

## “ARMS OUTSTRETCHED IN LOVE TOWARD THE FURTHER SHORE”: A CONVERSATION

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This dialogue is about epistemology and pedagogy. The two of us wrestle with ways to teach students how non-realist ways of knowing are radically different than realist knowing. Preservice teachers—and also those with years of classroom experience—may never consider how a knower knows that she knows. By default, teachers, like most of us, function as realists. But the historicist or evolutionary or pragmatic knowledge of Kant, Dewey, or Piaget, is a radically different conception of knowledge. Since making a problem of how we know that we know has evoked frustration in students of teaching since Meno replied to Socrates, we talked over tactics for leading students into the constructivist theory that underlies constructivist practices.

Professor Jardine works in the liberatory (or Rousseauian) tradition, so he attempts to help students see that a focus on mechanical efficiency is a problem for public schooling. I (Ted) try to help students see ways to embody Christian beliefs within educational practices. To give students a critical appropriation of any tradition, both of us try to turn the givens of present-day education into problems. We hope to inspire our students to realize that what seems immutable and necessary in education is not necessarily so.

I started the conversation. Most times, top-down theoretical approaches have failed to connect with my students' lived reality. Dewey observed long ago that abstractions provide a map—but what if the traveller thinks he already knows the

way? Seeing in David Jardine's writing a process of questioning and layer-peeling involving an old commonplace classroom item, I wrote to him about his alternative approach.

*Ted Newell, June 7, 2019, 7:29AM*

Professor Jardine, I'm teaching the foundations course for a small Christian university's Master of Education program. The course is organized on the subject-object split. We work through constructivisms from Kant to Vygotsky and Parker Palmer. Your book on Piaget includes an admirable description of Kant's epistemology, so I prescribe it when the class works through Piaget (Jardine, 2006). I'm writing to you on a hint from your book. You mention that the Canadian philosopher George P. Grant (1918–1988) tagged Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) as the historical point at which production and knowing became one. For tacit objectivists (like most of us), grasping pragmatism or evolutionary forms of knowing is not easy. How would you get students to see the strengths and weaknesses of historicist truth?

*David Jardine, June 7, 2019, 8:11AM*

I've found that one way "in" to those truths is to find the ways in which my students are already experiencing some commonplace matter in their own schooling that they think is just "how things are." When we start to uproot the historical arrival of what they experience first-hand (and therefore demonstrate that it is not something that just "is," but something that happened to turn out a certain way, and therefore something that we are not doomed to tolerate) it becomes understandable as possible, but not necessary. It is like delving into oneself *and* diving into causes, conditions, circumstances, histories ... at the same time. I think, for example of Frederick Winslow Taylor, industrial efficiency expert, who was hired by the United States Department of Education to re-think schools and make them more efficient saying: "we do not ask for the initiative of our men. *We do not want any initiative.* All we want of them is to obey the orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quickly" (Kanigel, 1997, p. 169, emphasis mine). The intimately experienced lack of initiative of students is not just a subjective report by one teacher, nor is it simply a property (or not a property) of "kids these days." In its full, living entanglement, it is a complex and ambiguous *inheritance* that we find ourselves caught up in. Telling students that the designers of modern schooling wanted no initiative, for example, can function as a "hook."

A great topic, by the way. I wrote this recently:

The terrible intimacy of this teacher's expression of his lived-experience — "this is the real world" — gets both confirmed and denied in interpretive work. His exhaustion and feelings of threat are confirmed as genuine and, in fact, deeply important, and they seem even closer at hand. And, at the same time, the flat declarations about "the real world," offered as a way to stop conversation in its tracks, start to "break forth" (Gadamer, 1989). A "whole (complex, multifarious, power-laden, historical, cultural, etc.) world view that underlies it (slowly) appear (s)" (p. 454). I must say, here, as plainly as possible, that a very common response to feeling one's deeply-felt story shifting and opening, to experiencing forces and ideas that have been lost to memory or deliberately blocked, (is) an understandable hostility, a feeling of having been "had." An interpretive desire to untangle the threads of our living can be experienced as blaming those who feel tethered by the "realities" of these threads. Worse yet ... taking on the interpretive work of untangling these threads can *increase* one's sorrow. One finds out that the conditions of one's exhaustion remain dominant *even though the causes and conditions of that dominance are now becoming transparent*. (Jardine, 2019, p. 18).

