

Peter Mellett has recently (01/10/20) provided a clear outline of his understanding of educational conversations for a symposium proposal for the 2020 Collaborative Action Research Network Conference:

Positioning contribution from Peter Mellett

I am hoping that the title of this conference – *Raised Voices* – refers to the agency of 'good-quality conversations' to generate new knowledge and understanding. My understanding of this term is based on insights that I have gathered over a number of years from a number of different sources. These insights fit together, as follows, to form what might be termed the 'rules of engagement' that set up the behavioural parameters for engendering good-quality educational conversations.

1. Dialogue and dialectic

In her review of Gadamer's contribution to modern hermeneutics, Georgia Warnke (1987) discerns a move from 'objectivity' to 'intentions' as the agent for understanding.

“... its attempt [*Truth and Method*] to resuscitate a dialogic conception of knowledge. ... reflects ... a change from a focus on the possible truth of a text to a focus on method; from the consideration of the validity of a text to a preoccupation with procedures for understanding an author's intentions.” (p. 4)

While Gadamer frequently refers to "texts" there is a clear emphasis on dialogue and dialectics, as discussed by P. Christopher Smith in his introduction to eight essays on Plato by Gadamer (1980).

"In live discussion ... we do not proceed *more geometrico*; instead, we move back and forth, often illogically, from one aspect of the thing to another within a given context or situation which defines the limits of what we say to each other. And the success of such a live discussion is not at all to be measured by its logical rigor but by its effectiveness in bringing the essence of the subject matter to light to the extent that the limited conditions of any discussion permit." (pp. ix–x)

"As opposed to methodical deduction, in discussion the question as such prevails over the answer. Good discussions are provocations to think further ... language is not a tool we use but something which precedes us and whose play we submit to." (p. x)

The emphasis on questions within discussion was earlier put forward by R. G. Collingwood (1934, 1991), who called this relationship "the logic of question and answer". He wrote:

“... you cannot find out what a man [*sic*] means by simply studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning, you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind and presumed to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.” (p.31)

Thirty years later, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 1989) reviewed Collingwood's ideas and took essentially the same point of view:

“... the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, i.e. it necessarily goes beyond what is said in it.” (p.333)

Gadamer also discusses the 'rules of engagement' for conducting dialogue in a dialectical manner that leads to the strengthening of insights into a matter of joint interest. It is worth quoting at length:

“...To conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross purposes. Hence it necessarily has the structure of question and answer. The first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us. ... To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented. It requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion. Hence it is an art of testing. But the art of testing is the art of questioning. For we have seen that to question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all the possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the 'art' of questioning is a person who can prevent questions being suppressed by the dominant opinion. A person who possess this art will himself search for everything in favour of an opinion. Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but in the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter).

“The unique and continuing relevance of the Platonic dialogues is due to this art of strengthening, for in this process what is said is continually transformed into the uttermost possibilities of its rightness and truth, and overcomes all opposition that tries to limit its validity. Here again it is not simply a matter of leaving the subject undecided. Someone who wants to know something cannot just leave it a matter of mere opinion, which is to say that he cannot hold himself aloof from the opinions that are in question. The speaker is put to the question until the truth of what is under discussion finally emerges. The maieutic¹ productivity of the Socratic dialogue, the art of using words as a midwife, is certainly directed towards the people who are the partners in the dialogue, but it is concerned merely with the opinions they express, the immanent logic of the subject matter that is unfolded in the dialogue. What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the persons leading the conversation knows that he does not know.

