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### A Rhythmic Analysis of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education: Space, Time and Affect

#### Abstract

Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of rhythm (Lefebvre 1992), this paper will present and discuss the preliminary results of a pilot project that endeavours to capture the rhythmic orientations of Birmingham City University, over the period of one month (September-October 2017) across its three main sites. To grasp the unfolding of their everyday life, it registers the teacher & learner's spatio-temporal and emotional experience of each institutional space at a particular time, testing the strength of the rhythm analytical project as a method to harness the rich complexity of these articulations in their simultaneity: the experience of teaching and learning cannot be disentangled from the temporal and spatial dimensions from which they emerge, nor understood without considering the perceptual idiosyncrasies and connotations of the material relations that they produce. Finally, how can turn rhythm analysis into a form of critique to identify and address rhythmic pathologies (arrhythmias) in contemporary higher education?

**Paper proposal – outline.**

**Context of the Study/theoretical framework**

The paper will offer a preliminary discussion of the core ideas and data generated through an interdisciplinary pilot project<sup>1</sup> to be undertaken at Birmingham City University in September-October 2017. The pilot will test and refine the practice of rhythmic analysis by conceptually drawing on Henri Lefebvre's definition/understanding of rhythm (1974, 1982, 1992).

However, his theorizations can and should be inscribed within a broader stream of (French) intellectual contributions to the study of rhythm. These started to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to structuralism: Foucault (1975), Deleuze (1983, 1985) Deleuze & Guattari (1980), Meschonnic (1982) and Benveniste (1951), in different ways, reintroduced temporality, diversity and creativity to a worldview dominated by systems of structures, in an effort to foreground rhythm -implicitly or explicitly- as a critical antidote to methodological individualism. These various theorisations reverberate through and resonate with Lefebvre's work, however the rhythm analytical project is unique in its being formulated –explicitly- as a philosophy *and* as an experimental research method for the social and human sciences. Rhythmanalysis can be in fact understood as a form of phenomenology: the focus on perceptual relations and on the body in its world of interrelations foregrounds the senses as privileged vectors of a myriad of reverberations, thus establishing rhythm as a meta-sense for the investigation of cultural phenomena. Rhythmanalysis can also be read as a new materialist philosophy. If we consider rhythm as a “localised temporality” or a “temporalized spatiality” (Lefebvre 1992), then we grant centrality to the nature of materiality, agency and materialisation. Then this philosophy becomes inherently applied and finds a fruitful, uncharted terrain in the everyday life and practices of a variety of social fields (e.g. higher education).

Based on Lefebvre's theoretical framework and inspired by recent attempts to put his ideas into practice (Chen, 2017; Alhadeff-Jones, 2017; Lyon, 2016), this project will attempt to capture the rhythms of teaching and learning as they naturally emerge from and unfold in three differently located campuses belonging to Birmingham City University (City North, City Centre, City South).

## **Research design**

This project is viewed as a pilot for a bigger project that we plan to expand to include other HEIs.

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<sup>1</sup> The project has been granted internal approval (research proposal and ethics approval obtained) and funding. At present, the research team is recruiting participants across the three sites and finalising the interview schedule.

The first stage is focussing on HE space/time (rhythm) as it is experienced by teachers and students of BCU. We aim to gather data across three BCU sites. At each site we aim to cover three curriculum areas, to reflect the range of learning environments offered by different courses. Each course area will gather data from one (ideally final year or post grad) student and a member of teaching staff (total participants: 18) We will identify a key week for each site to gather data on aspects of the physical environment as well as data from each of the six participants.

The data for each site will comprise: time-lapse footage from five different areas in each campus. Video/audio/textual data from 3 students and 3 members of staff (n = 6) from 3 different subject specialist areas on each campus. Total number of participants across BCU = 18.

Data collection time: 5 weeks.

### Data Analysis

Primary data will be complemented by secondary data (background analysis) of the HE provider (BCU), in particular the historical, architectural and institutional development of the three sites under scrutiny. Using a Lefebvrian framework, we aim to capture the rhythmic presence/production vis-a-vis inhabited space. This will be revealed using audio visual imagery (e.g. a time-lapse of a day/night of the HEI and their surroundings ) and/or the app that records sounds/images- the idea being that the different campuses form a rhythmic constellation of knowledge production, of which the outer layer would be represented by their relation with the space they occupy.

The inner layer would involve the exploration of the rhythms of each campus. Rhythm is here interpreted both as a phenomenology - so we focus on the perception and experience of rhythms of teaching and learning - addressing issues concerning acceleration, personal experience of the institutional place/space and affect. But rhythm is also a form of 'historical materialism', as such oriented towards production (in our case, the production of knowledge in the widest possible sense).

### **Implications of the study**

The project is substantially innovative at many levels:

Research: it revives Henri Lefebvre's intellectual legacy potentially contributing to theoretical refinement (theory of rhythm) and methodological development (a case study of 'applied

rhythmanalysis?). Finally, it could offer a significant contribution to an emerging body of work that investigates the relationship between time, space, rhythm and emancipatory education.

Praxis: development of a new methodological model -a rhythm analytical grid/typology- to scale up the project: from a single institution case study to a multiple case study analysis of the West Midlands region (regional and national ramifications).

Impact: should it be successful, it could generate novel ideas and methods to enrich, enliven and complement the work done in disciplinary fields such as institutional ethnography, organisational studies, cultural studies, education and media studies.

Need: this project/study addresses a gap that is both methodological and conceptual: practising rhythm analysis in a university setting has – surprisingly – never been attempted. Teaching, learning and occupying/living the HE space are quintessentially rhythmic activities. Yet so are the pressing governmental demands to align the university's mission, values and purposes to the imperatives of capital accumulation. The clash of opposing rhythms produces the pathological state of arrhythmia. By detecting arrhythmic malfunctioning in the perception and material reproduction of teaching, learning and living within and for (or in spite of) HE, this project could lead to a form of critique from within, and, hence, to a change of the social and institutional conventions that enable pathological reproductions (cfr. Boltanski & Thevenot's pragmatic sociology).

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