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*So, Jardine thinks a genealogical or historical-critical approach can get around learner defenses. To him, dialogue starts better close to the ground. Jardine advocates starting where experience is interrogated for larger frameworks of meaning. By raising questions—taking advantage of the holes present in the way things are—a teacher can experience success. Students may grasp how historical contingencies led to the phenomenon now taken for granted.*

*However, Jardine did not fully answer my question. I wrote to him because I am concerned to help realist teachers appreciate how learners piece together their world.*

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*Ted Newell, June 9, 2019, 10:58:49 AM*

In asking about historicism, truthfully, I had in mind the question of how to alter the basic epistemology for those who take an objectivist world for granted. Most of us, most of the time, do not question either physical or social reality. Pragmatic truth is such a different game.

*David Jardine, June 9, 2019, 11:58AM*

I'd reply similarly. Take something that they think is a given and untangle how they and their surroundings have inherited this idea.

For example, take that idea of “kids not having initiative” in schools. That assessment is not what kids “are” or “are not.” Instead, a set of causes and conditions brings the assessment. Young folk would remember that high school caused them to say, “Just tell me exactly what you want me to do and I’ll do it.” They would remember their response because they knew that doing what school wanted was going to count in the long run.

A historical consciousness allows them to see that there is nothing necessary or fixed or “objective” about this reality they experienced. Even though they experienced it as fixed and objective, it was not so.

The attempt to “alter the basic epistemology” is, in the end, I think, an attempt to “radicalize” students (literally, draw them to rootedness), into understanding that they have had certain forms of thinking and acting perpetrated on them, *as if* they were simply “the way things are.”

With my own work in curriculum, I would do something of this with every curriculum topic. Each one of those seemingly simple and straightforward topics is teeming with causes, conditions, fields of relations. Of course, this approach frustrated a percentage of students—inevitably, I guess. Many would just want to “get on with it.” *Every single topic in the curriculum guide has hidden relations, fields of interplay.* The first question to ask is not “How do I teach this?” but “What *is* this thing I’ve been asked to teach? How does it live? Where did it come from? What are its fields of interplay?” and so on.

There is an enormous pleasure, exhilaration, adventure, to be had in finding yourself caught up in the plays and interplays of the world.

*David Jardine, June 9, 2019, 3:51PM*

I guess that I’m also suggesting that the “basic epistemology” must be worn down from the ground up, example by example. I would finally have a breakthrough with a student-teacher about a topic they were asked to teach. They start to enjoy and explore its elaborate relations. Once a new topic arrives, without much practice, they/I must start all over again with *this* case of living fields of relations. Slowly, some make the switch to treating any topic this way; some have long-ago made the switch and can’t believe they are being told that that is good; some make the switch suddenly; some linger over it and try to imitate it from afar; some withdraw and treat my classes

with caution—my class became, for some, one more of the “find out what the prof. wants and give it to them” variety.

And this approach leads, naturally, to carrying oneself a certain way, to a way of experiencing the world, not as a flat line of finalities and fixities, but as an elaborate play and interplay of relations and ancestries and stories, shared and contested. I’ve found that the approach is, too, a way to teach and a way to learn—in fact, to become more attuned to what has happened and is happening to us. One is asked to become an active agent in the making of a world, an agent more alert to its plays and interplays, and, as a teacher, drawing the young into that play. Again, the secret, though: This is a profoundly enjoyable, aesthetic, venturous way to live ... hard, sometimes, because insight can be painful, but to hear the summons to be alert and alive is quite something. That, for me, is part of the epistemology I presume to shift students towards. A great cultural, multicultural enterprise, an ecological one as well.

*David Jardine, June 10, 2019, 6:02AM*

I also had students read philosophical works that supported this emergent epistemology. First Nations works, Maxine Greene, Bill Doll, Cynthia Chambers, David G. Smith, Dwayne Donald, David Abram, Michael Derby, Erica Hasebe-Ludt, and countless others. Students were relieved to find that there is a type of scholarly support for this emergent way of thinking and emergent form of classroom practice. Once affirming this, I would then introduce things like objectivism, efficiency movement, and so on.

*Ted Newell, June 10, 2019, 7:58AM*

I hesitate to lean heavily on abstract works. I had charge of our undergraduate senior-year “worldview” integration seminar for 25 semesters back to back, always with at least forty students. I made use of Gramsci’s hegemony (Bennett, 2006) to underline what a mass media theorist like George Gerbner (Gerbner, 2010) shows about network power to define values and, basically, identities. My underlying message was, “You have been conned. Seven media conglomerates bought and sold you.” Few were shocked or bothered. With a rare exception they remained in the matrix. They had a hard time grasping, for example, the historical contingency of changes to law in the USA under Reagan. Those changes released floods of marketing to children. With a rare exception, students thought corporate propagandizing of kids was a problem for parents. To conservative students, that the law or the state could push back seemed impossible.

