



Intercorporeal Construction of We-Ness in Classroom Interaction

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Abstract

Drawing on multimodal conversation analysis as a method, this article explores the role of embodiment and tactility in negotiating peer relations in classroom interaction. We aim at discussing how social relations between peers are locally constructed and negotiated through embodied, tactile-haptic, and spatial practices during classroom activities. The focus of the empirical analysis is on how students sequentially co-construct specific peer-to-peer touch type—sustained leaning touch—as well as how embodied two-student formations, synchronization of bodily movements and negotiation of personal space serves as displaying social bonding and balancing between students' dual role orientation. Our findings suggest that intercorporeal construction of we-ness—including exclusive and inclusive practices in relation to peer groups—is based on students' embodied orientations during leaning touch as well as re-organized embodied choreographies, participation frameworks and spatial arrangements. Our empirical analysis on tactility, embodied consciousness and intercorporeal compresence has its basis in a phenomenologically rooted understanding of intercorporeality, and therefore our article aims at building bridges between phenomenological understanding and conceptualization and detailed empirical analysis of clearly observable interactional phenomena.

Keywords Embodiment · Touch · Peer interaction · Classroom interaction · Multimodal conversation analysis

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The Role of Embodiment and Touch in Human Interaction

Embodiment and tactility play a crucial role in our social and cultural reality. Through embodied practices, including different types of touch activities, we negotiate the boundaries of our bodies, our social and cultural identities, and our relationships with each other, as well as display power relations and statuses and organize our relationship with the material environment. Our perception of the human body, as well as our embodied interactional practices, are socio-culturally shaped and locally constructed; they reflect the norms and practices of local and global communities that are, in turn, shaped by, for instance, different religious and cultural habits. Therefore, the meaning of corporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2011) and embodiment for everyday life is understood dissimilarly in different human cultures around the world (Andrews, 2010; Howes, 2018, 2020).

In this article, our analytical foci concerning embodied interaction are empirically rather limited: we focus on intimate sustained leaning touch activities between peers in classroom interaction. Furthermore, our analysis relies on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964), and especially on the empirical research on emerging tactile and haptic socialities inspired by the idea of intercorporeality as a fundamental aspect of social interaction (see, e.g., Meyer et al., 2017; Katila, 2018; Goodwin M.H. & Cekaite, 2018). In addition, we also utilize the concept of *compresence* (see, e.g., Cekaite & Kvist Holm, 2017; Meyer et al., 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1964), which refers to the participants' intercorporeal consciousness and embodied experience as a starting point of mutual embodied understanding.

As the intercorporeal practices and corporeal proximity between human bodies are socially constructed, they are also re-negotiated and continually in a state of change. Individuals' understandings of acceptable touch activities are shaped on the basis of their experiences and beliefs concerning socio-cultural practices and norms. In all cultures, there are many implicit and explicit norms concerning touch, and, in general, touching other people is limited to certain social situations where touch is expected and thus an accepted activity. These situations include, for instance, greeting rituals (Duranti, 1992; Firth, 1974), between both acquainted and unacquainted persons, as well as intimate and caring practices in family interactions and among close acquaintances (Goodwin M.H. & Cekaite, 2018). In addition, touch is necessary in certain institutional interactions where types of professional touch are conducted in order to carry out institutional tasks (see, e.g., Burdelski et al., 2020). It has been suggested that there exist certain semi-universal norms (that is, shared practices among several different cultures), concerning, for instance, the areas of the human body that can be touched in different types of relationships (Suvilehto, 2018). As shoulders, arms, and areas of the upper back are regarded as typically considered to be neutral parts of the body, some other parts, such as the area around the genitals, are considered too intimate to be touched by anyone other than (sexual) partners or, in specific circumstances, by caretakers. On the other hand, from an individual perspective, the perception of touch is at least partly based on an individual's touch biography;

that is, their personal life experiences as a toucher and a touch addressee (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019).

Embodied interaction, including human-to-human touch, is indisputably the most primordial and fundamental form of human communication and thus a crucial mode of interaction (e.g., Finnegan, 2005; Field, 2010). However, in modern (especially Western) societies, the value of tactile communication and the meaning of touch from the socio-emotional and physical (i.e., clinical and therapeutic) point of view is often underestimated (see, e.g., Barnett, 2005). The most illustrative example of the relevance of touch is the importance of touch in the early development of an infant and the relevance of tactile-haptic communication between a caretaker and a child. First, the development of an infant's self-regulation is based on tactile human-to-human contact and forms of self-touch, as well as their experiences with parent-child facial and gestural communication (Moszkowski & Stack, 2007). Second, skin-to-skin contact, together with gestural behavior and linguistic communication, is essential for a child's healthy growth and emotional well-being (Field, 2002, 2010).

All in all, touch is an extremely important and strong vehicle of communication, and it has enormous potential in interaction. In addition, as has been discussed in many studies, touch as a mode of interaction is in many respects an ambivalent phenomenon (Meyer & Streeck, 2020; see also Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019). While touch is necessary for a child's development and is an utterly important means for showing affection and care, it can also be used for negative purposes: to hurt and shame other people. The sensitive nature of touch and the different ways people experience different types of touch can lead to a large scale of possible interpretations, even contradictory interpretations between a toucher and a touched. While, for instance, hugging was meant to work as an amicable touch that shows mutual affection, it can also be interpreted as a violation of one's own personal space. The differing interpretations of the toucher and the touched can be derived from their views on the acceptability of the touch in certain situations, as well as their different views concerning their mutual relationship and its intimacy.

