

'TEACHING' PHENOMENOLOGY- THE HAPPENING OF UNDERSTANDING

PATRICIA SHAW

I remember as an undergraduate of Physics at Imperial College, that one of our lecturers in quantum theory said – “If you think you had no trouble understanding what I have just said, probably



you have not understood it at all.” The same conundrum faces anyone hoping to arouse appreciation amongst students of all that is revolutionary about phenomenology as a way of seeing, a way of experiencing and exploring the life-world.

During the session I will describe we wanted to explore the phenomenon of meaning, the acts of saying, writing, reading and the event of understanding. A satisfying, successful session here means that ‘something’ must happen, and happen again, during the session, experienced in the same but differing ways, maybe at different moments, for all participating. Not only must this happen, but the fleeting happening must be noticed by us, so that the knowledge of that noticing remains as a vivid reminder even when the moment of experience has passed. What kind of ‘something’ is this? And how do we notice ‘it’? What happens when we do? I hope this account reveals the kind of exciting joint adventure that is this tantalisingly elusive educational activity; the kind of care and attention such ensemble work amongst teachers/learners demands.

First practice: thinking aloud together - articulating our understanding

It’s Monday morning. A weekend of diverse activities has transpired between the sessions of the first week and our continuing today. So there is something obvious we can do – recap what we have learned so far. Ordinary though this may sound it offers an opportunity for

significant practice – that of saying aloud what we sense we have begun to understand, of giving shape in spoken words to what may be only vague glimpses.

To heighten this as a practice, to cultivate and hone faculties and sensibilities we will need to develop throughout the year and beyond, we work with two constraints: 1) we close our eyes and 2) people offer short contributions in no pre-assigned order, as they feel so inclined.

These constraints disturb the habitual reliance on visual cues and heighten awareness of the acts of speaking/listening as the soundings and reverberations of voices in bodies. We may thus become more sensitive to shifts of tone, to pauses in which speaking lies fallow but experience continues, to resonances stirring in us, sometimes urging us to speak out, an urge which we may allow or contain. Thus a very ordinary activity, that of reviewing before continuing, becomes one in which we face together a darkened openness, a fertile void in which forming happens, as contributions begin to weave a rich tapestry of related ‘sayings’. The possibility of finding ourselves speaking may occur at any moment and what we find ourselves saying may be more or less surprising to us.

In making this invitation it is necessary to listen to the shifting qualities of response in the room, and to say no more once there is the sense of the space of uncertainty and anticipation indeed opening, palpably appearing between us. Then we wait for the first act of speaking to arise, to break the silence.

When they come the first voices are low, hesitant, there are long pauses but slowly contributions gather confidence and spontaneity as people become easier with listening to each other and themselves, become more able to take up the freedom of venturing forth in unrehearsed speech. Certain motifs return, like nodes from which strands of

thought branch out again. What is said later resonates with what is said earlier so that both are coloured by each other. There is nothing linear about the unfurling conversation; we can recognise many experiences of the last week coming into relation - talks in the classroom, experiences by and in the river, Goethean studies with a tree, something read, or remembered or seen. People find that this interweaving creates a context which relieves them of the need for long preambles to their own contribution. Each person's saying arrives amid a lingering, ever more complex background which provides undertones, contrasts and fresh associations.

I will not reproduce the content of what was said in those 40 minutes as the sense and value of this can only be fully appreciated from within the experience of developing it together. Take this exchange, for example which brought the practice to an end:

** Every time we pop our heads above the river the current stops.*

** Does it?*

Gurgles of satisfied amusement roll around the room.

Like an in-joke it tickles only those who have participated.

The phenomenon of unfinished meaning.

Having experienced this practice together we could reflect upon it and begin to unpick the way we conventionally explain what goes on between speakers and listeners, writers and readers and see how careless this explanation is – how far it is from our actual experience.

We say that speakers or writers have a thought in mind, have something they wish to say or write, which they then put into words. This assumes that this thought must have an existence independently of anyone wanting to listen or read or understand. The second assumption we make is that the meaning of this thought must be stable and unchanging. The thought exists before a person expresses it, well or not so well. Then someone else receives the words and decodes it in their

minds to reproduce the thought the speaker or author intended. These presuppositions, so prevalent in our culture, lend themselves to many technical metaphors - senders transmitting messages, 'noisiness' in the transmission, 'filters' in the minds of receivers. We have industries of message crafting, corporate communication and training in presentation skills – how to get your message across. And we begin to worry over the possibility that no-one could ever be sure to understand what is 'inside' the head of another, and that there is no way of judging which of many received interpretations is correct – the kind of philosophical despair of being enclosed in subjective worlds of experience isolated from one another.

