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Harvey, L. and Bradley, J. (2023) Epilogue: Intercultural dialogue, the arts, and (im)possibilities. *Language Teaching Research*, 27 (2). pp. 359-367. ISSN: 1362-1688

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211044546>

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Epilogue: Intercultural dialogue, the arts, and (im) possibilities

Language Teaching Research

1–9

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DOI: 10.1177/13621688211044546

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Keywords

creativity, engagement, intercultural communication, language education, the arts

I Opening comments

We thank the editors for inviting us to make this final comment on the special issue, which represents an important opening-up of the language education field to consider, and make more prominent, the links between language and intercultural education, the arts and social engagement. We warmly welcome this move and are delighted to see this special issue published. We hope that the special issue contributes to more communicatively and culturally holistic, and more just, language education. In this short epilogue we offer some thoughts on how and where these ideas might develop in the future.

II Engagement at the intersection of language and the arts

The focus on the arts, communication and engagement is common to our own work at the intersection of language and the arts, and to both the global Learning at the Intersection of Language and the Arts (LILA) Research Network (2020–present) and its predecessor, the AILA Research Network in Creative Inquiry and Applied Linguistics (2018–21). Through these networks, we sought in part to define and to name this kind of work that takes place in the margins, as explored so openly in the editors' introduction. We used the term 'creative inquiry', tentatively and critically, to describe research which brings in the arts, broadly defined, or creative methods. The work undertaken through and around

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the networks also seeks to critically explore the concept of ‘engagement’, and how this is understood, performed and enacted at the borders of disciplines.

In the case of the current special issue, engagement can be understood as the creation of connections between disparate groups in order to enable and advance intercultural understanding. This is always a pressing concern, but particularly now, one and a half years into a pandemic which has highlighted the stark divisions in our world – between governments and the populace; between generations and ethnic groups; between those who have resources and those who do not – and which has in many ways reinforced the borders which define our world, both material and symbolic. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the connections, the communality and solidarity of social groups, the fluidity and adaptability of people and psyches and places and borders, and the ways in which our interconnectedness affects the ongoing pandemic. We are experiencing what might be described as collective trauma, and we will not emerge the same as we were before. This is perhaps particularly true of the broad domains of education and the arts, both of which are constituted by communication, the connectedness of utterer and hearer, and both of which are radically redefining how we connect and engage with each other at this time when the physicality and embodiment of togetherness poses a threat. In the UK, where the authors are based, these interlinking and overlapping domains have long been under siege from a neoliberal ideological agenda and concomitant lack of public funding, in a political context which is likely only to become more extreme. We are therefore, locally and globally, in greater need than ever of the arts and engagement: of creative, grassroots, inclusive approaches to language learning and teaching which acknowledge the varied dimensions – individual and collective, pragmatic and aesthetic, cognitive and affective – of our communicative and cultural experience.

As we emerge from this collective trauma, education and the arts will be domains in which we will tentatively anticipate, co-create and explore our new worlds. Keri Facer, writing before the pandemic, compels us to consider the educational experimentation which is made possible in times of fluidity and rapid change, when attention is paid to the margins:

On the margins, beyond the walls of the institutions that have come to dominate our conception of what counts as education, as well as within pockets of mainstream institutions, there are practices springing up that are characterised by a radical exploration of the knowledge, pedagogy, relationship between mind and body, and between the self and society that might be required to live in the complexity of current conditions. (Facer, 2019, p. 4)

And so, as the ideas presented in this special issue – at the margins – offer tangible and exciting examples of educational (and disciplinary) experimentation, we now offer our perspectives on how the ideas they engage might be developed for future research in intercultural and arts-based engagement.

