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Relating Differences: Insights from a Practice of Teaching In Between

Teaching with heterogenous groups in contexts of transdisciplinarity in the arts, I am confronted with the following issue: How to build a shared space of practice and reflection from and for a variety of singular positions? This paper explores the approach to teaching in between that I have developed in response to this challenge. I first discuss the contextual elements that inform it, together with some of the premises that guide and underpin it. Then, I turn to a particular sequence designed to address the question of how to articulate differences in and through teaching with heterogenous groups of students. The final section opens up further resonances and possibilities for relating differences.

Difference as a starting point

Imagine a group of students coming from a variety of places. Not only do they have different backgrounds in the arts and beyond, but they also come from different geographies and cultures, speak a variety of languages – from Swiss German and French to Ukrainian, Kurdish, Arabic, Spanish, or Russian. Some of them are queer or non-binary, quite a few are neurodivergent. Such constellations are commonplace in the MA program *Transdisciplinary Studies in the Arts* (MTR) at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), where I have been teaching for over ten years. In this context, I have encountered a set of challenges that have become central to my teaching practice: *How can a shared space of practice and reflection emerge from a variety of singular positions? How to articulate differences? How to bring them in relation?* The present paper explores these questions and offers insights into the practice of teaching in between that I have been developing in response to them.

At MTR, working with/in heterogeneity, i.e. with/in groups composed of individuals from diverse socio-cultural, linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds, is a fundamental condition of

the transdisciplinary approach developed and pursued within the program. Heterogeneity is what we work *with*, not in spite of. Moreover, it is encountered at different levels: it does not only concern the students, but also, albeit maybe to a lesser extent, the team of lecturers, with most courses unfolding through changing constellations of co-teaching. Heterogeneity also constitutes a shared horizon: the program does not aim to create a homogeneous group of practitioners, but rather to foster an open field of practice which makes room for a diversity of positions. As teachers, we are therefore confronted with the challenge of fostering the articulation of differences without erasing nor blurring them, while also creating the conditions for these differences to relate and interact with one another.

How to proceed concretely? My experience at MTR has taught me that there is no single nor unified answer to this question. Rather, each course can be conceived as a situated and, as such, particular and partial response to it. Precisely because there is no general answer or ready-made recipe, it becomes all the more important to articulate and share the various attempts to work with and articulate differences within an open field of practice. At ZHdK, a wide offer of internal advanced training focusing on topics such as interculturality and neurodivergence address ways of making room for diversity in teaching. The increasing internationalization of study programs, alongside the introduction of minor programs at the institution, also means that teachers and students alike are becoming increasingly familiar with the challenges of navigating groups in which diverse cultural backgrounds and disciplinary positions come together. The approach discussed in the present paper has been specifically developed in response to the kind of heterogeneity encountered in the context of the MTR. It thereby seeks to contribute to a wider endeavor while acknowledging the singularity of its situatedness.

In the first section, I discuss the contextual elements that inform my approach to teaching in between, together with some of the premises that guide and underpin it. In the second section, I turn to a sequence that concretely addresses the question of how to relate differences in and through teaching with heterogenous groups of students. The final section unfolds reflections on specific aspects of the proposed sequence and opens up to further resonances for processes of teaching in between.

Relating beyond established boundaries

Teaching as/from an entangled practice

As an artist-writer-teacher-translator-researcher, I see teaching as part of a larger entanglement of practices that both nurture and displace each other. Writing as an artist-researcher, teaching as a researcher-translator, or as an artist-writer, researching as an artist-writer: the different perspectives might combine in various constellations and converge in a transversal movement dedicated to exploring ways of relating. In writing this text, I privilege the perspective of teaching, while recognizing that how I engage with my practice as *a teacher* is also informed by the possibility of approaching it from the perspective of one or more of the other hyphened components. It is from this differentially entangled position that I seek to host, facilitate, accompany, and activate various processes through which differences can be articulated and worked with in contexts of transdisciplinarity in the arts.

This approach to my practice resonates with a central feature of the MTR study program which, as it cuts across disciplinary boundaries, allows students from diverse backgrounds to develop their own practice at the crossroad of established fields. Relating differences thus concerns not only relating practitioners from different fields, but also the different dimensions of a singular practice. Here, working with/in heterogenous groups represents a formidable opportunity as it enables to position the different dimensions of one's own practice not in isolation *but in relation to other positions*.

