

Conversing with subjects: Applying Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics to pedagogical and academic language and learning practice

Glenda Ballantyne

Sociology, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn Victoria 3122, Australia

Email: gballantyne@swin.edu.au

(Received 2 August, 2013; Published online 22 February, 2014)

In this paper, I explore the ways in which philosophical hermeneutics, and especially Paul Ricoeur's variant of it, has shaped my teaching practice, with the hope that the insights gleaned might have some wider bearing on issues related to Academic Language and Learning (ALL). Like many academics, my teaching practice has evolved for the most part in an ad hoc fashion, and the principles underlying it for a long time remained implicit. Recently, however, changing student demographics have brought the need for more explicit attention to fundamental academic language and learning skills to the fore, and prompted a reflection on the logic underlying my largely intuitive practices. This reflection has brought to light a set of hermeneutical principles, some canonically elucidated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and others bearing the mark of Ricoeur's themes and concerns. An ethos of open dialogue and receptivity, and a sensitivity to the intensely personal transformations that learning can involve, both underpinned by a strong conception of the creativity and agency of the learner, are identified as crucial elements.

Key words: Ricoeur, Gadamer, hermeneutics, academic language and learning skills

1. Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on the ways in which my intellectual immersion in philosophical hermeneutics has shaped my teaching philosophy and practice, and consider their relevance for Academic Language and Learning (ALL) more broadly. I begin with two disclaimers: I come to this project as neither a linguist nor an ALL professional, but as a sociologist engaged in research and teaching; and a reflection on the interconnections between these two components of my work has been a recent development. For my part, the process of reflection has been productive and rewarding. My teaching philosophy and practice has largely developed in an ad hoc and intuitive fashion, mostly in response to pressing – albeit evolving – pedagogical challenges, and it is only now that I have recognised the influence of philosophical hermeneutics on some of the most successful aspects of my teaching, and its broader relevance for ALL practice.

The immediate context of this reflection is the new and growing student need for academic language and learning support and the new institutional framework in which it unfolds that overlapping social, cultural and political developments have created over recent years. The shift to post-industrial economies in 'advanced' countries has created a need for a significantly expanded level of higher education, but it has done so in the context of the global spread of neo-liberalism which has intensified both its commodification and privatisation. Higher education now takes place in institutions increasingly penetrated by the technocratic spirit of our times,

fixated on quick fixes and cost-effective outcomes. And touched by that same spirit, the students we teach bring with them an increasingly instrumental view of education and rising expectations of bankable outcomes. In such contexts, as Gordon Taylor (1993) has noted, teaching and learning come to be seen as purely technical skills. As the influence of the technocratic perspective, now the norm among senior management, percolates through universities, teaching is increasingly looked upon as the transmission of objective units of information which can be transferred through the application of scientific and universal methods or templates, and learning is taken to be the equally straightforward and objective reception of them.

My teaching philosophy and practice is profoundly at odds with such views. I see teaching not as a set of codifiable techniques or 'objective' methods, but as an art which calls upon the individual capacities and qualities of the teacher. And I see learning also as a deeply personal experience, which can and should transform the learner. Yet despite being apparently out of step with the cultural imperatives of our times, my teaching practice has engaged students and fostered their learning, at least as measured by student feedback surveys, teaching excellence prizes and my observations of the quality of the work they produce. Having been prompted to reflect more explicitly on its principles and merits, I have come to the conclusion that what success I have experienced as a teacher is in large part attributable to a pedagogical approach which bears the unmistakable imprint of my engagement with the philosophical tradition inaugurated by Martin Heidegger, given canonical form by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and extended and in some respects reinterpreted by Paul Ricoeur. Two elements in particular stand out: an ethos of dialogue, respect and receptivity, and a sensitivity to the intensely personal transformations that learning can involve. These global orientations, I hope to show, are as relevant to ALL as they are in my own field.

