … necessary and I’ve put it in twice just to reinforce the fact that Geelong won in 2007.

**Zac**: Why?

**Sandra**: Because we’ve been waiting a very long time!

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6 The case described here was the first of the eleven case studies conducted. Sandra’s lessons were filmed just after the football grand final, in 2007.

7 Created by the cartoonist WEG (William Ellis Green), the Grand Final souvenir poster was made freely available by the *Sunday Herald Sun*, 23/9/2007. The *Herald Sun* is a popular Australian daily newspaper.
A self-described ‘Cats’ tragic’, Sandra materially performs an identity that provokes emotional engagement by the boys, here, perhaps, distaste for her choice of football team, or disappointment at the lack of premiership success of their chosen teams as conveyed in the ironic comment: ‘She had to put that in, didn’t she’. The ‘offending’ poster which appears twice on the information sheet is performative: it is productive of action, interpretation and consequence (MacLure, Holmes, Jones, & MacRae, 2010, p.498). An affective object, it occasions pointing by David, discussion between David and his partner Zac and arguably, a shift in the balance of power between students and teacher. The deployment of the poster by a teacher who ‘can have a joke’ brings about banter between the boys and the teacher. Following MacLure et al. (2010, p.498), David’s ironic comment draws its power from its ambivalent status and location: between sincerity and mockery, between challenge to the teacher and respect for her commitment to her football team. ‘It is not surprising’ writes MacLure and her colleagues (ibid., p.497), that ‘humour, silence, and the ambivalent respect of mimicry have been identified as the strategies of subaltern subjects faced with disciplinary power’.

‘Power relations work through specific articulations and movements of emotions that produce new affective and embodied connections’ (Zembylas, 2007, p.xiv). Sandra is a member of a school culture that can be claimed to privilege emotional self-discipline. Gender and class dynamics at her elite, private boys’ school might be thought to shore us this practice. Religion however, not so much. Football fanaticism is a socially sanctioned emotional ‘outlet’ at this (Catholic) school and channelling one’s teacher self via it, is, in my interpretation, culturally and pedagogically astute. Sandra is permitted to feel some emotions while, in all likelihood, prohibited others (Zembylas, 2003, p.110). As Zembylas (2003, p.108) comments, ‘emotions (as well as thoughts and actions) are part of the very fabric constituting the self, but they are also socially organised and managed through “social conventions, community scrutiny, legal norms, familial obligations and religious injunctions”’. To which one might add, ‘materially organised and managed’.

The curriculum artefact (data broadsheet) under consideration with its poster(s), co-mingles with the teacher’s evident pleasure in her team’s success and the boys’ ambivalent, affective response, to create what might be called an accomplished teaching assemblage – ‘a linked, hybrid field of flesh and accompanying objects’ (Thrift, 2008, p276). Affect, accomplishment and emotion are material-discursive practices: not only socially constructed, they are material-ised in bodies (speech, gesture) and artefacts. The curriculum materials that Sandra has prepared afford an opportunity to consolidate relationships with students while extending their conceptual understandings. One of the boys at interview comments on Sandra’s relaxed relationship with her students in this way: ‘She’s like a good teacher, laid back, like she’s serious in a way but she can have a joke’. Having a joke enters into the organisation and production of the subjectivity of accomplished teacher and of standards of teaching– ‘She’s like a good teacher’. The materials involved (eg. poster, material embodied speech: visceral productions of voice – ‘Because we’ve been waiting a very long time’) render teacher subjectivity visible and, as discussed above, to some degree, contestable: ‘Miss, is that really necessary?’.

In concluding this case account, a methodological comment may be warranted. Standard methods of qualitative inquiry which tend to privilege human meaning-making and language soon reach their limits when researching the bodily intensity of affect and its contribution to accomplished teaching. ‘Affect registers on the body. It is carried by facial expressions, tone of voice, breath and sounds, which do not operate as signs’ (MacLure, 2010, p.284). Tracing patterns made by material practices and
‘pulling on’ the instinctual threads that students, as key informants, provide are both necessary and analytically helpful as these closing comments from Zac imply:

First when she told us she was a Year 12 teacher, we were all a bit like intimidated, but she’s probably like one of the most relaxed, laid back teachers, she can have a joke and stuff like that, so that’s good.

We only do geography for a semester, but I think I’ve learnt. Before I started geography, I thought it was just like colouring in, stuff like that, but she’s like brought a different thing to it.

