

Learning together

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In early November I spent a wonderful three days in the Centre for Learning and Teaching. The highlights of my visit were my conversations with colleagues, a cross-disciplinary seminar on post-graduate supervision and a full-day symposium on innovation in teaching and learning. Throughout, I was on a steep learning curve and gained so much from colleagues within AUC. I am very grateful for the hospitality and for the opportunity to share ideas. I was also given a tour of your splendid Rare Books Library, its exhibitions and its archive. The latter is a hugely important resource beautifully curated by its staff. Thank you all very much. The following is a brief summary of the talk I gave at the symposium.

Almost all the problems we now face are collective problems: bigger-than-self-problems that require both collective and global understanding: global warming; decent trade regulations; the protection of the environment and animal species; the future of nuclear energy and the dangers of nuclear weapons; the movement of labour and the establishment of decent labour standards; the protection of children from trafficking, sexual abuse, and forced labour. Such problems can only truly be addressed through multilateral discussions.

Globalisation, in other words, presents us not only with economic, political and social challenges, but with a huge hermeneutical challenge: a challenge, that is, to our understanding. How, in a world of seemingly incommensurable difference, are we to engage in conversations that are both constitutive of, and conditional upon, shared understanding?

That was the kind of question that the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer was seeking to address. Gadamer's life spanned the long 20th century. Born in 1900 he lived till 2004, thereby surviving WWI, the rise of Nazism, WWII and the Cold War. His 1960 magnum opus – *Truth and Method* – reshaped the way in which we conceive of understanding and established hermeneutics as a major philosophical field.

Three big but beautifully simple ideas shaped his thinking: the idea of 'the fusion of horizons' - how understanding always entails an element of mutuality and reciprocity; the notion of what he calls 'the power of prejudice' - how we import ourselves into any attempt at understanding; and the idea that understanding is always 'beyond method' - that it involves what he called 'the hermeneutical imagination'.

Threading through these ideas is his insistence on what he calls 'the primacy of the question': an emphasis that takes us beyond 'the Socratic method' as a pedagogical tool and towards a theory of learning that places 'the learner as questioner' at the heart of the educational project. Understanding, he argues, lies in the formulation and articulation of the question.

What would higher education look like if it were framed on Gadamerian principles?

- it would place the student as questioner at the heart of the educative process;
- it would privilege dialogue and interchange;
- it would insist on the provisionality of understanding and the importance of acknowledging what falls outside the parameters of our existing understanding;
- it would highlight the indeterminacy of the outcomes of understanding.

So, let's unpack those four themes and open them up for discussion:

The primacy of the question ...

If to understand something is, as Gadamer suggests, to articulate the questions it asks of us, then we require pedagogies that recognise students as questioning agents: pedagogies that enable students to grasp for themselves the unique 'questionableness of something' (Gadamer's phrase). We then need to ask whether even our more progressive pedagogies measure up to the task: Who asks the questions? Whose questions matter? Are 'open' questions valued as highly as 'closed' questions? How, through our own questioning, can we encourage students to become their own questioners? When – if at all – do we acknowledge our students' ability to ask questions rather than answer them?

The centrality of dialogue ...

If, as Gadamer again suggests, understanding is a conversational process – not just metaphorically but in practice – then we require pedagogies that encourage and acknowledge reciprocity and mutuality, listening and recognition, and the willingness to maintain openness rather than closure. We need pedagogies that enable students to think together in dialogue. That then poses further questions: To what extent do we encourage students to think together and to share their insights and understandings? How do we recognise and acknowledge this dialogical element within our assessment regimes? When – if at all – do we model ways of thinking together in our own teaching?

The principle of provisionality ...

If, following Gadamer's lead, we see understanding as framed by ever-shifting and ever-stretching horizons, then we require pedagogies that acknowledge both the provisionality and boundlessness of human understanding: pedagogies for understanding-not-yet-finished. Questions that go to the heart of what we mean by 'lifelong learning' then follow: How do we enable students to acknowledge the provisionality – and uncertainty – of human understanding while also discovering purposeful trajectories and imaginaries? What dispositions and qualities are required of them and of us? When – if at all – do we address the ontological insecurities that are inherent in the very notion of 'understanding-not-yet-finished'?

The indeterminacy of outcome ...

Finally, if understanding cannot be reduced to method but always involves an element of what Gadamer calls 'hermeneutical imagination', then we require pedagogies that acknowledge intuition and inference, celebrate the surprising and the unexpected, and encourage speculation and risk-taking. We need pedagogies that operate outside the managerial frame of pre-specified outcomes and identifiable targets. Among the questions that then arise are: Would we recognise a significant but unexpected learning outcome if it occurred? Do such outcomes figure in our assessment routines and audit procedures? When – if at all – do we value and acknowledge the surprising and unexpected when it occurs within our tutorials, seminar rooms and lecture halls?

Such questions point towards a pedagogy that is both innovative and grounded in a notion of understanding as shared endeavour: a way of meeting across disciplines and across cultural and religious divides.

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