It is not my intention to suggest that philosophical hermeneutics has an exclusive claim to the principle of dialogue and respect or sensitivity to deep involvement of the learner in the process of learning. I hope to show, however, that the perspective's underlying premises make its take on these principles particularly relevant to ALL.

In the first place, philosophical hermeneutics offers a "from the ground up" critique of the ideal of certain and "objective" knowledge which underpins scientific and objectivist conceptions of teaching and learning. In contrast to the Cartesian claim that to be 'objective' knowledge must be presuppositionless, it insists that there is no understanding without presuppositions. All understanding depends upon our ability to relate new phenomena to an already existing set of pre-understandings and concerns; and this means that we always understand things from a particular historical perspective, embedded in and carried by a particular language.

Crucial too, though, are the more particular premises which underlie its articulation of the historical and linguistic "situatedness" of understanding. Two key points separate philosophical hermeneutics from some other – and perhaps more widespread – variants of the idea that human thought is situated. Firstly, it avoids the idea of "absolute text". Like other approaches with roots in the "linguistic turn", philosophical hermeneutics rejects the idea that language merely brings to expression a reality that is as it is in itself. Equally, however, it rejects the conception of language as a self-enclosed system of signs, which refers to nothing other than itself. For philosophical hermeneutics, language is neither a mere tool, nor an autonomous object in its own right: it is the *medium* of understanding.

Secondly, it avoids the idea of the 'death of the subject'. Again, the perspective shares considerable ground with other – notably postmodern and poststructuralist – approaches in modern philosophy; in this case it has in common a rejection of the idea of the autonomous subject, independent in relation to contextual influences and transparent to herself. But unlike the anti-humanist strand of that intellectual current, it does not dissolve subjectivity into linguistic and historical contexts. For philosophical hermeneutics, the point is to contextualise rather than deconstruct subjectivity.

These understandings of language and – above all – subjectivity are central to the philosophical hermeneutical tradition and shared by its exponents. It is, however, Ricoeur's developments of

these core premises which have most influenced me. Widely recognised as the third major figure of philosophical hermeneutics, Ricoeur's most distinctive contributions to the tradition have centred on extensive studies in language, and been animated by an abiding philosophical interest in human creativity and subjectivity. The two themes have, moreover, been intricately linked. The latter culminated in the "hermeneutics of the acting self" in his penultimate major work, *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur, 1992). The philosophy of human agency it contains, however, is inseparable from the wide ranging philosophy of language which occupied much of his earlier work (Ricoeur, 1978, 1984, 1985, 1988); for Ricoeur, the creative potentialities invested in various structures of language, and realised through their deployment by actors, are one of the deepest wellsprings of human agency and subjectivity.

In what follows, I sketch their origins in Heidegger and Gadamer's canonical texts, before outlining the developments in Ricoeur's work that are most relevant here. In the final section, I trace their influence on my pedagogical practice, and consider their relevance for ALL.

2. Core premises: Heidegger and Gadamer

Modern hermeneutics has always contested the scientific approach to understanding human affairs. In Wilhelm Dilthey's romantic hermeneutics, interpretation and understanding are a methodology for interpreting history through texts, based on the empathetic recreation of the life experience of others, which is explicitly opposed to positivist notions of uninvolved and causal explanation (Ricoeur, 1981, p.41). But Heidegger's (1962) phenomenological hermeneutics radicalised the critique. Where Dilthey implicitly accepted the Cartesian ideal of objective knowledge, accepting that historians could extract themselves from history to achieve "objective validity" (Bernstein, 1971), Heidegger deconstructed the problematic of subject and object on which it rests, and reconstructed it on new ground.

Heidegger's starting point is that understanding is not in the first instance an attribute human beings may or may not have, but what constitutes them, what they *are* (Madison, 1994, p. 300) Drawing on the phenomenological observation that relations between the subject and the world do not get established first on the level of cognition or knowledge, he argued that all explicit understandings build upon an "always already" constituted horizon of meaning that we presuppose and take for granted. For Heidegger, all interpretive understandings are presuppositional or "anticipatory" by nature (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 57).

