

## CHAPTER 5

# Blurring the Lines through Arts-Based Dialogues: A Question of Play?

*Ola Buan Øien, Andreas van Dijk, Rosemary Kate Martin, Sveinung Næss, Ninni Anita Rotmo Olsen, Laila Grendahl, B. Solveig Fretheim, Sondre Gran, Luca Nielsen Jenssen, Tore Kristian Aune & Alexander Victor Toresen Nynes*

Nord University, Norway

**Abstract:** This study is about blurring lines and boundaries, observing conversations and practices as well as thinking and being in our artistically inspired research, teaching and learning practices. Our agenda is to embrace the uncertain and murky spaces of making art in academic contexts. The study addresses the following research question: How might a collective playful and performative dialogue create a space to blur the boundaries between art, science and pedagogy? This contribution takes an arts-based approach to exploring the research question. The method is operationalised in the form of an arts-based dialogue played out through a live improvised performance at the intersection of the research paradigms, arts and roles within which we are all positioned. The video article is a multi-camera production of an improvised artistic performance led by a voiceover that dramatically ties the study together. The raw material consists of three 20-minute recordings of an improvised performance in which we participate in a multimodal dialogue. In addition, short portrait interviews with each of the participants are presented during the video to further illuminate our different perspectives. The main findings of this study are fruitful insights at the intersection of performative, pedagogical, and research practices. We explore how this approach can contribute to developing new understandings of what arts-based dialogue, playful research, and the blurring of our lives as artists, students, teachers, and researchers can potentially achieve.

**Keywords:** blurring lines, arts-based dialogue, improvisation, playful research, arts-based research

## Video Article



**Figure 1.** Video article

Note: Click [here](#) to view the video article.

Citation: Øien, O. B., Dijk, A. v., Martin, R. K., Næss, S., Olsen, N. A. R., Grendahl, L., Fretheim, B. S., Gran, S., Jenssen, L. N., Aune, T. K. & Nynes, A. V. T. (2023). Blurring the Lines through Arts-Based Dialogues: A Question of Play? In O. B. Øien, S. S. Kolaas, M. F. Duch & E. Angelo (Eds.), *MusPed:Research: Vol. 6. Explorative Perspectives in Music and Education* (Chap. 5, pp. 105–116). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.200.ch5>

License: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

## Video article transcript

**Rose (0:28–0:30):**

Could you slow down, just a little bit?

**Sveinung (0:31–0:36):**

I can't slow down. I don't wanna slow down, Mum.

**Ola (0:40–1:32):**

Yes, the background to the whole idea was a conference we had in October 2022, called 'MiU22' (Nord, 2022). At the end of that conference, we saw that we had managed to bring together educational, scientific and artistic traditions for research and development work in the same conference. This gave us the idea to go further, to explore how different art forms can dialogue with each other. How dance can initiate a musical interaction [...]

**Voice over by Rose (1:33–2:39):**

Agendas are political. They are powerful. We probably all have them. Agendas are everywhere. So, we ask the question openly and boldly: What is our agenda? Our agenda is to blur lines and boundaries, conversations and practices, thinking and being in our artistic, research, teaching and learning practices. Our agenda is to embrace a hazy space, a grey zone, an uncertain and murky space of doing and making art in academic contexts. In the process of developing an improvised dialogue, selections were made jointly by the authors, based on egalitarian and democratic principles of representation, creating a dramaturgy and contributing to a process relevant to exploring the research question of this study. The empirical material of the study is cross-cut from all three recorded performances.

**Ola (2:41–2:51):**

[...] How theatre sport in dialogue with visual art can develop a common expression in interaction [...]

**Sveinung (2:53–2:54):**

You're a gifted student.

**Rose (2:55–2:56):**

All in a day's work.

**Sveinung (2:57–2:58):**

Wow.

**Ola (2:58–3:44):**

[...] And that was part of the idea that came up, and the participants that have been invited are a strategic selection. There are people representing dance, theatre, music, arts and crafts. There are students [Luca and Sondre], there is an alumnus [Andreas], there are different subject groups, the dean of the faculty [Rose] is there—so there are a lot of people who represent both different roles, different art forms and different research paradigms. And it is interesting to see how the different participants see themselves in the project [...]

**Tore Kristian (3:45–4:12):**

[...] which in a way creates a bit of chaos and then it's a bit uncertain for a short period of time that you have to deal with it. And then you go back into a new stable phase. Like the scene with the car driving that was in the last shot here. It was a stable phase where there was car driving. And then something happens in that car drive—something happens that creates chaos, and then there is a new stable phase by the canvas (Button et al., 2020; Jirsa et al., 1994; Kelso, 1990).

