

Learning Relationships and the Entanglement of Sound and Noise

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Abstract

This essay will look at how sound as noise is entangled with other bodies in the formation and maintenance of relationships amongst adults and young people in non-formal learning environments. It considers relationships between people as intra-active, material-discursive practices and in doing so pays attention to affect and materiality. Using the concept of attunement as both an embodied and preconscious affect (Brigstocke & Noorani, 2016), I consider noise as agentive within the learning relationships, transgressing boundaries (Haraway, 2016a) and disrupting futures. In attuning to noise, this opens up the world to a becoming in which we acknowledge that relationships between people and the subsequent learning are not simply a human directed effort.

Keywords: Sounds, noise, relationships, learning, affect, attunement

Introduction

Sound is in the world, entangled and affective. The ubiquity of sound in shaping daily life (Born, 2013) and the agentic capacity of noise to not merely fill space but also to radically affect its constitution (Ouzounian, 2013) is often overlooked in education research. What does it mean to attune to sound and noise in its affect and materiality, and what difference does this make to learning environments and the relationships that emerge? In this exploration of noise in a community-based learning environment, I invite you to join me in following noise as it moves in, on and around bodies (human or otherwise), undulating and mapping onto forms with the potential to ‘attach’ (Ahmed, 2014) as an embodied experience that includes and excludes potential futures.

This essay has been informed by my doctoral thesis, an ethnographic study which explores the learning environment and learning relationships for young people and adults participating in a UK government-sponsored citizenship programme. The programme’s duration was just four weeks, each with a changing emphasis in terms of aims and intended outcomes, and correspondingly held in locations to support the mandated timetabled activities. Activities included residential outdoor education, residential independent living and community awareness, planning a community project for social action, and then delivering the project. The time-limited and varied context of the programme offered a rich opportunity to study relationships and learning as they were enacted from meeting to working together to saying goodbye. I followed

one cohort of young people and their adult team leaders through the programme.¹ By way of introduction, please listen here ([Clip - Setting some of the scene](#)).²

What does it mean to attune to the sound and noise, and are the terms interchangeable? There is invariably a blurred line between sound and noise, and the differences have been explored in other fields e.g., acoustics and sound geographies. It is worth noting that conceptualisations of the difference often refer to responses in relation to humans. In this predominantly human-centred approach, sound is based on mechanics and biology. Soundwaves cross the auditory pathways and cause a physiological response (Berglund & Lindvall, 1995). In contrast, noise has more traditionally been defined as both a physiological and a psychological response (ibid) with the potential to cause an adverse impact on the person hearing it – noise can be a nuisance. This suggests a uniform response to sounds, however, how we respond to sound differs between people and contexts too. This conceptualisation is, also, an anthropocentric idea of sound and a posthuman approach troubles this depiction, providing provocation to consider what is implicated beyond the human (Springgay & Zaliwska, 2017) in the process of worlding and the ongoing becoming-with (Haraway, 2016b). Paying attention to “more-than-human collectivities” (Dernikos, 2020, p. 135) in the understanding of sound, opens up knowledge about what sound does (Gallagher, Kanngieser & Prior, 2017) and how it moves as intra-action with different bodies and materialities, human or non-human. Agency is entangled in mutual constitution (Barad, 2007); when we pay attention to sounds, we are listening not just with our ears but through the physicality of our whole bodies within a material context. Sound in the form of soundwaves not only touches bodies or reverberates off bodies, it passes through bodies and enters space between bodies. Sound has the potential to affect whilst also being affected by the materiality of the environment, the affects are co-constitutive e.g., a sound bouncing off different building materials will cause different reverberations, which alters soundwaves and their resonance on other bodies. This problematises the conceptualisation of noise as simply having a negative affect for humans and instead embraces the multiplicity and complexity of noise-affect and the potentials it produces. My approach to sound is that it is one part of the phenomena being studied, one part of the material-discursive iterations (Barad, 2007) in which noise emerges as agentic and where sound and noise blur together as interchangeable.

