

Pandemic mutilated pedagogy: Teaching “in there” without my hearing body

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Although students with disabilities have generally been identified as a vulnerable group during the pandemic, the specific experiences of those with impaired hearing have not yet gained attention within the debates and literature on online teaching. Since the same condition holds for academic teachers, I will in this essay contribute an original and critical perspective by sharing my own story. Embraced by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the reader will be invited into my world of hearing differently, and be able to see what this means when teaching online. Through significant embodied experiences of having been born with impaired hearing, and concrete situations from my own online teaching, I reveal how academia is normatively structured around people with normal hearing, and how this norm has become even more strengthened during the pandemic. Against this background, my essay ends with suggesting a more inclusive “new normal” than is currently practiced and portrayed in the post-pandemic future.

Keywords: online teaching, hearing disability, discrimination, accessibility, embodiment

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the pandemic existence was difficult in general for both teachers and students, although some faced more challenges than others. Among these, we find students with disabilities, many of whom felt that the support they needed had been only partially provided (29%), or not provided at all (19%) in Swedish universities during the pandemic (UKÄ, 2022). Whether similar circumstances held for academic teachers with disabilities is unknown, since they do not exist as a distinct category in Swedish official statistics. Turning to previous research, and hearing disabilities in particular, teachers’ experiences have not attracted much attention beyond perceived hearing loss in noisy work environments (e.g., see Sachová et al., 2016). Similarly, in disability studies about online teaching, it is not the teacher who is in focus. Instead, emphasis is on how to improve conditions for students with impaired hearing, e.g., by investigating software tools available for such purposes (Zdravkova & Krasniqi, 2021). Since academic teachers with impaired hearing are seriously missing in the literature and debates concerning online teaching, I will in this essay contribute an original perspective by sharing my own story.

With reference to Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) phenomenology, my narrative develops from the notion of *embodiment*, in which my experiences are constituted by a dynamic relationship between me and my surrounding environment. Focusing on my *hearing* body, my preconscious “body schema” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) orientates me in how to *holistically* engage with the world of sounds in ways that work for *me*, i.e., as someone who has never experienced normal hearing. Since a body schema is shaped by an individual’s personal history, and functions as a “primordial

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habit-matrix of the body” (Morris, 1999, p. 6), this implies that congenital impaired hearing is not just about hearing less well. Essentially, it implies hearing *differently*. For example, when I cannot *see* what you say, I mean this literally, since this is how my body schema compensates for sounds that are out of my reach.

For this reason, my hearing should not be compared with hearing loss at an adult age. Although we may share many difficulties and compensatory strategies, our hearing body schemas are different in that my schema is fundamentally developed from the *visual* and *kinaesthetic* meanings of sounds. As a child, I knew that dripping water becomes a puddle that feels wet, but I could not imagine that annoying sound for people with normal hearing until I played Chopin’s raindrop prelude (Opus 28, No. 15) with its repetition of quavers in the same key, bar after bar. As an adult using hearing aids, I later also learned the sound of individual drops, but I still do not trust completely what I hear until I see or feel it. At home, I seldom think about these conditions. Yet at work I am often reminded of my (non)hearing body since academia is normatively structured around people with normal hearing, and in this essay, I will establish how this norm has become even more strengthened through the pandemic.

HEARING DIFFERENTLY IN ACADEMIA

Around 1.5 million people have hearing disabilities in Sweden, of which approximately 25,000 are children aged 0–15 years, and about 150,000 are 16–34 years old. While the percentage of persons with congenital impaired hearing is relatively constant in each generation, the number of individuals experiencing hearing loss has increased over the last three decades (Hörselskadades Riksförbund, 2017). I belong to those who are born with mild to moderate impaired hearing, which means that grasping exactly *what* other people say without hearing aids requires that they are at a nearby, speak with good resonance, articulate their words well, and that there is not excessive background noise. Otherwise, I compensate for their cloudy voices through “intelligent guesswork” (Rönnerberg et al., 2019) and reading lips. Of course, hearing aids help a lot, but they cannot reach the capacity of normal hearing (Rönnerberg et al., 2019), so I still listen with my eyes. For instance, I use subtitles when watching TV in my own native language to save my cognitive resources, although I find live broadcasts terrible to follow because of their misspellings and delayed letters that complicate understanding. Hence, subtitling is not an option for me in online meetings.

According to statistics, dropouts are common among university students with hearing disabilities, and they often have difficulties with being recruited into working life. Yet those who *do* complete their tertiary studies typically have promising career prospects (Holmer, 2022), although the number of academic careers among this group is still unknown. Throughout my entire education, from elementary school to doctoral education, I refused to use my hearing aids because of the accompanying stigmatising feeling. After all, I could still follow the lessons from my place close to the teacher’s desk, and I could also read the coursebooks when I came home. In doctoral education, my learning conditions became even better with mostly individual studies combined with visiting my supervisors’ quiet offices. Notwithstanding, when I started to teach fulltime myself it soon became necessary to change my approach to using hearing aids.

