

"All is in flux. Perhaps this is the place at which to start" - Ludwig Wittgenstein



Moving, speaking, thinking, differently

A few months ago, someone close to our activities at Escola Schumacher Brazil asked a colleague and I this question: 'Are you happy with Escola Schumacher Brazil's activities? Is what you wanted actually happening?' This is such a common and obvious question, yet it was a question we couldn't answer because it was posed in a way that made no sense to us. Reflecting on this scene now, I believe it reveals a tendency to articulate experience as if it happened in a certain order: first the things we want to see happening exist in our minds as desired goals and then we enact them in experience and bring them into reality. But what if this isn't the way things happen at all? What if there is another order, less to do with having our enterprises as 'things' in plain view and more to do with the unfolding 'current of their formation'?

I have been trying to live into this question since studying the MSc in Holistic Science at Schumacher College during 2011/12; I have been immensely helped by being in conversation with many writers and practitioners such as Patricia Shaw, John Shotter, Shantena Sabbadini, Tim Ingold, Iain McGilchrist and Henri Bortoft. Here I want to explore some of their ideas in relation to my practical involvement in enabling 'something like' a Schumacher education to blossom in Brazil. To see how we could use this phenomenological approach to initiating and sustaining a small educational enterprise. I use Ingold's form is asking what does it mean to 'return to the currents of the formation of things'?

Another question I am asked a lot is 'was it your idea to bring Schumacher to Brazil?' and again this language feels very unfitting. In setting up Escola Schumacher Brazil I have found that the language available to account for the happening of an enterprise is not

appropriate if one is to do justice to how this really happens. I feel I have had to become more attentive to ways of giving voice to the non-linear patterns in which events take shape, a process as clumsy for me as learning a first language. For example, even saying "in setting up Escola Schumacher Brazil" I am already falsifying the movement by implying I have gone out to set something up as if there was such thing as 'something' prior, or even separate, to the action. It is as if action was a projection of a ready-made thought, existing inside the mind, into reality. This ignores what Ingold calls the 'relational constitution of being' in which subject and object, self and world, co-arise in living experience – a process which Henri Bortoft (2010) calls 'the appearing of what appears'.

"All is in flux," says Wittgenstein. But, we ask, where to start then? The difficulty is that, as Shotter (2008) reminds us, '*The retrospective stories we tell each other about our actions inevitably miss out reasons for why we nearly did something else at each step in the process,*' and thus gives a much more singular, one-sided notion of how something happened in contrast to what it felt like to move with it. The phrase 'taking Schumacher to Brazil' had existed in the conversations of many Brazilians who had been at Schumacher over the years – Brazilians being the first nationality with more Schumacher alumni other than the British.

The coming into being of Escola Schumacher Brazil

In 2013 people at the college began talking about 'Schumacher Worldwide' in an opening up to other potential forms of Schumacher elsewhere in the world. I was the postgraduate volunteer coordinator at the time, coming to the end of my second year living at the College, and I found myself together with Mari Turato who was studying for her MA in Economics for Transition, often in the midst of conversations

with others where the question of something 'Schumacher-like' in Brazil was very alive. These conversations created a lot of enthusiasm and at the same time a vague anxiety generated by attempts to direct what was beginning to happen— 'where are we going with this? What do we want to achieve? If we do this in Brazil then does this create a path that we can take elsewhere?' Many 'what if?' questions began to be asked and suddenly reality became hypothetical - happening in our minds before it actually unfolded in experience. This way of going about human initiatives means that the response to the spontaneous calls of the surroundings (in our case many Brazilians over the years getting in touch to express their interest in Schumacher) is overridden by the 'Cartesian anxiety' (Shotter, 2012, p.5): "*an inability to think partially while still in the midst of uncertainty*". Then action becomes a means to deliver pre-agreed products, and by detaching action from the risk that is immanent to it as we try to anticipate developments, potential is lost.