The ideal of objective knowledge based on the assumption that the subject's cognitive activities are autonomous in relation to her social, historical and cultural contexts is from this point of view based on misinterpretations of both subject and object. For Heidegger, the "world" is not an objective reality that is completely external to the subject; it is, rather, a loosely packed amalgam of meaningful relations embedded in languages, practices and institutions. And the subject is not an isolated, autonomous, cognizing "knower", but a being who is constituted in and through her participation in the linguistic and practical contexts which constitute her world(s).

An idea of the conceptions of language and subjectivity that underlie this problematic can be found in Gadamer's (1975) canonical exploration of the epistemological and methodological implications of this "ontological" turn in hermeneutics. *Truth and Method* has proved a rich vein of philosophical insight across the disciplines interested in understanding and its applications, but I mention here only a few points each concerning language and subjectivity.

First, in his elucidation of the linguistic mediation of understanding, Gadamer (1975, p. 404) famously privileged the linguistic structure of *conversation*. Language, he says, "has its true being only in conversation in the exercise of understanding between people". In this way, he underscores the dialogic and communicative elements of language. Dialogue, he insists, is not the intersection of two monologues, but rather a search for mutual understanding that has its own logic and transcends the intentions of the participants. Importantly, moreover, mutual understanding comes not from correctly identifying the subjective meanings of the interlocutors, but on agreement around "what the conversation is about." This means that "when we have discovered the standpoint and horizon of the other person, his ideas become intelligible, without

our necessarily having to agree with him” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 270); understanding the past, or another person or culture does not necessitate coming into complete accord with it.

An idea of the philosophical hermeneutical understanding subjectivity can be gleaned from Gadamer’s argument that all interpretation and understanding involves *application*. With this term, he is making two points. The first is that we have understood something only when we are able to relate it to our own historical horizon, and translate it into our own, historically conditioned language. This means that understanding is never merely reproductive; it is always also “productive” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 264). The second is that understanding involves making what is understood a part of ourselves. Ultimately, for Gadamer, all understanding is self-understanding, which means that genuine understanding involves a transformation of the person who understands.

3. Innovations and extensions: Ricoeur

As I have argued elsewhere, two overarching and overlapping meta-philosophical concerns differentiate Ricoeur’s variant of philosophical hermeneutics: he has pursued a critical agenda, seeking to strengthen the link between hermeneutics and critical theory; and he has sought to uncover the wellsprings of human creativity (Ballantyne, 2008). Central to both themes has been the creation of a philosophy of language on which to ground hermeneutics. Ricoeur’s (1981) exploration of the possibilities for critique available within the philosophical hermeneutics perspective have made an important contribution to debates within the social sciences, and have relevance to ALL broadly conceived. However, it is his thematisation of human creativity and agency that has given my approach to teaching, learning and academic literacy its most distinctive features. Before considering its impact on specific pedagogical practices, I will outline three themes in his philosophy of language which underscore and develop the hermeneutical conception of the subjectivity.

3.1. Language as action

The first theme concerns his basic conception of language. In line with Gadamer, but articulated and developed in debate with structuralism, Ricoeur insists that the structuralist conception of language as a self-referential, self-enclosed system – “langue” in Saussure’s terms – is only the “system of systems” which makes discourse – the deployment of language by a speaker or writer – possible (Ricoeur, 1995). Against those who dissolve the subject into the structures of language, concluding that language produces only the illusion of subjectivity, he stresses the agency involved in the actualisation of language by a speaking (or writing) subject.

3.2. Polysemy and the ‘conflict of interpretations’

The second is the “conflict of interpretations” that is the inevitable outcome of the polysemy of language. In developing this theme, Ricoeur is radicalising the fundamental hermeneutical insight that, because language is not univocal, it must be interpreted. But his point goes beyond the basic hermeneutical insight that because there are ambiguities that have to be sorted out, or because the historical past or other cultures are initially foreign to us, understanding always involves interpretation. The real import of the polysemy of language, he argues, is that we are condemned not simply to interpretation, but to the “conflict of interpretations” (Ricoeur, 1974). His broader point is that polysemy of language and meaning makes it permanently open to competing and conflictual interpretive prisms; any given field of meaning – tradition, text – is always and intrinsically open to not only multiple but also *rival* interpretations.