At that point of time, the Occupational Health Service explained to me that anyone in my situation would become exhausted without hearing aids, so they sent me to an audiologist to replace my rusty, never-used equipment. After that I have never gone to work without my hearing aids, since now I could finally hear all my students without too much effort. As an adult I also discovered many amazing sounds that I had never heard before, such as the sparkling sound

of soda, hissing cats, and whispering leaves in the autumn. Unfortunately, my hearing aids did not help me much in my work during the pandemic.

I beg your pardon?

Compared to other people, academics often speak very softly – and some of them also do this rapidly with minimal lip movements. If other people obviously have no trouble with hearing that person, I usually resign and stifle my will to ask: I beg your pardon? From experience I know that this phrase is typically understood as indicating that you are either questioning the speaker, being uncultivated, or that you seem to be a bit slow. At least, this is what others' reactions have shown in most such situations. So instead of asking, I catch some words here and there, and create the most reasonable sentences in my head – which works most of the time. However, during the pandemic, I was no longer the only one who had difficulties with hearing. Unstable internet connections with obstructing, fluctuating, and disappearing voices now forced even people with normal hearing to ask: I beg your pardon?

It is well established in audiological research that individuals with normal hearing barely use their working memory¹ in the process of understanding speech, as long as the audible conditions are not too bad. Individuals with impaired hearing, for their part, instead need to use their working memory most of the time to both predict and reconstruct potential sentences while listening to a speaker (Rönnberg et al., 2019). Even though the technician in our department had procured a headset for me that was the best on the market, and indeed it reproduces crystal clear sounds compared to other headsets, the online conversations turned out to add new challenges for me. Apart from the fact that an unstable internet connection is devastating for someone who already has difficulties with hearing, and that human sound is deprived of its comprehensible humanity in the double technical loop of transferring voices via headphones to hearing aids, a strong working memory cannot compensate for the disparity between picture and sound. Delays of half a second of lip movements disturb interpretation of the input and create a situation where I need to follow two messages at the same time. After about an hour of such mixed input along with freezing pictures, my working memory has reached its limit and my brain capacity is consumed. Continuing like that for several hours a day causes me tinnitus. Thus, teaching online was to me mission *miserable*.

MISSION MISERABLE

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, I had never experienced online teaching in real time, but I was happy with email conversations with my students and physical teaching in the classroom. Whereas most of my colleagues shared common initial technical issues and pedagogical challenges coupled with transforming their entire teaching into an online format overnight, they eventually also saw the benefits with this remote education in line with national findings (UKÄ, 2022). Some of my colleagues enjoyed working from home, others experienced how the number of attending students increased, and still others found out that they could now engage in more multi-tasking than ever before. It all seems very convenient and effective for those with normal hearing. However, as you know, I am not one of these.

¹ Working memory corresponds to the amount of information that can be held and cognitively processed simultaneously without losing track. Thus, using one's working memory requires high levels of concentration and demands significant brain capacity.

I was nevertheless *very lucky* in that I did not have to manage all the technological finesses myself while teaching online, since a teaching colleague assisted me in creating breakout rooms and taking care of the parallel chat during my lessons. Also, we had our technological expert in the same building in case of emergencies, and he certainly saved many of my lessons when I could not enter my own digital classroom in the morning. In hindsight, I would say that this was the most positive experience I had during the pandemic: that I did not have to worry about the technology *per se*. Without my colleagues' invaluable support in this regard, I would most probably have ended up on sick leave because of too many technological things to worry about while being thrown back into a teaching situation that once burned me out, i.e., into not hearing all my course participants. Another factor that certainly also saved me from stress-related illness was that I did not teach continuously for several days in a row, so I could recover between the lessons.

In the spirit of Merleau-Ponty (2012), I would describe the art of teaching as unifying all bodies into one. In that possibility of action, neither the teacher nor the students become objects themselves, but instead their dynamic *relationship* enables full awareness of the common task – like riding a tandem bicycle. While holding a lecture on Zoom was the most boring teaching I had ever experienced, listening to my own voice was initially a space where I felt most safe online. No matter that the internet connection was weak, I would never lose myself. However, I was deeply sorrowful that I had lost one of my most important pedagogical tools, i.e., an authentic relationship with my course participants. Without being able to read all the faces and bodies, and to use my own whole-body language, I could not adjust my teaching to the unspoken climate accordingly. Hence, during the pandemic I occasionally had to deal with attacks that I had never experienced before, especially with respect to topics coupled with “trigger warnings” (Selberg, 2021). On one occasion when I shared research on such a topic, a couple of course participants condemned the entire course in the chat while I was teaching. However, I did not realise this until the break when I had the time to read the messages they sent to the entire class. Then I felt completely exposed and misunderstood, and this incident made me even more insecure in online teaching. Now I was not only worried about my hearing, but also about my speech. In that sense, I experienced regression in my teaching since my focus had shifted from the pedagogical relationship to my own performance (Kugel, 1993).