Practice sharing

Practice sharing plays a central role for various kinds of situated processes. I first became aware of it through my involvement in *Language-Based Artistic Research*, a special interest group of the *Society for Artistic Research*.[1] In contexts of artistic research, one encounters a certain ambivalence concerning the epistemological value of aesthetic processes. On the one hand, they are characterized by their singularity since they unfold in concrete situations and involve experiences that, as such, cannot be repea-

[1] For more information see: Cocker, Damianisch, Séraphin, Daus 2026.

ted. On the other hand, insofar as such processes can generate a specific form of knowledge, it should be possible to *share* them, which involves both sharing specific aspects and practicing different ways of sharing them.[2]

[2] The share-ability can concern the process as a whole, or you might want to share selected moments, aspects, dimensions, or outcomes of it. This implies each time a different focus and attention.

I would argue that *processes of teaching* display a similar ambivalence: they are highly singular, and yet they need to be shareable. Share-ability is indeed crucial if practices and processes are to travel across different contexts. The prefix *trans-* points in this direction as it invites to remain open to the condition of displacement between fields and beyond established boundaries. At this point, I would like to mention a project carried out at MTR together with lecturers Katja Gläss and Eirini Sourgiadaki. We are working together to collect and articulate the variety of teaching practices that have been developed, tested, and refined in this study program over more than a decade, with the aim of making them shareable in other contexts.[3] Exploring share-ability thus involves addressing the challenge of articulating a common ground from which practices can grow beyond the contexts in which they have been developed and flourish in unanticipated ways.

[3] A digital version of this project will be published online by the beginning of 2027, with the support of the program *Innovative Publishing in Open Science* of the Media and Information Center (MIZ) of ZHdK.

A multidimensional openness

At MTR, students develop projects that unfold not only at the margins of disciplines, but also across media, beyond genres, and between formats and contexts of reception. The openness encountered is both multilayered and multidimensional, and it entails the absence of a unified and unifying frame both at the level of the students' group and at that of individual practices. In other words, in my role as a teacher, I cannot rely on a shared paradigm in any sense of the word. There is no fixed set of norms that univocally shape how students think and behave, I cannot presuppose a shared system of references or a common familiarity with a specific methodological approach and, to a certain extent, there is not even a common set of prior experiences that I can rely on.

This often manifests in unspectacular ways. Recently, I was hosting a workshop bringing together artists and scientists. During a short introductory input, as I mentioned that we would be experimenting with writing scores, I noticed a certain wavering among the participants, whose source I was not able to locate. I invited clarifying questions but as no one took up the invita-

tion, we proceeded with the experimentation. It is only during the collective reflection at the end that the scientists-participants felt confident enough to disclose their astonishment, their skepsis even, upon hearing the term *score* in my introduction. They thought they would have to assess writing processes by using quantitative scales, and it was my turn to be confounded. I was so used to working with artists from the fields of performance, music, and choreography, that I completely overlooked this possible (mis)understanding!

Though minor, this incident is nonetheless telling. First, it reminded me that I will never be in a position to fully assess or anticipate the extent of difference among the perspectives involved. Second, it confirmed once again that changing context and circumstances is a fruitful means to bring implicit assumptions to the fore, and that confronting one's own views and practice with those of others offers an opportunity to better understand what one is actually doing and thinking.

This finally means that as a teacher in transdisciplinary contexts, I am part of the dynamic of difference. In this sense, I, too, teach on moving grounds, where some premise or assumption underlying what I say, do, or convey, will inevitably remain unspoken. When such tacit assumptions come to the fore, all I can do is attend and resist clinging to them, lest they fossilize into biases. As it appears, teaching on moving grounds can be disquieting for teachers and students alike, while it also holds transformative potential for all of us.

Navigating in-betweenness

The diversity of backgrounds also means that I cannot teach from a position of expertise alone. I do have areas of expertise, which is important, but my teaching is not (primarily) about transmitting knowledge. It is about providing students with the means to find their own ways into their projects and develop their own forms of expertise, in relation to and alongside one another. My role is to support them in this process through a variety of formats that enable them to attend to what they are doing *as a practice*, and to become experts of their own practice.

At this point, it is important to note that the term *practice* encompasses more than the mere doing or making of something. It involves regularity, duration, repetition, and it also embeds moments of reflection that contribute to the refinement of the

process. Moreover, when a practice unfolds between traditional fields and cuts across established boundaries of genres and disciplines, it also entails negotiating a series of shifts which, depending on one's prior training, education, and experience, may involve varying degrees of unlearning and re-articulating. In this process, ingrained habits of thinking and doing are called into question. Certainties are deconstructed. This can be destabilizing. It can be uncomfortable. For precisely these reasons, an environment in which one can relate to other positions who face similar challenges is invaluable. It fosters the development of a common ground from which to get acquainted with the uncertainties of in-betweenness. This might be what makes transformation possible in the first place. And this might also be what expertise in transdisciplinary contexts ultimately means: the ability to navigate in-betweenness far from familiar shores.

