

CAVEAT LECTOR...

The illusion of understanding

‘You cannot help dealing with the limited information you have as if it were all there is to know. You build the best possible story from the information available to you, and if it is a good story, you believe it...Our comforting conviction that the world makes sense rests on a secure foundation: our almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance’

(p 201)

The illusion of validity

‘The story was always the same: our ability to predict performance [of leadership candidates] at the school was negligible. Our forecasts were better than blind guesses, but not by much...The dismal truth about the quality of our predictions had no effect whatsoever on how we evaluated candidates and very little effect on the confidence we felt in our judgements.’

(p 211)

Kahneman, D. 2011. *Thinking, fast and slow*. London: Allen Lane.

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I would like to celebrate the completion of this thesis by acknowledging the help and support of the many people who have, during its very long gestation period, had an influence on my development as a person and scholar-practitioner, as well as on this particular piece of research.

Of course a work like this, based on a lifetime of experience, has many contributors. Bahktin coined the term ‘ventriloquation’ to describe this process where I speak through the voices of others that exist around me in various communities: all my talk is ‘filled with others’ words...[which over time I]...assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate’ (Bahktin, 1986, p 89). Often it’s difficult to identify and distil where these ‘voices’ or influences have come from - in a dialogically structured world, most ideas have many ‘fingerprints’ on them, and loosely paraphrasing Foucault, we often don’t know what what we did, has done (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p 187). The academic voices that have influenced me will be identified more clearly in due course in the body of this thesis but, here on this page, I’d like to try to acknowledge some of the voices of others who, while not sharing any direct responsibility for this work, have influenced, supported, and nudged me along the very interesting road I’ve been travelling along for over thirty years.

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ABSTRACT

Revealing what is ‘tacit/rationally-*invisible*/in the background’: an online coaching pedagogy for developing improved leadership practice through ‘presencing empathetic responsiveness’

This thesis reports on a self study into educational learning, energized and guided by the question ‘*how do I improve my practice?*’⁽ⁱ⁾, as I coach mature students on a distance learning Masters in Leadership Studies at Exeter University.

My ‘living’ educational inquiry⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ captures and articulates the development of online pedagogic practices which stimulate a ‘virtual’ culture of inquiry. These regular ‘dialogically structured’⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ web-based interactions help students successfully negotiate learning barriers posed by the online medium, allowing them to notice and exploit the variety of opportunities for learning and development available in their everyday lives, and the many different forms of knowing embedded in these. Through developing richer epistemologies and more resourceful ontologies, students increase their receptiveness and responsiveness to challenges in the situations they study and work in.

Through detailed analysis of textual and audio-visual data, I offer glimpses of such learning and development, and the coaching associated with this, in *fleeting moments* of educational influencing which spark ‘primitive reactions’, in *development episodes* where ‘indwelling’^(iv) transforms these into new ‘language-games’, and in *reflexive biographies* which trace the longer term development of new ontological skills involved in ‘knowing how to go on’^(v).

At the heart of the online coaching pedagogy is an original ‘inclusional’^(vi) coaching process I call *presencing*^(vii) *empathetic responsiveness* which I use to encourage students to contextualise and presence their learning under conditions of epistemological and ontological uncertainty. This ‘ontological’ form of coaching enables students to become agents in the production of their own lives despite the masking and insidious effects of disciplinary power^(viii), so they can learn to contribute effectively in a world characterized by ‘supercomplexity’^(ix).

The originality of the thesis lies in the synthesis of and creative linking between the development of this situated learning, the methodological inventiveness^(x) of the pedagogy, key ideas on communication and learning from the literature, and the embodied values that have enabled me to become a better educator.

i I use two meanings of the word ‘practice’: the first is the generally accepted meaning used to describe what an individual habitually *does*; the second meaning looks beyond the individual to the complex of interactions in a specific place and time in which she/he and others are embedded and responsively involved in. The meaning I’m using will generally be evident from the immediate context of the surrounding text.

ii The question ‘how do I improve my practice?’ and the term ‘living’ educational inquiry come from the version of action research developed by Whitehead (Whitehead, 2009)

iii ‘dialogically structured’ is a term used by Shotter and refers to Bahktin’s idea that ‘every utterance must be regarded as primarily a *response* to preceding utterances’ (Bahktin in Shotter, 2008, p 51)

- iv Polanyi's 'from-to' model of tacit knowing uses the term 'dwelling in the subsidiaries' to describe what happens as one moves *from* 'tacit' *to* 'focal' awareness (Polanyi, 1983)
- v The terms 'primitive reaction', 'language-game', and 'knowing how to go on' come from Wittgenstein's ideas in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1958)
- vi The term 'inclusional' comes from Rayner's work on 'natural inclusion/inclusionality' as are the earlier terms 'receptiveness' and 'responsiveness' (Rayner, 2010)
- vii This is a term coined by Scharmer (2005) combining the words 'present' and 'sense' to convey the action of bringing into present reality a vision/idea from the future.
- viii This idea from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* refers to the subjugating effects on what people feel they can and cannot say, of exclusionary practices in mainstream discourse (Foucault, 1977)
- ix The term 'supercomplexity' refers to Barnett's idea that knowledge in the modern university is contested and uncertain, and that teaching/learning for operating effectively in the modern world, should accordingly take place under conditions of 'epistemological and ontological uncertainty' (Barnett, 2000)
- x This is a term used by Dadds and Hart to describe how developing the right form of methodology for a piece of research can become as important a source of motivation as the research topic itself (Dadds and Hart, 2001)

**Revealing what is ‘tacit/rationally-*invisible*/in
the background’: an online coaching pedagogy for
developing improved leadership practice through
‘presencing empathetic responsiveness’**

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