



Towards a Curriculum of Rhythm: Learning at the Speed of Sound

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Abstract:

This paper examines rhythm and repetition as possibilities for curricular wide-awakeness. When a rhythm is established, an expectation is established with it: patterned beats create momentum, so that subsequent beats arrive to a place that has been prepared by anticipation. But what happens when the rhythm stops? Grounded in the repetition of footsteps that constitute walking, this paper explores how rhythm offers pedagogical possibilities for curricular reconstruction, looking to the way that expectations for the future are informed by habits of listening to the present. It begins by framing the experience of monotony that can cloud sensitivity to daily life. Suggesting that “biographic situations” can be understood as beats in a historical phrase, the paper discusses poly-rhythms as invitations to observe, reflect and participate in the making of (rhythmic) history. Drawing on Deleuze, Pinar and Butler, it emphasizes the productive precarity of rhythm that is imminently falling away into the past, clearing spaces for new possibilities for imagining how circumstances and reactions could be otherwise. It concludes with a call to recognize the complexity of breaking with pre-established patterns of expectation, using sonic experience as practice for the cultivation of historical agency and ontological self-awareness.

Keywords: curriculum of rhythm; rhythm; repetition; groove; productive instability; anticipation; agency; walking

First Steps

Sometimes, through a haze of monotony I am struck with the sense that all this has happened before—not the circumstances, but my reactions to them. This current moment is not exactly the same as another moment, at least not one that I can recall in crystal detail, but this moment is of a genre with others. It has a thematic solidarity with times past. The realization is always humbling: I am not the first one to confront any given state of affairs, and I certainly won't be the last. Even within the history of my little lifetime, I repeat myself (my self repeats) and I witness again and again my tendencies towards certain responses. Without changing them, my life will go on as it has, altered only by the decay of mind and body. I am more predictable than I like to admit.

There is a redundancy to being. Each Monday signals the end of another weekend and the beginning of the week ahead. Each morning heralds breakfast, a commute and work. I catch myself repeating phrases: my own stories become familiar, so that my emotional energy is invested more in performing than in searching for new ways to speak. I become dull to myself and inevitably to others. How to shake free of these tired ways? How to acknowledge the familiarity of my emotional archive—defensive when criticized, righteous when slighted, wounded when snubbed—and recover an agency that helps me see and transform these patterns? How to be *wide-awake* in the world (Greene, 2001)?

The argument that I want to make is that rhythm has something useful to teach me about responding to these questions. How I engage with rhythm is analogous to how I engage with historical circumstances, so that attending to patterns is training for ontological awareness. Observing, reflecting on, and participating in rhythm constitute a dynamic curricular project in the practice of agency.

The idea for this paper was nurtured by a recent re-reading of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925/2002), that day, both sublime and mundane, when Clarissa Dalloway "said she would buy the flowers herself" (p. 3). The bells that punctuate the story, "leaden circles" that "widen over the city," constitute a rhythm in content (the peal) and form (repetition throughout the book). The original title of the book was *The Hours*, later taken up by Michael Cunningham (2000), another nod to repetition, the marking and falling away of time. Woolf's later work, *The Waves* (1931/1978), too, refuses to let go of the hypnotic effect of layering and repeating. In her own words, it was written "to a rhythm and not a plot" (from her diaries, dated Sept. 2, 1930; in York, 1995).

But the idea for this paper, this conviction that rhythm presents a unique pedagogical opportunity to practice attuning one's self to worldly patterns, began much sooner, long before reading Woolf. In a way, it was provoked by the simplest of activities: walking.

Rhythm and Experience

Walking is made up of steps. One step on its own is not walking. Something greater is a foot (ahem) when one step follows another.

Each step constitutes a beat, “a burst of energy that is part of a repeated and structured pattern” (Attridge, 1995, p. 9). But not all beats are audible. Sometimes they are visceral and embodied. For example, the beats of language can be felt in the body, such as in poetry or in theatrical scripts that tell the actor to pause “for a beat.” This indefinite description of time has meaning in relation to the pace of what is around it. Without context, it is hollow. Taken on its own, a single beat suggests no more than itself—there is no larger system from which to derive significance. It is an event, but not a rhythm.