One afternoon Mari and I gathered with a few other Brazilians who happened to be at the College for a short course. One of them raised the need to decide whether we should translate material to Portuguese or would we have sessions in English; very quickly an education centre like Schumacher was being envisaged and questions raised about how it would run. Another alumnus asked us if he could contribute by doing market research for us in Brazil which would guide us to what courses should be offered, what length, what themes etc. This way of thinking about institutional activities very quickly showed itself exhausting. We had lost touch with our living reality and were fantasising about making things happen. Thinking about that scene now, this was a key moment for both Mari and I as we realized there was something not quite right in how we were approaching this move. Becoming more aware of and acknowledging this brought an immense sense of relief to the endeavour and yet, the question of how to go forward remained unanswered. But this, I want to emphasise, is the very point – such a question cannot be

answered in the abstract but only in the movement itself.

To stay with the uncertainty of that movement requires a different orientation, what Keats (1817) called 'negative capability'. This is not a mental process but is more like developing organs of perception as Goethe suggested happens when we thoroughly observe a growing plant. From this perspective, uncertainty is not 'not knowing' but knowing of a different kind, rooted in the ground of our lived experience and our ability to respond to its texture. It has much more to do with the immediacy of our sensory engagement with our everyday lives and the attention we pay to what is going on around us.

To simply move closer to what we felt was already happening meant at the time that Mari and I wrote to alumni in Brazil with a tentative invitation: would they join us for a weekend gathering or for a dinner in Sao Paulo? Many of them responded with willingness to do so and Mari and I worked on a budget with estimates for what it would cost to have Jon Rae, Head of College, and Patricia Shaw, Fellow of Schumacher, for 10 days in Sao Paolo. Rather than jumping ahead we were now 'inviting small possible steps by paying attention to our own sense of nextness'.

Having estimated the costs for these 10 days, it seemed that the only way this could be viable would be to present a project to potential funders in Brazil. But, of course a project usually sets out clear goals, expected outcomes and deliverables – how would we do this without falling again into the traps of projection? This felt very challenging! In a conversation with Patricia Shaw we grew the confidence to write the story so far of the spontaneous relationship between Schumacher and Brazil and the desire of many Brazilians for something to unfold in their country. We made explicit how the conventional way of asking for funds would be to promise returns and that we were not willing to do that. We found a sponsor who asked only to have a lunch and conversation with us during the 10 days that Jon Rae and Patricia Shaw were in Brazil.

One could argue that to find a sponsor not interested in the deliverables and goals is not something likely to happen – and that we were lucky. Maybe we were indeed, but we were only ‘lucky’ in the course of proceeding in an unusual way. Perhaps the tendency to compromise comes when we do not expect to be surprised by how other people may actually resonate with a different narrative. This route we were taking meant we were less attached to what we wanted to gain as a result than to a movement that felt right as we took it. Although wanting to achieve something is natural, to take seriously what ‘just’ happens is the difference of a phenomenological approach. Such an approach means that activities are always emerging through our relational involvement in the world from within the multiple interactions surrounding us, and our bodily responses to them. It is through this weaving that a form (this being a course, a programme, a partnership or whatever) is becoming itself although we may not be able to fully see its final shape as we move towards it. And it is through our involvement with the formation of ‘things’ that our very sense of purpose arises.

To work this way means staying fully ‘in touch with the developments of what happens when you do what you do.’ Writing this I find myself seeing the image of a potter with his/her hands on the clay literally giving shape to something through its formation. However, in the world of human action the challenge is that as we act there is nothing visible before our eyes like a ball of clay, and to move with it, *“We need to get inside the developing nature of the invisible but complex dynamical events that constitute the unique and distinctive ‘it’ characterizing the meetings in which we are involved” (Shotter, 2008).*

Those early 10 days in Brazil, during October 2013, involved many sorts of meetings with people: sharing meals with different alumni, visiting a farm owned by a couple who had visited the College at the time when conversations for this trip were happening, a weekend outside of Sao Paulo with 30 alumni, a dinner for 50 people at the vegetarian restaurant of an alumnus. These conversations were a mix of organising and being taken by surprise - some of these encounters were

intended and other encounters just happened. As I recall now, none of these conversations held a sense of ‘in order to’ as I have experienced with many so-called experiential methods, but they were like life, ordinary. Our openness did not come from an ‘open methodology’ but from an openness of spirit, a willingness to meet and take our experience seriously. It was in this attentiveness that the next steps would happen - in being fully in the present the potential ‘future’ arises.