Ricoeur draws important epistemological and methodological implications from the idea of the conflict of interpretations. On the epistemological plane, various – and rival – theoretical frameworks operate as “structures of pre-understanding” which decipher language (and the patterns of meaning it carries) according to its particular frame of reference. It follows that each interpretive framework can find only what it seeks. But by the same token, none can claim to be an exclusive and definitive interpretation.

This theme has a central place in Ricoeur's "critical" hermeneutics, because he uses it to legitimate a critically oriented "hermeneutics of suspicion", exemplified by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, which seeks to demystify manifest meanings and dispel illusions (Ricoeur, 1970). More importantly in this context, however, the idea of the conflict of interpretations underlines the involvement of a subject who must not only actively and imaginatively construe meanings, but adjudicate between rival interpretive frames.

3.3. Textuality

The third linguistic theme which allows Ricoeur to stress agency and subjectivity is *textuality*. With this theme, he is returning hermeneutics to its original locus in the interpretation of texts. He does so, however, while taking on board the full implications of Heidegger's "ontological turn". His point is not to question the psychological, sociological or historical priority of speech over writing, but to argue that the objectification of language in writing inaugurated a change in our relation to the world (and traditions) which Gadamer's use of the conversation as the privileged model for analysing language does not fully grasp. One of the most important of these concerns his attempts to strengthen the connections between hermeneutics and critical theory. Most relevant here, though, are three points at which his focus on the textualisation of language allows him to underscore human agency and subjectivity.

First, his focus on textuality allows him to radicalise Gadamer's notion of application. The key here is the theory of reading through which the theory of understanding and interpretation gets played out in Ricoeur's textual hermeneutics. Texts are different from conversations because they have the capacity to be decontextualised – from the author's intention, its reception by its original audience, and the economic, social and cultural circumstances of its production. By the same token, they must be re-contextualised in new situations, through the creative *act* of reading/interpreting the text by a reader. To underscore the agential character of the reading through which texts are interpreted, Ricoeur adopts the term *appropriation*. With it, he means to underline the fact that readers actively engage with and assimilate the meanings in texts (or text-like entities), and to stress that this is not something that passively happens to readers, but something which requires effort and involves the actualisation of the meaning of the text (Ricoeur, 1981).

Closely related to these points are the new connotations Ricoeur's text-oriented framework adds to the idea that interpretation/understanding culminates in self-understanding. His general point is that in the process of reading – giving the text a meaning – readers are themselves actualised – given a self – by the text. To understand a text, Ricoeur suggests, "is at the same time to light up our own situation" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 202). Ultimately, in fact, for Ricoeur the interpretation of a text "culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 158).

Some specific aspects of Ricoeur's text-centred understanding of this process are also important. First, Ricoeur's focus on the text foregrounds the role of *imagination* in understanding (Madison, 1994, p. 333). The key here is that where a conversation refers to the shared, immediate and present world of the speakers, the referent of the text is an imagined, possible world that is projected by the text itself. To understand, he then argues, is to receive a self that is enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds that are projected by the text.

Second, he argues that, in the first instance, appropriation is not a kind of possession, but a moment of dispossession of the ego. To begin with, he argues that self-understanding occurs not by projecting oneself into the text, but by exposing oneself to it. And in exposing ourselves to the text, we undergo 'imaginative variations' of our egos which allow us to receive from the text an enlarged self. The dispossession of the immediate self/ego is necessary to make possible the enlargement of the self. To this extent, he says, in reading, I "unrealise myself" (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 94).

