

# *Hermeneutic Musings on Learning: The Dialogical Nature of Teaching Interpretively*

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**ABSTRACT:** The relationship between learning and teaching is explored within the context of a graduate class offered to interdisciplinary students on hermeneutic phenomenology. Both students and the professors who co-taught the class offer insights on questions that are raised, concerning the birth, discovery, creation, generation, and sustenance of interpretive writing. Various pedagogical practices and philosophies are invited into the room to create space for students to explore a deeper level of scholarly, hermeneutic understanding and composition.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Le lien entre apprendre et enseigner est étudié à l'intérieur d'un contexte d'un cours de troisième cycle qui a été proposé à des étudiants pluridisciplinaires en phénoménologie herméneutique. Les deux, que ce soit les étudiants ou les professeurs qui ont fait le cours en partenariat, offrent des idées sur les questions qui ont été soulevées sur la naissance, la découverte, la création, l'production, et le soutien de l'écriture interprétative. Dans la classe, ont été apportées des applications et des philosophies pédagogiques variées pour ainsi offrir aux étudiants un espace pour explorer à un niveau plus profond d'érudition, de compréhension et d'écriture herméneutique.

This paper marks something of celebration. To celebrate means to frequent, honor, commemorate, and mark (Agnes & Guralnik, 1999). In an educational context that gave rise to something of celebration, we found ourselves marked as students and professors. In this marking, we were caught in a muse, a muse that could only be created when interpretation and Hermes were allowed full reign. Musing is part of learning. As students wonder, are absorbed in thought, making new connections to previous knowledge, musing necessarily shows up. Musing suggests profound meditation or abstraction, to be in the state of wonder, to be absorbed in thought, and to marvel. The levels of

musing that occurred in this joint venture of teaching and learning were a celebration, marking something of importance.

### *Students' Voice*

This paper started out as a group discussion after a spring course, a discussion that invited conversation about the specifics of what helped us, as students, to learn how to think and express ourselves more interpretively. Hence, musing came to be. The word *muse* is derived from the Latin *musa*, one of the nine sister-goddesses, the off-spring of Zeus and Mnemosyne (memory), who were regarded as the inspirers of learning and the arts (Onions, 1966)

The idea of writing a paper that could tell the story from both the student and professorial perspective of a new course in hermeneutic phenomenology came out of a few simple questions: "What has made the greatest difference in your learning throughout this course?" "What makes for good interpretive thinking?" "How would you know if it wasn't good interpretive writing?" As each of us grappled with questions of learning interpretively, we decided to write about our collective understanding as each idea built on a fellow student's comment.

The graduate level (masters and doctoral) class in hermeneutic phenomenology was taught by two professors in nursing who had research backgrounds in hermeneutic phenomenology. The course covered the ancestry (Moules, 2002) of the hermeneutic traditions, including the work of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer. We explored the distinctions between hermeneutic and phenomenological positions from a philosophical view. Our interpretive inquiry took us back to our areas of clinical interest, to look at those areas with new interpretive lenses. Masters and doctoral level students came from a variety of backgrounds, including psychology, nursing, rehabilitative medicine, and education. As part of the introduction to the course, Tapp and Moules (2004) stated in the course description:

Students will have opportunities to develop beginning skills in interpretive practices, including interpretive interviewing and writing. Throughout the course, the nature of interpretive thinking in hermeneutic inquiry will be a focus of discussion. Students will have opportunities to develop and explore the implications of course topics for their own theses or dissertation projects. (2004, Course Outline)

Stimulated by the class discussion, each of us wrote about our experiences in various disciplines, our areas of clinical work, or our thesis topics. One student brought up her experiences working with brain-injured adults, and revealed her struggle to think and write interpretively about her encounters, when much of the tradition in her area promoted objective, non-interpretive research. She discovered, when she ventured to read her beginning understandings to the class, the feedback from her peers served as a re-interpretation of her own writing. Many of the other students expressed a similar experience in their own research endeavors, and found her writing a stimulus for re-interpretation of their own clinical work. The feedback helped to uncover areas in our practice that had previously been hidden to us in the way we viewed and thought about our clients. Each of us began to look at our research and practice in a new way.

As we grappled with the essence of the learning experience a year later, we asked each other questions. What had been the central learning experience? Was it hermeneutics that intrigued us? Was it the professors' knowledge? Was it the variety of interdisciplinary students? What created a particular atmosphere of learning which allowed the students to go beyond their expectations, both in learning to write hermeneutically, as well as in carrying that learning to their everyday practice? What brought about a synergy in writing even though students did not see each other's writing until they shared it orally in class? Was it the act of taking risks and finding it possible to take risks only when there was safety around self-disclosure? To risk talking about personal experiences that touch on one's topic is to risk exposure of possible vulnerabilities, and yet, this risk was taken.