Simone’s story: ‘I just couldn’t come today and not talk about this’

While a relative newcomer to teaching, having been practising for six or so years, Simone, like Sandra, is widely understood by her peers to be an accomplished geography teacher. At the time of filming, she was working in a rural, private, co-educational school and with a Year 8 geography class on the topic ‘different river processes’. Introducing the lesson thus: ‘We’re going to start looking at river landforms and the way rivers work in erosion, deposition and transportation’, Simone’s stated intention in the lesson is to build knowledge about the workings of rivers in preparation for a forthcoming field trip to a river. Five or so minutes into the lesson, Simone stops and says: ‘Before I start though … something pretty big has happened and I couldn’t … not talk about it today’. Showing a digital image of Burma (see Figure 3), she proceeds to hold a lively class discussion about the impact of a tropical cyclone, Cyclone Nargis, which, as reported worldwide earlier in the day, has devastated southwestern Burma, and concludes thus:

I just couldn’t come today and not talk about this … it’s a big deal. Sixty thousand people, that’s a bit of a big deal and Australia is currently tossing up (as to) how much support we should provide. … That was just my little quick introduction; ‘cos we couldn’t live without that.

Underscored by ethical and political considerations and surfacing significant social justice issues, part of this discussion proceeds thus:

If there was a cyclone that hit (name of local area), very unlikely, but if it did what would happen straight away?

Why would it (the land) flood in the first place?

You live in Burma … you’re a farmer and you don’t have much money … the cyclone’s gone, are you still in danger?

Figure 3: Introducing Burma

There is an affective component to the consideration given to the poor Burmese farmers as a consequence of being ‘hit’ by Cyclone Nargis. Simone attempts to place the students in a position similar to the position of these farmers by working from the students’ lived experience: ‘If there was a cyclone that hit (name of local area), very unlikely, but if it did what would happen?’. The capacity for affective connection does not reside ‘in’ Simone herself but in the flow of emotion generated by her sensibilities, the students’ empathic responses to the farmers’ suffering, and utterances and interchanges around the injustice of this event occurring in a poor country and the responsibility of rich countries, in circumstances such as these, to
assist. The ‘shifting speeds and intensities of engagement’ with this event ‘do not just prompt thought, but also generate sensations resonating in the body as well as the brain’ (MacLure, 2010, p.282) – frissons of energy and possibly anxiety and fear: ‘You’re a farmer and you don’t have much money and your house wasn’t made of bricks … and … has been swept away. You could be dead, some people in your family could be dead. The cyclone’s gone, are you still in danger? And, affective connections are of consequence. As Zembylas (2007, p.xiv, citing Holmes, 2004, p.223) comments, ‘encouraging explorations of affective responses to injustices and inequalities can inspire students and teachers “towards new considerations of their relations with others and open up new spaces for continuing struggle”’.

Simone’s accomplished practice is characterised by narrative modes of teaching which serve to consolidate learning through embodied and emotional identification with everyday struggles and life events: ‘Also her stories, … she was explaining about going to the airport with her bags, and she was getting tired so she dropped them off her, to show deposition in a river. … There is another (story) about how her dam, how the water was dark and just how the drought affected where she lived’. Material objects and practices play a performative role in this classroom: they help bring learning into being, as Simone and one of her students report respectively, at the post-lesson interview:

(I)If I couldn’t have my data projector, if you teach rivers, for me it is so important like, for example, when they were doing their perfect rivers, a lot of them had started writing stuff demonstrating that they were unsure, (so I) show(ed) those three Google images of the three different rivers, so, for me, without having those allied images or anything like that to be able to show, I wouldn’t be able to do as well as I can I don’t think with them and they won’t understand it.

The animation really helped. … It actually showed the actual physical movement of things and how they (river processes) actually do it. Instead of just explaining and picturing it in your mind, you can actually see it. And it’s really good.

Turning up the magnification somewhat on the affective encounter that is at the heart of this case material, Simone happened to say at the post-lesson interview:

The first thing I decided to do this morning was to talk about the cyclone. I added that to the (lesson); that to me was important. Because one of the things I have been talking to them about is current events in geography. So, I thought I have to talk about this. That was a key event.

and added, interestingly: ‘Talking about the cyclone, that was unexpected for me. I, I, that was just something, I just thought this morning, I’ve got to talk about this’. While styling the decision to talk about the cyclone as an epistemic one – ‘I added that … because one of the things I have been talking to them about is current events in geography’, something more appears to be playing out in these data. Simone is caught up in professional work and in self-work. The hesitations and felt intensity expressed in: ‘I, I’, ‘I’ve got to talk about this’, ‘cos we couldn’t live without that’, and ‘I couldn’t … not talk about it today’, are markers of identity work, a show of subjectivity: ‘patterns by which experiential and emotional contexts, feelings, images and memories are organized to form one’s self image, one’s sense of self and others, and our possibilities of existence’ (De Lauretis, 1986, p.5). As Thrift (2008, p.172) has it, ‘issues like identity and belonging quiver with affective energy’.