So: one step starts and ends. Many steps is walking.

I walk. A rhythm emerges.

Rhythm is not only made by beats, but by the spaces between them. Those spaces can be experienced as either leading away from a beat that has just passed (an easing of tension), or building towards a beat that is to come (an accumulation of tension), or both (Attridge, 1995, p. 9). Even the beats themselves are complex, and can be broken into parts. For Woolf, the rhythm of a sequence of events included preparation, complication, fulfillment and aftermath (York, 1995, p. 118), overlaying undulating waves throughout a story. So too in dance, where each gesture (the beat of movement) includes a beginning, middle and end, often passing from stability to instability and back again (Larson, 2012, p. 148). These “bursts of energy” (Attridge, 1995, p. 9) also beat in daily life. One might describe the rhythm of a workday, or “a quality of motion” in architecture and painting (Larson, 2012, p. 139). Rhythm can even, I argue, describe patterns of response to emotional life and offer possibilities for redefining those patterns. It can be practice for becoming an agent in the making of history.

Poly-Rhythms and the Co-existence of Multiple Presents

Return to the example of footsteps. First there is one step—not a rhythm, just an event. Adding more footsteps generates walking. Now imagine walking with a friend. The event is still the step, but there are many of them, played out in parallel patterns. Taken together, they still constitute walking. They could be drawn as undulating lines, often aligning, sometimes cleaving apart. Now imagine a crowd. More patterns. A more complex rhythm. More undulating lines. In a musical composition, these would be the varied parts played by different instruments.

These overlaid patterns take on a greater significance when interpreted as the layering of historical events. For Woolf, writing was the project of synchronizing these “sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human being” (in York, 1995). But the present is complex not only because of these many intertwining presents, but because the present is constantly

vanishing into the past to make way for the next iteration of the present (Deleuze, 1968/1994). This means that the past can be thought of as an archive of vanished presents, including, even, contemplations of the future, for they are situated in the ever-vanishing present that hosts them¹. The present occurs, falls away, becomes past, and another present takes its place. So too with beats of a rhythm, as with steps: they occur, fall away, become past, and are replaced. Contemplation of the occurring and vanishing sequence is what creates repetition, and with it the experience of time (Deleuze, 1968/1994). When the complexity of the present (an imminent archive of history) is interwoven with Woolf's "sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human being" a curriculum of listening is needed so that one is not overwhelmed by the innumerable temporal threads to attend to. So how can one tune in to the richness of available patterns that these poly-rhythms entail?

I have a friend who, when she finds herself in an applauding audience, tries a little game. She listens very carefully, and hears that the applause moves in waves. Not in single unified claps that all arrive on the same beat, but a bulk of clapping draws together and undulates through the larger mass. With great determination, my friend tries to contradict this trend, clapping erratically, deliberately without consistency, going against the trance-like stability generated by the applause. She tries to break the rhythm.

To do this requires attention. She must listen to the many clapping hands that transform themselves from discrete units into collective movement. She must tune in to the larger expression of the whole. Once she identifies it, she joins with the applause but in a way that redistributes the pattern over the space. She observes, reflects and participates.

My friend's engagement with applause is an allegory for how to engage with circumstance—observing, reflecting and participating in a way that redistributes "bursts of energy" over time. Each clapping person generates a pattern of history, a pattern that is fortified as others draw to it, becoming collective movement. New possibilities for agency emerge with this renegotiated participation in the whole, possibilities for where to place one's burst of energy.

Rhythm and the Search for Meaning

But first, a mental sidestep. Here is an exercise to illustrate the contemplative mind's craving for order in patterns. It is the foundation of how the mind makes sense of rhythm. The exercise is borrowed from Larson (2012). Larson gives his students three seconds to memorize the following sequence of numbers:

¹ I am reminded of the short story by Borges (1962), *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, which imagines a fictional civilization wherein "the future has no other reality than as present hope, [and] the past is no more than present memory" (p. 25). By this collapsing of time, whether Deleuzian or Borgesian, the site of radical reflection and engagement with history is now.