A situated process of relating

Developing a field of practices beyond established frames constitutes a horizon which cannot be attained in isolation, nor by following a single path. Rather, such a field takes shape through the exploration of multiple paths that meander along the margins of populated terrains. It requires the ability to connect a wide range of *chemins de traverses*, off the beaten track. This in turn calls for the ability to move and translate between established practices, and requires a range of skills including articulating, mediating, shifting perspective, transposing, reflecting, and moving between various frameworks.

This kind of navigation can be practiced at a small scale, and the sequence presented below is conceived in order to do so. It is designed as an iterative process through which the skills mentioned can be exercised and developed in concrete situations of encounter, where the focus lies neither on outputs nor on finished products, but on experiencing and experimenting with/in the process itself. It is about getting familiar with a diversity of singular positions, learning to articulate commonalities among them and exploring share-able ways of relating across differences.

The sequence builds on previous iterations in the context of MTR. On one occasion, it was implemented as a standalone sequence in the first session of a semester-long writing workshop,

on another, it was embedded in a larger sequence at the beginning of a project week dedicated to exploring collective writing practices. Although adapted to the specific format of each iteration, the sequence served the same purpose: to enter a shared space of differences that can be brought into relation with one another.

More precisely, it consists of an iterative process unfolding across nine interconnected steps and various constellations of individual and group work. It is designed for groups of up to twenty-four students, working primarily in groups of three, and requires at least an hour and a half to complete.[4]

[4] All durations indicated below can be adapted to fit the number of participants as well as the time available. Note that you might also want to prepare in advance a printed description of the different steps that you can distribute among the participants, allowing them to work in groups of three at their own pace (this holds especially from step two to six).

The score

> 1. Invite participants to choose a book that is relevant to their own project and/or practice and to bring it to class. You can send the invitation in advance via email and explain that they will introduce themselves and their project / practice through their chosen book.

Note: Alternatively, this step can be carried out collectively during the course. You might take the group to a nearby library and invite participants to select a book from the shelves, or you bring a selection to the class and invite them to browse and choose one that they would like to work with. In the context of an advanced course focused on a specific issue, it is also possible to delineate the invitation and/or the selection of books accordingly.

> 2. Invite participants to form groups of three and introduce themselves and their project and/or practice through the book they have brought. (ca. 3 minutes each, i.e. 10 minutes in total)

Note: Participants take turns presenting, while the other two listen. They can use a timer to ensure that everyone has the same amount of time to speak.
You might invite participants to focus on listening and refrain from engaging in conversation at this stage, explaining that there will be an opportunity for exchange later on.

> 3. Invite participants to write an individual text in the first-person singular, drawing on what remains with them from what they have heard in the previous step. Let them know that they will share (parts of) their text within their group. (10 minutes)

4. Invite participants to read aloud from the texts they have written. They do not need to read the entire text but can let their gaze wander across the page and read aloud the lines or words that catch their attention. (10 minutes)

Note: As the participants read aloud in their groups, the way they do so plays an important role. They might read in a predetermined order, in an improvised sequence – for instance by looking at the person they would like to read next –, or in the form of a jam session, allowing different resonances to emerge each time. You can guide the participants in determining the order or leave it to them to decide intuitively.

5. Invite participants to compose a new text together in the third person plural, drawing on the textual material generated in the previous steps. The text should fit on a single A4 page. (20 minutes)

Note: Each group can negotiate how they want to proceed. If needed, the following possibilities might be mentioned as incentives: they might select words, lines, phrases, or sentences from the texts written in step three and copy, paste, or weave them together; they might write between passages of texts, write from memory or echo resonances heard in step four; or they might mix written and spoken passages.

6. Invite participants to write individually on a card a line describing how the collective composition was approached. (3 minutes)

7. Invite the groups to come together in plenary and read (from) their final compositions while the other groups listen. (duration variable)

Note: Each group might choose how they want to read (from) their final composition, either together or in turn, depending on the nature of the text written. The modalities might be adapted to fit the time available.