All this to say that I would fear that your better alternative, placed before anyone recognizes a problem, might not register with many students. I took a historical timeline approach with the required pre-service foundations of education course, until I realized that not exposing the paradigm with which all are familiar until halfway through the course—the bureaucratic, scientific, efficient schooling model—was to miss a vital connection with student experience. Half the course would be spent in Classical schooling and Plato until that late point in the course where they would say, in effect: “At last! I know efficiency schooling, and I know Rousseau too! Aha!” However logical, the historical timeline approach was a mistake. Until the scientific paradigm became problematic, traditional forms of education and Plato’s alternative were abstractions.

I’d love to learn from you how to approach the second paragraph of your previous email “not as a flat line of finalities and fixities, but as an elaborate play and interplay of relations and ancestries and stories, shared and contested.”

*David Jardine, June 10, 2019, 9:35AM*

Attached is a paper that a colleague and I wrote about reading books to young children, “Wabi Sabi and the Pedagogical Countenance of Names” (Seidel & Jardine, 2012). It arose out of discussions with school children, student-teachers, teachers and graduate students. More than once discussion arose in a Kindergarten class—grey-head me reading this strange book and listening to them speculate and laugh. It illustrates, I think, the passage you cite. Student-teachers getting ready to teach in the younger grades always ask for advice regarding books to read. We directed them to read the books themselves as adults. They were to look for what is going on, to listen for the echoes of old stories, old practices. First absorb the book for yourself, *then* read it to children. You’ll find yourself able to “hear” what they are asking.

The discussions that ensued with student-teachers assured them that reading books to children is an ancient art and also a funny, serious business. The themes wrapped in and through books are an enormous, beautiful human legacy. This was later a chapter in a book that a colleague and I wrote (Seidel & Jardine, 2012).

*Ted Newell, June 11, 2019, 7:27AM*

Very interesting, David. Like trying to disrupt subjective reality via a koan. Or a parable. Except, the undermining/casting doubt and re-presenting becomes an ongoing practice.

David Jardine, June 11, 2019, 11:17AM

Parabolic learning is a nice likeness. The disruption happens, but it doesn't end with disruption but with parabolic practice, a continuance of alertness. I get the parabolic effect myself in teaching. The next group of students require of me the same level of alertness all over again. My practice is enriched as I attend to the ins and outs of their particular lived realities. Something of my practice remains constant, of course. The other part is the next tale of some student-teacher having trouble in a class with *this* kid acting *that* way. His problem requires me to start all over again at ground level. My past experiences are summoned by the new case and asked to prove themselves here, now. Very parable-like ... ancient, but it is always new as well.

Ted Newell, June 11, 2019, 12:03PM

I appreciated these notes in the "Wabi Sabi" piece:

- "Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear" (Seidel & Jardine, 2012, p. 177)
- "The community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs and stories, and both consciously and unconsciously in ways. A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge in place for a long time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates." ([cited in] Seidel & Jardine 2012, p. 179)

Some of the trick, pedagogically, is getting the students to realize where you are coming from and what you are about, is it not. Yes, resisters just want the goods for exam and paper, please. At first, two in the front seats are killing themselves, and the others are puzzled. But when some realize you are saying more than they are getting, they begin listening for resonances. Unless they listen, they miss the joke.

David Jardine, June 11, 2019, 2:05PM

...and those of that lovely middle crowd who sense that "Something is happening but (we) don't know what it is" and, shall we say, 'lean in' when the tale is being woven. Found this often with young children — only part of it is "getting it." Part of it is "being there when it's happening" and giving permission to just let it sit. It takes time, another topic I've written about extensively. You mentioned Gadamer, who said, "every word causes ..." Following Heidegger, Gadamer called it (Gadamer, 1989, p. 458), *Verweilen*, "whiling time" (Jardine, 2008; Ross & Jardine, 2009).

"What you are about." Indeed, yes. And, as part of this, learning to trust that this won't end up being simply a trick, in Gadamer's (Gadamer, 1989, p. 378) lovely phrase

“entrust (ing) (themselves) to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest.”

It was very hard, over my career, to have to repeatedly keep the institution’s expectations as bay so we could get down to real, tough work.

That other passage is Wendell Berry (Berry, 1983, p. 73). I showed Berry on video to many classes, both grad and undergrad. Here is an excerpt from Berry:

The answers will come, not from walking up to your farm and saying, “This is what I want, and this is what I expect from you.” You walk up and you say, “What do you need?” And this can’t be hurried. The important thing to do is to learn all you can about where you are, to make common cause with that place, and then, resigning yourself, become patient enough to work with it over a long time. And then, what you do is increase the possibility that you’ll make a good example. And what we’re looking for in this is good examples (Berry & Moyers, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ejYAfcjImY>)

Reminds me of Parker Palmer.

