



## Knowledge as a ‘Body Run’: Learning of Writing as Embodied Experience in Accordance with Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Lived Body

by Eva Alerby

### Abstract

*What significance does the body have in the process of teaching and learning? In what way can the thoughts of a contemporary junior-level teacher in this regard be connected to the theory of the lived body formulated by the French phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and vice versa? The aim of this paper is to illuminate, enable understanding and discuss the meaning of the body in the learning process, with specific focus on the learning of writing as embodied experience. In the process, the boundaries of learning are also explored. While understanding the significance both of learning as embodied experience and of the boundaries of learning is essential within the educational field, in this paper the discussion is limited to exploring how learning as embodied experience and the boundaries of learning can be viewed by taking Merleau-Ponty’s notions as theoretical starting points. In an attempt to answer the aim and connect the paper’s theoretical point of departure with a voice from a teacher, an interview with a junior-level teacher was conducted. The paper thus offers a theoretical contribution to the field of educational research, but one in which the theory is exemplified by, and connected to, a teacher’s voice. Accordingly, the paper concludes by summarising the common understandings of learning held theoretically by Merleau-Ponty and made real in the activities of the contemporary junior-level teacher.*

### Introduction

*Knowledge must take a run through the whole body before it becomes real knowledge. If it just goes in one ear, without a ‘body run’, it will immediately disappear out of the other ear and no knowledge will emerge.*

The above thoughts were formulated by Anna Andersson<sup>1</sup>, a junior-level teacher at a primary school

<sup>1</sup> The name of the teacher has been changed in order to maintain confidentiality.

in a village in Northern Sweden. What is implied by the notion that knowledge must take a “body run” before it becomes real knowledge? What significance does the body have in the process of teaching and learning? In what way can the thoughts of the teacher be explored and explicated as connected to the theory of the lived body formulated by the French phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and vice versa? The aim of this paper is to illuminate, enable understanding and discuss the meaning of the body in the learning process – with specific focus on *the learning of writing as embodied experience*.

In an attempt to answer the aim and connect the paper's theoretical point of departure with a voice from a teacher, an open-ended interview was conducted with a junior-level teacher. The interview, which took place at the school and lasted one hour, focused on the teacher's views on teaching and learning in general, and, more specifically, on the meaning of the body in teaching and learning situations aimed at teaching pupils to write. Theoretically the discussion emerges from Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1996) theory of the lived body. However, Merleau-Ponty's thoughts are reflected through and in the light of the junior-level teacher's approach to learning and knowledge. Merleau-Ponty's theory of the lived body is, in this paper, used in order to understand what it means to learn language – or, to be more precise, to learn to write. This paper should thus be viewed as a theoretical contribution to the field of educational research, but with the theory exemplified by, and connected to, a teacher's voicing of her own views and approach.

Learning is moulded by the experiences we as human beings are undergoing in the world, and these experiences are above all incorporated through our body. 'Incorporate' as a concept is derived from the compound Latin word *incorporo* – meaning 'embody' – with what it implies evident from the addition of the preposition *in* to its root, *corpus*, meaning just 'body' (*Nationalencyklopedin*, 1998). We, as human beings, view the world through our eyes, we listen through our ears, we incorporate different experiences of taste through our mouth, we grasp, caress and feel things or other people through our hands, and so forth. Thus, it is through our body that we have experiences in the world, which in turn are prerequisites for learning.

### The Meaning of the Body from Different Perspectives

How, then, is the body viewed in different learning situations? Let me make a brief historical survey confined to the 20th Century. With the breakthrough of behaviourism at the beginning of the 20th century, how humans – and animals – learnt things was understood and explained by the model of stimulus-response. Within the domain of pedagogy it was common to perform experiments on animals, and doctoral students were often allotted an 'official rat' to demonstrate the pedagogical principles of learning theory (Lundgren, 1990). This practice was based on a view of the body from a naturalistic perspective on human beings, and assumed a causal relationship between physical stimuli and physical reactions. The body, as well as the mind, was explained by physical

characteristics, and the human body was viewed as, in effect, a puppet on a string.