The Discrimination Act sent back to quarantine

In 2015, the Swedish Discrimination Act was amended by introducing inadequate accessibility as a new form of discrimination. According to this Act, inadequate accessibility means that:

a person with disability is disadvantaged through a failure to take measures for accessibility to enable the person to come into a situation comparable with that of persons without this disability where such measures are reasonable on the basis of accessibility requirements in laws and other statutes, and with consideration to

- the financial and practical conditions,
- the duration and nature of the relationship or contact between the operator and the individual, and
- other circumstances of relevance.

(Discrimination Act, SFS 2008:567 with amendments up to and including SFS 2017:1128, Chapter 1, 4 §)

The Equality Ombudsman further explains in simple terms that “being disadvantaged means being treated unfairly, being deprived of something or being placed in a worse position.” (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, 2018). During the Covid-19 restrictions I certainly found myself in a worse position compared to my colleagues with normal hearing, although there was no other “practical” or “reasonable” reality available, so I could not complain about the online format. Thus, I felt relief when the pandemic restrictions were temporally relaxed and most teaching went back to campus. Yet this relief was soon replaced by stress when I was mercilessly thrown into the hybrid lesson.

Even though we had announced that our course would be on campus as soon as the restrictions ended, most of our course participants had obviously planned for an online course throughout the entire semester. Thus, before the first physical meeting I received numerous emails asking whether, for different reasons, it would be possible to follow the lessons online. Recalling my bad experience of holding a hybrid seminar as a guest lecturer some years ago, I knew that the hybrid format would go far beyond the capacity of my hearing aids. Hence, in agreement with my teaching colleague, I responded that the course would from now on be on campus, in accordance with our syllabus, and that it would be possible to compensate for potential absence by make-up assignments. However, my response fell on deaf ears.

Since Covid-19 infections raged outside of Sweden, one course participant felt he could not take any risks. Also, based on his own teaching experience, the hybrid format functioned very well, so he strongly recommended to me that I provide this option. In a list of signatures sent to me and my teaching colleague, half of the course group supported him in this regard. No matter that I informed them about my hearing situation, the Discrimination Act was sent back to quarantine, and I soon found myself completely dependent on my teaching colleague, since I had no headset and could not see my online participants in the physical classroom. In lucky cases, I could respond to the online participants directly, but otherwise my colleague had to repeat their questions. Thus, I was subjected to the worst type of stigmatisation – the one that made me *feel* disabled, not only in my hearing, but also in my teaching profession, which led me to have serious doubts as to whether academia was the right place for my body.

FACING THE NEW (AB)NORMAL

My teaching is now completely back on campus, and I manage to have a few short Zoom meetings when I collaborate with researchers across provinces and continents. Otherwise, the “new normal,” with hybrid meetings and webinars, is something that I avoid as far as possible, in order to keep myself whole. Many times, in different contexts, I have pointed out my difficulties with the hybrid format, although the new norm (obviously set by people with normal hearing) seems to be that it is more important to include as many remote people as possible than it is to include a single person with hearing disabilities. Of course, exceptions exist, such as when my unique expertise is needed in doctoral supervision training across Sweden and abroad – then it is more important to include me in person on my own terms in the physical classroom. I am grateful for these exceptional moments of complete professional happiness.

After about twenty years of teaching in several universities – within Sweden and abroad – I have noticed that seeing students with hearing aids is *very* rare. With respect to academic teachers, I can count these on the fingers of one hand, myself included. Therefore, who cares about this extremely marginalised group of individuals and their careers? Frankly, they are not forced to stay in academia. Well, for the sake of living up to an ideal of diversity, I would say that the

inclusion of students and academic staff with hearing aids matters to that picture. However, hearing aids are not visible online following headsets, black screens, and absent participants, so the new (ab)normal not only masks diversity, but, speaking for myself, I would say that it also disguises exclusion as inclusion. Accordingly, even though I am fully vaccinated, the Covid-19 virus has seriously infected my professional lifeworld.

TYPING ANOTHER “NEW NORMAL”

The time has come for reconciliation. By accepting that my pre-pandemic existence has become a utopia, my remaining possibilities of action are two. Either I subordinate myself to the current “new normal” without further complaining, since my utopia has been blown away by the online hurricane anyway, or I take the opportunity to propose another new normal. I choose the latter option with Merleau-Ponty by my side while typing ... click ... click ... click ... about how genuine inclusion could be embodied in the digital era. The epistemic gestalt of this finger dance is captured below.