As pointed out above, touch is a rather ambivalent phenomenon, and hence the conceptualization of embodied activities as well as the empirical analysis of touch moments are rather complicated in many ways. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's (1962, 1964) and Husserl's (1989) phenomenological thinking on intercorporeality, Meyer and Streeck (2020: 311ff.) have identified two main characteristics—essential reciprocity and inherent privacy—that differentiate touch activity from other modalities (linguistic expressions, gestural activities, postures, etc.), and make touch a unique phenomenon. Essential reciprocity refers to simultaneous subject-object-experience during touch activity, in which the toucher and touch addressee are mutually involved. When the bodies are interconnected, embodied meaning-making and mutual understanding can occur. The mutual understanding is based on subject-object intertwining and is related to participants' own bodily consciousness. This intercorporeal experience is grounded on the individual's inner-bodily sensations that, in turn, characterize the inherent privacy of touch activity. In that sense, intercorporeality can be understood as embodied intersubjectivity (Streeck et al., 2011), which means recognizing how we draw on our own intercorporeal experiences to

understand each other and to construct social meanings in interaction through embodied cues and intercorporeal connection. Both of these concepts, essential reciprocity and inherent privacy, are relevant for the analysis in this article, since our empirical focus is on intimate touch moments in institutional interaction, namely in classroom interaction, and particularly on embodied activities that create possibilities for negotiating peer relations in that situation.

Embodiment and Peer-to-Peer Interaction at School

In displaying and negotiating identities, as well as social relations, mutual solidarity and group identity are essential parts of building peer relationships among students at school. These negotiations are reflected in students' peer interaction as displays of either visible or more subtle indications of who is accepted as a member of the group and who is ignored—that is, the social practices of inclusion and exclusion (e.g., Goodwin M.H., 2002a, 2002b; Svahn & Ewaldsson, 2011). Many researchers have been interested in the roles of gender, socio-economic and ethnic background, and social status in the construction of social relationships, peer relations, and group dynamics among schoolchildren (e.g., Willis, 2016/1977; Woods, 1978; Devine & Kelly, 2006; Killen & Stangor, 2001; Goodwin M.H., 2002a; Waksler, 1991).

In earlier seminal school ethnographic research, the experiences of children have been an important basis for the analyses, and this knowledge has often been reached by interviewing the children (Willis, 2016/1977; Woods, 1978) or analysing narratives (Waksler, 1991). These studies have revealed social mechanisms and countercultures that usher peers to adopt the norms and attitudes of their social class or gender, in the pressure of surrounding authorities and social institutions, including the school. However, in this article we analyse participants' experiences only through their observable, verbal and particularly bodily, orientations towards each other, situationally, provided by excerpts of video material. This means that in this article we approach social bonding—including inclusive and exclusive practices in peer groups—primarily as an interactional phenomenon that takes place in students' locally co-constructed embodied activities (e.g., Goodwin M.H., 2002a, 2002b; Ewaldsson & Karlsson, 2020; Svahn & Ewaldsson, 2011). This approach allows us to take into consideration social categories only if they become relevant for participants during the analysed episodes (see Schegloff, 1987). For analysing situationally and in a detailed way the choreographies of social bonding, we focus on a specific type of touch between students that we call a sustained leaning touch. Through it, students display, more or less observably, social bonding with some peers, but also detachment from other peers.

In school spaces and classrooms in particular, students are often physically quite close to each other, within touching distance. For this reason, different types of physical contact between students—either intentional or unintentional—are quite common. While touch activities in children's peer relations have already been investigated to some extent in preschool settings (e.g., Ekström & Cekaite, 2020; Ewaldsson & Karlsson, 2020; Keränen et al., 2021), there is still a lack of detailed analyses on touch activities in constructing and maintaining peer relationships between older

children and adolescents in classroom pedagogical situations. Also in the upper grades, peer-to-peer touches are rather frequent, both in informal interaction—for example, during transitions between classroom activities such as school recess—and relatively informally organized classroom activities, such as group work situations (see, e.g., Jakonen & Niemi, 2020; Kääntä & Piirainen-Marsh, 2013). However, they also occur during teacher-led instructional activities. In these cases, peer-to-peer touches often construct parallel participation frameworks that are more or less related to a teacher-led classroom agenda (e.g., Tainio & Heinonen, 2021). These parallel frameworks reflect students' distributed orientation toward peer relations and the pedagogical agenda in classroom interaction. In classrooms, students' orientation to both the teacher's pedagogical agenda and to the informal side-talk between peers is often characterized as a dual role orientation. Studies have suggested that while students in the role of learners of school subjects seek to perform institutional agency and fulfil the expectations of their academic role and teacher's instructions, they simultaneously orient to meaningful peer relations and their (desired) status as a popular and respected friend (Kyratzis & Goodwin M.H., 2017; Francis et al., 2012). In this article, we continue discussing students' orientation to this parallel classroom organization and their dual role in classroom interaction from the perspective of embodied interaction.

Studies on family interaction and mother–child interaction have revealed that displays of intimacy and compresence are achieved and co-constructed by participants through different types of embodied choreographies and tactile practices in interaction (Goodwin M.H. & Cekaite, 2018; Katila, 2018). To contribute to this discussion, we will analyze the construction of embodied choreographies of displaying intimacy among peers in educational settings. More specifically, we will discuss prosocial forms of touch activities, the negotiation of intimacy in institutional contexts, and the power of touch in performing social relations (see also Katila & Niemi, 2022). Therefore, we are interested in the construction of we-ness in students' peer interaction. By “we-ness,” we refer to the interactionally and locally co-constructed social bonding that is manifested mostly in embodied choreographies indicating close peer relations. In school contexts, the embodied construction of we-ness has earlier been discussed from the perspective of bonding in school communities through collective performative embodied activities, such as handshake rituals organized by teachers (Boyd et al., 2018; Shields-Lysiak et al., 2020). However, our analytical point focuses on the embodied negotiation of students' mutual peer relations during school activities (see Jensen, 2018).

Embodiment and Multimodal Conversation Analysis

In our analysis, we use multimodal conversation analysis (e.g., Goodwin C., 2000; Mondada, 2016, 2019; Deppermann, 2013). In the field of multimodal conversation analysis, embodiment is considered a key element of social interaction. In many studies, analysis has focused on the interplay of embodied actions and linguistic expressions; that is, on the lamination of different modalities (e.g., Cekaite & Kvist Holm, 2017; Goodwin C., 2000). Analysts have explored the intertwining

of different modalities and the co-ordination of their temporalities (e.g., Keevallik, 2013, 2015; Mondada, 2015, 2021). In addition, the interplay of embodiment and material environment in constructing different types of complex multi-activities has aroused interest—for instance, in analyses of technologically mediated or hybrid professional and educational contexts and workplaces (Haddington et al., 2014; Nevile et al., 2014; Jakonen & Niemi, 2020).

