Entangled Engagement: Getting Started with Lines, Knots and Participatory Theatre.

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Abstract

This think-piece reflects on the challenges that I have faced in the early part of my PhD, during which I have spent around 250 hours as a volunteer in the Theatre of Sanctuary programme run by a local theatre. Drawing on the work of Tim Ingold (2007;2015), the paper rejects metaphors that see humans as bounded and separate individuals which might be characterised as blocks or blobs (Ingold, 2015, p.3). Rather I frame what happens at the theatre as an ongoing work of becoming, in which participants, spaces and methods are flowing and ongoing lines (Hayes et al., 2021, p.514), which come together to weave the world from "ever unspooling strands" (Ingold, 2015, p.15). Using illustrations drawn from Ingold's work and from my experience at the theatre, the paper explores how, by becoming knotted within this ongoing flow of places, practices, and people, I have begun to accept the challenge of mess in my research.

Introduction

I suspect that I am not alone in bringing a desire for order to my PhD studies. When I began my doctoral studies in 2021, I pictured my PhD a bit like a block tower in which the bricks represented my ideas. According to this metaphor, each idea would each fit neatly with those surrounding it and would be combined into a solid wall of knowledge, which I could write up, submit, defend, and move on from! I think I can forgive my slightly younger self for picturing my research like this, because the building-block metaphor is deeply entrenched in our culture (Ingold, 2015, p.14). A cursory google yields over seven and a half million results for the phrase "atoms as building blocks of the universe" for example, and we often hear DNA described as the "building blocks of life" (Ingold, 2015, p.14). Nor am I the first to use it epistemologically, as was illustrated by statistician Douglas Altman who, in 2012, collated hundreds of examples from PubMed, Google and Google Scholar of papers describing themselves as the building blocks of knowledge (Altman, 2012).

What I have learned in the early part of my PhD, however, is that my project is much messier than my initial imaginings allowed. The purpose of this paper is to consider my emerging and continued dissatisfaction with this architectural metaphor and its failure to accurately describe the research process in which I am engaged. I will discuss some of the theory that has been helpful to me in making sense of what I have found, my discomfort with the messiness that I have experienced in my work, and my ongoing quest to reconcile myself to it.

A Messy Project

My PhD grew out of my teaching career, and specifically my unmet desire to adequately support refugees who were seeking sanctuary in the UK. The terms 'Migrant Crisis' and 'Refugee Crisis' have been used in the British and European media since 2015, when large numbers of people started dying when attempting to travel to Europe by boat (Balabanova and Balch, 2020, p.413).

Between starting teaching in 2010 and leaving the profession in 2020, I welcomed increasing numbers of children with refugee backgrounds into my classroom against the backdrop of the 'crisis of hospitality' (Balch, 2016), which saw legislative measures designed to make staying in the UK very difficult (Simpson, 2020, p.489) and a media campaign of misinformation about migration (Simpson, 2020, p. 489), which positions migrants as a threat to the nation's prosperity and security (Cooper et al., 2021, p.196). At the same time, my teaching practice was impacted by austerity-driven financial cuts, which impacted language support, classroom assistant time, and staff training (Granoulhac, 2017). I had something of a lightning-bolt moment when I realised that the African drumming sessions that my class took part in once a week seemed to be a particular moment of connection for a newly arrived member of my class, and embarked upon my PhD with lots of partially formed ideas about how performing arts might be useful as an educational tool for children with refugee backgrounds.

As a part-time student, I have not yet begun the process of data generation, but I have spent around 250 hours volunteering in the Theatre of Sanctuary programme run by a local theatre. It is within this context that I intend to conduct my research. The programme runs every week, with one session catering for adults and the other for pre-school children and their families. The sessions are facilitated by theatre practitioners, a member of staff from the theatre and a team of volunteers, and they involve storytelling, drama games, conversation, and the sharing of food, amongst other things. It has become increasingly evident to me, during my engagement in these sessions, that this research is not going to be as neat and orderly as I imagined at the project's outset.

One obvious inadequacy of the building block metaphor is that it fails to take account of the fluid nature of my role in the sessions. I do not arrive at the theatre, execute a neatly classifiable task that can be encapsulated within a tidy framework and then leave. Rather, my involvement includes a range of activities including conversations, moving furniture, supporting crafts, occasional piano playing, and the celebration of birthdays and other special events. As part of my volunteering, I have distracted small children from too-bright lights in a projector, cleaned dirty floors, poured juice, made tea, supplied food and become greetings-card-buyer-and-writer-in-chief. The edges of my role are wobbly and stretch and move to accommodate what is needed in each session. This flexibility is not accommodated by my building-blocks picture.