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The identity of the accomplished geography teacher in geography teaching is not centred and settled. It is continuing and, I surmise, ‘split’. There is a tension running through the data around keeping the focus on the topic of the day (river processes) and treating real-world events, a practice that could be deemed, by Simone’s peers, to be more personal than professional. ‘(T)he teacher-self, as produced in the performance of it, is constantly contested and fractured by the intersection of activities, judgements, emotions, and desires’ (Zembylas, 2003, pp.123-124). Over the course of the discussion, Simone appears to apologise to the students for being off-topic: ‘Not to do with rivers ok, but I just can’t ignore this at the moment’ and ‘I know this is not quite to do with rivers’. Yet, Simone’s students appreciate her ‘personalisation’ – ‘There is another (story) about … how the drought affected where she lived’ – and the orientation to world events that this geography class provides: ‘(The things that helped my learning were) things like the casual talks, like about things, not just the topic that we are learning, things that happen on the actual news and the happenings around the world’. From a learner perspective, teaching accomplishment involves conditions of possibility for taking part in meaningful learning, learning that is embodied in real life, lived experience such as ‘casual talks … about things, not just the topic’. Affective encounters are central to such engagement?

Affectivity matters: ‘She’s like a good teacher … she can have a joke’

In making my socio-material account using the case examples above, I have emphasised that emotion is not a personal property of the accomplished teacher. It is assembled – a complex and often contested gathering of energies, words, gestures, commitments, affects, artefacts, bodily feelings, routines and habits that constitute the teacher’s subjectivity as accomplished. I have attempted to demonstrate the thingliness (Navaro-Yashin, 2009) of affect and the centrality of affective encounters – encounters underscored by emotion as a material-discursive practice – to both accomplished teacher subjectivities and teaching standards. Rather than something ‘personal’ – bringing intrinsic qualities or potentialities to bear as an individualised psychological view of self has it – teacher identity and teacher emotion are constituted in assemblages of practice of a social (eg. institutional demands; gender relations; emotion discourses; policy discourses) and material kind (eg. curriculum materials; teacher gesture, posture and embodied action). Thinking subjectivity and standards as an assemblage affords a sense of collective responsibility. Neither standards nor selves are the exclusive concern of the teacher (or of the school). They are embedded in distributed, heterogeneous and specific practices, so responsibilities for developing and maintaining them are similarly distributed and heterogeneous. As Larsen (2010, p.215) notes in her account of the dangers presented by the discourse of the centrality of the teacher, ‘contemporary teacher policy reforms (such as the widespread use of teaching standards) are part of a broader neo-liberal business model educational reform agenda, which includes the development of school management systems, the privatisation of schools, cutbacks to educational funding, the introduction of nationally prescribed curricula, standardised student testing and the establishment of school league tables’.

More broadly, the empirical analyses stress agency, process and emergence over the kind of completed order implied in notions of accomplished teaching, accomplished teacher and accomplished teaching standards, providing for the idea that teacher subjectivity at the accomplished level of teacher expertise and accomplished teaching standards are more matters of becoming (transformation) than being. Teaching presents as a complex and always contingent process of ongoing construction or, a more suitable metaphor, assembly. Exploring teacher subjectivities as practised affords a strong sense of the shifting, embodied and
emotional terrain of teaching: ‘I just couldn’t come today and not talk about this’. Teachers cross this terrain with students who appreciate being caught up in a ‘passionate pedagogy that encourages a teacher to express her or his emotions using a particular vocabulary and performance’ (Zembylas, 2003, p.123) − ‘Miss, is that really necessary?’ This exploration also invites attention to the role that affect and emotion, as ‘unruly practices’, can play in challenging our currently established systemic concerns in education with (received views of) scientificity (eg. metrics, measures, league tables). From a learner perspective, ‘having a joke’ is a/the measure of the good teacher; ‘She’s like a good teacher, laid back, like she’s serious in a way but she can have a joke’.

My main matter of concern in this paper has been to explore how these embodied enactments can create new spaces for thinking and ‘doing’ teaching standards and identities of ‘accomplished’ teacher and teaching, towards challenging the closures that identity categories such as ‘the accomplished teacher’ and ‘accomplished standards’ carry along with them. (Net)working affective spaces and objects opens up the possibility for teachers to contest these closures and continue to create conditions for classroom learning, such that this learning, like affectivity itself, is contagious or catching!

References


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