Embodiment is an essential resource for carrying out institutional practices, especially in many institutional and professional contexts (see, i.e., Burdelski et al., 2020). Therefore, many studies have highlighted the operative view of embodiment and touch as a pragmatic tool. For instance, physical contact between a professional and a client in medical care and in health and welfare services is often a precondition for professional activity (e.g., Nishizaka, 2017, 2020). In some cases, tactile practices are carried out using different objects and instruments (e.g., Heath & Luff, 2020; Mondada, 2011, 2014).

Also, a large number of studies analyze embodied interaction and touch in different types of educational settings, where teaching and learning are at stake. Drawing on early philosophical understanding of the embodied mind, or “body-mind” (Dewey, 2009/1922), researchers have emphasized the interplay of body and mind that is “bodying knowledge” in specific learning processes (see, e.g., Andersson et al., 2015). Furthermore, according to phenomenological understanding, learning has been conceptualized as a fundamentally embodied process—as an “incorporation process” (Merleau-Ponty, 2011/1962; see, e.g., Stolz, 2015). Along these lines, studies applying multimodal conversation analysis have focused on embodied demonstrations in learning as well as identification of learnables in, for example, language learning situations, certain settings in vocational education, and in learning physical skills in classes, such as martial arts or dance (Keevallik, 2013; Majlesi, 2014; Öhman & Tanner, 2017; Råman, 2019). In addition, the relevance of embodiment in both preschool and elementary school has been shown clearly in many studies. The focus of these analyses has often been on teachers’ practices in guiding, caring for, and controlling the children (Cekaite, 2010, 2015; Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; Cekaite & Kvist Holm, 2017; Routarinne et al., 2020; Heinonen et al., 2020). Furthermore, embodied practices have been investigated, for instance, as the socialization of children into rituals and politeness routines (Burdelski, 2010), and as the management of peer conflicts through the teacher’s instructions (Burdelski, 2020; Burdelski & Cekaite, 2020).

All in all, a large number of studies on touch have been carried out in analyzing asymmetrical interaction, such as, for instance, the interaction between therapist and patient (i.e., Merlino, 2020; Nishizaka, 2016), parent and child (i.e., Goodwin M.H. & Cekaite, 2018; Katila, 2018), caregiver and resident (i.e., Svennevig & Marstrand, 2018; Mononen, 2019; Raudaskoski, 2020), and student and teacher (i.e., Burdelski & Cekaite, 2020; Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; Heinonen et al., 2020). The lines of appropriate touch have often been one of the topics in these studies. The debate on the limits of acceptable touch from the point of view of child protection and children’s rights has often been particularly intense (i.e., Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2017). In addition, educators themselves do not always view work-related touch as unproblematic. For example, while early childhood education teachers celebrate the power

of touch, they also express the need to tolerate uncomfortable touches that occur during their work. As professionals of caretaking, they have to face and balance the many overlapping views on touch—including personal, professional, practical, and cultural views (Keränen & Uitto, 2021).

Even if there is some multimodal conversation analytic research on managing and negotiating peer relations (e.g., Goodwin, M.H.; in pre-school context Evaldsson & Karlsson, 2020; Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011), there is still a need to analyze the role of touch in managing peer-to-peer interaction, especially during school activities. In this article, we will focus on that very issue. We intend to identify moments where we-ness—that is, close amicable bonding—occurs in everyday classroom interaction while working on learning tasks. The phenomenon that we will explore—intimate peer-to-peer leaning touch in institutional settings—is frequent and easily identifiable in classroom settings, and therefore calls for detailed empirical analysis. However, as a fundamental intercorporeal activity, it is also applicable for phenomenological conceptualization. Furthermore, the analysis enables mirroring this locally constructed phenomenon towards the general social and cultural norms of human-to-human touch in social interaction.

Research Phenomenon, Methodology, and Empirical Data

In this article, we focus on peer-to-peer leaning touch, which is a frequent phenomenon in classroom peer interaction. By analysing this touch type in an institutional framework, we gain further insight not only into the meaning of embodied practices in peer relationships but also into the role of embodiment in the construction of social relations in general. In our analysis, we consider sustained peer-to-peer touch as a means for negotiating group relations and indicating exclusion and inclusion in relation to peer groups. Through our analysis of these touch activities, we contribute to the discussion as to how participants indicate inclusive and exclusive practices through their bodily orientations (see also Evaldsson & Karlsson, 2020; Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011). We are especially interested in how intimate peer-to-peer touch—in this case, leaning on one another's shoulders while sitting side-by-side and working on a group task or conducting individual desk work—is co-constructed, maintained, and spatially negotiated. The focus of the empirical analysis is to explore how students construct peer relations through the co-construction of intimate touch and the negotiation of their own personal spaces during classroom activities. In our detailed analysis, we ask:

- 1) How are the embodied transitions in two-student formations constructed and displayed to other participants, especially when entering and detaching from the leaning touch?
- 2) What is the role of synchronized embodied formations and other interactional resources (e.g., spatio-material environment, verbal and facial expressions, gazes, and gestures) in constructing compresence and displaying social relations with a peer in classroom interaction?