Attunement to the intra-action of entanglements in which noise is implicated opens lines of thought as “difference, dissonance and suspension” (Brigstocke & Noorani, 2016, p. 3). Posthumanism encourages an exploration of the different possibilities; the approach obfuscates binaries, it looks to both/and, not either/or. Drawing on this invites curiosity as to what else e.g., what does noise do with other bodies, how does it affect and become affected in relation to other bodies? Embracing the liveliness and vibrancy of noise was a practice in noticing the brilliance, the shimmer (Rose, 2017), in the doing of relationships. The frequency alignment between and within bodies was crucial in the navigation of relationships in which being attuned or being aware of affective forces was a pivotal step into tuning into others to build relationships. And when issues arose in the interpersonal relationships, retuning to each other became a practice of negotiating the different frequencies we inhabit.

¹ I want to express my gratitude to a wonderful group of people (all eighty of them) for allowing me into their lives with so much generosity and warmth.

² Clicking on the link should take you to SoundCloud, there is no need for an account. The clip should start automatically or alternatively just press play. Please be aware of your volume level before pressing play.

Attuning

Perhaps you may not be surprised if I said that 80 young people, most of whom were 16 years old, were noisy, even cacophonous at times ([Clip - The Noise](#)). And yet, in spite of being a youth worker earlier in my life, I was surprised. Why was this noise such a surprise to me? As I explored my audio recording on return from the fieldwork, the noise overwhelmed me, I hid from the data for two months and I began to wonder about my response to the noise. Was it a process of defamiliarisation (Braidotti, 2019) that came with a change of positioning, moving from a youth worker to researcher? The embodiment of different roles brought different practices and subsequent alterations to the power dynamics. Whilst my role was still a privileged one, there were aspects such as expectations about noise that were no longer in my remit. If I felt this loss of agency might this be similar for other bodies? I took this as the invitation to engage with the sound and noise to see where we would go together (MacLure, 2013).

I had not consciously considered the importance of attuning to sounds prior to fieldwork although I did have my audio recording device ready to dutifully ‘capture’ conversations and interviews. Once I began to wonder, my notes showed me that my first spark concerning sounds happened on the first bus journey – a three-hour trip to the outdoor residential centre. I had noted that the restrictions of the seat belts and seat heights meant I had interrupted sight lines, and this was frustrating in my eagerness to start data collection as, being an ethnographer, I was more attuned to sight than sound. However, in using my experience as a youth worker, I quickly realised I could hear activity; and not only could I hear the sounds, but there was also an awareness of a physicality to the sounds. I could feel them – the general vibration of the rumble of the bus on the road through my body, the sudden loud laughter making me jump, the high-pitched squeals making me wince, the chatter that made me smile – sound was in and all around me. This noticing opened up to me the affective nature of listening and feeling sounds. I was attuning to the difference offered by sounds. Attunement makes the call to offer ourselves up to different ways of knowing and being, an invitation to follow the sound as both an embodied and preconscious affect (Alarcón & Herrema, 2017; Brigstocke & Noorani, 2016). To be affected and affective foregrounds, relationships and our encounters with others (human or more-than-human) offering meaning about our entanglement within the world. Therefore, following sounds and noise may offer knowledge in the connection or changing of bodies (Gallagher et al., 2017). This is exciting when reflecting on the building of learning relationships, as it offers lines of flight that go beyond the human interaction and encompasses an ecological understanding that includes materiality.

Tuning In

When I re-listened to the recordings, there was a clip that provoked and enchanted me because it was a powerful reminder of that bus journey [Clip - bus journey](#). The bus ride had been fairly uneventful although full of anticipation for what is going to come next. Following a service station stop, the general hum of chit-chat and laughter was disrupted by music as our amenable bus driver gave Alfie, a staff member, permission for a sound system takeover. Having stood in front of brand-new large groups of adolescents and knowing the vulnerability of being the first person to try and engage a group, Alfie did something that I feel was quite brave and difficult to do in that he started singing along to well-known Disney tunes at the front of the bus. Alfie is a six-foot plus rugby player and the juxtaposition of his appearance with what he was singing immediately caught my attention. It wasn't just me that noticed. What started as Alfie singing

along to the songs became a murmur of noise amongst the cohort reaching a crescendo of noise together and as my reflection notes from day one of the first week note “by the time we arrived, the teams had been singing, dancing in the chairs and ...generally lots of smiles.”