III Beyond intercultural dialogue

I Decentring language

The concept of intercultural dialogue is a major thread tying together the articles in this special issue. *Dialogue* is widely invoked in literature on intercultural communication

and learning, but it is less frequently defined and critiqued, and the expectations of what it can fulfil are rarely articulated, with dialogue often being presented as an end in itself. When invoked in intercultural contexts, dialogue is usually taken to be occurring between a clear and bounded self and other, an I and a not-I (see Harvey et al., 2021). This binary logic is often implicit in the referents of intercultural dialogue (following Phipps, 2014), which are usually individuals or groups of actors in recognized social and cultural configurations (e.g. Somali woman asylum seekers, or international students, or speakers of a minority language) (Phipps, 2014, p. 114). Dialogue is often framed as a key strategy for ‘solving’ the ‘problem’ of diversity (Arndt, 2017, p. 910), fundamentally aiming to advance understanding (Kazepides, 2012, p. 915), through the promotion of linguistic communication (speaking or writing) (see Harvey et al., 2021) between discrete and identifiable groups. Our work at the intersection of language and the arts has led us to fundamental critiques of both language and understanding, which we outline here as possible starting points for the future development of this domain of research.

We have of course come a long way from modernist, structural views of language in which words stand for ideas which are received by a hearer who similarly understands those ideas (e.g. de Saussure, 1922/1983). However, when it comes to language (in) education, we are still broadly working with ‘an implicit ideology of communication’ that ‘to “understand” is normal, and to “misunderstand” represents a breakdown or failure of something that is natural’ (Bailey, 2004, p. 395). To have understanding as a goal suggests that the Cartesian ontological dualism of the European Enlightenment, the privileging of the mind over the body in *cogito ergo sum* (‘I think, therefore I am’), is still a firm underpinning of our language (in) educational principles. An area of language education and applied/sociolinguistics which has made great advances in this regard is translanguaging, which, as Wei (2018) points out, has particularly captured imaginations in recent years. Translanguaging has drawn attention to the individual and grassroots fluidity of communication without regard for the political and national boundaries which often define top-down approaches to language education and policy (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015); to the flexibility and mobility of communicative resources (Blackledge & Creese, 2019); the dynamic negotiation of meaning-making (Wei, 2018); the complex power relations inherent in language use (Makalela, 2016); communicative injustices (Simpson, 2020); multimodality, including the artistic and aesthetic (Bradley et al., 2018); and the performativity of language and meaning-making (Moore et al., 2020).

Decentring language (Bradley et al., 2022; Harvey, McCormick & Vanden, 2019), and the discomfort it entails, is fundamental to intercultural learning and the ability to move across, through and beyond the various boundaries which shape our world and our interactions. A decentring of language has the potential to go some way towards including that which is not visible, pushing away from our propensity to ‘privilege the observable, the present’ (Thurlow, 2016, p. 487). In Bradley & Atkinson’s arts-based research with linguistic landscapes (Bradley & Atkinson, 2021), ‘language’, as encountered visually in public spaces, is decentred, as participants explore their own sensory engagements in these everyday spaces through the arts. In this way, languages, as named and nation-state bounded, are reoriented, reworked and redrawn, entangled with the wider semiotics of the street: the architecture, the sounds, the smells, the colours and shapes.

This aligns with a translanguaging approach, which seeks to reorient attention to the minoritized, and to the less audible. The project embraces the impossibility of experiencing that space in the same way as another. Instead, it seeks to make visible the time-bound and space-bound engagements with public space that normally pass unnoticed and unannounced. Semiotic transformation (Bradley & Moore, 2018) is one approach to widening multimodal possibilities in language- focused research, allowing an openness to going beyond the linguistic. And of course, this is not new: Pennycook considers an ‘*antidisciplinary*’ (original emphasis) stance in applied linguistics, which foregrounds questioning and criticality (2001). To what extent might the arts, therefore, offer the possibility for this *antidisciplinarity*? And how might *antidisciplinarity* look, while not conveniently forgetting or ignoring the complex histories of methods, approaches and disciplinary identities? As Thurlow states, ‘we are at a loss for words, just as we are lost without them’ (2016, p. 503). We cannot reject language, even as we seek to transcend it. In Thurlow’s words, we can only seek to provincialize that which is usually dominant. Likewise, we cannot reject the embodied histories within creative practice – and provincializing language in this context allows us to explore the less obvious, the sidelined.