And yet if we stop to ask ourselves, we know that we have profound experiences of being or not being understood, of understanding others, of shared understanding. The phenomenon of shared meaningfulness is a very important experience, it nourishes us, is food for us humans, without which we shrivel.

And now we realise that meaning is not just a 'what'. The moment of meaning is understanding happening.

An instance: We are talking together, struggling to 'get' something. Suddenly someone speaks and people respond – YES, that's it. Say it again. To everyone's chagrin, the speaker is unable to do this apparently simple task. No-one quite has it anymore. We've lost it again. Meaning happened in the saying itself at that moment in those circumstances. It does not reside in the words spoken after the fact. We can try and go back and capture the form the event had. But even if we could and we listened again, already new or further meaning reveals itself. Henri Bortoft calls this - catching saying in the act. The act of what? Of meaning appearing in the living moment of understanding. Always unfinished. Always potentially more. Always for another first time.

And then we realise that our human world is littered with all those finished, after the fact 'whats' of saying, separated from their appearing, like literal litter proliferating on our planet, dead until picked up and re-entering the living moment. And immediately we recognise what makes poetry so special—honed kind of sayings that are like buried seeds which sprout meaningfully each time they are watered by an attentive listener/reader.

And someone says: *"So that's why Wittgenstein said that all philosophy should be written poetically."*

And another: *"and who said: the merely correct is not yet the true?"*

"Heidegger."

"And isn't that where we get presencing, the living phenomenon in its appearing?"

"Yes, we know when something rings true."

"So we are moving here from the conventional academic notion of validity in reproducibility to a consensual experience of ringing true. We are embodying a different notion of method and of ethical inquiry."

A voice tense with excitement: *"I have just written: The moment of meaning happening is a becoming for the one who understands. It's like extreme listening – YOU, the listener, are listened to in that moment!"*

"Like being with a plant – it coins its meaning into us and each of us picks up a different aspect of the plant. When that happens the text or the plant means into you. Not the authors intention – but the meaning of the work (the text, the plant)"

"My work is in forecasting trends. I like to write by hand and later I see a deeper meaning in the text – it reveals itself later."

"And I'm thinking how in my organisation we were always trying to create knowledge bases

– as though we could bank understanding and give people the access codes."

Second practice: reading aloud together – experiencing the event of understanding. So now we are ready for a further practice, another very simple activity of reading an article aloud together. There are layers, though, in this apparent simplicity. Firstly, the article is attempting to describe what is happening in the very activity we are engaged in – attending to the appearance of meaning. Secondly it is an edited transcript of Henri Bortoft (*Holistic Science Journal Vol2 Issue 2, pg 31-34*) speaking about his last book which he muses on how he has come to express and communicate an understanding of phenomenology. Thirdly, embedded in the text are various other authorial voices – Oliver Sacks, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Iain McGilchrist – who express the same understanding differently. And lastly in reading aloud by passing a single copy of the article around, each person reading a paragraph, we have the chance to notice whether or not understanding is happening as different voices bring the text to life, or are unable to.

The practice constraints are these: if meaning does not stir in you as you read the words aloud, notice, stop, go back and read again carefully. If meaning does not appear as you listen, notice, ask the reader to go back and read again. These are in fact very tight constraints. We become acutely aware of the difference between reading as just words strung together and the moment when understanding happens. This may sound a tedious business as indeed it takes a long time to read a short article this way, but the experience is far from tedious.

It can become electrifying, especially as the early concerns to 'perform well' give way to being intrigued by the phenomenon we are exploring. Readers, including those whose first language is not English, find themselves exploring the sounding of phrases and sentences, emphases, pauses, tone and breath and finding that a dense impenetrable piece of

text suddenly jumps shockingly to life, meaning appears like a miracle, physically affecting many people who sigh, exclaim –aah, mmm, YES! Sounds of relief and of pleasure reverberate.

To offer a flavour of what we were doing, here are a few early paragraphs from the Bortoft article. I have added textual emphases to approximate the experiments in saying.

“Description was for me a practical activity and very difficult. You think that when you describe something, you just look at what’s there and put it into words. But when you get to the level I am talking about you find it is NOT like that at all!.....because it isn’t there. (because IT isn’t there) (because it isn’t THERE) Actually it is not there until I describe it (Actually it is NOT THERE until I describe it.)”

“People say – that’s just a description ...we want an explanation! – but the mystery is in the description – that’s the remarkable thing. Once you have got a description you can invent explanations ten a penny.”

“In English you say you think about something, but this is not what you do. You think it, you do not think about it. You think distinction, you do not think about distinction.”

