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Enacting A Space of Possibility in Education

Johnna Haskell

Independent Scholar, Maine

Warren Linds

Concordia University, Montreal

*Enactive space and human experience are
like two legs without which we cannot walk
—inspired by Francisco Varela, et al., The Embodied Mind*

The Enactive is an approach to cognition, or a way of experiencing within a reality that is not pre-given. Francisco Varela (1999) speaks of a world that is enacted as inseparable from how we act in it. Our knowing emerges through our bodyminds interacting with/in the world, rather than being something we try to control and represent. This interplay exists throughout embodied actions, and our educated perceptions of possibility and impossibility, within the world. Even impossibilities unfold the possible if we can “see” or “flow” within our world—the educational world.

Our journey began by entering a space where we put together a mix of voices around the enactive with/in education for *BodyMind: Holistic Explorations of Cognition, Action, and Interaction in Education*, a conference we organized along with Brent Hocking at UBC in 1999. A publication of a collection of works resulted in a book, *Unfolding bodymind: Exploring possibility through education* (Holistic Education Press) in 2001. We saw in this process an emerging scholarship with/in the enactive “space” and wanted to further explore this landscape. Our call for papers through Educational Insights provided an opportunity to enlarge our own perceptions of the “enactive space.”

Exploring the Space

Our daily lives are based on a framework of assumptions. “Draw a different frame around the same set of circumstances and new pathways come into view” (Zander and Zander, 2000, 1). When we encounter a framework that seems to ‘fit’ our exploration, “extraordinary accomplishment becomes an everyday experience” [1].

Within each of the following texts, we have connected with bits and pieces of language that

highlight and help unfold the enactive. We are conscious that the use of language means that often theories are seen to be fixed and not flexible or adaptable. A temptation is also to do this with the enactive approach by reifying it as yet another theory.

However, we see the enactive as not a thing, nor as an 'ism,' but, rather, as an approach to cognition that enables us to experience the unfolding of the possible. Thus we view these papers as providing us with a "glimpse of something else" (Rosch) that opens a space for us as editors to leave the "paper" so to speak, Image-ining possibility. An interplay of knowing and experiencing while reading or writing on-line opened a movement toward learning the unfamiliar—"a space of possibility" outside the everyday and into an emerging contemplation, or bodymind experience. Such a journey arose out of theories that authors draw upon such as hermeneutics, ritual, holistic education, aesthetic contemplation, complexity theory, pedagogy, and phenomenology. Between, and amongst, the interplay, and overlapping, and sliding between all these diverse theories is a fertile space where contrasting concepts interact and where knowing flourishes, awakening us to the enactive possibilities all around us with/in the world of education.

One way to explain this dynamic tension between theories is through the Hua-yen Buddhist tradition of Indra's net (Cook 1997). This net has a crystal at every knot, stretching multi-dimensionally, through all space and time. If you arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, you will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the web, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an "infinite reflecting process occurring" (Loy 1993, 481).

By exploring these papers in such a process we begin to see ways of interacting in the flux and flow of the connection between jewels. Each one reflects and connects to another, as our knowing continually unfolds.

This is a relationship of "mutual identity and mutual inter-causation" (Cook 1979, 2), iteration and re-iteration. The immense universe of cognition is taken as a given. There is no fixed centre of space or, perhaps, if there is one, it is everywhere. Mirroring jewels reflect and trace other mirrors. Each section of this journey contains traces of the others. Some of these threads are taken up again with a view of the theme from another angle; sometimes this other angle mirrors a new theme. Placing them with/in the themes as outlined is only one possibility of how the articles spoke to us.

Thus, our educational worlds are filled with enacting and possibility. It is our ways of being and living with/in a world, trying to grasp and control experience that lead us to living embodied spaces unable to "see" the enactive "spaces" all around us, much like air particles interacting with us in these spaces. Do we "see" such interacting, or sense such spaces rich with possibility? An enactive approach is the perceptual act of embodying such "senses" within the constantly shifting space or groundless world. For example, we base this approach on the Buddhist philosophy of grasping. If we can only stop searching for answers, we can enact such "sensing" or "spaces of possibility"? How might we allow these moments to be integral to educational learning?