**Alexander (4:16–4:38):**

We don't have as much control over what we're looking for. So, after measures 2–3, the role changed to standing up and looking for what it is that makes us get the results that we do. What is changing. What is it that is affecting him [Sondre] or causing the results [on the brain scan graph].

**Tore Kristian (5:13–6:21):**

And that's also how we think about change in dynamic systems from a natural science perspective (Kelso, 2021). There is order at one level, then something comes in from outside that creates chaos, then there is order again at another level. And then I feel that you can use some of these

natural science theories, to put it like that, to understand and interpret improvisation. What happens in such an improvisation space. So, I feel that you can apply some of these concepts and understandings to it. And for me it is about ‘blurring the lines’ in a way between our worlds, in a scientific way, and how they [the scientists] approach that kind of knowledge. So, for me we have blurred the lines between research traditions and not only, as you probably experience it, between art forms. But I also feel that we have blurred the lines between the theories and the understanding of what is happening in the space.

**Sveinung (6:22–6:34):**

When I was six years old, I walked into a really huge forest. The trees were about twenty [...]

**Solveig (6:34–6:47):**

[...] feet high. The forest had really little, little, little, little, little creatures. With big teeth.

**Laila (6:50–7:07):**

“Bahhh”, said the creatures. Hhhaaahhh, I got terrified. How on earth should I come back home again? Mummy [cries].

**Voice over by Rose (7:08–7:49):**

In our lives as artists, students, teachers, and researchers, we sometimes see partitions being made, barriers being put up, and a sense of ownership and protectionism being put up within or around the disciplines, methodologies, and pedagogies we engage with. We wish to blur the lines. And, furthermore, blur the lines between the roles we represent, such as student, teacher, researcher and artist.

**Solveig (7:50–7:54):**

[...] and corn. Soft.

**Sveinung (7:57–8:16):**

Softness. I looked on the ground and I saw a hole in the ground. I opened it and I started to crawl into it. It was like a tube, under [...]

**Laila (8:18–8:24):**

[...] the soil. Under the grass. I made a tunnel, under [...]

**Rose (8:25–8:38):**

[...] and I dug this tunnel, deeper and deeper and deeper into the ground. Meeting worms, and bugs, and [...]

**Andreas (8:39–9:18):**

You didn't seem to pay much attention to the camera. Because it can happen very quickly: "Oh, I'm on camera" and you really have to pull yourself together and, yes, change your behaviour. But those who have been behind the camera have not felt that way, at least not in the sense that they have become afraid of the camera. Maybe you worked more with it. And seen a... yes, we've had very different sessions [takes] today. One that was perhaps very restrictive and one that was freer, as well as the playful one at the very end. How much different exactly the same people can do [Laila laughs]. It is something special to see.

**Luca (9:19–9:39):**

I have seen you all step out of your comfort zones. And I am very used to seeing teachers in their comfort zone, or mostly knowing what they are teaching in a teaching role. But here people seem to be a bit outside of what they are used to, and it is very liberating for me to see that as well.

**Voice over by Rose (9:41–10:31):**

Research question: How might a collective playful and performative dialogue create a space to blur the boundaries between art, science and pedagogy?

Method: This offering takes an arts-based approach to explore the research question. Arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2018; Rolling, 2013) can imply research and arts of many forms. In the same way, arts-based dialogue can be played out in different ways and in this study, we are particularly informed by theatre sports practices (Johnstone, 1999). Furthermore, inspired by the title "A question of fun" (Stinson, 1993) from a seminal dance education text, we propose

“A question of play” [as an approach to exploring the research question and the methodology of this work].

**Laila (10:32–11:27):**

As I told some of you yesterday, when I came here, I lost the square format as a musician that I have. I became all sorts of things in this room in the face of other art forms. So instead of switching between different hats, I had no hats. I just walked in and was a body in a room with sound, visual art, yes – all formats. And I decided to do it. Because I could say: “No, I’m just the conductor, so I’m going to work within this”. But something made me take the chance to just go into it with myself and see what happened. Because the last two days I’ve been doing things that I don’t normally do on campus [laughter]. Or at home.

**Voice over by Rose (11:29–11:57):**

More broadly, there is the hope that this creative output might contribute to perspectives of *playful research*. Here, the term play is thought of in the sense of putting ourselves in play and at stake, by and with each other. Through playful interactions we explore embodiment with improvisation (cf. Martin, 2019).