78 9101 1121 314

A few students can do it. Next, he gives them three seconds to memorize the following pattern of letters:

thissen ten ceise asytome mori ze

Again, a few are able. The purpose of the exercise, for Larson, is to demonstrate how meaning is easier to perceive and retain when it is supported by a pattern.

7 8 9 10 11 12 13

this sentence is easy to memorize

I experience a similar craving for patterned order almost everywhere: in the erratic tick of a radiator, a glass pane that shudders in the wind, the passage of traffic, a wobbling spoon. Looking at this very sentence, the letter *e* is distributed at intervals over the available space. I feel the pull of rhythm, of wanting rhythm, searching the area for a pattern in the placement of the letter, even where there is no coherent order. It is as though the repeated object exerts its own will to belong. For Larson (2012), the “patterned relations” made by our contemplative minds are the foundation of meaning itself (p. 137). Without the order of pattern and repetition, the experience of time is chaotic.

The ordering of sonic patterns need not reach consensus. Larson (2012) remarks that if one plays a series of undifferentiated clicks (say, from a metronome), people tend to group the sounds in twos or threes—some people hear *tick-tock*; others hear *tick-tack-tock*. It is another reminder that patterns and their meaning are made (i.e., not found) through contemplation, that rhythm is a construct of a mind engaged with the present (p. 137).

It also suggests that there is nothing dull in repetition, only in the mind that contemplates it. Repetition may have gotten a bad rap in the introduction to this paper, being framed as monotony, but that says more about my reaction to it than it says about repetition itself. In literary studies, for example, Levine (2016) points out that repetition is essential for establishing character—a statement such as “Sarah is brave” projects that “Sarah has been brave many times and will continue to be so” (p. 66). Levine (2016) defends repetition, which she argues has been maligned by demands for novelty and innovation, as the essential structure from which we perceive the unfolding of time. Without repetition, time is negated by relentlessly starting over in every discrete event. Instead of treating repetition as an obstacle to the dynamic action that punctuates a story, she acknowledges that those punctuations are made possible by the sub-structure of patterns that host it. Even the words used to tell such a story rely on repetition to derive their meaning. Through repeated usage, language takes on significance (Levine, 2016, p. 67).

Another example of how pattern and repetition create meaning: consider the peal of a bell. What time is it? With each subsequent toll—five, six, seven o’clock—a new meaning is revealed. By listening, one attends to the chance of another time declared.

Rhythm, Anticipation and Expectation

Meanwhile, footsteps advance down the hall.

In the wake of the most recent step, the listener prepares for the sound of the next one. She anticipates that another step will follow, based on the historical context of steps that have preceded it. There is a lulling effect, soothing, as she relaxes from expectation into trust. The sonic pattern becomes a fixture of the circumstances, lending the space a logic, a coherence. Each step seems to belong.

But then, as if out of nowhere, a cane taps the floor. Is it a discrete, isolated event? Or is it a new rhythm? Only time will tell. The contemplating mind cannot make rhythm out of a single, unique instance.

The cane taps again. Now there is an interval. A shape emerges, an area, a glimpse of cadence. As the next interval runs its course, the contemplative mind anticipates the next tap. The beat is expected. It is wanted. The cane belongs.

If the tap of the cane arrives to the space that the historical archive of repetition has so far prepared for it, a rhythm has been reinforced. If it doesn't, the meaning that repetition has thus far generated will scatter. The listener will have to look for signs of another pattern, another meaning. Expectations for what is ahead will have to be reorganized. Work with rhythm is work with anticipation, wanting a certain declaration whose terms have already been defined. In fact, it is entirely because they have been defined that they are wanted at all.

The steps continue. The cane is regular. A poly-rhythm.

With each approaching beat, a space is cleared, the temporal space of anticipation. The beat either fulfills that anticipation by reproducing the cadence that has shaped it, or not. If the beat arrives "on time," it satisfies and generates further anticipation. If the beat arrives "out of sync," the anticipation goes unfulfilled. The listener is cast out of rhythm's stability. It has not yet abandoned him or her completely, for the absence of an instance can constitute a rest and thereby describe a more elaborate shape to what at first appeared as a simpler pattern. But without maintenance, without reminder, that cadence fades into oblivion. In this failure of repetition, the listener learns to let go of expectation, to relax anticipation. The space ahead is no longer reserved for the instance that will sustain what came before. The space ahead is infinite.

