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Holding Fast to Being Possible: Teaching as an Interpretive Practice

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Abstract

This short piece is a response to the provocation, *teaching is an interpretive practice,* as offered in the hermeneutic research class I was taking. I discuss why I believe teaching to be interpretive and point to aspects of my practice that I believe to be a rich source of insight.

Keywords

teaching, philosophical hermeneutics, silence, capabilities approach

Illustrious Ancestors
by Denise Levertov

The Rav
of Northern White Russia declined,
in his youth, to learn the
Language of birds, because
the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless
when he grew old it was found
he understood them anyway, having
listened well, and as it is said, 'prayed
with the bench and the floor.' He used
what was at hand – as did
Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations

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were sewn into coats and britches.
Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems direct as what the birds said,
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.

The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart
by Jack Gilbert

How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,
and frightening that it does not quite. *Love*, we say,
God, we say, *Rome* and *Michiko*, we write, and the words
get it wrong. We say *bread* and it means according
to which nation. French has no words for home,
and we have no word for strict pleasure. A people
in northern India is dying out because their ancient
tongue has no words for endearment. I dream of lost
vocabularies that might express some of what
we no longer can. Maybe the Etruscan texts would
finally explain why the couples on their tombs
are smiling. And maybe not. When the thousands
of mysterious Sumerian tablets were translated,
they seemed to be business records. But what if they
are poems or psalms? My joy is the same as twelve
Ethiopian goats standing silent in the morning light.
O Lord, thou art slabs of slat and ingots of copper,
as grand as ripe barley lithe under the wind's labor.
Her breasts are six white oxen loaded with bolts
Of long-fibred Egyptian cotton. My love is a hundred
pitchers of honey. Shiploads of thuya are what
my body wants to say to your body. Giraffes are this
desire in the dark. Perhaps the spiral Minoan script
is not a language but a map. What we feel most has
no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses and birds.

This is a response to the following provocation: *teaching is an interpretive practice*. I certainly believe it to be. Teaching is about working together to reach an understanding. Gadamer's notion of *genuine conversation*, in which the participants are carried along above their own wanting and doing (Gadamer, 1989), is not just a metaphor for teaching, but its core. I find one particular aspect of conversation in my teaching practice has become both a source of richness and unease: *silence*. Although we tend to focus solely on what is said in a conversation, silence is also important. As Gadamer (1989) wrote, "to say what one means … means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in a unified meaning" (p. 464). I chose to open this

piece with two poems that I hope will help to both elaborate on why I believe teaching to be an interpretive practice and reveal more about this source of unease. I have also titled the piece by way of both introduction and conclusion with a phrase borrowed from Heidegger: *holding fast to being possible* (cited in Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015, p. 28). This phrase, for me, captures what it means to work alongside children in an interpretive way.

The Address of the Topic

There are many aspects of the teaching profession that arguably do not fall under the rubric of interpretation. In discussing the role of language in understanding, Heidegger differentiated between *saying* and *speaking*: "Saying and speaking are not identical. One can speak, speak endlessly, and it may all say nothing [but] one can be silent, not speak at all, and in not speaking say a great deal" (Heidegger, cited in Freeman, 2011, p. 546). I came a bit late to teaching, and although I felt that teaching held promise, I did not hear or feel that *call* described by many practitioners in vocations such as teaching and nursing. To me, much of it was just *speaking*. In fact, I had also applied to go to school to become a journalist, and chose a teaching program mostly for practical reasons. But somewhere around the middle of my program, in the second of my three required practicums, I was *addressed by the topic*. Moules et al. (2015) wrote that being addressed in such a way is the "experience of being addressed personally about something at work in one's life or practice" (p. 71), and that it often occurs at a moment in which one becomes aware of a tension between the familiarity and strangeness at play in one's life and work. Previously, I had completed some coursework and a five-week practicum in a grade four classroom and had come to believe I had made the wrong choice in pursuing teaching. The classroom itself felt both familiar and strange: I had experienced the same smells (damp lunches in brown paper bags) and activities (tracing your hand to draw a turkey) as a student more than two decades earlier, but it all felt as foreign to me now as it did then. In my second practicum, a six-week immersion into teaching in my subject major of mathematics, I ended up at an alternative high school in a small, western Canadian city. It was in this context that the "disruption of success in our everyday practices [allowed] a topic to emerge, in completely familiar, but also strange and disrupting ways" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 74).

The word *alternative* meant nothing and everything in this context. One defining characteristic of this student body was that they evaded labels: yes, many of them were there because they had not experienced success in the city's other high schools, but there were also many students highly capable of academic success in a traditional classroom. Those students were there for other reasons: they might have been struggling with addiction, parenting children, experiencing psychological distress, or homeless. In the end, what defined the students at this school was the way in which disadvantage manifested itself in their lives: it was pervasive, proliferate, and persistent. I had prepped and planned all sorts of mathematics lessons, but I threw them out the minute I sat down with my kids. It was not that working with them was or should be different than working with more "traditional" populations. Rather, it was in questioning whether this "traditional" or "normal" population existed at all. It put the specious notion that teaching and learning is inextricable from our lives into high relief.