Enactive and emergent approaches to pedagogy

How do educational opportunities close or open spaces of possibility?

Think of something solid in an absolute sense, that is, something that has no spaces within it [set aside for a moment your knowledge of kinetic molecular theory]. Now see if there would be any change, or action, or, for the solid, any interaction with the environment. Try and imagine it happening. Do you find it can't happen because, without space, there is no interaction, no motion, no possibility? Even for passive change like the rusting of metal, there must be spaces which allow for interaction and change.

Francisco Varela (in an interview in Brockman 1995), outlines how his study of the human brain enabled him to see emergence as the transition from principles of interaction between individual components to global principles encompassing the entire collective of components. Knowledge is circulated and exchanged, allowing a new order in terms of insights, new or different understandings or even discovery or “seeing” as new relationships unfold. It is in this journey between the individual and the collective “where” spaces of possibility emerge.

Looking at education through the lens of the enactive enlarges the potential of the space or the in-between as embodied and dynamic. This “space” is informed by, and respectful of, a complex world, and it helps those interacting with/in it to discover different, unknown, and unrecognized spaces about their world, bodies, or community. Rather than treat these spaces as places to be grasped intellectually, we need to experience them as vibrant, living, creative spaces providing opportunities for dialogue and growth.

Articles by Laidlaw, Linds, and Haskell open pedagogical approaches where they see this experience happening:

Linda Laidlaw explores the complex living system of a school community and how small changes create subtle, but important, changes in pedagogy and relationships between teacher, administrators, students, families and the landscape of learning.

Schools are also places to explore the unfolding of community through drama. **Warren Linds** journeys into the role of the teacher/facilitator as one who enables a space to emerge through a process of negotiation and dialogue between educator, students and a community-in-the making.

Johnna Haskell adds still another perspective to pedagogy through her notion of freefall, attending to how the unexpected can inform, and shift, ways of being. These moments, as well as through interaction with the article, provide opportunities for learning that take us into the world of which we are always a part.

These moments, as well as through interaction with the individual articles, provide opportunities for learning that take us into the world of which we are always a part, open pedagogical approaches where they see such enactive and emergent opportunities.

Embodied knowing

The enactive view puts into question the relevance of space as an object to be grasped. Because every situation changes as a result of our enacting with it, space unfolds in different patterns. Thus the space is embodied (and not only including the bodies in the space), but all the relevant social history attached so to speak. Knowing is fully embodied. Such embodied knowing has many dynamics which occur all at once. Thus, knowing is co-emergent; it is neither caused by the world nor does it simply emerge from the structure of the person. So, by “embodiment,” we mean the integration of the physical or biological body and the phenomenal or experiential body [Varela, 1991]. This approach implies that knowing emerges collectively through engagement in shared action. Embodied action brings forth an awareness which is not attached to any one event or concept but is, rather, an un-grounding, as knowing is shaped by our actions with/in the world. Groundlessness is an exciting “space” where possibility arises for how we think about knowledge, cognition, and experience.

John Dewey (1929), in *Experience and Nature*, indicates that the shift in emphasis from what is experienced to the embodied relational ways of experiencing opens capacities for perceiving “unattained possibilities” (151) and promoting respect for the potentialities of

human experience (36). He argues that the process of experiencing, such as breathing, which includes an interaction of both air and function of the lungs, cannot be separated (13). It is this notion of object-subject separation that we come to believe and accept in education through tradition and habits. Dewey's theory of experiencing attempts to bring this into question so that we may welcome the unknown, invisible, and ineffable of experiencing. If knowledge and learning are not located in a body, but in the shifting movement of experiencing, new possibilities emerge for how educators, perceive, interpret, research, and interact within the world. Thus, embodiment suggests a seamless, though often elusive matrix of bodymindworld, a web that integrates thinking, being, doing, and interacting with/in a world we are part of. How this seamlessness emerges in education and under what conditions it flourishes are critical questions.