So one listens. Rhythm creates expectation, expectation for more of itself, and fulfills that expectation by continuing. Rhythm both wants and satisfies.

Larson (2012) argues that anticipation is a key element in enjoying music, part of the reason why repetition is so satisfying. The listener makes assumptions about where a piece of music is "going," and even congratulates herself when she believes she saw it coming. "I knew that would happen, I felt it," she says, when a movement resolves in the way she expected. Repetition rewards

those who develop expectations, giving them what they want, creating the circumstances for them to want it in the first place.

What can we learn from this? First, *when* we can learn from it: pedagogical possibility is at its peak when rhythm fails expectation. That possibility is palpable when crossing the street under a walk signal, which, for the pedestrian who doesn't know how many times it will blink, casts them out when the light suddenly changes. No one told them when the walk signal would end, how much time they had. Or climbing unfamiliar stairs in the dark, pawing each step to discover if it is the last, not knowing where the staircase becomes the beginning of the hall. In that instant of uncertainty, one is both carried by repetition and facing its abandon. Anticipation teeters on its brink. One cannot do away with rhythm completely, nor can one completely stop trusting it. Streets must be crossed; stairs must be climbed. Dancing, too, relies on the assumption that the beat will continue, that it will occur at the same instant that the gesture is completed, justifying the simultaneity of movement and sound. And yet there are variations of movement within the range. Dancing well depends on it.

Rhythm and Groove

If the failure of repetition leads to new possibility, how is one to break out of rhythm without existing in a void?

Drummers know this: one of the ways that cadence can be flexed is through *groove*. Groove is a state of rhythm that cannot be divided into constituent parts, but in its gestalt accommodates micro-variations without breaking (see Roholt, 2014). It is an experience of rhythm wherein different beats are "allowed" to be later (making the rhythm feel like it is "leaning back") or earlier ("leaning forward"). Reducing groove to a mechanical prescription of, say, a snare drum that lands 1/16th of a beat after it is expected, however, misses the complexity and embodied nature of groove, which requires physical engagement and a sense of directed movement in the body as well as the rhythm (see Anderton, 2011; Roholt, 2014).

In his meditation on groove, Roholt (2014) emphasizes that musicians tend not to focus on a particular nuance (e.g., the 1/16th delay), but instead think in "non-structural nuance *objectives*" (p. 37, emphasis original). The larger aesthetic experience of the rhythm, its attitude and feeling, become the form that is achieved by small deviations from systemic authority. Single beats are not designed alone, but their playing reflects the cadence that can encompass a range of expressions. Groove, then, is when the parts do not necessarily reproduce every value of the whole, so that minor variations that are mathematically "out of sync" with the greater rhythm still contribute texture within it, adding to its complexity, in fact, embodying its complexity. Even though the beat is "late" or "early," it fits².

² For examples of this in popular music, listen to "Crazy" by Gnarls Barkley (Downtown Records, 2007), in which Ce-Lo Green pulls backwards against the instrumentation; or the intro to "Thank you (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)" by Sly and the Family Stone (SlyATFamilyStoneVEVO, 2013); or "What about us?" by Brandy (Léxx N Effect, 2008); or a range

Roholt (2014) points out that this deviant aspect of groove is not a strictly sonic phenomenon. Images, too, accommodate dissonance without diminishing in aesthetic power. Instead, their composition is arranged such that dissonance is an expression of their necessary form: in a triptych (tick-tack-tock) of Cézanne [paintings](#), *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress (1888-1890)*, *Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Armchair (1893-1895)*, and *Madame Cézanne with Green Hat (1894-1895)*, the background line between the floor and the wall do not line up on either side of the sitting subject. In spite of the contrast to the expected nature of the line, that it would be straight, it is not at odds with the greater values of the painting. Instead, the mismatched line is an expression of those values.

A rhythm without groove relies on highly normalized time signatures, precise allocations for where and when a beat is accented so that it maintains its singular drive. Groove, meanwhile, is always a little bit beyond the prescriptive, always eluding the strictness of mapping, and yet it describes a form that can accommodate difference. It is that model for inclusive variance that I turn to as a curriculum of rhythm.