**Ninni (12:00–13:17):**

I know the stunt in myself when I put myself on the line and see it in a relationship. So, I think the sharpening I had to do myself when I started with abstract idioms makes me very insecure and on shaky ground. Does it work or doesn’t it? And then it is required, so to speak, that it should make me tremble. I have to be on a bit of shaky ground if I don’t want to rise above it and put myself in a certain position. But I have really tried to get into playful situations where I can laugh. You have to laugh a little bit and I felt that coming. So, I think it was a wonderful way of working because we don’t know each other from before and it’s this mix with also the quantitative that gives an external pressure, which means you have a movement between the external and the internal perspective, which I think can be good. And that makes you wonder a bit.

**Sveinung (13:20–14:26):**

Yes, coming from a theatre background, I've done a lot of improvisational work (see Johnstone, 1999). But never with so many and such different art forms and backgrounds. And I discovered that at the beginning I was looking and searching [video showing a situation in which Sveinung gives instructions to a part of the group]. Maybe I became more open. Maybe the hat, the drama hat, became smaller and smaller. So that I was more accessible to what was happening around me. And I also relaxed my shoulders a little bit, I think. So, the concept of time, I think, became an important keyword for me, along with the gang of people.

**Voice over by Rose (14:28–15:00):**

We meet and explore 'risk', 'vulnerability', being 'at stake' when in dialogue with each other in arts-based encounters—and are conscious that such an approach might challenge norms of research, of teaching and learning, or of the arts (cf. Martin, 2021). We weave into the dialogue visual arts as experiment—the concept of STUNT (Olsen, 2015) is applied to the work as a practice of improvisation within various art forms.

**Rose (15:14–17:57):**

Yes, so I think it's about, yeah, the meeting points, the meeting... opportunities for meeting. The opportunities for opening up. Because these frames; it's so easy to get into your frame and environments that we work within in academia, or, as you're saying [points to Ninni], you know, it's like encouraging these frames. But, this idea that also, I think, some of that holding on to the frame instead of relaxing a little—which could allow for new possibilities, come often from, I'm gonna say 'fear', I gonna say 'trying to protect', 'look after'. Maybe sometimes with good intentions: 'take care of'. Whether it be disciplinary histories, or whatever it might be, but by kind of letting some of that going, going: "It's cool". Like, you know, we can still have our practices and our disciplines. But it's cool, we can meet, and we can actually, maybe in that meeting, also find opportunities for newness, for innovation, for finding out: "Actually, maybe we have more in common than we have difference." Because it's that, you know, if I'm coming from a deep practice led post qualitative

approach (see Pierre, 2014; Springgay, 2021; Østern et al., 2021), but I dialogue with someone that's working in a scientific quantitative way. Often, we realize we're not so far apart as what we imagined. And often this is so imagined and constructed, and that the rigor of all these methodologies, all the theories that can be applied; we can do that. You know, that's cool, we can do that in so many ways. But it's often the stereotypes, the assumptions, the baggage that we carry into the space, that I think limit us from, type, relaxing a little. Into being: "Okay. Maybe I don't know what's going to happen, but maybe, actually, I'm gonna go further in my research, in my teaching, in my own lived experience than what I even imagined." So, for me it's about how do you create spaces for that? In that, how do you allow people to feel that they can relax those frames. And they're not losing anything, they're only going to gain something. That, to me, is the goal over this type of work, that, it is... be so bold to say this is the future, you know? We can't live in siloes; we can't live in bubbles. So, how do we collectively work together? Yeah.

**Voice over by Rose (17:59–19:14):**

STUNT (Olsen, 2015), an acronym based in the Norwegian language, is understood as an approach that: (S) spisser (*sharpens*), (T) tirrer og skaper (*shakes and creates*), (U) undring (*wonder*), (N) nærhet (*mutual proximity*), and (T) tillitsforhold (*relationships of trust*).

Thus, the study contributes on a theoretical and methodological level. The method is operationalized in the form of an arts-based dialogue which is played out through a live performative improvisation at the intersection of the research paradigms, arts, and roles we are each positioned within. So, within the methods we explore we are also interrogating the 'big' questions of: What is art? What is dialogue? And what can "play" look, feel, and be seen as in the context of this work?