“As the art of conducting a conversation, dialectic is also the art of seeing things in the unity of an aspect ... i.e. it is the art of forming concepts through working out the common meaning. What characterises a dialogue, in contrast with the rigid form of statements that demand to be set down in writing, is precisely this: that in dialogue, spoken language – in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other's point – performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. Hence, it is more than a metaphor; it is a memory of what originally was the case, to describe the task

¹ Of or denoting the Socratic mode of enquiry which aims to bring a person's latent ideas into clear consciousness – from Greek ... *maieuesthai* 'act as a midwife'. Concise OED (1911, 2004) Oxford, OUP.

of hermeneutics as entering into dialogue with the text. That this interpretation is performed by spoken language does not mean that it is transposed into a foreign medium; rather, being transformed into spoken language represents the restoration of the original communication of meaning. When it is interpreted, written tradition is brought back out of the alienation in which it finds itself and into the living presentation of conversation, which is always fundamentally realised in question and answer.”
(pp. 367–8)

2. Validity

Issues of validity are central to the legitimation of claims to educational knowledge. Habermas' (1976) commentary on validity within "speech acts" encompasses issues of comprehensibility, truth, rightness and authenticity in reaching an understanding with another. The speaker must:

- choose a comprehensible expression
- have the intention of communicating a true proposition
- choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background
- want to express his or her intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe and trust the speaker; (pp. 2–3).

I understand these four issues as having a close association with the dialectical approach to creating new knowledge described by Gadamer (*ibid.*) and the question-and-answer structure within conversation of Collingwood (*ibid.*).

3. The 'Respectful Editor'

I use this term to describe the manner in which two people engage in the sort of ideal dialectical exchange described above. Each of the participants comes to the conversation with their own unique autobiography – which is the story each tells themselves about themselves – and writes the latest section of their respective personal stories through their *educational* encounter with each other. Each new insight generated within the conversation has to be assessed and edited into the existing and evolving stories, as the educational outcome sought from any educational enquiry.

How do they incorporate each other's evolving story into their own as the conversation proceeds? How does each act as a 'respectful editor' within this dynamic relationship and help the *other* to write his or her latest story?

I identified the notion of the 'respectful editor' in 2000, when writing for the [BERA Review](#) under the title *Educational Action Research within Teaching as a Research-based Profession*. Although the focus of that text was on educational research in the formal sense, I now maintain that there are aspects of all human interaction that take the form of educational research, whether research projects as such, or as the question-and-answer relationships between humans engaged in the exchange of written texts or engaged in face-to-face conversation. Thus, although the *BERA Review* article referred to educational research, they may be read as having significance for the interaction between people, as follows.

In the context of formal educational research, Robert Donmoyer (1996) speaks of 'gate keeping' as a major role of an editor of an educational journal. He describes the two approaches to gate keeping that I would now refer to as elucidating the 'rules of

engagement' implicit in the style of all human encounter. Donmeyer begins by identifying two postures commonly adopted by gatekeepers: the 'Traditional Response' (we talk sense; 'they' talk rubbish) and the 'Balkanization Response' (leave 'them' to get on with their business while we get on with ours). In these cases, there is no dialogue and no understanding, particularly between those who wish to maintain a position of power within a relationship.

Donmoyer then describes a third way, quoting from the conclusions that Richard Bernstein (1993) suggests should be drawn from the debates about incommensurability:

“ ... to listen carefully, to use ... linguistic, emotional, and cognitive imagination to grasp what is being expressed and said in 'alien' traditions ... [without] either facilely assimilating what others are saying to our own categories and language ... or dismissing ... [it] as incoherent nonsense.” (p. 22)

My attention then turned to Pam Lomax (1999) who introduced the notion of 'respect':

“Respect for evidence is the corner stone of evidence-based professionalism, but evidence does not necessarily imply an absolutist position. ... In the past, there has been a tendency to accept scientific evidence which appeals to rational criteria rather than other evidence that might appeal to moral, spiritual, political, aesthetic, emotional or affective criteria, or to the practical criteria that practitioners might employ. ... the most challenging aspect of a new evidence-based professionalism based on a value of respect for the integrity of our acts. ... A new discipline of educational enquiry.” (p.13)

Pam Lomax's contention is that respect is the cornerstone of evidence-based professionalism – for me, it is also the cornerstone of a good-quality conversation, which, in its ideal state of dialectical question-and-answer, constitutes an educational enquiry.