In order to answer these questions, we analyze sustained peer-to-peer leaning touches that mediate bonding with each other during pedagogical activities. During these activities, the leaning touch typically occurs when two or more students are positioned side-by-side in close proximity to each other while conducting either individual or shared pedagogical activities that often involve reading or writing. Typically, the students are oriented to either a shared or an individual pedagogical resource, such as a book or task sheet, that is located in front of them on the desk (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

As shown in Figs. 1, 2, 3, students may lean on each other's shoulders, press their upper arms together, or, in some cases, make contact with other body parts. Compared to many other student-to-student touches in classrooms (see, e.g., Tainio & Heinonen, 2021), this touch type is rather specific in its temporality and sequentiality: the touch is typically sustained, and students may spend a rather long time in this mutually constructed and stable bodily position. This underlines the nature of this touch as one that is, first, constructed through essential intercorporeal reciprocity between peers; second, it is displayed in pedagogical settings in order to re-negotiate

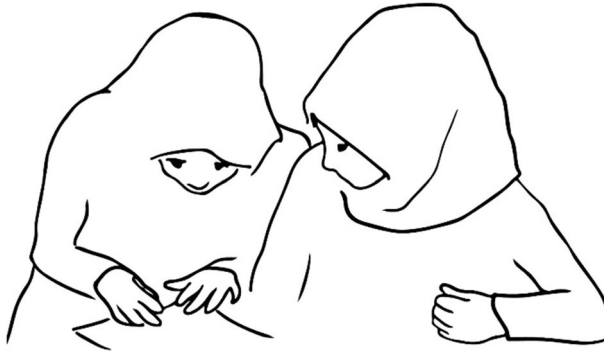


Fig. 1 Leaning touch while conducting shared pedagogical activity



Fig. 2 Leaning touch while conducting individual pedagogical activities



Fig. 3 Leaning touch during group work

social relations through the inherent privacy concerning this specific touch type (see Meyer & Streeck, 2020).

A shared material or tool enables—and in some cases even requires—touch, and thus justifies the close physical proximity of the students (see also Jakonen & Niemi, 2020). However, the bonding function of the leaning touch is manifested by the fact that, even in cases where the spatial arrangement of students during classroom activities creates preconditions for the leaning touch, it does not necessarily occur (see Figs. 3 and 4). Instead, students are very skilled at keeping their distance from each other and avoiding touching peers, even when the pedagogical activity, to some extent, requires peer-to-peer touching. The following two pictures (Figs. 4 and 5)

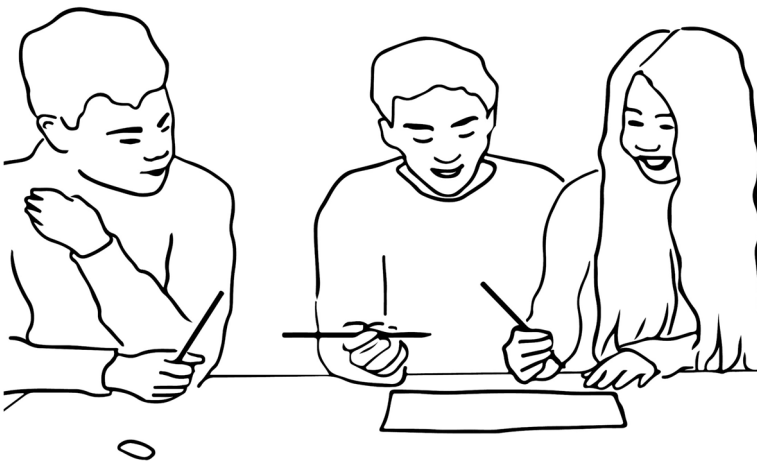


Fig. 4 Students' partly distributed bodily positions during group task



Fig. 5 Students' close bodily positions during group task

illustrate rather different types of bodily positioning of the students in relation to each other in an almost identical spatial formation during the group task.

Since sustained touches between students often occur during ordinary pedagogical activities, in some cases they are almost invisible and unnoticeable to other participants. Therefore, the leaning touch can be defined in its local context as “seen but unnoticed” (Garfinkel, 1964). In addition, from the perspective of multimodal sequential analysis, it is often hard to define what actually are the sequential starting and ending points of the touch, how long precisely the touch is sustained, and how the mutual shifts in bodily movements are organized. However, in some cases, sustained peer-to-peer touches—and especially shifts in bodily formations—during the leaning touch may be performed in such a way that the touch is clearly observable to other participants (see analyses in the next sections).

The leaning touch is one of the types of touch we have identified in the *Touch in School* project (funded in 2017–2021 by Kone Foundation). In the project, we explored touch practices, socially and locally negotiated norms and rules on touch behavior in school settings, as well as the pedagogical and social functions of touches in Finnish schools. We have used multiple research methods and a range of different types of data in order to analyze tactile practices and the meaning of them to participants. The leaning touch was present—that is, observed or mentioned—in all our data settings, which include:

- 1) classroom interaction data corpus (121 lessons; 3.5 h of small group work) including both primary and secondary school classes from general education classes and preparatory classes (i.e., classes for newly arrived pupils);
- 2) interviews with teachers (19 teachers, ages 35 to 63, class-, subject-, special education- and preparatory-education teachers, 31 h, collected 2018);
- 3) videotaped interviews (7.5 h) with pupils (30 children, ages 7 to 12, conducted as individual or pair interviews, collected 2019); and

4) written school memories (53 responses).

The leaning touch was identified in school settings by both teachers and pupils, and was mentioned frequently in interviews and written school memories. The following quotes illustrate the ways in which the leaning touch is reflected in interviews with teachers and students:

When they're standing in the yard they can lean to each other or even stroke each other. (Teacher, interview 14)

When they are allowed to choose their place freely they go close to each other and position themselves closely side by side, arm to arm. (Teacher, interview 1)

The leaning touch mediated a wonderful friendly feeling. Particularly if I was a bit down, the guys pushed me carefully or just sat by me very close, arm to arm. (Student, written memory 17)

Our empirical analysis in this article is based on a collection of occasions of leaning touch in our video data. We will analyze two representative excerpts from two specific settings: the first data set consists of 13 videotaped sessions in which 2–4 fifteen-year-old students are collaborating in solving a grammar task. The data were collected in 2011 in Southern Finland. The second data set consists of videotaped lessons from a preparatory classroom recorded in a Finnish primary school (LongSecond project, see, e.g., Routarinne & Ahlholm, 2021; Shestunova, 2019). It consists of videotaped lessons recorded twice a week during one school year in 2010. The pupils are aged between 7 and 12. In these interactions, 4–7 pupils, as well as a teacher and an assistant teacher(s), are present. All lessons were recorded with two cameras, and all participants, as well as students' caregivers, have given their consent to use the video-recordings for research purposes. We have pseudonymized all participants in our transcriptions, and we use animated figures (drawn from original still figures) to illustrate our focal analytical points. Since the number of students present in the settings is limited (2–7), making it easier to observe touches in detail, both of these data sets are ideal for the analysis of tactile interaction.