**Solveig (19:16–20:41):**

I like the idea of putting people together, not quite random, but just to see what's going on or what's coming out of it or what happened. Like in the Stinson article (see Stinson, 1993), that, what was going on? And to try to reflect on that. And that's, I guess, how I like to work in class. Or when I do more artistic work, I tend to start with that rather than a goal of the



session. So... It's like dwelling in the space is a good thing for me [laughs]. So, and I appreciate the people in the room. Really for each one of you participating, and I think it's a matter of vulnerability. And I also feel responsible, that I have to... I can not stop or I can not go outside. Yeah, I'm stuck here, and I have to offer something in response. So, it's also a... yeah, putting yourself at stake. Yeah, being at stake... and you can have it too, and eat it, yeah [laughter].

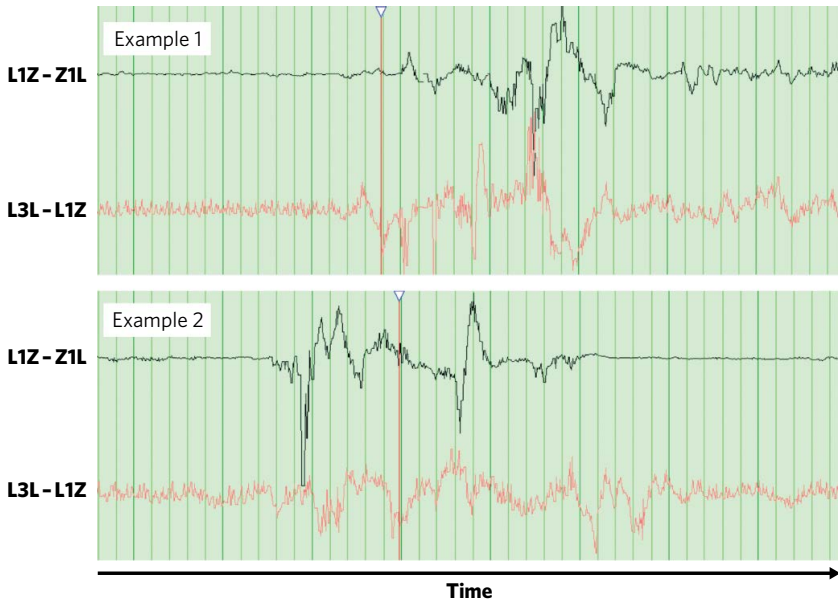
**Voice over by Rose (20:43–21:35):**

Arts-based presentation and dissemination (see Kara, 2020; Leavy 2018; Øien, 2021): We offer an arts-based presentation and dissemination of the research question that we explore. Therefore, the result of our experiment is presented as a peer-reviewed video article in the MiU22 anthology. The video article is a multi camera production of an improvised artistic performance led by a voice over that dramaturgically ties the study together. The raw material consists of three 20-minute recordings of an improvised performance where we participated in a multi-modal dialogue. In addition, short portrait interviews with each individual participant are presented during the video to further illuminate our different perspectives.

**Sondre (21:47–23:23):**

In this context, I have not experienced a boundary between the roles of teacher and student, nor have I in the past when I have played concerts with teachers. Maybe I'm more used to it now. But as soon as we are in a teaching situation, of course I know that it is a teacher who is going to teach me something. But now we are all on the same level, so there is no one here who is better than anyone else or who knows more about this than anyone else. So, I felt there was an equal hierarchy. The differences that I was more aware of were probably more to do with the art form because it's something I've never done before. I'm more... when I play music, there tend to be fairly fixed roles and frameworks, like this: chorus, verse and so on. Yes, but here I had to put all that aside and just try my hand at it, and that was very unusual for me. Another thing I found unusual was that I'm very comfortable behind the drums, so when Laila suddenly says "Sondre, blah blah blah" and then I have to react... then I suddenly say "Oh!", yeah, and then I react. It was certainly shown

on the screen there [Sondre points to the screen showing his brain activity during the process, laughter].



**Figure 2 (23:24–25:02).** Electroencephalogram (EEG)

*Note:* The figure illustrates how a person's brain activity reacts and interacts with specific incidents in the surroundings of an environment. How patterns of humans' behavior emerge, persist, adapt and change in situations is a collaboration of multiple characteristics in the context/environment and in relation to other people, and the variability in reactions is a result of the input and the person's affordances. The figure illustrates two examples from the present experiment of how a relatively stable pattern of brain activity in the frontal lobe is spontaneously changed and increased because of a specific input from another person's behavior. This is illustrated and is in coherence with the stable scene of car driving, followed by an abrupt change in environment, and how it creates chaos in behavior, and continues into a new stable phase by the canvas. These observations at the behavioral level of analysis correlates and are in association with the EEG-patterns shown at the neurophysiological level of analysis (Button et al., 2020; Jirsa et al., 1994; Kelso, 1990). This is how change in dynamic systems from a natural science perspective can be thought of and potentially shows how natural science theories could be used to understand and interpret improvisation.