Furthermore, I occupy a dual role within the sessions, as both a volunteer who is genuinely committed to the theatre's objectives, and as a beginning researcher – constantly on the lookout for things that might shape the direction of my project. This duality is particularly evident in my relief at the theatre's recent procurement of more funding for its Theatre of Sanctuary projects, which is coloured by my own, slightly selfish questions around whether this funding will last for long enough for me to complete my data generation. Even before starting the data generation process, I have begun to experience the "role confusion" identified by Jenifer Hagan in her work on ethnography and volunteering (Hagan, 2022, pp. 1180-1181). I anticipate that this will become even more pronounced as I start my data generation, when I will face the challenge of remaining

a helpful member of the team, who is fully engaged in the session, whilst also keeping my eyes, ears, pen, and camera on things that speak to my research questions (Garthwaite, 2016, p.64).

My position as a volunteer also troubles the insider-outsider dichotomy (Merton, 1972, p. 21; Saidin and Yaacob, 2016), because I am simultaneously an insider (in my role as a volunteer) and an outsider (because there is no forced migration in my background) (Holmes, 2020, p.7). What's more, my position at the theatre means that I have a very definite impact on the sessions. I cannot claim to be an objective observer who arrives, watches, and leaves the sessions, returning to my desk to transcribe what I have witnessed. While in that picture the researcher might be a block who can be easily removed from the setting in which they are working, my volunteering role means that I am inevitably a part of what happens during the sessions, and any knowledge that is created later in my project will come about through embodied interactions (Watson and Till, 2010, p.126), rather than distant and objective observations. My relationships at the theatre do not fit easily into a block either. They are messy, multi-faceted and complicated. My professional background is as a primary school teacher, and this has left me with a strong inclination to maintain professional distance. I recall, for example, my initial anxiety when an adult participant in one of the sessions added me on Facebook, because the management in my former school was very clear that staff members should avoid interacting with parents on social media. What I have found at the theatre, however, is a very different world from the fierce professional distance expected in my teaching career, where hospitality is crucial (Turner-King, 2018), and relationships are a fundamental part of the practice in a different and freer way to a primary school.

I have already suggested that the edges of my research are flexible, and as I near the end of my second-year volunteering, the relationships that I have built are stretching out beyond the confines of the theatre sessions into other parts of my life. I've recently had an invitation to the wedding of one of the theatre practitioners, for example, and went out to eat with the staff and volunteers from one of the sessions during the summer. There is talk of a road-trip to visit a family who were very involved at the theatre until they moved into dispersal accommodation elsewhere in the country, and we are currently rallying friends and family members to help to furnish the flat of one of the participants who has recently come to the top of the council's housing waiting list.

What's more, the messiness that I have found in my relationships at the theatre makes the ethics of my project feel particularly complicated. I am acutely aware that, while I have been a regular fixture at the sessions for the past 18 months, I have not yet begun formal data generation, and the participants in the sessions have not yet consented to being part of my research. It is vital, therefore, that I do not exploit my "undocumented historical knowledge of the people and cultural phenomenon being studied" (Taylor, 2011, p.9), and that anything that I have seen prior to ethical clearance and participant consent does not make an appearance in my PhD.

I am struggling even to put hard boundaries around my language choices. Very early on in my PhD, I decided to abandon the term 'asylum seekers' because of the negative ways in which it has been used by right-wing media and a certain brand of politician. Along with terms like 'Small

Boats', 'Migrant Crisis' and 'Economic Migrant', 'Asylum Seeker' has been used to reinforce binaries and highlight difference (Jackson, 2005; McKay and Bradley, 2016). It has been employed to depict some humans as "a threat to the nation, its culture and the livelihood of its people" (Yuval-Davis, 2007, p.567). In an attempt to distance myself from this rhetoric, I have tried out a number of alternatives, none of which I am entirely happy with. After a recent meeting with representatives from the City of Sanctuary initiative, I came to appreciate their use of 'Sanctuary Seekers', which lacks some of the negative connotations of 'asylum seeker'. Unfortunately, though, it also lacks its clarity. I have been testing it out over recent months and have been met with puzzled looks and questions about whom, exactly, I am working with. For the moment, I have chosen to adopt refugee or, where appropriate, refugee seeking sanctuary, as a middle ground. While less loaded than 'Asylum Seeker', the term 'Refugee' does carry some stigma and negative associations. I have started to use different terms in different circumstances, so that rather than being independent blocks about which I have made a decision and built into my theoretical wall, my language choices are contingent and provisional, and are subject to ongoing revision.