Finally, he stresses also that the text's revelation of new, possible modes of being calls out from the subject new capacities for knowing herself. Key here is the *reflexivity* that is entailed by the

fact that in order to appropriate the possible self-proposed by the text, it is necessary first to distance oneself from oneself (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 192).

4. Pedagogy and ALL

As Gordon Taylor has observed, “hermeneutics does not prescribe a method or technique that the teacher or the student can take away and apply as a template to cut out sufficient understanding to deal with any problem at hand” (Taylor, 1993, p. 70). But as Taylor’s own account of the insights for learning, teaching and ALL to be gained from (especially Gadamer’s) philosophical hermeneutics showed, there are a number of more or less ‘operationalisable’ insights, as well as a more general set of principles and orientations to be garnered from it. As my reflections are in agreement with Taylor’s insightful and wide ranging analysis, I draw on it where it touches on themes that have most influenced my teaching. My main focus, however, will be the principles and practices that are derived most directly from Ricoeur’s analyses of language and subjectivity. In some cases, I show how the insights I have gained from the hermeneutical perspective have been translated into concrete pedagogical practices, and could be used to inform ALL practice more broadly. In several cases, however, it is the insight itself that is most valuable. In these cases I present them to students to stimulate and enhance a reflexive relation to their learning, and envisage a comparable role in ALL contexts. In other cases, the main influence of the insights has been rather more nebulous, shaping a spirit of engagement with students rather than specific practices, and for that reason are readily applied in ALL work.

4.1. Reflecting on disciplinary presuppositions

Philosophical hermeneutics tells us that all understanding necessarily occurs within inherited traditions of thought and communities of practice. In both pedagogical and ALL contexts, this “first” principle calls for an acknowledgment and examination of the (mostly taken for granted and unexamined) presuppositions which underlie and shape explicit curriculum. As Taylor points out, the ambit of this imperative is wide. The traditions and social structures which carry the presuppositions that shape learning and understanding are embedded in overlapping contexts, including those of the disciplines which structure academic knowledge, of the broader culture and the university as an institution, and of students. I deal with the first here, and the latter two under subsequent headings.

Reflection on the assumptions and traditions involved in its disciplinary conventions and paradigms is perhaps more common in sociology than other disciplines. Yet even here it is not always adequate, or undertaken in a systematic way. To serve the important purposes Taylor (1993, p. 62) notes, of revealing the historicity of presuppositions often taken to be immutable truths, and of articulating those of current paradigms in order to open them to critical and reflexive consideration of their virtues and drawbacks, I build such reflection into the curriculum of all areas of study. In less reflexive disciplines, and in ALL practice traversing them, such reflection is an important principle.

4.2. Reflecting on cultural presuppositions

The importance of reflection on broader cultural presuppositions applies across the disciplines, serving to uncover, *inter alia*, ideological premises such as those which underpin the technocratic and managerial approaches now prevalent in universities. But such reflection has an additional relevance in disciplines, including my own, in which cultural differences are often at issue. Philosophical hermeneutics’ emphasis on the presuppositional nature of understanding locates our understandings of these basic components of our thought in particular social networks of meaning, and these, self-evidently, vary across different cultures. Reflecting on taken-for-granted assumptions focuses attention on culturally specific presuppositions which frequently operate beneath conscious thought. These may be as fundamental as our assumptions about the self and her relationship to broader social contexts.

Reflection on such premises is crucial to an adequate understanding of human affairs, but is particularly important in our increasingly multicultural educational contexts. To aid reflection in this situation, I use the cultural diversity that is now a permanent feature of Australian classrooms as a pedagogical tool, drawing on the lived experience and knowledge of students to throw into relief unrecognised and naturalised cultural premises, and to widen students' awareness of those of other cultures. While this pedagogical resource may not always be present to the same degree in ALL work, the principle remains pertinent where a student's minority cultural background is an issue.