Alfie had taken the first steps in building relationships, not just between the staff and young people but also within the various groups of young people, with music filling the spaces and connecting them to each other. This could have been disastrous given the potentially vulnerable situation but instead Alfie, the kind bus driver, and the music, had created an entanglement from which emerged a ‘shimmer’ of sounds that mapped onto individuals; filling the gaps in between so that it became a blanket that enveloped and entangled us further. When thinking about what was being done with/in this entanglement, I was drawn to the concept of shimmer as explored by Deborah Bird Rose (2017). Learning from the Aboriginal aesthetic, ‘Shimmer’ (translated from the Yolngu term ‘bir-yun’), Rose describes it as being the invocation for participation in the vibrations of the world, being captured by its brilliance and in doing so, accessing other knowledges. Shimmer, in this vibrating sense, becomes more than an observable object; it becomes something you feel, hear and experience. It is an aesthetic open to all the senses, something that fills the in-between, making connections. It is affective in that it generates emotions and grabs attention. I am aware of the danger of misappropriating Indigenous thinking as a researcher from the Global North, but I recognised and learnt that shimmer had the power to direct my attention to the capacity of music in doing relationships. Thinking about shimmer as a way of paying attention to the world offers a way of recognising the historicity we bring to our encounters in the here and now, which open potentials for the future (Malone, Logan, Siegel, Regalado & Wade-Leeuwen, 2020). Existing knowledges are brought to this moment that can be shared and built upon for the future for moving forward.

In this instance, the noise that created the phenomena came from different sources: Alfie, the music, the sound system, the young people, the coach, all came together in a shared moment. I used the word ‘murmuration’ deliberately, to describe the movement of sound. Sound did not compel engagement by everyone all at once, instead I witnessed different patterns as the noise affected everyone in different ways, much like starlings as they move one way and another. The pleasure of witnessing a murmur is in the seemingly effortless movements the birds make together – coalescing and bunching, swooping to different altitudes, changing direction and spreading their reach across the sky. Similarly the movement of sound seemed to swoop and coalesce with some bodies before spreading out and affecting others in different ways. The Disney songs brought a cheer from a small group of girls and they started to sing, their histories of knowing the songs and experiences of singing giving permission to come into being. Their laughter and their singing affected others in our own enjoyment and opened up possibilities to be something other than what we might habitually enact. I found myself singing along with them, a little self-consciously, mindful that I was there as a researcher (is this what you do?) and that I am not a great singer. However, when the singing quietened down I was able to talk to the young people around me; we shared our favourite Disney films and they were able to be openly curious as to the reasons for my being there on the programme.

Noise thus brought forward connections with the potential to transform and open other presents and futures. An assemblage denotes multiplicity and complexity, a concept to understand the intensities, flows and relationality that affect and in doing so marking and connecting territories that both exclude and include other relational ways of being (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Ringrose & Renold, 2014). This ‘noisy’ assemblage was indicative of remembering pasts but also

turning to embrace the new. Further to this, the sitting on the bus is a material manifestation of leaving other, old lives behind. We were travelling **away** from home. This could evoke a number of emotions including loss, fear, and anxiety. Instead, the music allowed Alfie to open a new way of being and knowing; sound as an agentic force welcomed young people in, gave an insight into a possible space where it was neither school nor home with a possible future of doing differently. Disrupting accepted noise patterns and expectations is often viewed as problematic and troublesome (Dernikos, 2020). The affect of noise generated by adolescents is often depicted as unwelcome on bodies of privilege, whether at home, school or in our communities. There has even been technology developed to prevent adults being inconvenienced by the noise and disruption of adolescents. For instance, the use of sonic technology by devices such as The Mosquito (a machine that emits sounds to create an uncomfortable/painful noise in teen ears without affecting adult ears) is often employed in public areas to prevent 'loitering'. It is a physical manifestation of how children can be 'othered'. However, Alfie and his use of Disney songs offered something different, and this was not necessarily about creating meaning; instead, the accumulation of all the sounds were creating noisy sensations that signalled something else. The young people on the bus were encouraged to leave behind what was before and look to something new – new relationships (Springgay & Zaliwska, 2017) generated by encounters with the music and each other. Attunement is to become aware of pre-conscious affect but what does this affect do? Embracing the awareness in an embodied, sensorial and physical way through the music was a tuning in to difference, a difference that included alternative ways of knowing.