2 Decentring selves

Another of the commonalities among the articles in this special issue is how arts-based pedagogies enabled participants to decentre themselves and their perspectives. Participants’ engagements with discomfort in the projects described here led to openings in contexts where there might otherwise have been closures, and to the development of new, ethical relations of responsibility for and towards the *other*, and to life *entre mundos* (‘between worlds’; García, 2020, p. xxi). However, this is not, we would suggest, owing to the potential of art to help us to place ourselves in another’s shoes (*pace* Porto & Zembylas, 2020) and therefore to understand the journey another is making. In this particular claim for the value of the arts, there is a danger of overstating the case (following Fleming, 2021, this issue), the risks of which are real and multiple (see also Clift et al., 2021). The arts will not lead us to Utopia (Bishop, 2012), and are unlikely to bring us any closer to a resolution of difference. Rather, we suggest, what it does is to show us the impossibility of being in another’s shoes, the impossibility of making that journey with another, and that intercultural learning lies in our irreducible difference from each other (Ahmed, 2000; Arendt, 1994; Harvey, McCormick, Vanden, et al., 2019).

It is perhaps helpful here to consider more closely the status of ‘understanding’. Despite being a core concept in language education (and in education more broadly), the concept of understanding remains largely unproblematized in the language education field, although scholars in applied linguistics and intercultural education are increasingly taking up critique, many engaging the arts and creative inquiry. Alastair Pennycook (2018) troubles assumptions about understanding in applied linguistics, and Moore et al. and colleagues (2020) have pushed the field into new ontological and epistemological territory in their examinations of collaboration and transformation through complex communicative practices. Applied linguistic work on language and trauma (e.g. Busch, 2020; Busch & McNamara, 2020) has considered ‘the extent to which the understandable can be borne’ (Busch & McNamara, 2020, p. 331). In intercultural communication, a

number of scholars have critiqued the promise of understanding implicit in the field's foundations (Ferri, 2014, 2018; Frimberger, 2016, 2017; Harvey, 2016; Harvey, McCormick & Vanden, 2019; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013; Phipps, 2013, 2014). As Phipps (2014) and Ferri (2018) have pointed out, the promise of intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding does not account for irreconcilable differences or the impossibility of engaging with the other in contexts of conflict and violence (see also Aman, 2012); when relations with the other are based on tolerance, the relationship is conditional and tolerance can only extend so far. We can imagine the other, but we cannot articulate them, experience them or understand them. The promise of understanding must remain unfulfilled, as 'the hope for an arrival at a common, collective place of understanding is to deny the necessity of constant difference' (Phipps, 2019, p. 11).

These critiques engage a range of theoretical perspectives and frameworks, but a potential shared focal point is the question of how we conceptualize language beyond what can be said. Milani claims that 'the limits of the sayable' have not received sufficient attention, perhaps because to do so would be to question 'the very centre on which a whole discipline is built' (Milani, 2014, p. 13). And yet, if we are serious about the potential of language education to enhance engagement with issues of global justice, we have to question that centre. Milani describes language as belonging to a realm on which order has been imposed, so that things can be represented and told, and, by extension, understood; whereas violence, trauma and suffering belong to the domain of chaos, and can only be experienced and felt, beyond the realm of rational understanding (Milani, 2014). We suggest that how we engage with both these domains, as educators and researchers, is fundamental to future research at the intersection of language and the arts.