Turning to Theory – Blocks, Blobs or Lines?

In the light of these messy engagements, it is clear that the building block metaphor discussed above does not work for my research. Anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests that the problem with it and other dominant metaphors of containers and chains is that they do not allow for life (Ingold, 2015, p.14). According to Ingold's theory, a wall of blocks does not genuinely interact, rather they are stacked next to or on top of each other. Ingold extends this 'building block' thinking to argue that what this understanding of the world does is characterise people as blobs. In his book, The Life of Lines, he argues:

> It is… usual to think of persons or organisms as blobs of one sort or another. Blobs have insides and outsides, divided at their surfaces. They can expand and contract, encroach and retrench. They take up space … They may bump into one another, aggregate together, even meld into larger blobs rather like drops of oil spilled on the surface of water. What blobs cannot do, however, is cling to one another…For when they meld internally, their surfaces always dissolve in the formation of a new exterior
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> (Ingold, 2015, p3).

Unlike building blocks, blobs can come together, but, as Ingold points out, when they do so, they forfeit their own surfaces and integrity, forming something entirely new in the same way that copper and tin combine to make bronze when mixed in the right proportions (Ingold, 2015, p.3). This model of interaction seems to offer more than building blocks, but I am not sure it accounts well for the end of our interactions. Are we forever melded with every person or thing with whom we interact? Or might we temporarily or permanently be separated from them to interact with other people? And do we always become something completely new in our interactions? I'm not sure.

I have not found either the building block nor the blob metaphor to give an accurate or entirely helpful picture of my experiences so far in my PhD. Ingold's suggestion is that, rather than being about stacking blocks or melding blobs, life is about clinging. As he sees it, we are designed to cling – first to our mothers, then to other people. And what is essential for clinging is found in neither blobs nor blocks but in the emergence of lines (Ingold, 2015, p3). Ingold goes so far as to argue that "life began when lines began to emerge and to escape the monopoly of blobs" (2015, p4) and points to lots of examples of lines emerging from blobs, which facilitate the vibrancy of life.

Picture for a moment a bacterium, for example, a blob-like cell with a wispy flagellum. Ingold characterises this as a blob and a line – whereby the blob contributes energy and line mobility (Ingold, 2015, p.4). Similarly, a potato in a sack ready to be eaten is a reservoir of carbohydrates but put it in the soil (or leave it in the vegetable rack for too long) and threadlike roots start sprouting from the blob – moving out from it to seek water and nutrients (Ingold, 2015, p.4). Or consider the example of a tadpole – starting as a decidedly blobby piece of frogspawn and being transformed by the emergence of lines, first in the form of a tail, then limbs, which endow the frog with the ability to swim and jump (Ingold, 2015, pp.4-5). For Ingold, it is the presence of lines that allow for both movement and clinging together.

For me the idea of stickling bricks is helpful here. While building blocks just sit on top of each other, the lines built into the structure of the bricks allow them to cling to each other. In building with the stickle bricks the lines reach out to each other, inter-locking and intermingling to allow the bricks to temporarily combine to form something new, whilst retaining their own integrity.

And not only do lines enable us to reach out and cling to each other, but for Ingold, humans and other elements are constantly engaged in the practice of drawing lines (Ingold, 2007, p.1) because, as he puts it, lines represent our "most fundamental mode of being in the world" (Ingold, 2007, p.83). This means that, for Ingold, all elements in a scenario, including people, methods and physical spaces, can be thought of as an already-flowing line, coming from somewhere and flowing somewhere else (Hayes et al., 2021, p.514). Ingold calls this process of us drawing lines 'wayfaring' and argues that the wayfarer lives their life along the trails of their journey, which are "typically winding and irregular, yet comprehensively entangled into a close-knit tissue" (Ingold, 2007, p.81). He describes the close-knit tissue forged as a result of this kind of being-in-the-world as a meshwork. According to this metaphor, life itself is imagined as "a manifold woven from countless threads spun by beings of all sorts, both human and non-human, as they find their ways through the tangle of relationships in which they are enmeshed" (Ingold, 2007, p.3). This picture is truly a messy one, but it feels more honest than imagining myself as a building block which can be extracted from the others as in a game of Jenga.