Different Frequencies

It would be disingenuous to conclude that this instance of singing together in the bus thus induced everyone to get along with each other, or that sounds created together always have a positive affect, or, that experiencing noise together is inclusive. Sounds bounced around bodies and filled the gaps continuously even when falling asleep or during quiet periods as recognised by one of the staff members, Adele:

It's not just like people noise either, er, like last night in bed I definitely heard an owl or two and there's noises I've never even heard before where I'm just like wooh! But even when you walk, it's not like you walk in silence, there's a crinkle underneath you all the time.

The shimmer in evidence here, through the brilliance of the 'crinkle underneath' creates different knowledges and materialities affecting the sensory experience. But as I reflected earlier, this could be a powerful phenomenon, one not always welcome. What happens when the noise is felt adversely by those experiencing it and what can this do to relationships?

Following sounds, particularly in the first and second week of the programme, illuminated noise as affective in a multiplicity of ways bringing complexity to the doing of relationships. This was particularly evident amongst the members of Team 1, a group of twelve young people and two staff members. Their relationship as a whole group within and between each other was bumpy, following a haphazard trajectory that was not straightforward. When I spent time with them in their activity sessions, I observed people talking over each other, teasing each other, and the staff commenting about other members, and lots of swearing and/or complaining about activities, the environment, or other people. And yet there was also lots of laughter, general chatter, and insightful comments. This cacophony of sounds was either being amplified or

dispersed depending on whether we were inside or out. ([Clip - Inside-Outside](#)). A young person called Emma told me she found the noise difficult at times, in her own words she was ‘neurodivergent’ and I would observe her at times, when space allowed, just moving slightly away from the group. Neurodiverse people have reported finding ambient noise to be overwhelming, causing anxiety and fear (Lamb, Firbank & Aldous, 2016). However, Emma was not alone in her discomfort; others in the team also found being engulfed by the noise to be problematic. The commotion of noise was obstructive for some, making the building of relationships difficult, as shared by Penny, a young person, who said to me in the first week:

“Er, I think that it should be specified, and it should be helped that the more quiet ones, shouldn’t be over—, like not heard—, just cos these loud people— and people should respect other people even if they would rather be quiet—like no one should have to speak if they don’t want to.”

Penny had been thoughtful and articulate in my conversations with her, but I also observed her struggling to be heard amongst some of the louder characters and general noise in the group. Her tone was quieter and her words less frequent than others in the group, a mismatch, as Saffron, a fellow team member, commented:

“Yeah but if you have a ... a difficult student and you keep tryin’ and tryin’ and tryin’ and tryin’, you’re gunna get to your ends width until you just go to... Yeah but we’ve been nice to them and they, some people just can’t be nice back.”

There is irony in this comment sounding like it came from a teaching adult. Saffron had expectations of good or respectful engagement, familiar to the hegemonic discourse of silences and talk experienced in classrooms (Dernikos, 2020; Hanna, 2021). However, Saffron struggled with what she saw as lack of reciprocity – “you keep tryin’” while Penny explored reciprocity as a gift of space to think. Within these two quotes, varied receptions to noise are evident. It is not that they do not want to get on, they are just not in agreement about how this should be done. The difference in the way Penny and Saffron expressed themselves both in terms of volume and quantity of noise was problematic to their potential for relationship building and highlights the ‘tyranny of extroverts’ (Reilly, 2000) that can be found in learning spaces. One talked too much and too loudly (my interpretation), the other much more quietly and infrequently. Within the bustle of the group Saffron was, frequently, an instigator; she would fill silences quickly whereas Penny stated she needed to be given time to think without everyone talking or laughing. The way they encountered the world was different, enabling two perspectives on how to build relationships – one was about talking with others and one was about giving/taking space to think, using silence.