During the 1970s the naturalistic view was abandoned in favour of a cognitive view. The cognitive approach quickly became dominant, and learning was explained in terms of cognition, which often seemed to function without a body. The unavoidable question in relation to this is whether cognitions can ever arise and develop without a human body. However, it has become clear that neither behaviourists nor cognitivists can give the complete answer to the question about the meaning of the body in the learning process. In an attempt to discuss one possible way to view the body and its significance for learning, let's instead take as a starting point the view of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who developed the concept of the 'body-subject' as an alternative to the Cartesian 'cogito'.

I will start by introducing some notions in Merleau-Ponty's view of the significance of the body with regard to learning processes, and I will also give some examples from Anna's teaching. The distinction between the concept of the body-subject and cogito is significant, in that Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996) perceives the essences of the world existentially. This view is opposed to the Cartesian idea that the world is merely an extension of our own minds. According to Merleau-Ponty, the subject – which he understands as the living body – is always situated in the world. "Consciousness, the world, and the human body as a perceiving thing are intricately intertwined and mutually 'engaged'" (Wikipedia, 2006).

Through our existence we, as human beings, experience the concrete world in all its complexity. Consequently, a person's existence provides the prerequisites for the worldly experience, which is not to be interpreted as meaning that the human body is *in* the world in the same way as things, such as stones or chairs. Instead, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the body *inhabits* the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996), human beings live in a world that they share with other human beings. The relationship between human beings and the world, like the relationship between human beings, is interdependent. This leads to a view of human beings as participating in the world. Human beings are not merely observing, but, through their bodies, they are acting in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Pupils, as well as teachers, are thus assets in the world of the school. It could also be said that teachers and pupils inhabit the school world. In both

cases, what is signified is an indissoluble inter-dependency between human beings and the world. Expressed in another way – the world and life affect each other mutually in the sense that life is always worldly and the world is always what it is for a living being. In this way, life and the world are integrated into a unity that cannot be separated. Reality must be seen not in terms of ‘either or’, but in terms of ‘both and’. This applies not only to life and the world, but also to body and mind, object and subject, outer and inner, physical and mental, sensuous and cognitive, self and other, individual and society, and so forth.

As has been argued above, it is through our human body that we as human beings experience the world. Van Manen (1990) stresses that we are always bodily in the world. We use our hands, our legs, our eyes, our ears, our mouths and so on, and by doing so we learn more and more about the complex world we inhabit. However, sometimes our own body is not enough in itself, but we make use of different types of things or artefacts to acquire further experiences in the world, which is of importance for learning. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996) illustrates the importance of these kinds of experiences by referring to the blind man and his stick. The stick constitutes an extension of the blind man’s body, and with its help he experiences the world. This is, according to Merleau-Ponty, an example of human beings’ ability to extend their own body through instruments. Another example of this is the pencil, which constitutes an extension of the writer’s body and thus makes it possible to write.

By viewing the body as a subject, we acquire a different understanding of its relation to the world. Through the body we are in a living relation to things, in this case a pencil, and it is by our embodied being-in-the-world that the pencil gains meaning. The pencil becomes an extension of the writer’s body. However, it is not enough to take a pencil in one’s hand for the first time. To really incorporate a thing – in this case a pencil – into one’s own body, a habit must be formed (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1996). When a child holds a pen for the first time, there is a distance between the pen and the child before the pen is incorporated in the child and becomes one with the child’s lived body. The theory concerning habits is not only valid for different things, but Merleau-Ponty also understands and explains the use of language with his theory of habits. Language is, in other words, in the body, or – as Merleau-Ponty expresses it – “in the tongue”. It is not enough to know all the letters, the symbols of words of a language, to know its grammar, and so forth. In order not to experience the language as an external object, but to incorporate language in the

body, habits must be formed. Let us have a look at how the junior-level teacher Anna teaches language. She expresses the following thoughts:

*One has to ‘taste’ the language and use it and test how one makes different sounds. Rhyme and play with words ... that is also a way to let the language run through the body, even though language is very hard to feel. But in a practical sense use what you have learnt theoretically; that’s a way to learn. And one tries to ... I have ‘letters work’ with the first grade pupils and then I try to let the pupils do different things with each letter so they will get to know the letter better.*

Anna describes what this can mean in a concrete way:

*That can be listening for the sound ... that can be ... well it depends on where they are in their learning process. If they already know all the letters and can read they will have other tasks. But if they are absolute beginners, they can be listening for the sounds of a letter, and they learn how to recognize the sound.*

*They can form and give shape to the sound. They can, for example, shape the letters with their hands, or use clay to give the shape of a letter, or use a piece of wool, or things like that.*

*And we also check what you really do with your mouth when you are making the sound. Which parts of the body are you using? Can you do a ‘G’ with your lips pursed? Is there any sound then? What letters are really working with lips pursed? Maybe, it’s only one letter? And if you are holding your tongue, can you then say an ‘R’? I think we are really looking funny at these times, but the pupils think it is such fun.*

*And I also use jokes about the letters, for example ‘M’ is the tastiest letter. You can hear that, ‘MMMMM’. And, for example, ‘A’ can sound in two different ways. Sometimes, if you are very tired, it can sound as ‘AAAAA’, and sometimes, if you have kicked a stone with your little toe, it sounds like ‘A..A..A’, because it hurts so much. And then we play with the letters and the sounds.*

In connection with Anna's descriptions of her own teaching and the activities it involves, it is interesting to illuminate to what degree the human senses communicate with each other. A lemon can be used to illustrate the communication of the senses. When viewing a lemon we do not see only its yellow skin, but we can also 'see' its bitter taste. Other examples are the coldness of a snowball, which we not only feel with our hands, but also 'see'. Or we can hear a motorbike driving round the corner of a house and at the same time we can 'see' the motor bike.

In the example given by Anna, when her pupils are making forms and shapes to a sound of a letter by using clay or wool, the sense of hearing is communicating with the tactile sense. The sound of a letter enters the body by hearing and comes out in the tactile sense of the hands. Anna's description also reveals the various options she had and choices she made. First of all, Anna has chosen a particular content of the teaching situation: 'letters work', as she calls it. She has also made a choice of teaching methods. By taking Merleau-Ponty's theory of the lived body as a point of departure, reason is given bodily properties in contrast to purely intellectual properties, as would occur with the cognitive approach. This implies that, when Anna has made her choices and is in the classroom together with her 7-year-old pupils, education is already an integrated part of Anna's body. The choices are integrated with Anna's bodily teaching, and in her way of being. All the activities that Anna describes are bodily in character. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996), they are sustained by an *intentional bow arch*. What Anna is doing in the classroom when she is trying to help her pupils learn the letters emanates from Anna's earlier experiences, experiences which are embodied. Her earlier experiences give direction and meaning to her present and future activities with the pupils. Past, present and future are bridged by the "intentional bow". When Anna participates with her pupils in checking if it is possible to say the letter 'R' if the tongue is held, it emanates from Anna's earlier experiences of work with letters, as well as from her choice of content and teaching methods, and this gives direction and meaning to her ongoing work.

By using the theory of the lived body, learning is constituted when the experiences of a lesson are incorporated in the body, blend with earlier experiences, and become habits. Using this line of reasoning, it should be noted that experiences outside of school are also significant for the learning which occurs within school. But how can the teacher know when knowledge has become one with the body,

when habits have been formed and learning has occurred? Let us once again visit Anna and her pupils and ask her how she can notice when the pupils have the knowledge they need to write – a knowledge which, according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996), is in the lived body.