A paradox of active receptivity

I would like here to look deeper into some of the detail. For example as people were confirming their participation on the weekend gathering, one email arrived from a woman wanting to know more details of what would happen during those two days we would spend together away from Sao Paulo: “what will the agenda be?” she asked. Mari and I felt stirred. We had not felt the need for an agenda for the weekend. We did know clearly what the two days would *not* consist of - not talks or lectures nor sessions to plan bringing Schumacher to Brazil. Rather we were concerned with encouraging conversations that would shape the movement of activity rather than the other way round.

The ‘Power of No’ was the title of a talk by Iain McGilchrist, in 2015, at Schumacher, proposing that every ‘yes’ is reached only on the far side of ‘no, not quite’. For him, the high appreciation given to ‘yes’ in our culture is ‘a cruel deception, a consequence of rigid, linear thinking’. By taking seriously the NO’s that arise in the midst of our movement we are able to hold space for something to emerge. This is not a passive waiting, as emergence, a term much used in the sciences of Complexity, which has often been misunderstood in the field of social sciences. Henri Bortoft describes this way of responsiveness as being ‘actively receptive’, saying that receptivity is a paradoxical state, more subtle or finer than being active or passive. Being open thus includes the bodily responses we sense in ourselves from within a situation. This means putting our discernment at the centre – a difficult task for the field of social sciences as it

makes it hard, if not impossible, to replicate action, as many methodologies set out to do. So how did we respond to that email asking for an agenda? We described how we imagined the contours of our experience: “during those two days we will cook together, clean together, sit to talk together, share meals together, walk together. We will be in a big group and in smaller groups”..... At the end of the weekend, in a final session – that very participant shared with the whole group how she had been anxious beforehand and had written to us wanting to know what would happen, and she realized after the 2 days how grateful she was that the space between us all had not been filled up by our suppositions of the topics that would have mattered to the group, but that these were able to fill the space spontaneously as they arose. In doing that, we all allowed conversations to fertilise the soil of what became possible instead of talking about a future, hypothetical Schumacher College in Brazil. This difference between allowing encounters to shape what comes next is radically different from gathering to decide on a shared future.

As I write about this openness of being agenda-free, I am aware I may be interpreted as ‘against agenda’ or ‘against plans’. This reflects the tendency we have to think in terms of polarities and not in movement, which is paradoxical for our thought. In the activities I have described, there is also planning but what matters is the attention to the experience in which the plans we make arise and change, emerge and dissolve.

In the same way that phenomenology can easily end up caught by ‘intellectual paraphernalia’, I have often seen ideas that point to a dynamism like complexity science for example, being encapsulated by the rigidity of the mind. New methods get developed in the social world: for speaking better, to connect groups to a dream and purpose, to host others better in an event, to name but a few. They all

hold the Cartesian assumption of ‘application’, i.e. that thought comes first and then practice follows. The unintended consequence seems to be that although we master ourselves at a certain prescribed flow, we become inept in sustaining a movement with others in between the events of the method - for whilst these have a beginning and an end, human action is indivisible and infinite.

The language-world we are familiar with is immensely fitting with the world of objects, leaving us stranded when it comes to this arising of form that both phenomenology and complexity reveals to us. We abstract life from its ongoing movement into static ‘counterfeit wholes’ (Bortoft, 2010) and before we know it, we have become the emissary of the objects of our own creation.

Rumi, the Sufi poet reminds us: “*Life, like a stream of water, is renewed and renewed, though it wears the appearance of continuity in form*”. The desire to continue collaborating with the farm we visited during those 10 days led to the first ‘Schumacher Experience Brazil’, a week organised ‘by Brazilians, for Brazilians in Brazil’. The intense cooperation generated the beginnings of a loose ‘faculty’ willing to help teach, organise, support and administer such activity. As interest developed we were able to offer an eight-months long ‘Schumacher Certificate Programme’, which was fully subscribed from the start. At present more than 100 students have joined courses and programmes through 2015 under the name of Escola Schumacher Brazil with the blessing of the Devon based College which is our source of inspiration.

References

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