We spoke of the circle of learning, the interplay of teaching and learning when both students and professors played with teaching as well as learning. When is teaching straightforward, and when is it *play*? When is it the forgetting of oneself that happens in play; the forgetting of oneself when it is the topic itself that is at play (Gadamer, 1989)? Was it this that the professors themselves demonstrated, so that we were able to carry on without a break between teaching and learning?

*What has made the greatest difference to your learning in this course?* Our experience was that the class played out the hermeneutic gesture of interpreting our own work through the re-interpretation from our classmates. A complex topic of hermeneutics was taken up in an experiential way, so that our writing was interpreted, added to, and re-created by our classmates' responses. It seemed to us that this

hermeneutic experience caught us and brought our writing to the level of hermeneutic inquiry necessary for graduate work.

The professors offered us commendations when we ventured out into reading our interpretations of a videotape shown in class, providing the safety of knowing that what we exposed in our writing was accepted, even celebrated. A space was created for us to fill with our writing. Something happened to increase our capabilities as each opportunity arose.

Was it that there were several disciplines represented in the class? In our differences as students, it may be that the topic of hermeneutics allowed us to uncover and celebrate our differences, bringing them to the forefront instead of hiding them. One student admitted to the class that she had opted to take the course because it seemed a safe methodological course to take, after a difficult year in which she had lost a family member, only to find that two classmates were from palliative care, and were writing from their experiences of being present at deaths. What became central in the class discussions were death, loss, and pain, and without intention, this created a space for this student to find herself there.

Another valuable experience for us was that the professors did not "let go" of a topic until certain concepts were understood, so that we stayed with them, expressed beginning ideas, which eventually flowered into full-blown ideas. What helps professors to know the right amount of "not letting go" in order to keep students voicing ideas and germinating new thoughts from the impetus of the whole group? Our experience was that we were invited to keep on exploring and questioning until we were able to share more than we had initially intended on saying. It seemed to occur in response to something that happened in class, which we were unable to put into words.

Gadamer (1989) offered that to understand a person is to understand the subject matter, that is, the topic. The conversation, whether written or verbal, is not about the author's rendition of the experience, or to relive an experience, but to genuinely hear the other person, and in response, to create something new – that is, to create a new understanding of the topic, the subject matter. We were learning that it is the topic that sustains us, holds us, cajoles us, sometimes coddles us, but always keeps us on track. It is the topic that remains central, that both nourishes us and is nourished by us.

*Professors' Voice*

In this particular class, the topic was interpretation. This spring course afforded the rare luxury of teaching together, taking up the topic of interpretation in a truly Gadamerian sense, bringing it to light through dialogue between professors, stumbling together towards eventful conversational openings with each other and with students in the class. As the course professors who developed and taught the course, we (Tapp & Moules) felt an obligation to remain true to the topic in such a way that the course could live out the topic well. When one commits to remaining true to something, however, selves are changed; one cannot be true to something without looking inside, and being ever vigilant of where our gaze lands outside.

In a class that bears this topic of interpretation, lives show up. A student talks about her husband being diagnosed with a kidney tumor where there is a 90% chance of cancer; another student finally reveals the recent loss of a sister to cancer; another student speaks of a lingering story of being present when a man found a way to talk into his final hours; a student talks about having conversations about death with dying children; another about being watchful and weightless living alongside an eating disorder; and yet another about having conversations with brain injured adults. Another student spoke of the delicacy of conversation with the offended and offending in sexual violence.

One cannot be a participant in such conversations without being changed in the way that the next word is approached. As teachers, we may not necessarily be changed in terms of our ideas, beliefs, or ideals around teaching, or what they should look like, but we are changed in the next word, and our regard of what was last spoken is inevitably changed. Some of this requires a careful sense of movement, of somehow knowing when to stay with the word in the room and when to move onto the next, when to stay in the moment, be present to the particulars at hand, and when to raise it to another level of interpretation, all in the service of remaining true to both the topic and the process of living it out well.