As a method for analyzing the data, we used multimodal conversation analysis (e.g., Goodwin C., 2000; Mondada, 2016, 2019; Deppermann, 2013). This analytical method is based on ethnomethodological conversation analysis (e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Heritage, 2013), which aims at exploring in detail participants' orientations and situated activities in order to understand how they sequentially organize their social activities in moment-by-moment interaction. It thus enables a micro-analytical perspective on social interaction and accurate observation on how participants establish and co-construct intersubjectivity in interaction. From the multimodal point of view, the analytical focus is on how participants exploit multiple modalities of communication (i.e., gaze, gestures, touch), as well as the spatio-material environment, to achieve their interactional goals.

Negotiating We-Ness Through Synchronized Embodied Peer-Formations

In this section, we will focus on the leaning touch from the perspective of synchronized embodied peer-formations that are constructed through both embodied and linguistic means. Through these types of formations, students display their close peer relationship and their detachment from others in the on-going situation. First, we examine how students during the sustained leaning touch construct simultaneously a synchronized bodily formation and a peer-to-peer participation framework. As this participation framework overlaps with the pedagogical activity going on at the same time, its moment-by-moment construction reflects the students' balancing between their two roles: as peer student and as friend. Second, we analyze the bodily formations that are constructed during the leaning touch from the perspective of how, for example, through the mirroring of peers' gestures, the bodily compresence and we-ness (Jensen, 2018) between students is constructed and made visible to the other participants in the situation. At the same time, the sequence reveals a tension related to group dynamics: embodied peer formations display inclusion with a close peer and at the same time the ignoring, even exclusion, of other participants (e.g., Goodwin M.H., 2002a, 2002b).

Our first excerpt is from a lower secondary school class in which 15-year-old students are solving a grammar task. They sit side-by-side at the table (see Fig. 6).

Figure 6 illustrates the spatial constellation of students during a leaning touch. Students C and D are orienting to the task (paper sheet on the table, not visible in the figure). Although Student B orients mainly to Student A with her upper body, her lower body is partly oriented to the task sheet. This illustrates B's distributed orientation both to the ongoing academic task and to the peer Student A.

During the leaning touch, Student B manages parallel activities, orienting at the same time by tactile means to her close peer (Student A) on the right side and by linguistic means and gaze orientation to ongoing group work and other peers on the

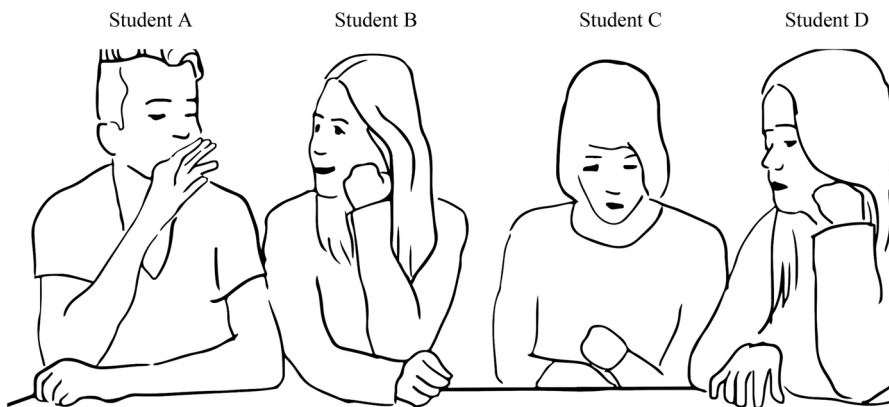


Fig. 6 Spatial constellation of students during a leaning touch

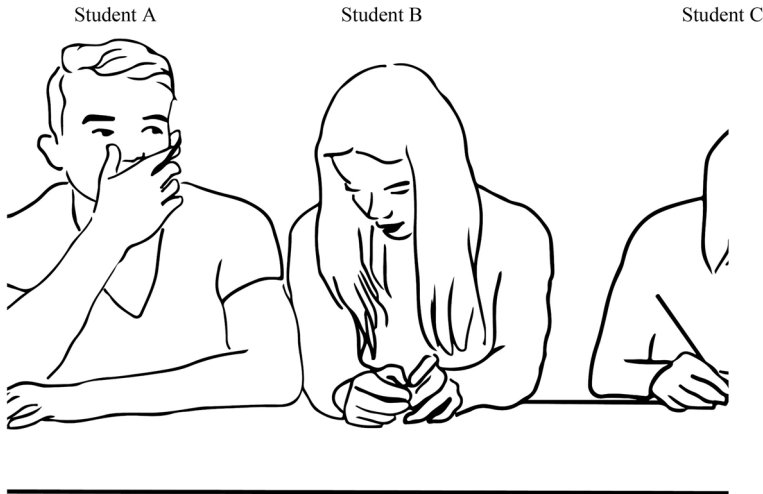


Fig. 7 Student B gazes diagonally toward Student A

left side (Students C and D). This indicates how touch practices are in many cases fundamentally adapted and tied into the ongoing pedagogical activity (e.g., Jakonen & Niemi, 2020). The shifts in students' bodily orientations are sequentially organized: for instance, through re-organized gaze directions and bodily formations while simultaneously contributing verbally to the mutual task. In many cases, this type of interactional work of embodied negotiations is very subtle. For instance, the material environment can be used in legitimizing a shift to closer proximity with a peer: Student B reaches for an eraser on the table and manipulates it in her hand while gazing diagonally toward Student A (see Fig. 7). Student B's side-activity seems to work as an embodied account for re-organizing her bodily constellation vis-à-vis Student A and negotiating a closer proximity with him during group work. While manipulating the object and getting closer to Student A, Student B contributes verbally to the mutual task by producing a question. The question concerning the task is addressed to Students C and D, while embodied orientation, including sustained leaning touch, is simultaneously co-constructed with Student A.