4.3. Reflecting on personal presuppositions

Making explicit and reflecting on the pre-existing and often "common sense" orientations that students bring to the pedagogical encounter is important too, as left unquestioned they can be an impediment to learning new and counter-intuitive insights (Taylor, 1993). The principle that drives my practice in this area is to understand students 'where they are at' in order to expand their horizons.

To draw out the "prejudices" influencing students' initial thinking I use the "Platonic" method of leading students to "the point" through a series of questions beginning in the region of their untutored assumptions. This approach is perhaps more suited to classroom discussions on disciplinary content than to more focused interactions with ALL practitioners, but is not without useful application there. More generally, and pertinent to ALL and teaching practice alike, this approach is most effective when undertaken in a dialogic spirit which conveys a genuine interest in the students' opinions and views. I return to this point below.

4.4. Dealing with competing paradigms

Ricoeur adds a further, important, dimension to the insight that understanding always occurs within inherited traditions of thought when he argues that the epistemological implication of the fact that symbolic fields are polysemic is an irreducible "conflict of interpretations".

Students often experience great confusion as a result of their simultaneous immersion in rival worldviews. The rival perspectives they confront are sometimes within a discipline – notoriously so in sociology – and sometimes between them – as in the common experience of students studying sociology and psychology. The idea of the conflict of interpretations provides a helpful framework for approaching this confusion, offering not only an explanation for their competing epistemological and methodological approaches, but also salutary lessons for dealing with them. As Ricoeur (1974) shows, their multiplicity does not discount the insights of each; at the same time, it does relativise their claims. Making sense of the irreducible multiplicity of perspectives, while underlining the impossibility of deciding between them, is as relevant to ALL practice as it is to teaching.

4.5. Innovating within disciplinary traditions

One further important aspect of philosophical hermeneutics' view of the anticipatory nature of understanding concerns sees mutability of the interpretive frameworks that embody the presuppositions which shape thought. It sees these not as fixed bodies of opinions or "truths", but as "living" traditions which are permanently open to innovation. But while innovation is always possible, it does not occur "ex nihilo"; it necessarily occurs from within, and in relation to, inherited interpretive horizons.

Ricoeur (1992) makes a further observation about the relationship between tradition and innovation with a significant pedagogical implication: the conventions that govern and constitute disciplinary traditions need to be assumed before they can be violated. This insight is the basis for a pedagogical and ALL point of some relevance in our era, characterised as it often is by the valorisation of 'transgression': disciplinary and other conventions need to be mastered before they can be meaningfully challenged.

4.6. Understanding through writing (and speaking)

Philosophical hermeneutics tells us also that language is not simply a tool we use to express thoughts that are fully developed before they are articulated, but the medium in and through which we develop understandings.

This principle has an immediate bearing on the vexed issue of ‘expression’ in students’ academic work. It means, as Taylor (1993) has pointed out, that ‘content’ and ‘linguistic expression’ cannot be neatly divorced in the way both longstanding tradition and the current vogue for marking criteria rubrics suggest. The Canadian hermeneutical philosopher Charles Taylor (1985) has developed this insight in terms pertinent to pedagogical and ALL concerns when he makes the point that “if we haven’t expressed something clearly, we haven’t understood it clearly”.

Presented explicitly to students, this maxim provides an effective counter to the widespread belief that poor expression is a trivial, technical issue independent of understanding. More generally, it is a principle which can be used in both teaching and ALL contexts to explain and justify the importance placed on precision and nuance in their writing.

4.7. Reading and writing in circles

Hermeneutics has long insisted on the circular character of understanding, such that it is necessary to understand “the part” and “the whole” in relation to each other.

Making the principle of circularity explicit has provided me with a number of pedagogical precepts, equally relevant to ALL. First, it provides a way of cautioning students against unrealistic expectations of instantaneous knowledge, so often evident in their incredulous declarations that “I had to read it several times!” Conversely, and more positively, it is the principle upon which I base my reassurances that many texts require multiple readings to be understood.