A particularly useful conceptual lens for doing so has recently emerged in the field of peace education, where 'transrational pedagogy' (Cremin et al., 2018; Dietrich, 2019; Kester, 2018) has been used to describe approaches to education which engage with both the rational and non-rational aspects of learning and knowing. In the movement across, through and beyond the rational, as denoted by the trans- prefix, such pedagogy enables space for the emotional, embodied, spiritual, sacred, discordant, collective, aesthetic, and metaphysical aspects of learning, and for the entanglement of these with the rational, the psychological, the cognitive and the analytic. Transrational pedagogy decentres the mind, which means recognizing its limits, acknowledging its constructedness, and opening up to a world of knowing beyond and besides the mind. It means acknowledging that students' knowing is bound up with their material and metaphysical experience, or what Karen Barad calls the onto-epistemological entanglements of learning (Barad, 2014; see also Bradley, 2018; Harvey, McCormick & Vanden, 2019). A transrational framework offers the possibility to engage with the aspects of knowing and learning which cannot be understood in the cognitive sense, and in this it can contribute to unsettling the dominant, mind-centric forms and systems of knowing in the global centres of power (see Harvey et al., 2021). This makes it a particularly valuable framework for the analysis of arts-based and creative inquiry, and for engagement with the challenge levelled by art: the radical decentring which occurs in the aesthetic encounter, the encounter with the non-representational, the symbolic, the unconscious (see Scarry, 1987). This decentring asks us to accept that we learn with and through difference (Phipps, 2019), and that we are all strangers to each other (Ahmed, 2000); to accept that we will never be able to walk

in the other's shoes, and to accept their otherness and care for them nevertheless. This is the ongoing ethical and existential challenge we face, throughout history and perhaps particularly in these times of negotiating collective trauma and divisive politics: how to live as 'a citizenship of strangers . . . which is not after a common *ground* but rather articulates interest in a common *world*' (Biesta, 2012, p. 690; original emphasis).

IV Conclusions

We have considered the two domains of language education and the arts, the possibilities and impossibilities in research and practice at the margins, or *entre mundos* (García, 2020, p. xxi), and the value of decentring (see also Lytra et al., 2022). It is important to acknowledge that interdisciplinarity brings multiple challenges, many of which are described in the articles within this special issue, and the arts are not a panacea. Approaches and methods for researching intercultural communication are of course broad-ranging and diverse, and while artists and creative practitioners may also draw from similar approaches, they are also influenced and informed by dominant themes which arise from the arts practice itself, for example in image making. Artists, and those working with the arts, are influenced and informed by different histories, by technological innovations in materials and contexts. In recent anthropological history, the 'writing culture' associated with anthropology, in which fieldwork is flattened into a simplified narrative form, underwent a crisis (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Pink, 2006), leading to the incorporation of modalities, such as the visual. Likewise, in recent research in linguistic landscapes, we have seen the multimodal extension of the field, towards the sensory and the embodied (Bradley et al., 2018; Pennycook, 2015). And similarly, the transdisciplinary move towards working at these intersections means more attention needs to be paid to the embodied histories and tacit knowledges of what is being brought into the research, even with an *antidisciplinary* stance. It opens up wider inquiries in which working in a trans-ing paradigm (Bradley & Moore, 2018; Harvey, 2020; Jones, 2016) becomes very valuable, enabling us to move across, through and beyond the boundaries which shape our engagements with the world (Hawkins & Mori, 2018), allowing us to embrace their fluidity, porosity and dynamism without effacing them altogether as we move into our new, (post-)pandemic world.

It is therefore here, in this complex and contested space, in which histories and embodied experiences clash and clang together that we see the potential for a transrational approach to intercultural communication through the arts. By bringing together diverse disciplines and practices, we are forced to come face to face with the impossibilities of understanding, of dialogue and of walking in the shoes of another. It is the theoretical complexity of this kind of research and practice that enables its productivity in terms of furthering inquiry. This special issue raises important questions around how we might undertake this kind of work, how we might find the cracks which allow us to explore these tensions without the risk of overclaiming or indeed diminishing the fields of practice from which we are drawing. It also asks how we might stop and think, about how we might not take for granted what we see and how we might see it.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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