Rhythm and Curriculum

It is five o'clock in the morning and I am awake, but not by choice. It is the fault of the radiator, which emits sequences of erratic ticks, some accelerating in succession, some slowing, some with wide troughs of silence between them. I strain to understand them, to group the beats. Yet just when I think I have found the pattern, the key to their repetition that will lull them into familiarity, returning me to sleep, the sequence changes. Nothing is stable.

If the noise were consistent, measuring out the same pattern of clicks again and again, they would come to represent a reliable presence. I would notice them less. I would be able to fall back to sleep. There is comfort in the known, even more comfort in the predictable. But opportunity lies in a sonic experience that is more organized than the anarchical tick of the radiator and more dynamic than the monotony of the metronome. In the space where rhythm is both made and broken, teetering on the brink of abandon, there is a curriculum of wakefulness, combining attentiveness and rest.

Think again of a steady beat, a click that marches through the present. One anticipates its next event. In the instant of anticipation, there is a clearing of possibility. One expects the beat to occur, but it has not yet occurred. The momentum of history leads one to believe that the next instance will reproduce itself, fulfilling the established rhythm, but just as easily it might not. What is this state? Some call it the Utopian function (Bloch, 1989; Muñoz, 2009), the straining from the present towards an unknown but potential future. The listener hovers, suspended in anticipation, expecting an outcome that has been defined by the preceding encounters with the repeated instance, but *there is no necessary reason why the next event will be the same as the last*. Repetition comforts and lulls; it

of songs produced by Timbaland in which time signatures are flexed but not broken, pushed and pulled beyond the normalized beat. Perhaps the most endearing and impressive example of flexing the cadence of rhythm can be found in the sublime lyrical flow of "FEROMedia presents Khaliyl Iloyi rapping at 2years old" (FEROMedia, 2011).

builds a home in time; it belongs and creates belonging. To break with it is to be cast out, without historical guide, without the rhythm of time. Completely losing track of the beat is not the goal here. But to relax one's expectation is to awaken to infinite possibilities for rhythmic complexity. That pre-determined moment makes a clearing, not just for the next beat (the next instance, the next event) but also for the revelation of entirely different patterns.

Woolf understood this, too. Her writing is often about a mode of being that is "constituted by a mixture of repetition, distraction, and expectation, of immersion in the present and attunement to the future, of inertia and growth" (York, 1995, p. 121). This state of awareness to present and future through attention to rhythm both instructs about how to live (what to expect, what to anticipate) at the same time that it lulls (it suggests parameters for what is possible). Embracing the pedagogical potential of rhythm requires interruption.

The *pleasure* of rhythm's necessary instability, the possibility that at any moment it could cease to repeat, should not be overlooked (see Butler, 1993). For it is the possibility of a change in identity that makes rhythm interesting. A metronome on an endless cycle recedes in importance. It may irritate, but it does not inspire. However, engaging with each tick as though it could be the last flings possibilities at the beat ahead. Will the present moment repeat? If not, what could be made in its place? That pre-beat moment, charged with anticipation for a repetition that has not yet been fulfilled, is an embodiment of productive instability. It offers a fleeting chance to imagine how history could be otherwise.

Suppose the beat repeats. The progress of time sustains its order. The previous beat falls away into past, making it possible for the latest beat to arrive in its place. Faced with history as an archive of vanished presents, the question of agency transforms. No longer is it, "What kind of *future* do I want?" but "What kind of *past* do I want? What archive of hopes do I want my history to become?" Without the possibility for deviation from repetition, the pleasure of uncertainty is denied. Without repetition, there is nothing to deviate from. The chance that the rhythm could end, is always imminently ending, means that the present requires constant attention to the absence and presence of the beat. To frame the situation differently, "[identity] requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de*-instituted at every interval" (Butler, 1993, p. 315). That risk is essential to rhythm's curricular productivity.