As Gordon Taylor (1993) notes, this circularity is also at odds with the widely deployed idea that (essay) writing should be led by plans that are considered to be fully determined at the outset. He proposes instead the model of a circular movement through the interlocking activities of questioning, reading and writing in which each stage must begin with an approximation that will be revisited in the light of the others, in a circular rather than linear fashion. I make the additional observation that writing itself is often a circular process, as the parts must be first approximated, then revisited and refined in light of each other and the whole, emphasising the necessity and importance of ongoing editing of drafts.

This principle also underpins my efforts to ensure, and make explicit, the coherence of the curriculum and assessments within a unit of study. Making explicit the relation of the parts to the whole aids the process by which students come to appreciate the content as a totality. An example of this approach can be seen in the design of a first year unit, *Understanding the Modern World*. The aim of this unit was to give students a historical context for making sense of contemporary social life. Weekly topics covered specific modernising processes and their outcomes. But unlike many “omnibus” introductory sociology units, where one topic follows another with few connections made, links between the individual elements and their role in the producing a new type of society were regularly stressed. In addition to these attempts to make apparent the real world connections between the unit’s diverse themes, the assessments were designed with explicit connections to each other, and to the curriculum of the unit as a whole.

4.8. Conversing with receptivity

Philosophical hermeneutics, most notably in Gadamer’s work, has famously stressed the dialogic character of understanding. Responding to this insight has had a profound but diffuse impact on my approach to teaching. It has shaped some particular practices, mentioned shortly, but equally has inspired a spirit of openness and receptivity that, I am convinced, is one of the most powerful sources of student engagement and learning. While some of the practices

mentioned below do not lend themselves to the settings of ALL work, this spirit is as applicable there as in the classroom.

The first way I apply this principle is quite literal: my teaching (in tutorials) takes the form of a conversation. To do so, I have quite often to resist a strongly felt obligation to convey information/knowledge, to “teach” students disciplinary content that I believe to be important, and to which they do not have “lay” access. Experience has indicated, however, that ultimately they are better able to assimilate such content when it is received in the spirit of genuine dialogue, in which their initially “untutored” views are part of the conversation.

I also take care to *invite* students into the conversation, by remembering and using names (as Ricoeur has observed, we need to have names, in order to be “called” into the conversation of humankind) and by returning to a classroom format of sitting around a shared table rather than having students facing the teacher at the front. This latter has increased participation, quantitatively and qualitatively, to a quite remarkable degree.

A final principle prompted by the dialogic imperative is derived from Ricoeur’s intellectual *modus operandi* of going as far as possible with his opponents. All of his philosophical work exemplified this spirit of seeking to find as large a sphere of consensus as possible, before laying out the points at which he departed from his interlocutors. More pragmatically, he once observed that you can’t teach anyone anything if you are hitting them over the head. In contrast to some more combative academic styles, this approach encourages engagement in the conversations through which learning occurs.

4.9. Connecting with students “where they are at”

Genuine understanding, Gadamer and Ricoeur stress, involves applying what is understood to one’s own practical circumstances.

This insight underpins the design of assessments in my units which ask students to relate what they are learning to their own horizon of experience. The subject matter of sociology has allowed me to apply this type of assessment systematically, across general introductory and focused advanced units of study. In the first year unit mentioned above, students were asked to relate relevant research and theory to their own, or their families, experience of modernising processes such as urbanisation, secularisation, individualisation or the spread of “consumer society”. In a second year level unit on migration, they similarly related relevant conceptual frameworks and literature to the migration experience of family or acquaintances. While there are probably far fewer structural opportunities available to deploy this strategy in ALL work, the material through which they gain ALL skills could also be related to their experience.

4.10. Transforming and enlarging subjectivity

Closely connected to the idea that understanding involves the application of what is learnt to the experience of the learner is the recognition that understanding involves a transformation of the person who understands. Gadamer underlines this point, but Ricoeur’s notion of appropriation adds further insights.