In other words, an embodied way of knowing guides actions or choices to bring forth a capacity for interacting with the unknown. If we remain open minded, open to views, interactions and intuitive choices, then doing and knowing emerge through the “flow” of actions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Kendal Bennie, Alison Pryer, and David Jardine and Jennifer Batycky explore engagements as another sense of embodied knowing:

Kendal Bennie unfolds awareness as teacher in drama education, learning, through the metaphor of surfing. Bennie struggles as we all do to find a language to express embodied knowing.

Alison Pryer further links such a pedagogy of bodymind experience to the shifting of bodily ritual, place and connection.

David Jardine and Jennifer Batycky enrich the notion of embodiment as teacher, learner and researchers. They question the idea of an external world that we enter into in pedagogy, in research, in research texts, and suggest that ‘things’ exist for themselves as well as for us, but also require something of us in the process...asking us questions and opening up possibilities for engaged interpretation. Such engagements lend insights into possibility as another sense of embodied knowing.

Experiencing possibility

We are often unaware of what actually is possible. It is almost that we take for granted living with/in the moment, blending past, future and current. We live largely as though things are as they are and that, furthermore, we have little to say and do about what is going on. That is a misnomer. We have all our bodyminds to bring possibility into being because the future unfolds through our ‘living and being’ within a world.

Brian Wattchow, Ardra Cole and Maura McIntyre , Sharon Abbey, and Martha Zacharias introduce possibility through particular approaches to pedagogy:

Brian Wattchow seeks an enactive interpretation of adventure education and river experience using hermeneutic text and phenomenology to enter into an experiential dialogue. Such dialogues open our understanding of the natural world and our interpretation of such outdoor classrooms.

Ardra Cole and Maura McIntyre explore the notion of qualitative research as an aesthetic experience where meaning emerges through a contemplative process that links art and viewer. Such views open researchers to experiencing possibility.

Martha Zacharias engages in a philosophical exploration of curriculum and consciousness theories through literary text and how it relates to philosophies of cognition

that explore the enactive.

Practices within education are explored through **Sharon Abbey's** application for holistic classrooms. Abbey enlarges a space for opening the distinction between embodied knowing as content and engaged knowing as process to disappear. The terms embodiment, engagement, and experiencing are used interchangeably. Such mindful practices open opportunities toward a holistic perception of enactive spaces to learning and interacting within the world.

The diversity of perspectives in this issue are exciting as each of the authors engage in experiencing the unarticulated possibilities that we continue to explore. We are excited that the authors have begun an enactive journey and that they struggled to find the language as well as the path to enter into spaces of possibility.

Entering the Space of Possibility

We met artist Andrew Campbell via the internet. We had encountered Andrew on an email listserv exploring Maturana and Varela's concept of 'autopoiesis.' He had acquired *Unfolding bodymind* (2001), the book we had edited and expressed interest in our work. He sent us a link to an online journal where he had done artwork responding to an interview with Francisco Varela before his death. Here is Andrew's response to our invitation to create artwork for this issue of *Educational Insights*.

A great artist of the twentieth century, de Kooning spoke of 'slipping glimpses' coming from the practice of art. So, I liked it very much when I read something Eleanor Rosch wrote in an online article about art describing humans as "a part of inexpressible, unthinkable openness and sacredness," but that when cognitive scientists and embodied practitioners turn to face this reality and "actively pursue the ground of the mind, what you see is something else." She thinks the arts can "slip it to us sideways."