In thinking about my engagement at the theatre as wayfaring, I imagine everyone involved in the sessions as being woven and knotted together like threads in a piece of cloth. A glance at our clothing reminds us that threads in a piece of cloth cannot be easily untangled. Indeed, any attempt to do so would be destructive of both the cloth and the individual strands which make it

up. Ingold argues that, for the wayfarer, knowing is found along the way of walking (Ingold, 2007, p.91) and that "the knowledge we have of our surroundings is forged in the very course of our moving through them" (Ingold, 2007, p.88). If the line of my walking through the world is the path of my knowing, then trying to disentangle myself from the setting of my research and the people that I am researching with would also disentangle me from the knowing that I am seeking. While this research might be messy, Ingold's theory has helped me to reconcile myself to the entangled nature of my work, and to adopt a different perspective from notions of professional distance and remaining separate from my participants in the pursuit of more objective knowledge.

Becoming Entangled in my Research

I am still very much in the process of understanding the complexities of Ingold's ideas about lines and wayfaring and how they relate to my own research. That said, I am going to close this paper with some examples of the ways in which I have experienced the drawing of lines in my volunteering at the theatre so far.

The line that I am drawing through my research grows out of my practice as a primary school teacher. I started out on my PhD journey because of my frustration at my inability to provide adequately for children who had recently arrived in my class. It was fuelled by my frustration at the lack of resources that I had at my disposal and my dissatisfaction with my own practice. It will not end when my fieldwork does but will go into my analysis and writing up and then into the rest of my life and career. This line became entangled with the theatre through a suggestion by a friend that I find out about the theatre's work, and an email introduction which set me on the path of collaboration with them and with the refugees with whom they work. The lines that I am drawing are mingling with the lines drawn by other people who are involved in the sessions, and many who are not. As I interact with people at each session, the lines that we are drawing become increasingly enmeshed and knotted together, through our interactions, as we build shared experiences and make art together.

Other lines come from elements in the sessions that are not attributable to an individual. Religious festivals intervene, altering the content of the sessions or the number of attendees, as does particularly good or bad weather. Other organisations contribute to the meshwork as they send people to us or keep them away with other activities. Even a late dinner service in the initial accommodation centre draws lines which interact with those drawn at the theatre. Lines are drawn by food that is shared in the sessions, stories that are offered and problems that are solved. They are drawn by government policy, media rhetoric, news stories, phone calls from family members or an infestation of bedbugs at the initial accommodation centre.

Lines that have been drawn by individuals unspool in other directions as people "get their postcodes" and are moved onto dispersal accommodation around the UK (Home Office, 2023), and new lines are drawn by people arriving at the initial accommodation centre. Lines become more enmeshed and knotted as the participants, staff and volunteers become involved in each other's lives – supporting with medical appointments, offering informal translation to each other,

loaning out carpet cleaners, celebrating each other's milestones and commiserating with each other on bad news.

Conclusion

While the metaphors of blocks and building bricks might look tidier, I am increasingly coming to find value in the messiness of my engagement with those that I will research with. I was fortunate to have been at Professor Awad Ibrahim's CLAIR Conversation session in Leeds during the last academic year. During this session, Professor Ibrahim spoke very convincingly about research done 'as an act of love' (Ibrahim, 2014, p.15), which requires that, as researchers we "place ourselves…completely into a relationship, to truly understand and "be there" with another person, without masks, pretences, even without words" (Ibrahim, 2014, p.16). For me, this notion chimes completely with Ingold's ideas about wayfaring because there is knowledge to be found in drawing lines in relationship with other people. This kind of thinking is helping me to stop seeing messiness as a problem to be solved, but to recognise that there is knowledge to be found along the way, as I allow myself to become entangled with all those engaged in the drawing of lines alongside me.

Biography

Hannah Wainwright is a PGR in the School of Education at the University of Leeds. Following a decade-long career as a primary school teacher, Hannah's PhD research looks at the ways in which participatory theatre is being used to support belonging for refugees seeking sanctuary. She is particularly interested in the role that place has in belonging, and the impact that participatory theatre might have on how place is produced and experienced.

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