We took all of ten minutes on the following sentence:

“This is the fundamental phenomenological step – from what appears, to the appearing of what appears.”

(If you are unfamiliar with this sentence, you might try reading it aloud several times in different ways until the full import arrives in you. You really GET IT!)

We begin to appreciate that not getting it is valuable. It creates a space in which we experience a tension, the potential of not yet understanding. The sentence remains just words strung together, a what, littering the page, left stranded from its source, it’s appearing, which continues to tantalise. People offer each other clues. *“Try making a big pause here.” “Stress this syllable.”* And someone recognises: *“It’s like when we were working with visual perception and the duck/rabbit drawings, or the two vases/faces.*

People said look here is an ear, here a nose...Trying too hard gets in the way. Suddenly understanding happens, like seeing happens.”

Edmund Husserl: *‘The word phenomenon is ambivalent because a phenomenon is not only something which appears, but appears as appearing. There is the shock of appearing.’*

“It is really physical. I remember reading a book on a train and became so agitated with the meaning stirring in me, I had to get up and walk around.”

“Like with the chestnut tree. Oh that’s another leaf. But when I stop and I look and then I see it – it shows itself as leaf, it appears to you. It happens within you. It creates itself into you. It births in you. “

“Does that mean it is in the seer?”

“It is in the act of seeing, the act of distinguishing.”

“It’s a kind of reciprocal recognition – I also feel seen.”

“But then naming seems to shut a door in me.”

“Now I realise why I feel so uncomfortable with the DSM – the classification of mental diseases and their symptoms. I can see that the DSM is an arrangement of finished products of ‘seeing/understanding’. And I begin to glimpse what we mean by a holistic practitioner rather than one who matches DSM diagnosis to already complete patterns of symptoms.”

“The difference between a kind of explanation and the describing – the event of reciprocal recognition between patient and practitioner when there is that YES – that sense of meeting and being met.”

“Being habituated does a disservice to the world.”

“Yes we are moving from a technical, instrumental notion of scientific inquiry to a science of living meaning.”

“I am remembering those Portuguese adventurers sailing a boat to an island – the indigenous people could not see it. Until it was shown to their chief who saw it. When he could point it out then all could see it too. Potential was there but not for them until that moment.”

“This reminds me when my wife got pregnant I suddenly started seeing pregnant women

everywhere and seeing the beauty in it more and more. My world changed. I changed.”
“Can we see how the text we read together is proliferating into the resonances amongst us?”
Someone suddenly gets up and moves to the whiteboard. “I want to try and draw it: the space of appearing, the space where things appear.”
“When you are in the space of appearing you cannot describe it. Only afterwards. There is an event horizon. When our normal mode of articulation fails, one falls forward, one is committed to know something, but not till one emerges on the other side. We are beginning to talk physics.”

Someone else gets up: “I am spinning under your drawing. Drawing it, showing it, dancing it, singing it, math-ing it – all ways of saying!”

There is a burst of energy in the room, people speaking simultaneously “expressive arts....patterns of growth....spirals.....chiasma...presence...”

And then a long pause, a quiet flowers in the room. Then we read the last paragraphs:

Bortoft: “The happening of appearing, the appearing of what appears, is a manifestation of the thing itself. It actually is there. It is not a representation of it, it is direct because it is appearing. If it appears it must be the thing itself. That’s an astonishing thing.

This the great step forward of the 20th century and it has hardly been noticed.

Patricia Shaw has developed approaches to organisational leadership, learning and change that pay attention to the conversational life that emerges in everyday organisational relating and how we all participate in sustaining and potentially transforming the kind of possibilities the future may hold. She is a Fellow of Schumacher College, guest Professor at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark and a Visiting Professor at The Business School Hertfordshire University.



Things exist but may not have appeared. There is a depth in appearances and that depth is the appearing. Be-ing not an entity behind, which then appears. Be-ing is appearing. This is the dynamic depth of the coming into being. The word being is both noun and verb, but there is no two world ontology but nor is the world reduced to a flatland. The depth is the appearing itself, which is dynamic. The world is totally dynamic. It can’t be understood in any other way. This is remarkable.”

There are sounds like *WHOOOF* in the room, long out breaths.

“Can I say it in Chinese? At least, translated..”
“*The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao.*

The name that can be named is not the eternal name

The un-nameable is the eternally real

Naming is the origin of all particular things

Free from desire you realise the mystery

Caught in desire you see only the manifestations

Yet mystery and manifestation arise from the same source

This source is called darkness

Darkness within darkness - the gateway to all understanding.”

There is a very long vibrant pause.
And we all go for lunch.