Embodied and linguistic balancing between pedagogical content and prosocial orientation towards a peer indicate Student B's dual role orientation, and in that way legitimize intimate touch between students A and B in the institutional context. During fine-tuned embodied shifts in their two-student bodily choreographies, the students maintain their leaning touch; that is, they hold their bodies together in a sustained position by leaning on each other's shoulders and upper arms. Tactile compresence between peers through sustained leaning touch seems to work as an embodied way to perform social relations and to draw a line between close and distant peer relations; that is, they serve as subtle embodied practices of inclusion and exclusion in peer groups.

Previous studies have highlighted that face-to-face formation is a crucial part of tactile intimacy and its interactional construction (e.g., Cekaite & Kvist Holm, 2017; Katila, 2018). In Fig. 8, we can see how Student B seeks a mutual gaze with Student A in order to prepare to construct a more private participation framework.

During this shift, Students A and B are still bodily located in close proximity to each other in a leaning position.

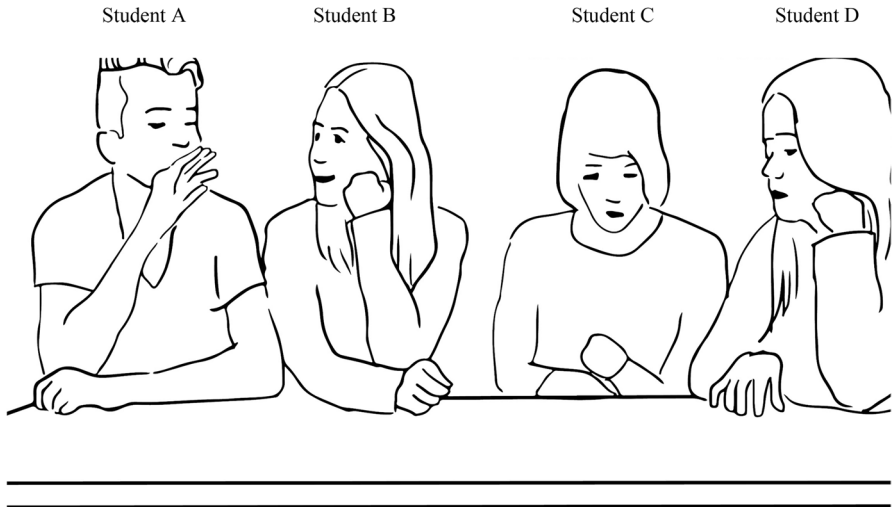


Fig. 8 Student B seeks a mutual gaze with Student A

By re-organizing her gaze orientation, Student B bodily ignores Students C and D. The mutual gaze, while maintaining an intercorporeal compresence between Student A and Student B, indicates that at this moment these students are partly concentrating on their own interactional project in order to display intimacy, social bonding, and we-ness during group work. This is also visible in the embodied shift in leaning formation, in which gaze orientation, together with synchronized movements and gestures, works as a resource for constructing a parallel participation framework. Figure 9 illustrates how Student A puts his hand in front of his face to invite Student B into private conversation. During the whispering (thus inaudible to others) conversation between A and B, the students' hand formations work as barriers to construct a private participation framework.

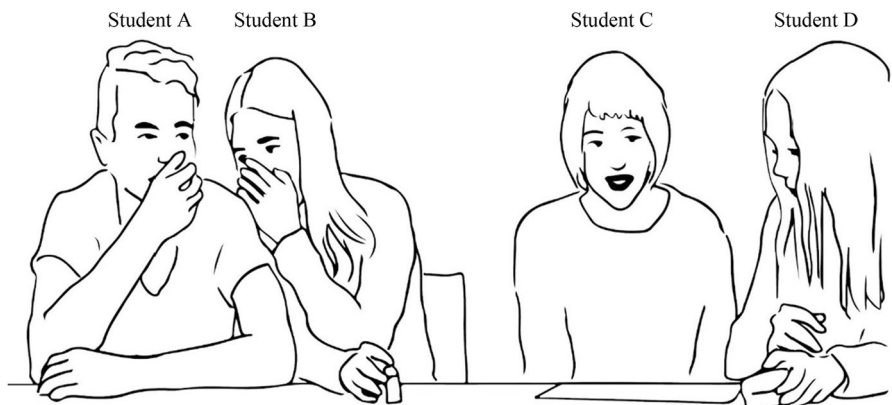


Fig. 9 Constructing a private participation framework during group work

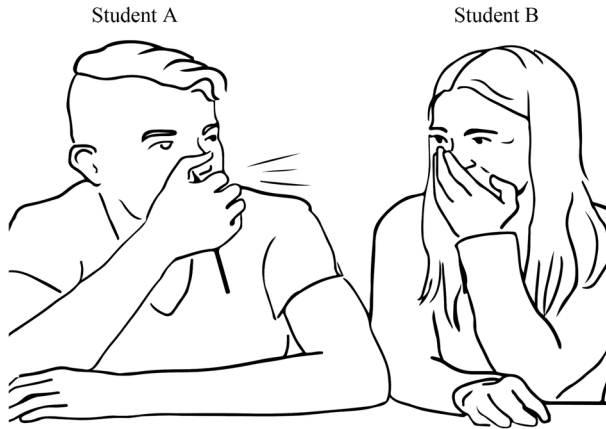


Fig. 10 Students' synchronized bodily orientations

A private participation framework is constructed mainly through embodied means: students are positioning their bodies toward each other's and protecting bodily their mutual interactional space. Figure 9 clearly illustrates the ways in which the bodily constructed embodied barriers between the two student pairs are displayed in this very moment. It is also worth mentioning that during this extended sequence none of the students orients visibly to an on-going tactile-haptic connection itself. Instead, this embodied choreography is handled as “normal,” or as “business as usual” in its situational context. Students C and D orient bodily to a shared academic resource without paying attention to A's and B's activities.

Furthermore, the students also synchronize their bodily orientations and mirror each other's movements, and in this way indicate through fundamental synchronization a mutual compresence and incorporeal constellation indicating we-ness. Figure 10 illustrates the next embodied shift, during which students' faces and gazes, both arms, hands, as well as their entire upper bodies, are co-constructed in an identical mirroring position in relation to each other (see Streeck, 2020).