Like the principle of conversation and dialogue, this insight leads as much to a general sensibility as definable teaching practices. But also like it, it has played a pivotal role in engaging students in the process of learning. The key here is conveying to students an awareness of the intensely personal and transformative experience they are (hopefully) going through as they learn, and being responsive to it.

There are, however, two sides to this issue. The first, more positive aspect stems from Ricoeur’s observations on the generative, formative and constitutive role of our engagement with cultural creations, most succinctly put in his observation “we become human, adult selves, only by interpreting meanings that first exist *outside* of ourselves”. This flies in the face of psychological conceptions of the self that are widespread, especially among the many students studying sociology as an adjunct to their main studies in psychology, by underscoring the fact that the “source of meaning” lies not within us, but in the world. What is distinctive about this

take on the “social self”, however, is its emphasis on the generative, creative and enriching character of the social meanings that constitute our worlds. In a discipline that is for good and necessary reasons significantly constituted around issues of power and inequality, this point is often submerged in analyses of the power relations built into social and cultural life and involved in constitution of “knowledge.” My point is not at all to neglect these crucial issues, but to remember that the activity of learning is also an enlarging and creative one.

The second, darker aspect concerns the sometimes unsettling dimension of learning. While it might seem unhelpful to point out that learning can be a traumatic experience, it is demonstrably so. The howl of recognition elicited when I raised the topic in a recent conversation with a PhD candidate little known to me is a recent indication of this phenomenon, but it has also been evident among (often the most promising) undergraduates; over the years I have seen a number of cases of students dropping out or suffering severe mental anguish and anxiety over submitting work. In both pedagogical and ALL contexts, the very act of supporting students may trigger anxieties about the “judgments” being made.

Ricoeur’s insight into the dispossession of the ego which occurs before the reader can appropriate meaning offers an important insight into the experience of fear and trauma that can accompany assessment, as what we write or present often feels like a direct and deep expression of ourselves, and judgment – real or anticipated – is often deeply confronting. Recognising – and thereby fostering reflection on – the fact that the enlargement of one’s subjectivity is sometimes accompanied by profound existential challenges is a potential way to ameliorate its most corrosive effects.

5. Conclusion

I hope to have shown how the strategies outlined above stem from the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and especially Ricoeur. Running across them is an emphasis on dialogue and sensitivity to the active involvement and effort of the learner in the process of learning. In my teaching they come together in an ethic of care for and interest in students as persons, and it is, I believe, students’ recognition of this which is ultimately the most powerful motivation for engaged learning. This ethic is eminently applicable to the realm of ALL work.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr Tim Moore at Swinburne University for prompting and deepening this work. My work with him on embedding ALL skills within Sociology units was the occasion for many stimulating conversations around the nature of and responses to changing student needs in this area.

References

- Ballantyne, G. (2008). *Creativity and critique: Subjectivity and agency in Touraine and Ricoeur*. Lieden: Brill.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1971). *Praxis and action: Contemporary philosophies of human activity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1975). *Truth and method*. (Sheed and Ward Ltd., Trans.). New York: Seabury Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Madison, G. B. (1994). Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Ricoeur. In R. Kearney (Ed.). *Twentieth-Century continental philosophy* (pp. 290-347). London: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and philosophy: An essay on interpretation*. (D. Savage, Trans.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1974). *The conflict of interpretations*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

- Ricoeur, P. (1978). *The rule of metaphor. Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*. (R. Czerny with K. McLaughlin & J. Costello, Trans.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the human sciences*. (J. B. Thompson, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative* (Vol. 1). (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1985). *Time and narrative* (Vol. 2). (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1988). *Time and narrative* (Vol. 3). (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another*. (K. Blamey, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1995). An intellectual autobiography. (K. Blamey, Trans.). In L. Hahn (Ed.). *The philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (pp. 3-53). Chicago: Open Court.
- Taylor, C. (1985). Interpretation and sciences of man. In C. Taylor (Ed.). *Philosophical papers* (Vol. 2), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, G. (1993). A theory of practice: Hermeneutical understanding. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 12(1), 59-72.