Starting with hearing in online meetings: it certainly makes no difference by leaning your headsetted body closer to the screen, because you are completely dependent on the technological possibility of interaction. If the internet connection is strong and stable in both directions, the speakers use high quality headsets with their microphones close to their mouths, all voices are produced from quiet, non-echoing, physical rooms, and the number of participants is small – then I can actually hear even better than I usually do in a physical room. The problem is that these optimal conditions are almost never met. Sometimes either or both of our connections are weak and turning off the camera is a common strategy to improve the sound capacity, although the visual dimension is vital to me. Furthermore, most people do not use adequate headsets, and some connect to the meetings from noisy background environments (multitasking, you know). Add to this that the “new normal” entails including as many participants as possible and that I also need to register and adapt to a great(er) number of different tonal scales and dialects to be able to comprehend the conversation.

Consequently, to make oral online teaching work for people with hearing impairment in general, lectures are pre-recorded and subtitled², while group discussions include just a few participants with stable connections in silent environments with good acoustics. Also, if we all look like e-sport gamblers with robust headsets, none of us will be alien. The only thing that we have less control over on my wish list is the internet connection, which still makes online teaching a hazardous task for me.

Hybrid teaching is a totally different matter. In addition to the difficulties mentioned above, the use of headsets only applies to digital space. Hence, irrespective of what room I am placed in – physical or digital – I will lose half of my hearing potential. Also, the ambition to include remote people as far as possible in the physical room seriously restricts a teacher’s body space,

² Also, PowerPoint presentations are very important compensatory tools for hearing. The most helpful presentations are those containing significant keywords and illustrative models relating to the spoken context, rather than providing lengthy paragraphs to be read. The latter form tends to distract more than it assists because the slides neither visualise the most significant units of meaning nor synchronise the written words with the speech – unless the speaker is actually reading from them. However, that would also be a pedagogical mistake since the teacher’s body in such moments is orientated towards the text rather than the students.

since you cannot then move outside the angle of the camera or the scope of the magnifying microphone. Without having the opportunity of being fully embodied in both rooms, the whole situation leads not only to poor hearing, but also to poor teaching, which ultimately ends in poorer student learning. Since this goes against my ethics as a professional teacher, my best recommendation for hybrid teaching is to abandon it. Irrespective of whether some course participants find it practical and flexible to engage in hybrid lessons, I do not think that the hybrid format is pedagogically defensible compared to other forms of teaching which allow undivided embodiment. Using myself as an example, I contend that the hybrid format is discriminating as well, since better options exist that do not force people with hearing disabilities into a “worse position” (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, 2018).

It is no longer unusual to enter buildings accessible to people with impaired hearing, for instance, where the acoustics is improved with soft-textured ceilings and loops installed that transfer speech directly into hearing aids. However, digital reality is still far from accessible. Also, I do not teach with my head alone, I teach with my whole body that relates to the entire body languages of others. Digital teaching with all the enframed heads is therefore, in my experience, mutilated pedagogy. Still, a digital path to be tread by phantom limbs has become an element of a desirable post-pandemic educational infrastructure by many students who prioritise flexibility (UKÄ, 2022).

Accordingly, perhaps one should hope for another technological turning point soon. For instance, when the current technologies of virtual reality in higher education have developed further in their pedagogies (Radianti et al., 2020), bodyless digital classrooms might be replaced with alternatives that include avatars. Yet at that point, my avatar would still not be able to sense the physical warmth from all the learning bodies, feel the freshening wind from an open classroom window, or perceive the smell of a half-eaten apple on the table. All this, too, matters for my embodied teaching since we share these experiences together in the physical classroom. In such moments of authentic teaching, we are not alienated objects “in there” ... click ... click ... click ... but embodied subjects *in here*, where my hearing body can be fully present in all its compensatory senses.

INCLUSIVE AFTERTHOUGHTS

My story has shown that there is no one way to learning, so of course I cannot suggest that all teaching should follow my preferred mode of being embodied. Thus, to me, genuine inclusive education is not found in one single space for interaction, but in the *possibilities for action* – which is the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) notion of embodiment. Thus, parallel realities of how to teach and learn would be my recommendation, where we can choose between courses that are completely online, completely physical, or involve components of both modes – although not all at the same time, as is the case in hybrid teaching. After all, even the avatar must physically move between worlds to be fully present, and in augmented realities one’s feet are still standing on the same ground as those of the dinosaur around the corner.

BIOGRAPHY

Eva Brodin is Associate Professor in Educational Sciences at Lund University in Sweden and is also a senior research fellow at the Centre for Higher and Adult Education at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. While her teaching and research are primarily focused on doctoral education, her authorship also involves critical perspectives on higher education in general.

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