I suggest that noise perceptions here are opening her/his-stories that are both associated with the past and now enfolded into the present, bringing to the fore dilemmas around inclusion or exclusion. The entangled emotional aspects of safety, confidence in relationships and feelings of self-worth occupy different positions. Both girls wanted to connect but it seemed that there was a struggle to find an equilibrium in which they could bond and relate to each other. Taking a simple explanation of the mechanics of sound, in particular the soundwave, when waveforms line up both in terms of their amplitude and wavelength, this is known as being ‘in phase’ (Barad, 2007). Another way of looking at this is through the concept of attunement, in which attunement includes conscious empathy which lessens gaps and bring the resonance into the same field (Kossak, 2015). In their different ways, the noise waves emanating between Penny

and Saffron were operating at very different amplitudes and wavelengths, which they were mis-tuning with a lack of conscious empathy for one another. The frequencies were not ‘in phase’; the misalignment related to different affective capacities within each entanglement for both Saffron and Penny. They were not learning how to be together and this meant that opportunities to line up, even momentarily, to connect and to affect each other positively were missing.

Re-tuning

However by the end of the four weeks, Penny and Saffron, while not great friends, did speak more positively with and about each other – they worked and achieved together. Sounds and noise played a role in this success, giving opportunities to attune to each other and learn conscious empathy for each other. The agentic nature of music was implicated in this trajectory for their relationship, as Emma explained to me, “song and dance brought us together.”

This was a significant statement by Emma and she voiced my own thoughts about Team 1, although they were not the only team to experience this. On the first residential, teams started to learn and perform their own songs/dances. Singing and music permeated the air, particularly when there was down-time or specific time with their own teams ([Clip - Team 1](#)). I was asked on several occasions to film or record a group both within and between teams and even sometimes invited into the experience, which delighted me more than perhaps I expected. It was joyful experiencing music with the cohort, but this was more than a fun activity; the music was implicated in the doing of the relationships, as the following exploration of the team songs illustrates.

Despite the differences between members of Team 1, which included Emma, Saffron and Penny, they were one of the first to choose a team song. In their case it was ‘Girlfriend’ by Ariana Grande. The song as a focal point emerged, initiated by the young people not the staff, and became an invitation to come together, to work together. There was a power to the song that whenever it was played, it transcended temporal and physical boundaries, allowing synergy and overcoming disharmony. I saw this in action when my attention had been directed to record them. The whole group were waiting for the next activity, sitting outside in the same area but in smaller huddles of people chatting to each other with staff intermingled among them. Raheem took his phone out and started playing ‘Girlfriend’. One by one they each started to join in with the singing, then their staff leaders got to their feet and started to dance using the dance moves they (the staff and young people of the team) had previously choreographed together, and then the rest of the team joined in. It was a rippling effect, a wave of togetherness. The sound moved between bodies and as part of bodies, encompassing and moving more of them so that the pinnacle of the phenomenon was when another Team moved nearer, drawn to watch them singing and dancing as one unit.

The affectivity of music brings people together, but it was more than the affectivity of the music that generated togetherness in this scenario. Within this assemblage of a team song and dance, sounds came from different sources – voices, a phone, hands and feet, shoes, the surrounding walls – it was a coalescence of noise that drew and compelled bodies to participate. A purely psychological perspective such as Social Identity Theory may posit that the songs and dances act in bringing people together through a shared identity (Haslam, 2017). It is certainly true that songs were an identifier for the teams that had one; they would talk and ask me about ‘our song’ for instance. However, the idea of a shared identity that facilitates relationships, more

accurately describes outcomes, but does not explore what happened along the way – as Emma said, it brought them together. But how?