*I can notice it by ... the happiest moment is when you can notice that it starts working, or what you say. One can say that they are breaking the code. For some ... well, their eyes are shining and then – 'Yes, I know!' – and they really take it literally. And for some others, well they just slip in and suddenly you find out that they can. ... You can notice it when ... I think ... the knowledge how to use the letters ... that the letter is for something. In other words, that the letters have a meaning, you can notice that when they start to write on their own. Before that, if they do not write on their own, it's hard to understand what the letters exist for. But when the knowledge is coming and they sit down, take a pen and start to write ... that is something. It does not matter what they are writing. Some just write a few words ...*

### **Boundaries of Learning vs Boundaries of the Body**

In discussions about learning it is often argued that learning takes place *within* human beings. But what does "within human beings" mean? Do human beings end at the boundary of their skin, or can external things, such as a walking stick or maybe a pen, also be part of them? And, if one accepts that different types of things, such as a pen, can be part of the lived body, one realizes that people's learning does not just occur within the mind, nor in the physical body. Humans can instead be extended by different types of artefacts, which influence and are important for their learning. Consequently, it could be said that the boundaries of the human being are open. Let me once again illustrate this by using the pen. But first – how can a thing called "pen" be understood? A pen can be understood as a material thing – that is, a pencil consists of a core of black lead, enveloped by an angular wooden cylinder which has been painted yellow. All these qualities of the pen are material. The pen can also be understood in a totally different way, namely as the idea of a pen, or as constructed cognitions of the pen. To understand a pen as either matter or idea, or even as both together – matter and idea – does not give a complete understanding of the pen. The pen also has a utility quality – the pen can be

used by someone to do something. The utility quality cannot be reduced to the qualities of either matter or idea. It has to be regarded as a different kind of quality, which provides a further dimension to the pen and demands a lived body using the pen (Bengtsson, 1998).

With regard to Anna's description of how she can know that her pupils have the knowledge required to write, parallels can be drawn with the discussion about the human body's ability to relate itself to the world through different things, for example a pen. One way for Anna to discover that a pupil can write is when the pupil actually grasps the pen, takes a piece of paper and writes some word on it. The pen, as well as the paper, is, in this example, a prerequisite for the writing. However, it is not enough to put a pen in the pupil's hand and a piece of paper on the desk in front of her or him. The pupil must also know something about letters and understand the meaning of them. Apart from that, the pen has to be an integrated part of the pupil's body, and not only exist as an object; in other words, a habit to use the pen to write has to be formed. A child who, for the first time, takes a pen in her or his hand, trying to write some word, is often totally focused on the pen. As a consequence, the pen is often held very hard with whitening fingers, which means that the child's concentration is focused on holding this unfamiliar object. Later on, when writing has become a habit, the concentration can move on to what the child wants to convey with the pen. Then, the pen has become an extension of the child's body, and only then can the child be said to know how to write. The knowledge of writing is, according to Merleau-Ponty's theory of the lived body, neither in the physical body, nor in the physical things, nor in the cognitions of the language, but in the bodily use of the utilities to write – or, in other words, the quality of usefulness as expressed in embodied knowledge.

### Some Final Words

The school's mission is to educate the children and young people in its society so that they may reach the level of knowledge that the Government has stipulated by law. The task of educating the citizens of Sweden is described in the text of the schools' management documents: educational legislation, curricula and municipal school planning documents (SFS, 1995:63; The Ministry of Education, 1994, 1998). One way to increase the level of knowledge is, according to both Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996) and the contemporary junior-level teacher interviewed, to involve the whole body in the teaching and learning process. Theoretically, the discussions in this paper

emanate from Merleau-Ponty's thoughts concerning the lived body and its significance in learning situations. This theory has been used in order to understand what it means to learn to write. The junior-level teacher Anna Andersson's experiences and thoughts have been used to exemplify the discussion. The question may be raised regarding in what sense Anna Andersson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have something in common concerning their view of the body and its importance for learning.

It is interesting to illuminate the learning of writing, particularly as it is described by Anna, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's theory of habits. Writing, along with things such as a pen, has to be incorporated with the body, to become a habit. Anna emphasizes that she knows when a pupil has the letters, and thereby also the writing, in the body. It is when the pupil "grabs a pen and starts writing something". In other words, it is about *living writing* with the whole body – the knowledge is embodied. As van Manen (1991) expresses it, "Truly enabling knowledge is embodied knowledge" (p. 145).