In this very moment, the aspect of we-ness is also verbally underlined. Student C intrudes into this private participation framework by addressing Students A and B and asking whether they can help in the task. The sequence turns to a humor-mode, since Student B responds by laughing: *Hey we are Betty and Andrew, maybe it's not worth asking us*. However, an embodied orientation, together with linguistic choices, is constructed in coherence: while producing the inclusive pronoun *we*, she points bodily towards herself, and gestures toward Student A as a deictic gesture of we-ness (see Fig. 11).

This excerpt illustrates how mirroring bodily constellation organized with synchronized movements and gestures is a way to maintain a bodily delimited “interactional bubble” between Students A and B, protected from others. Meanwhile, the students are orienting to the negotiation of the territories of personal space (see also the analysis in the next section): sharing the personal space allows for close proximity to each other. Furthermore, by momentarily ignoring Students C and D, Students

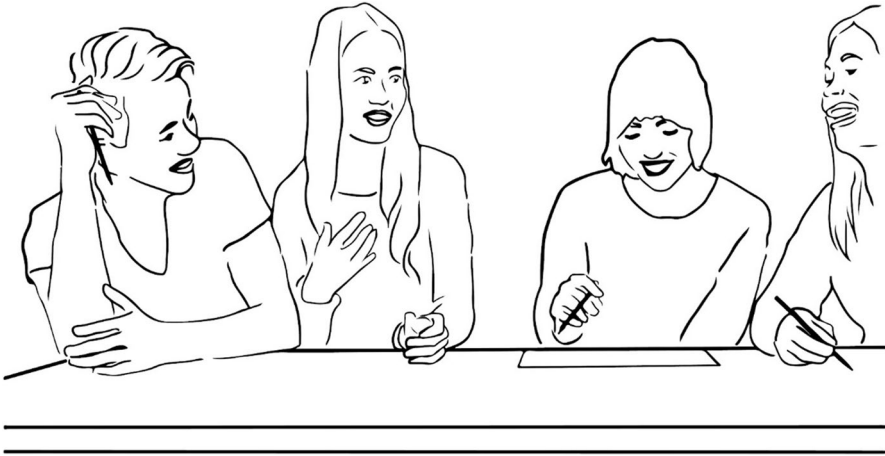


Fig. 11 Bodily and linguistically constructed we-ness

A and B are carrying out inclusive and exclusive practices in multiparty interaction in an embodied way.

Negotiating We-Ness Through Sharing a Personal Space

In addition to bodily coordination and synchronized bodily formations, a characteristic feature of the leaning touch is that during peer-to-peer touch the student momentarily shares their own personal space with another student and uses this shared space for the learning activity (see Goffman, 1971: 34f.). Thus, the leaning touch is a way of making visible through spatial re-arrangements the situated peer relations between students: who is allowed to have situational access to one's own personal space and who is thereby shown to belong to one's own immediate peer group. According to Goffman (1971: 32ff.), in social situations we tend to orient to our personal space and delimit it with our body and bodily positioning and also by marking it with material objects. For example, in public spaces we can make the boundaries of our personal space visible to others by sitting in the middle of a bench or by placing a garment or bag on the seat next to us in a vehicle. Students can mark their personal space by, for example, positioning their own school supplies, such as pens, papers, and erasers in certain positions on their school desk (see Rossano et al., 2015). However, the tendency towards open classrooms and digital learning tools calls for more nuanced embodied negotiations through which students produce local moral orders in order to organize spatial and personal territories in learning situations (Niemi & Katila, 2022).

The following data excerpt illustrates the division of personal space during the leaning touch, and, in particular, how material objects also appear to be relevant in delimiting personal space during an intercorporeal constellation. The excerpt is from a lesson in preparatory education for newly arrived students. Students are

seated at desks in a circle formation, and they are working on individual tasks (see Fig. 12). Pupil A is 7 years and Pupil B 9 years old.

Figure 12 illustrates how Pupil A leans towards the table during sustained leaning touch and prepares to intrude on Pupil B's personal use space in order to achieve a connection with the teacher. What follows is that Pupil A gives his own drawing to the teacher (not visible in the figure), at the same time invading a peer's personal space while maintaining the leaning touch (see Fig. 13).

Pupil B does not orient to this close incorporeal constellation or to the fact that Pupil A is visibly reaching towards him. Instead, he gazes forward and seems to be lost in his own thoughts. Even if Pupil A now more clearly dwells in his personal space, Pupil B unquestionably shares it with a peer. However, Pupil B orients to the material environment and his own paper on the desk by moving the paper in front of him slightly and protecting it with his own body by framing the paper with his arm. The reason for this embodied shift might be practical: he tries to prevent his paper from being damaged while a close peer is conducting his project in very close proximity. However, this shift also illustrates how the limitations of the self and personal space might be arranged through the material environment (see Goffman, 1971).

Figures 12 and 13 illustrate how Pupils A and B are leaning on each other in shifting bodily formations: first with elbow and hand, then with arms touching each other. However, during the whole sequence, students maintain the leaning position. Tactile compresence, together with a clear display of sharing the personal space during the leaning touch, serves to construct we-ness in an ongoing pedagogical interaction. The situational negotiation concerning which students permit the proximity of certain others—who they allow to stay close to them and who they seek to be close to—is relevant from the perspective of negotiating peer relations. With these practices, the students perform social bonding with those