*David Jardine, June 12, 2019, 8:08AM*

Even though you and I might disagree on *what* is “the foundation,” our relationship to it is necessarily parabolic. The problem with objectivism is that it forgot its parabolic nature. Natural science is fine, providing it remembers that it is a *possible* way to address our concerns. There is nothing necessary about it. Sometimes it is precisely what is needed. Sometimes it is misguided in its often-hegemonic application.

So, with Piaget, talking about stages is useful, sometimes, but we have to understand what is hidden in it and act cautiously. An old anecdote from a student-teacher, years ago: “I don’t care about Piaget. That’s just a name for me. All I care about is the individual child and how to get them to the next stage.” *Almost* adorable, slightly tragic.

*Ted Newell, June 12, 2019, 9:25AM*

I’m not sure our provocations would be totally different, David. To break up a given way of knowing, parables are good. Parabolic methods are good. Koans are good. I might even go as Nietzsche: there are no facts, only interpretations (constructions).



In appropriating Kant, a Buddhist— isn't that your leaning? —has the advantage of seeing mind as active in constructing. Do I understand that basic Buddhist supposition aright?

By contrast, a Christian who believes in a divine pre-construction will emphasize the limits to human constructions. A created order will not support constructions made any-which way. A Christian perceptual grid is at least a viable option.

Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (2015) was a great help in my first four years; I thought he gives confident non-naive realism constructed by the knower.

The Christian tradition goes part way on ultimate knowledge/truth. It never claimed to have more than an accommodated grasp of the numinous, but that the grasp is good as far as it goes. Beyond human finite thought is (only?) the *via negativa* mystical line of thinking.

*Ted Newell, June 14, 2019, 12:31 PM*

We have this in common—attempting to disrupt the status quo. In the conditions of late modernity, all traditions/religions face stiff resistance.

My original problem for you was evolutionary "truth." I use "historicism," which is, granted, a multi-purpose ambiguous term. I set historicism or constructivism against students' (and most of our) naive objectivist "truth."

I read your basic answer as, "Go, problematize by teaching the historicity of everything." Or, "It is all conditioned, people."

A Christian is not going to be content with simply exposing the conditionality of everything without arriving at an intimation of reliable reality (at least).

*David Jardine, June 14, 2019, 1:16 PM*

There's an old anecdote of William James (or Bertrand Russell? or just apocryphal?) at a meeting where someone was talking about the mythopoetics of the earth resting on the back of an elephant which rests on the back of a turtle and blurting out, "What is the turtle resting on?" The purported answer was "It's turtles all the way down."

That Christian discontent is, in a way, precisely a locus of Buddhist interest. Buddhism is premised on all things, everything, being "dependently co-arising." Everything is

empty of inherent existence. Now that last statement has a Christian affinity, of course, but the interdependence of existence, in Buddhism, goes “laterally” and is not a “founding” interdependence but rather confounding. I likened it once to grasping at corn starch dissolved in water: the harder and faster we grasp, the more solid it *seems*, and the more desperately we think that that solidity has nothing to do with our grasping. Even our discontent is dependently co-arising.

Oh well, much more to dwell on, when we are able.

### ***Postscript***

*Ted Newell, June 14, 2019, 7:23PM*

Thinking on “(T)he relief that many students have found in your writing and in mine, because it steps away from the penny-ante distractions...” (Smith & Jardine, in press). Did you ever see this quote?

I recognize all the bleakness for which (George) Grant is often criticized. But only with my head; for months after I read his essays, I felt a surge of release and exhilaration. To find one’s tongue-tied sense of civil loss and bafflement given words at last, to hear one’s own most inarticulate hunches out loud, because most immediate in the bloodstream—and not prettied up, and in prose like a fastidious groundswell—was to stand erect at last in one’s own space (Lee, 1974, p. 53).

*David Jardine, June 14, 2019, 9:05PM*

George Grant was at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, when I did my undergraduate and MA philosophy degrees. Never did take a course from him. Don’t think we ever even spoke. An imposing figure.

*Ted Newell, June 14, 2019, 11:17PM*

I wrote on George Grant for a recent symposium with Canadian Christian university presidents. Lament was a major genre for Grant, not only in his most famous book’s title (Grant, 1965). I am still moved by his quote from Virgil for what’s been lost:

*Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore*

“They were holding their arms outstretched in love toward the further shore.”

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