There is something frail, delicate and above all deeply loving about the work I was sent for this edition of *Educational Insights* and in the entire project it is part of. I believe in the tumult of our world, a world full of gathering storms and that there are new forces arising and emergent, from with-in people and among diverse peoples. This artwork tries to capture the essence of all creation and creativity as set out by Lucretius, and much quoted by the so called complexity scientists. "At uncertain times and places, the eternal, universal fall of atoms is disturbed by a very slight deviation—the clinamen. The resulting vortex gives rise to the world, to all natural things." A 'slipping glimpse' is such a clinamen.

These two-dimensional images represent my effort to slip it to you sideways. If they succeed, you may glimpse some other dimensions.

Entering this diversity of "seeing" with the wonders of our contributing authors and artists has opened us to experience. We continue our own journey to enacting with/in academia and our unfolding of expressing the flow of experiencing in the enactive space.

Our mental processes and experiences are closer to a maze than a motorway, every turning yields another turning, not symmetrical, not obvious when we enter (Winterson 1996, xiii).

According to astronomy theories (NASA 2003), the solar system is wrapped in a bubble that is constantly pulsating, expanding, and retracting. Since the categorization of a "space" cannot be linear, but actually more like a soap bubble that pulsates as the space enlarges, the publication of these articles in *Educational Insights* opens another space of possibility as you read and interact.

Entering such a space of possibility requires us to work with both legs, a co-emergence of enactive space and human experience which is not a fixed, predelineated domain. Instead, it is changeable and fluid...All we have is experience at its own level of examination, and depending on the kinds of efforts and methods brought into play. It moves and changes, and its exploration is already part of human life (Varela and Shear 1999,14).

As scholars we would like to acknowledge those who opened the space of possibility. In particular, Brent Davis and Karen Meyer who introduced us to enactive knowing through two graduate courses at UBC, David Abram and David Jardine who had profound influence on other interpretations of the enactive, Carol Fulton, who assisted us in working with authors, and Lynn Fels, co-ordinating editor of this journal and her approach to performative writing and research.

Through invitation and encouragement, we feel we have opened a space for authors to explore possibility with/in education. We hope this on-line dialogue will continue to open such spaces for readers. We want to thank all those that sent proposals and encourage them to continue their journey to articulate possibilities for the enactive view of cognition, pedagogy, and learning. The ten articles that follow extend our understanding of emergent approaches to education, pedagogy, experience, curriculum, and research. More specifically, an enactive view continues to arise through your engagement with this on-line text, enabling insights to emerge through sharing with all those choosing to interact with the articles.

Please engage in these articles, as we have, to explore for yourself walking on two legs within the enactive space. The experiences of these educators, struggling with/in the spaces of possibility occasioned by their writing and this journal, are the unfolding of your journey to enacting a space of possibility with/in education.

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[1] "Groundlessness is the very condition for the richly textured and interdependent world" (Varela, et al 1991, p. 144). Worlds, indeed, all phenomena, are revealed through cognition, which is knowing how to negotiate our way through a world that is not fixed but which is continually shaped by the actions in which we engage.

About the Authors

Warren Linds, Ph. D. is a community educator in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada and has been working in popular theatre and community education since 1978. He is interested in the exploration of the facilitation and development of transformative drama processes that address issues of racism through a performative writing and research methodology. He is currently an assistant professor teaching small group leadership and diversity work in human relations in the Department of Applied Human Science, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec. Warren is also co-editor of *Unfolding bodymind: Exploring possibility through education*.

E-mail: w.linds@sasktel.net

Johnna G. Haskell, Ph. D., is an independent scholar in Carrabassett Valley, Maine. Her research interests explore outdoor experience, ecological and enactive perspectives, and freefall pedagogy. Her passion in education explores the unknown and unexpected. She is a co-editor of *Unfolding bodymind: Exploring possibility through education* (Foundation for Educational Renewal, 2001), <http://www.great-ideas.org/bodymind.htm>.

E-mail: johnnagh@adelphia.net

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Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia
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