**Ola (25:04–25:20):**

If you can take your own role, then it's not so important what you do or don't do, as long as this concept [arts-based dialogue] leads to development on both an individual and collective level.

**Voice over by Rose (25:27–27:56):**

**Findings:** This study offers fruitful insights at the intersection of performative, pedagogical and research practices. We explore how this approach can contribute to developing new understandings of what arts-based

dialogue, playful research, and blurring of our lives as artists, students, teachers, and researchers may possibly accommodate. *STUNT* (Olsen, 2015) opens for a multimodal dialogue, staged through play, that focuses on higher interests than conflict. Relational aesthetics can in turn manifest temporal moments that tremble with curiosity. In the absence of control, the impulse is given room for stunt-based actions, and in this landscape, difference is recognised and it changes the understanding of oneself and others. Differentiated aspects of actions create new challenges that lead to wonder at form and expression, and in understanding a relationship of trust develops. Implicitly, creative processes open up perceptual expansions; explicitly, they change the view of how art-based methods can lead to new conversations about what art is. In the same way, stunts open relational aesthetics that can lead to new forms of teaching that shake aesthetic perceptions towards new horizons. Art-based teaching processes redefine and refine the view of knowledge and learning. The blurred boundaries will metaphorically give meaning to difference, blurring boundaries that can lead to new horizons. Making oneself available to inequality, being quietly open, wondering and vulnerable in learning processes can function symbolically as an art-didactic framework for *PLAY* (Olsen, 2015). So, we know we might not get answers that are simple or even clear, we know we might only get more questions, but we could argue that it is in these blurry spaces, the boundary pushing spaces that there is the potential for something new to emerge.

**Credits (27:57–28:16)**

## References

- Barone, T. & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts based research*. Sage.
- Button, C., Seifert, L., Chow, J. Y., Davids, K., & Araujo, D. (2020). *Dynamics of skill acquisition: An ecological dynamics approach*. Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Fuchs, A., & Scott Kelso, J. A. (2018). Coordination dynamics and synergetics: from finger movements to brain patterns and ballet dancing. *Complexity and synergetics*, 301–316.
- Jirsa, V. K., Friedrich, R., Haken, H., & Kelso, J. S. (1994). A theoretical model of phase transitions in the human brain. *Biological Cybernetics*, 71, 27–35.

- Johnstone, K. (1999). *Impro for storytellers* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315059709>
- Kara, H. (2020). *Creative research methods: A practical guide* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Policy Press.
- Kelso, J. S. (2021). The Haken–Kelso–Bunz (HKB) model: from matter to movement to mind. *Biological Cybernetics*, 115(4), 305–322.
- Leavy, P. (Ed.) (2018). *Handbook of arts-based research*. Guilford Press.
- Martin, R. (2019). Feeling the field: Reflections on embodiment within improvised dance ethnography. *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, 11(2), 197–207.
- Martin, R. (2021). Transgressions Towards Difference: A Tertiary Arts Educator’s Reflection on Teaching in Norway. In B.-T. Bandlien, I. O. Olaussen, M.-A. Letnes & E. Angelo (Eds.), *MusPed:Research: Bd. 3. Utdanning i kunstfag: Samarbeid, kvalitet og spenning* [Arts education: Collaboration, quality and tensions] (pp. 357–376). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.152.ch14>
- Nord universitet. (2022). *MiU22: Explorative perspectives in music and education*.
- Olsen, N. A. R. (2015). *En studie av stunted som dramaturgisk grep for å fremme kreativitet i et kunstdidaktisk undervisningsforløp* [Masteroppgave, NTNU]. <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2434775>
- Pierre, E. S. (2014). A brief and personal history of post qualitative research: Toward “post inquiry”. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30(2).
- Rolling, J. H. Jr. (2013). *Arts-based research*. Peter Lang, Primer.
- Springgay, S. (2021). Feltness: On how to practice intimacy. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(2), 210–214.
- Stinson, S. W. (1993). A question of fun: Adolescent engagement in dance education. *Dance Research Journal*, 29(2) (Autumn, 1997), pp. 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478734>
- Østern, T. P., Jusslin, S., Nødtvedt Knudsen, K., Maapalo, P., & Bjørkøy, I. (2023). A performative paradigm for post-qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Research*, 23(2), 272–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211027444>