Canoe Math

I ended up completing my final practicum closer to home in another city and, although I am trained as a mathematics teacher, was hired into a middle school there as an English teacher upon graduating. I very much enjoyed teaching English (which was the degree I had actually started in as an undergraduate), but I never forgot my experience at that alternative high school. A couple of years into my teaching career, one of the two math positions at that alternative school opened up. I got the job and spent the next five years teaching there. In this section, I briefly recount a math program I designed and ran with a colleague in which students collaborated to build 14-foot Prospector canoes to achieve grade ten and eleven math credits.

Working alongside the students at this school had made me realize the degree to which our education system, particularly in the case of mathematics, did not reflect their lives or experience. I wanted to create a program that enabled students to realize the mathematics we learned in their lives in ways they had reason to value. I have written elsewhere about this program in more detail (Markle, 2019), so I will recount it here briefly: we moved our math classroom down to a small space adjoining the wood shop and got to work collaboratively building canoes. One source of inspiration for the course was Martha Nussbaum's work on capability (Nussbaum, 2011). A capabilities approach places its emphasis not just on what one can do (a test score, for example), but on one's capacity and potential for action. A second source of inspiration for this work was Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Reading Gadamer gave me the language and ideas I needed to make sense of what was possible. Focusing on capability was a necessarily interpretive practice. Of course, I still collected evidence of what my kids could do, but from the perspective of hermeneutics, these demonstrations of understanding changed from periods to question marks. They were not the last say in my grade book, but rather they disclosed what was possible.

One student I worked with took the class for both grade ten (Math 10-3) and eleven (Math 20-3) math credits. He was an intelligent but reluctant student. In our first iteration of the class, the excitement of offering such a novel program was compounded by my own inexperience and lack of qualifications in the wood shop. In short, we all struggled. But one moment with this student stands out in particular. In building our canoes, we had to first stitch together the twenty planks that would form the canoe's hull. This was a complex exercise in spatial reasoning: first we had to organize the planks in a two-dimensional plane (i.e. on the floor of the shop), stitch them together with wire, then jostle them into a three-dimensional canoe shape. It involved bending and contorting all of these planks in different ways in different places. In one particular class, nine or ten of us were doing just this. This student had not engaged in the class thus far and he stood off to the side by himself, watching the process. We tried and failed to get the canoe into shape a couple of times and frustration was beginning to mount. Our primary mode of discourse in this class was what a lay observer might characterize as *hollering* – keep in mind, we were in the shop. I preferred the phrase *mathematical argument*. And it was over this din on our third try that this particular student called out: "It's not going to work!"

It was not exactly what I wanted to hear, but when I looked over to the student, he was making a motion with his hand and arm, as if to describe a curved surface. He was looking at a particular spot of the canoe and making that gesture. Another student asked him what he was talking about

and he came over to us, first working in one spot, then another, saying things like, "it has to be like this," until the canoe seemed to pop into shape.

The Silence of the Word

The canoe program ran for five semesters and has been a source of reflection and insight for me ever since. I have written about my experience working alongside those students in the shop several times, and much like re-reading a poem, each time it resonates differently. I would now like to return to the two poems with which I opened this short piece. Both in some sense deal with the finitude of language. I am acutely aware of language's inadequacy each time I think back to trying to assess the understanding of the student mentioned above. To be sure, one could argue that the student simply lacked some of the mathematical vocabulary for describing the understanding he embodied through gesture. But I argue there is something ineffable in that sweeping hand gesture, something as mysterious as the silence when the tailor would pause, so to speak, both in terms of *how* this student understood and what that disclosed of what was possible.

At the 2019 Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Dr. James Risser spoke of the silence of the word that speaks along with the spoken. One reason I believe I have a growing unease when I think and write about teaching as interpretive practice – and even more so when I am in the classroom – is because I find myself drawn to this silence. As Risser (2019) noted, silence is not simply the absence of speech or the limit of understanding (p. 2). Rather, it is a disclosure: silence can reveal in both what is said and what is not said. It pervades and sustains speech. Much like Levertov, Risser (2019) characterized silence as something that "intervenes in the manner of a suspension, a kind of holding apart that allows something to be free in movement" (p. 5). So much of what I have come to view as fundamentally important in teaching and learning consists in maintaining the tension between *holding apart* and *holding fast*. Teaching as an interpretive practice means working with students so as to hear them speak. It requires an openness to what is possible, to which we must hold fast. So much of the teaching profession seems not just oriented by but given purpose through accountability and efficiency. How can we make sure teachers cover all of the content? How can we make sure teachers have delivered it effectively? But focusing on these criteria is a relinquishing of *being possible*. And it is in *holding fast to being possible* that we realize teaching as an interpretive practice.

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