What happens as co-teachers in the recognition of these moments of staying and moments of moving? Between us, as co-teachers, colleagues, friends, and hermeneutic scholars, there was something that occurred in shared glances that signaled moments when we knew something happened. This silent communication seemed to be that of asking "how

do we move with them beyond the moment of the particular, to have this shape into something that falls into the topic at hand, which is not always the topic of the particular but the topic of the class?" In this glance in the moment, there are many conversations that occur – a different level of dialogue that lives and breathes, separate yet connected to the one at hand. There is a knowingness that someone in the class has taken up something that we think is significant, or that someone has taken up something in such a way that it is reshaping our thinking of what is significant. Here, in these rare and cherished moments of teaching and learning, a moment of leverage is noticed. This moment could so easily be stifled by rhetoric, by applause, or by an inadvertent attention to it by inviting others to tell their stories rather than a punctuation of that story, in that moment. In these moments, hermeneutics arrives.

There was so much that showed up in this class that beckoned our gaze and attention; all held potential. There were things that we sidestepped deliberately, the way that Gadamer (1989) described tact, noticing them, but choosing in that moment to step aside. Why? – because a choice is made in the moment that those ideas might not move us toward something, but away from something. They might be interesting, engaging, or compelling, but they move us away from the topic to particulars, rather than allowing particulars to lead us into the topic.

In the occasional glance between teachers, there was a recognition shared that something anew had shown up and a recognition of this something as an opening. It did not necessarily need to be a new idea but something that could serve as a portal to take us someplace important in the learning. We had faith that it could be a portal to understanding. In the middle of the glance, we knew, with an almost paradoxical certainty, that something had, in the midst of uncertainty, shown itself as a thing that was begging to be mined, excavated, something that was clearing space for the arrival of the topic.

In this regard, we may have been technicians. There was always a conscious consideration of clearing the debris, recognizing the timing of something arriving, knowing the importance of timing, knowing that something cannot arrive before the space has been cleared for it. As an example, we believed as teachers that to clear the space for the present to arrive, we needed to unearth the history of hermeneutics, to speak to the tradition, to invite the ancestors into the room.

We also recognized that something cannot un-arrive once it has arrived. Once we greeted the arrival we knew we had to embrace it. It is difficult to talk with children about their dying or to hear that someone's husband may have a cancer that could take his life. These topics cannot be closed, finished, ignored, or sidestepped. They have arrived to stay but it is what we do with them that take them back to the topic. Constant angst and constant ethics of being a good teacher are about having the wisdom to know how to navigate these stories and arrivals, with timeliness, tactfulness, and discretion.

There was also timing about knowing that enough space had been cleared to send students away to write interpretively, for us to join them in this endeavor, which, by the very nature of interpretive writing, we knew would also offer another portal – one into our own experiences. For all, this was humbling and no less scary for students than professors. In returning together, and reading our work aloud for all to hear, there was a turn that jostled interpretation right into the middle of the room. There was a shift in the class as each of us became more visible, more present, each joining in the rubric and fabric of the way that the course would proceed.

Course professors set out a course outline. Embedded in it, is a hope of where the course will go. This embedded hope is subsumed under objectives and outcomes, required by the academy, but what can never be fully accounted for is the way that the participants, including the teachers, will humanize these objective means. One cannot teach this kind of course with a primary or sole commitment to only the structure. The nature of this kind of course calls forth a loyalty and faith in the process, and a willingness to meet the students in the process, to live it out well and responsibly, to be willing to meet the topics that come to greet us. There is a breathlessness in the moment of recognizing it coming or arriving, seeing *it* as something that matters, as something full of possibility for showing us the topic, and knowing that the moment must be seized as a way in, despite the complexity and difficulty, tenderness and frailty of what it is that has just arrived.

What arrived? One thing that arrived was stories. We, however, use the word with some caution, for as much as the term has become a vanguard in qualitative tradition, we are reminded that it is not just a story to the people in the midst of difficult experiences. Story has the implications of being contrived, without substance, a weaving of myth, fiction, and inheritance (the receiving and passing on of the story). All of these things are true of stories, and make them rich, but it cannot be

the richness of these inheritances that alone sustains something of experience. What sustains experience, what holds it up to be true in the instance of arrival, is an immediacy that is belied by history, inheritance, and retelling. What arrived in these moments, in this class, was not something that had been constructed over time, voiced by many other participants, but something that stuck in the hearts of the students and the teachers. Sometimes, a retelling buffers and buoys, and allows distance from a story. This did not happen in the class. Instead, there was a poignancy of immediacy in this class that was not buoyed by a retelling, in the ways that, over time, we construct the stories that hold us up. We lived as though in the first telling of the story.