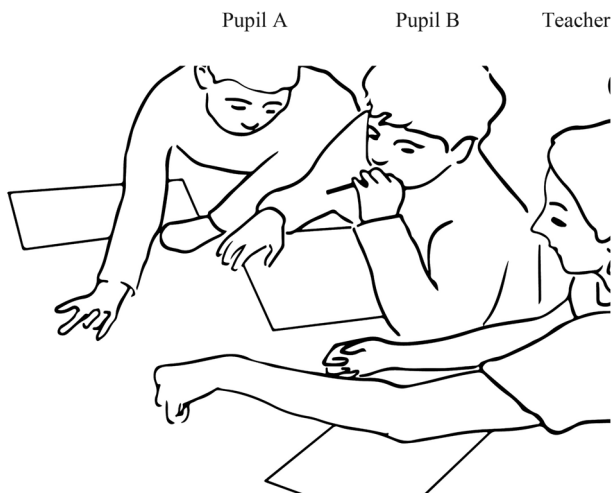


Fig. 12 Leaning touch while working on individual tasks

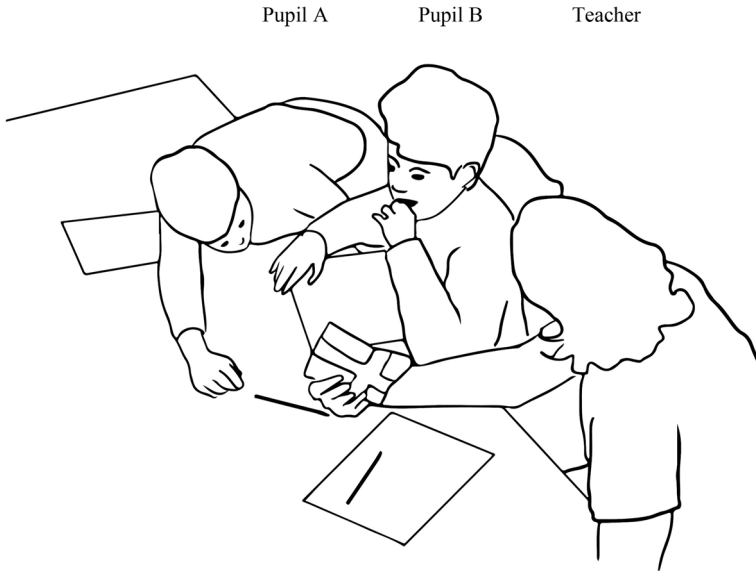


Fig. 13 Invading a peer's personal space

with whom they want to be seen as close friends in social situations (Goffman, 1971: 41f.).

From the perspective of managing peer relations, this excerpt differs from the previous one in its overall interactional constellation, since in this case there are only two pupils and a teacher involved in the sequence. For that reason, the display of we-ness in relation to others, as well as inclusive and exclusive practices vis-à-vis other peers, is not so clearly visible. Instead, in this case, sharing personal (school) space and allowing a close peer to intrude in their own desk area while maintaining close haptic-tactile choreographies indicates a situated display of social bonding and we-ness. However, in this case, as the other pupils are sitting in front of them, the leaning touch is performed to others as well. Another clear difference compared to the previous excerpt is that, even if the leaning touch between pupils is sustained through the whole sequence, the absence of face-to-face formation makes this intercorporeal choreography less intimate. All in all, both excerpts shed light, from different perspectives, on the bodily and spatially organized negotiations that occur in peer relations during school activities.

Discussion

In this article, we have analyzed the construction of specific peer-to-peer touch types and discussed how negotiations of peer relations are bodily constructed in an institutional setting. We have shown how sustained leaning touch, fine-tuned organization, and synchronization of bodily movements, as well as the negotiation of personal space, are means by which students construct mutual consciousness

and incorporeal compresence and display both the inclusive and exclusive dimensions of we-ness. We are aware that social relationships are gradually built over a long period. In the analyses of our examples, we have shed light on the tiny moments that one after another construct and strengthen social bonding and close relationships between peers over time. However, in our detailed analysis, we have focused on the situated practices of social relations that were observable in the data, drawing on the main principles of multimodal conversation analysis. Through analysis of leaning touch, we have aimed to discuss how social relations between peers are situationally negotiated through embodied, tactile-haptic, and spatial practices. We have also tested how a phenomenologically rooted understanding of intercorporeality may have been operationalized in the identification of clearly observable interactional phenomena and their occasions in empirical data.

The leaning touch is a rather frequently observed phenomenon in our data. Our excerpts show how these intimate touches can be interpreted as deeply meaningful but at the same time as “unproblematic” in their interactional context, both by the participants of the touch activity and the other participants in the situation. The reason may be partly due to the fact that, even if the leaning touch is intimate, it involves neutral body parts (arms, hands, etc.). However, from the perspective of intercorporeal intersubjectivity it is an exceptionally interesting practice as well: the key elements of tactility—an essential reciprocity and inherent privacy (Meyer & Streeck, 2020)—are clearly observable and analytically reachable in their interactional construction (including embodied shifts, synchronizations, and spatial negotiations), their social consequences, and in their overall nature and uniqueness. However, as a fundamental intercorporeal activity, the leaning touch is also suitable for phenomenological conceptualization. Through the fine-tuned analysis of embodied shifts in peer-to-peer choreographies, we are able to discuss how phenomenological conceptualizations of intercorporeal understanding, as well as intertwining subject and object, may have been actualized in a local social order and its haptic-tactile practices. Simultaneous subject-object experience during touch activity, in which the toucher and touch addressee are mutually involved, enables meaningful intercorporeal connection, embodied intertwining, and mutual bodily consciousness that have consequences both locally in individuals’ corporeality and in the organization of social relations between peers. Meanwhile, the leaning touch enables students to subtly manage their dual orientation in an institutional interaction by constructing parallel activities between academic tasks and peer orientation.

Furthermore, the analysis enables the mirroring of locally constructed phenomena in an institutional context towards the social and cultural norms generally realized in social interactions. We started this article by discussing the role of human-to-human touch vis-à-vis socio-cultural understanding and meaning making, as well as its power in negotiating social relations. Students’ incorporeal practices displaying we-ness seem to be one way of establishing the local construction of peer relations. They also show the meaningful role of intercorporeality in social interaction and human bonding. However, the power of touch in shaping the participation framework, as well as in displaying inclusion and exclusion, is visible through embodied peer-to-peer choreographies in which participants

bodily construct barriers between peers (first excerpt) and when personal space is re-negotiated through embodied means (second excerpt). Thus, through this article we hope to have continued the ongoing discussion within multimodal conversation analytical studies as to how embodied intersubjectivity and phenomenological understanding, conceptualization, and meaning-making are fundamentally rooted in our daily social life and its local practices.

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Declaration

Conflict of interest None.

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