In the folding away of bygone nows, the listener has a chance to make history. In the vanishing of each instance is an opportunity to "gather the traces of the former present and model the new present upon the old" (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 104). This is the job of imagination. Because the available history is not a single thread but composed of multiple, overlaying strands—poly-rhythms—the listener selects elements for the next instance of the present. The present, including the future that one anticipates from that present, is not made from nothing but from sifting through the past, choosing patterns from layers of repetition in the ever-growing archive of vanished moments.

The falling away of each present does not mean that the listener is cast out into a void, only that she faces the *possibility* of the void. As Deleuze (1968/1994) points out, in spite of the

succession of instants in a life, one still has the impression of “the same life” (p. 83). Deleuze calls this “destiny” (p. 83), but it is not as prescriptive as the word usually suggests. Instead, destiny “implies between successive presents non-localizable connections, actions at a distance, systems of replay, resonances and echoes, objective chances, signs, signals and roles which transcend spatial locations and temporal successions” (p. 83). Destiny works poorly with determinism, but well with freedom, for freedom means “choosing the levels,” selecting patterns from the poly-rhythms. It is not total freedom, not the void, but freedom within a range.

Finally, there is a glimpse of the pedagogical possibilities for rhythm. Attunement to the productive precarity of being in rhythm is a mode of curricular engagement, not a thing, but a doing (see Pinar’s 2004 discussion of *currere*: literally, “the running of the course”; p. 35). Because it is the nature of rhythm to constantly fall away into past, attention to rhythm is attention to the making of history. In the context of curriculum studies, Pinar (2004) hypothesizes that all moments constitute “biographic situations,” meaning that the student is “located in historical time and cultural place, but in a singular meaningful way, a situation to be expressed in one’s autobiographical voice” (p. 36). Think of these biographic situations as beats; each beat is located in historical time and cultural place. Engaging with rhythm, attending to the way a rhythm is embodied and anticipated, presents an opportunity to manifest a personal attachment to history through the individual freedom to select from available poly-rhythms. This expands the curricular project from a classroom setting to a worldly one, no longer limited to specific instruction but constituting study, that ancient site of true education (Pinar, 2005).

Achieving this attunement is no easy task. Awareness of complex (historical) rhythms requires, as with *currere*, “an intensified engagement with daily life, not an ironic detachment from it” (Pinar, 2004, p. 37). One cannot simply ride the beat. One must participate in its making, embodying it, for contemplation of repetition is what creates the experience that time is passing. One must attend to the repetition of behaviour, of reaction, of history. It is a project with aesthetic dimensions, too, one of noticing the beauty of sonic repetition, the interplay of poly-rhythms, and the pursuit of meaning that they facilitate. Carried into the present by patterns of movement, teetering on the brink of an unknown future, one anticipates, one contemplates, one attends to history in the making.

Walking on: Rhythm and Possibility

Of the rhythm of poetry, Levine (2016) writes, “the spectre of monotony is also the promise of equality. Rhyme and meter always hint at the possibility of perfect equivalence, yet they teach us to accommodate and even celebrate unevenness” (p. 79). Rhythm establishes the comfort of familiarity, of belonging, and builds anticipation for further repetition. But the hospitality of rhythm need not lull. There is room for variation within the form. The unevenness of history can be shaped by asking: Which patterns do I want to change? What do I want to change them with? Just because power cannot operate without repetition does not mean that repetition only entrenches inequality. With conscious reflection, awareness of anticipation, and selection of history’s multi-layered threads (Deleuze’s notion of freedom), repetition can also entrench relations of justice (Levine, 2016, p. 67).

The precarious balance between being in the world (*of* history) and making the world (*for* history) is a challenge to maintain. It is a state of constant anticipation, born from the hospitality of repetition, patterns and rhythm, while leaning into the unknown. That balance asks us to draw strength from the stability of the familiar and to resist the hypnosis of monotony, to remain alert to the constant disappearance of instants so that the present can be made. Above all, it is a call to active listening, to break with pre-established patterns, using sonic repetition as practice for the cultivation of ontological self-awareness. What are my rhythms? What are my anticipations? What do I expect of myself and of these circumstances? In what ways are my present responses iterations of previous responses? How can I respect the momentum that has brought me into the present while clearing a space for new possibilities?

I walk on.

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