We all wondered about what happened in the reading and hearing of each story, and the particular reading of the interpretations. In the next class, we invited the group into a dialogue, wondering: "Something special happened in that class and how might we understand it?" What magic or not-magic, contributed to a sense of something at play in what had happened? One could offer the idea that Hermes, as a central character in our whole topic, was boisterously at play there in the middle, mischievousness abound. Hermes entered, as the trickster he is:

The story of Hermes, like his character, is filled with complication and multiplicity. In the paradox that so often holds Greek truth, the messenger god is a trickster. He lies, he jokes, he speaks by indirection as often as he speaks clearly. Tricksters spill with the energy of creation, and true to the form, Hermes loves sex: when the other gods retreat in horror at the sight of Aphrodite trapped aloft in a net with her lover Ares, Hermes only desires her more. Like language, like unsocialized sexuality, he can travel between realms freely – what he wants, he goes after. The paradox that so often holds Greek truth, the messenger god is a trickster. He lies, he jokes, he speaks by indirection as often as he speaks clearly. And it is in his playfulness, irreverence, and disdain for the rules, that his capacities for seeing things new, for invention, also reside...The power of Hermes is that of change. (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 186)

We can assign many interpretations to what happened: the combination of students; professors who like to work together, trust each other; a willingness to play off each other – playful, but fully cognizant of the ethical and generative nature of play. Students commented that they were taken by the way that we recognized something in their writing, in their comments, taking it somewhere else that they had not recognized for themselves, even in their own writing and dialogue. This recognition

that occurs in interpretive work is the very extension beyond what was originally intended. As professors, how were we able to do this? A big piece of this lies in our faith that no interpretation is about rightness or truth; every interpretation brings something to light that was not brought into play before. Those things brought to light will always be shown, like a good gem, differently in a different light.

In this class, in the middle of this topic, we experienced the arrival of an event of something, a community of people who accidentally, serendipitously, perhaps strategically found their way onto the same road of experience. Do these events happen because of our will, against our will, in spite of our will? Do they happen because of skillfulness of the teachers or students, or is it about the encounter in the teaching? We argue for all of the above, with one caveat: that even with the most well thought-out course outline, the most directed and experienced professor, the most open and intelligent student, that the outcome of our teaching cannot be predicted. We argue that, even with all of those, a different ethos with a different group would have evolved. Therefore, we suggest that it is here, in the complexity and evolution of *this* class that, with humility and curiosity, we situate these questions: What happened? Can we recreate it, and if so, how do we do it? Can you ever redo the “first kiss?” We have come to the belief that it cannot be recreated; it can never be the same, but what needs to happen is a willingness to be open to a new event, to the newness of what might arrive in another moment, and an openness to stand again in awe of the newness of the next arrival. It requires a willingness to stand against our own experience of things having gone well in the past and look beyond it, ready to meet something else, knowing always that the last arrival will shape the one to come, just as the one that comes re-shapes the last.

We are different. We are shaped by the last arrival. In this course, we had an experience of synergy, intensity, wonder, respect, and awe. Robert Frost (1942) wrote, “We dance around in a ring and suppose; But it’s the secret that sits in the middle and knows.” We wonder if the secret in our middle is the topic of interpretation and all of our willingness to let it live.

### *Discussion*

The writing of this paper came about, not because it emerged from our writing in class, or because we doggedly continued to write out of a sense of obligation, but because the unwritten paper lingered, it still called to us a year after the class had ended. It was important for us to try to

capture both the students' perceptions of their learning, as well as the professors' perceptions of the interplay between their teaching and the students' interpretive writing, followed by feedback from both student and professor. There was a synergy that occurred between the professors as co-teachers as well as a synergy between the teaching and the learning taken up visibly by the students in their interpretive writing and learning that emerged.

In a similar way, the writing of this paper occurred, in which the student group wrote independently of the professors. The professors wrote about their teaching experience, which picked up the thread begun by the students; where one group ended the other had already begun. The synergy of the manuscript writing seemed to mirror the synergy experienced a year earlier in the classroom.

What called to us, to reach farther than we had reached before? The prescribed route – course outline, objectives, and evaluative assignments – may have taken us to a designated, secure result. For students and professors alike, risking the next step, venturing further into the fray of untried thoughts, brought about another horizon beyond our own separate views. *What has made the greatest difference in your learning throughout this course?* Learning, perhaps, is a mystery that needs continuous, further exploration, further musing. As often happens with profound questions, we find that there is no single answer to this one. We live in the in-between: within the complexity of relationships in teaching and learning, within recognition of play, and within the promise and difficulty, love and tragedy of writing. We have, however, clearly found that when learning occurs, it is to be celebrated.

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