8. The cards from step six are brought together on a table or displayed on a wall around which the participants gather. Invite them to share and reflect on their experience: Which difficulties did they encounter? Which moments struck them? Which aspects of the process did they enjoy and would like to implement in their own practice? Or what would they want to avoid? (ca. 15 minutes)

9. To close the sequence, invite the participants to individually write on a card a line they would like to carry into their own practice. Suggest that they pin it above their desk or on their fridge as a reminder. The line might also serve as the starting point of a new writing sequence in a subsequent session. (ca. 3 minutes)

Unfolding the process

The iterative character of the sequence establishes a framework for a shared process that is grounded on and growing out of different positions. While conducting the sequence, my role as a teacher-practitioner is to hold the space that allows participants to experience the process in their own ways. This position requires a specific kind of presence. It requires guiding without leading, inviting without instructing. It requires preparation and flexibility, precision and improvisation. Maintaining this balance can be challenging, and the equilibrium might shift greatly depending on the course setting. As I am responding to what unfolds and adjust my approach to the particular situation, teaching unfolds in between the participants and myself. The score presented above thus provides a structure, but it does not determine what happens within it.

The steps presented are conceived as open invitations: providing a direction for experimenting with/in the situation encountered and supporting the participants in finding their way within the given parameters. As a whole, the sequence is thus designed to enable singular experiences of the different moments of a situated process that the different steps bring into play. The first two steps are designed to foster an awareness and understanding of the positions present. More precisely, by inviting participants to bring a book to the course, the first step encourages them to reflect on their own position and expectations. In step two, listening to others allows both to become acquainted with others' positions and to recognize the specificity of one's own interests, project, and/or perspective. Encountering different approaches thus allows participants not only to grasp but also to expand and extend their own position.

The next steps introduce various movements of relating differences. While step three is the occasion to individually trace back what has been heard from the presentations of others and what stays with oneself, it is also an invitation to confront

the task of articulating others' thoughts and ideas from a first-person perspective. Step four is an opportunity to experience a different kind of perspective shifts: the participants recognize their thoughts in the voice of others, through the prism of others' formulations; they hear and listen to how the ideas circulate between them, and how they re-combine through the different voices. Taken together, these two steps are also the occasion to relinquish the individuality of one's position without erasing its singularity. Or, to put it differently: they invite shifting away from a straightforward individualistic approach through experiencing how the first-person perspective entails a plurality of (others') voices. Participants often describe this as a pivotal moment.

Step five is a crystallization of the process so far. The textual material gathered is brought into a shared composition where both the content and the method require negotiation within the groups. The invitation to shift to the third person plural intends to foster the arising of a collective position which is not reducible to the sum of the persons involved – as would be the case with the first-person plural. To this extent, the collective position might be played with and invested by the participants with some distance, facilitating the adoption of a reflective stance in the next step.

Reflection is crucial for the articulation, the refinement and, ultimately, for sharing a process and its various dimensions – which include, but are not limited to, its output. The last two steps are designed from this perspective: they embed reflection in the process of relating and thereby seek to implement a practice of thinking-in-the-making. Step six focuses on methodology: it confronts the participants with the crucial task of articulating an emerging methodology from within the process of relating. By bringing together the different groups, step seven extends the scope of the experienced process and step eight allows for a better understanding of the range of possible approaches. The diverse compositions and proceedings can be compared, similarities recognized, differences confronted, and resonances might emerge. Finally, step nine invites the participants to individually identify aspects of the process that have been relevant to their own practice and that they would like to retain for future work.

Engaging with/in differences: an urgent task to carry on with

The sequence can serve different purposes. It might pave the way for the further development of projects. It can also be implemented as an activation of critical reflection on a variety of topics such as authorship, writing as an embodied practice of relating, or on specific issues dealt with in the selected books. As it expands writing into a process that involves a variety of shifts through persons, bodies, medium, and formats, it specifically questions the still widespread understanding of writing as an individual practice carried out in isolation, as well as the correlated understandings of authorship centered on an individual figure. To this extent, the sequence can also function as an entry point into a reflection on issues linked to authorship and/or human writing in times of generative AI. The specifics of the course situation will determine which of these developments are to follow and how to adapt and adjust the sequence accordingly.

More fundamentally, in the present context, it is becoming increasingly crucial to bring differences into relation within shared spaces that make room for complexity. The proposed sequence aims to contribute to this task by creating occasions for participants to acknowledge, articulate and negotiate differences on a common ground shaped by their diverse positions. This requires openness to the situation at hand, attentiveness to what emerges, and a willingness to negotiate changing conditions, both individually and collectively. It also calls for a plurality of perspectives to enter into relation without losing their singularity. This might involve frictions, tensions, fear of losing ground, or even getting lost. Teaching in between thus involves not only creating occasions for working with/in differences, but also holding the space for engaging with the challenges encountered in the process. This is not an easy task, yet it is an urgent one. It needs to be carried forward through a variety of perspectives, allowing a common ground to emerge as practices are shared across boundaries and travel between established fields, and beyond.

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