Another important aspect of Merleau-Ponty's theory of the lived body is the notion of the "intentional bow", the implication of which is that the subject's earlier experiences give direction and meaning to present and impending actions. This has been exemplified by using Anna and her planning for the teaching situation concerning 'letters work'. Anna has also given examples of the importance of involving the whole body in different learning situations, with the learning of writing highlighted in this paper. In an attempt to relate this theoretical discussion to Anna's work in the classroom, I want to recall the example in the beginning when Anna and her pupils 'tasted' the language and gave shape to the sounds of the letters using clay or a piece of wool. To have knowledge of the shape of a letter is, of course, of great importance for writing. By using, for example, clay or wool, the pupils also use their bodies when trying to learn the letters, and thereby also the language, as a prerequisite for writing. In other words, human beings acquire the language in different linguistic environments by using the lived body. In this regard, Hannah Arendt's discussion of human beings' life as divided into two parts can be highlighted. According to Arendt (1958), there is a distinction between the active life, *Vita Activa*, and the contemplative life, *Vita Contemplativa*. She claimed that human beings are by nature active and social beings who participate in social activities, and this life, *Vita Activa*, includes the elements of work, production and action. In contrast to this active life, one finds the human need

to withdraw to find peace. It is here that the contemplative life begins, which consists of the elements of reflection, volition and discernment.

School must be regarded, above all, as being active as opposed to contemplative, to use the terminology of Arendt, even if this activity for the most part consists of cognitive activity, as opposed to physical activity (Alerby, 2003). However, in this paper examples of 'active life', in the form of both cognitive and physical activities – or, to use Merleau-Ponty's expression, "using the whole body" – are given by the teacher. She has vividly described her teaching and how she lets the pupils use their whole body, including their mind, when learning to write. In this regard, I want to emphasise the significance of using the whole body in teaching and learning activities, and of interweaving and valuing *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa* equally. The phenomenology of the life-world has, according to Husserl (1950/1995) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996), taken a step on the path towards an ontology which combines the mind and the body. Merleau-Ponty also emphasises the interdependency between human beings and between human beings and the world. However, there is a risk that the idea of human beings can be seen as exclusive and constricted. According to Bollnow (1989), 'human beings' can be viewed as 'sentient beings' – or, as he expresses it, human beings with sentient qualities. This in turn allows for a richer both-and world in which we as humans participate. Bengtsson (1997) stresses that, within the life-world, the subjective and the objective sides of a pheno-

menon are to be understood as correlating with one another, and not as conflicting or mutually excluding one another.

I also want to emphasise that the teaching and learning situations, which have been exemplified above by the teacher, can be viewed as a narrative connection that involves 'us' as human beings. Buber (1948, 1947/1972) stresses that real living begins with relation, or within a narrative connection that involves 'us', and that learning to write can be viewed as a part of 'real living'. It is all about openness toward other human beings, in this case a junior-level teacher and the pupils in her class. But it is also about openness toward the theoretical points of departure – the phenomenology of the life-world, or, to be more precise, the theory of the lived body.

According to Paulo Freire (1998), both openness and open-ended curiosity are essential to educational practice. In this paper I have explored and discussed one approach, which can be seen as an attempt to reach openness and open-ended curiosity in relation to the teaching and learning of writing. I ask that the reader of this paper embrace the same – openness and open-ended curiosity.

Finally, I want to stress once more the communication between our human senses. By letting the pupils listen to the sound of a letter and use their sense of hearing, the sound can communicate with the tactile sense and gain form in the pupils' hands – *knowledge is taking a 'body run'*.

### About the Author



Eva Alerby is a professor in the Department of Education at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden. Her main research interests focus on teaching and learning, and, more specifically, on people's experiences of different phenomena within the educational sphere. Currently Prof Alerby is involved in a research project concerning learning and psychosocial well-being among children and youth. She is also interested in research within the field of philosophy of education.

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