I would suggest that the ‘bringing together’ is facilitated by the agency and power of the song, dance and accompanying sounds, to enable a sharing and exchanging of feelings (Volgsten, 2012), and bring about connections where there are none or where they may be failing (Rose, 2017). Perhaps this ‘shimmer’ is music’s capacity to affect and connect. In their discussion of ‘hapticality’, Harney and Moten (2013) describe it as a way of feeling both with and through others. There is a symmetry in the singing and dancing that is felt together; they are doing ‘with’ and this is amplified because the music is moving through them as one. The ‘shimmer’ of music moving through bodies, filling the gaps between bodies allows them to feel as each other, to connect as a sensory experience of togetherness that they can build upon. As the affect circulates, the intensity has the potential to accumulate and build affectivity (Ahmed, 2004) and the shimmer leaves traces on bodies and lingers, creating further connectivity across time and space.

The invoked emotions are part of the material-discursive iteration and the opening of potential for positive relationships built on shared experiences. The intensity of ‘hapticality’ is more than just feelings in the now, it leaves traces to be felt beyond that present moment. The traces as historicity will later surface as memories with the associated emotions of the affect of togetherness. The embodied intensities inherent within this noise assemblage become enfolded within the present and the future (Anderson, 2004) and anchors the group to each other. For the young people Penny, Saffron and Emma, the song ‘Girlfriend’ and their shared dance will always be something that they have in common. A reminder of fun times and smiles, the song acted as a pivot point whenever things were tough for the group. They learned that they could achieve together and create positive emotions and that good things can come from this. The experience is an affirmation of being and knowing together, an affirmative ethical ‘doing’ of relationships based on entangled relations in which the subjective position is ‘we’ (Braidotti, 2019). It is a praxis encompassing play rather than instruction which troubles the traditional learner/educator hierarchical relations. The song moors them again and again to feelings that they were/are a team, no matter what went/will go on in other moments and assemblages. The joy and feelings of belonging wash over me now and will every time I listen to this particular song by Ariane Grande.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored the wonder I felt about sounds and noise through my PhD wanderings. Posthumanism makes an invitation to avoid binaries, to move beyond either/or and instead to consider what else may be happening, framed as a ‘both/and’ lens. This essay has explored how sounds and noise can both facilitate and obstruct relationship building in non-formal learning environments. Noise is agentic within the learning relationships, transgressing boundaries (Haraway, 2016a) of human and more-than-human bodies, disrupting and enabling futures. An active attunement to noise, as a manifestation of both sound and the environment entangled within phenomena, offers insights into how relationships are ‘done’, illuminating his/her-stories in learning and the potentiality of what is next. Within this context, I explored the concept of ‘shimmer’ to illuminate noise as sensation and hapticality (Harney & Moten, 2013) with consideration to othering and togetherness.

This paper heeds Barad's (2007) injunction not to overlook relationships as intra-active, material-discursive practices and to pay attention to affect and materiality. Attuning to the noise connected me to a vibrancy of life that I may have missed otherwise. Moving away from educationally- valued coherent speech and spoken language, attuning to noise opens up the world to a becoming in which we acknowledge that relationships and learning are not simply a human-directed effort. My curiosity towards noise was a process of noticing – my own bodily reactions, my own feelings, my own thoughts as part of an assemblage that felt both familiar and strange. Being curious, and undertaking exercises of defamiliarisation are practices in learning environments that are available to all. Attuning to myself opened up an attunement to other frequencies. Recognising my discomfort was an affirmative reworking (Braidotti, 2019) that transformed my approach to the research. This raises the question: how do we hear more frequencies in our learning relationships? ([Clip - Together](#))

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864912440778>

Audio Links:

Researcher of Noise (2021, November), *Setting the Scene* [Audio], SoundCloud.
<https://soundcloud.com/user-666005575-600434182/setting-the-scene/s-DbN2pWbneyM?si=4a8e5907f068493680080c9e74073d0a>

Researcher of Noise (2021, November), *Noisy Group* [Audio], SoundCloud.
<https://soundcloud.com/user-666005575-600434182/clip-noisy-group/s-FwpYw7L3A6n?si=13d4d674c5054bb8bf717b500af506e0>

Researcher of Noise (2021, November), *Bus Journey* [Audio], SoundCloud.
<https://soundcloud.com/user-666005575-600434182/clip-bus-journey/s-xnlz7a9dED4?si=1d3ebe175940459c8fb9495e3d3eea9d>

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