

Gadamer and ALL: A hermeneutic understanding of Academic Language and Learning

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(Received 6 April, 2013; Published online 6 September, 2014)

In the English-speaking world, Hans-Georg Gadamer is known principally as a theorist of qualitative research. However, this was a role that was thrust on him by others, more especially by his English-language readership. On the Continent, by contrast, he is viewed as a leading philosophical student of Heidegger and renowned for developing philosophical hermeneutics, a highly innovative generalisation of the theory and practice of textual interpretation to encompass the whole of human experience.

In educational endeavours generally, but particularly in language-oriented fields such as Academic Language and Learning, Gadamer, it seems to me, offers many insightful concepts that can enrich both our practice and our understanding of our practice.

Key words: Gadamer, hermeneutics, language, ALL

1. Introduction

In the English-speaking world, Hans-Georg Gadamer is known primarily as a theorist of qualitative research. However, this was a role thrust on him by his English-speaking readers, a result of the fact that the first account of Gadamer's work in English was a sustained critique beginning in 1967 by the Frankfurt School critical social theorist, Habermas (for representative coverage, see Bernstein, 1982; Hoy & McCarthy, 1994; Schrift & Ormiston, 1990, pp. 145-334, Pt. 2). Also Gadamer's (1989) own account of his hermeneutic philosophy, *Truth and Method*, was not reliably translated into English until 1989. Thus Gadamer's initial presentation to English-speaking audiences was in the guise of an interlocutor in a wide-ranging and high profile dispute between interpretativism, empiricism and critical theory in social theory and the social sciences generally. On the Continent, by contrast, he was viewed as a leading student of Heidegger and renowned for developing philosophical hermeneutics, a highly innovative generalisation of the concept of textual interpretation to encompass the whole of human experience.

The morphing of theorists when their work is translated from one context to another has been addressed by Bourdieu (1999), when protesting against the way his own work had been misrepresented when re-purposed as a weapon in discussions and arguments indigenous to the Anglo-sphere. Of course it is one of the key features of written texts that they can 'circulate without their contexts' and thus move from their own field of production to other fields of production or consumption. In fact it is the implications of this very process that is at the heart of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic. But, for both Bourdieu and Gadamer, there should be an intellectual ethic of faithfulness to the original text together with sustained hermeneutic efforts to understand its formative context.

The re-purposing and recontextualisation that affected Bourdieu was also wrought on Gadamer's work such that he has become an almost ritualised citation within qualitative

research. Yet, Gadamer is not a social theorist nor a social scientist or researcher; he was a philosopher whose fundamental commitment was to the classical humanist tradition of the humanities. His primary academic studies were in classical philosophy, particularly Plato and Aristotle; and it was this lifelong work of interpreting these classical philosophers in university seminars to show their continuing relevance that formed the practical ground for the emergence of his theory of philosophical hermeneutics. Moreover, his value to the ALL field should in my view rest more on what he has to offer for the concepts of learning, practical knowing, the role of vernacular language in experience and learning, the ontological character of learning and knowing, the notion of hermeneutic experience as the site of learning, and the hermeneutic finitude of all human being. This is not to deny his significance for theories and practices of research in the social and human sciences, especially the recent work of Flyvbjerg and his 'phronetic' social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Rather, it is to frame ALL as more intently focused on the specificity of learning and the role of language as both barrier and springboard in learning, and to interpret Gadamer's significance in this light.

1.1. Biographical background

Born in 1900, Gadamer was brought up in a progressive Prussian family. His mother died when he was nine, while his father was a renowned chemistry professor whose textbook was reprinted for many years. However, according to Gadamer, although a university researcher in the natural sciences, his father was "basically averse to all book knowledge... During my childhood he tried to interest me in the natural sciences in a variety of ways, and I must say he was very disappointed at his lack of success. The fact that I liked what those 'chattering professors' (as Dad called them) were saying was clear from the beginning" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 5).

Having established a quite different direction from his father, Gadamer continues:

My studies in those days were like the first episodes in a long odyssey. A whole range of things enticed me and I ventured to taste many of them. If, in the end, it was the philosophical interest that gained the upper hand, rather than my genuine interest in the study of literature, history, or art history, this was really less a turning away from one of them and towards the others so much as it was a gradual pressing further and further into the scholarly work as such. (Gadamer, 2007, p. 5)

Even in the very terms in which this short passage from the memoir "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey" is phrased, we can discern themes that will guide Gadamer's intellectual life-work. There is his interest in 'books', but more specifically interpreting the (classical) texts that Gadamer usually refers to as 'works', texts that form the history of Western culture (literature, history and art history) which hints at his theory of tradition and claim that consciousness is always already 'formed' by its embeddedness and embodiment in historically effected traditions manifest in texts and their history of interpretation. There is also discernible in this short passage a hint of how Gadamer will not situate philosophy as a distinct discipline sitting alongside the interpretative disciplines of literary studies, history or art interpretation, but will work to bring them into a closer relationship so that the interpretative disciplines become more philosophical and philosophy becomes more hermeneutic.

Experiencing the horrors of World War I as a teenager and the disillusionment of the post-war, for Gadamer "the proud cultural consciousness of that whole liberal age, with its faith in scientifically based progress" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 6) was no longer credible or liveable. As a student of philosophy, he explored a range of possible responses to the 'mood of catastrophe' dominating German culture: Expressionism, the 'life-philosophy' of Nietzsche, the aesthetic style of the George circle, the existentialism of Kierkegaard, the phenomenology of Husserl. Finally,

I myself suddenly realised from Heidegger that we could only 'fetch back' [wiederholen, repeat] the philosophizing of the Greeks after we have forfeited that *fundamentum inconcussum* of philosophy on the basis of which Hegel had written his story of philosophy and the neo-Kantians their history of problems – namely, *self-consciousness*. From that point on I had a

glimpse of what I wanted, and obviously it had nothing to do with the idea of some new, all-encompassing system. (Gadamer, 2007, p. 10)

Thus aged 24, Gadamer found the ‘motivating question’ to which his life would be dedicated: how to understand and philosophically frame the relationship between ourselves as situated reader/interpreters and the founding texts that form the culture within which we live. Whereas Hegel believed that he could write as it were from the point of view of the culminating ‘end of philosophy’ looking back on the past as a developmental path leading to the absolute truth of the present, Gadamer insisted that ‘the objection lodged by historical relativist scepticism against the claims of supertemporality is persuasive, I think, and cannot be gainsaid’ (Gadamer, 2007, p. 11). As readers and knowers, we are always already ‘prejudiced’; there is no escape from context. But as a philosopher who was concerned with the pursuit of truth, Gadamer could not simply acknowledge the insights of relativism and leave it at that. In fact a central motif of his lifework will be trying to find a philosophically viable way of ‘splitting the difference’ in formulating the relationship between the pursuit of truth and the acknowledgement of context.

There was one final lesson that the young Gadamer learnt from his master, Heidegger: how to *destrukt* the texts of ancient Greek philosophy in such a way as to:

make the old questions of the tradition understandable and so alive that they became our own questions. Today I would call what I am describing here simply the fundamental experience in hermeneutics...Heidegger’s ‘destruction’ of Greek metaphysics and radical critique...called into question the Christian character of theology as well as the scientific character of philosophy. What a contrast to the bloodless academic philosophising of the time...Suddenly Plato and Aristotle appeared as co-conspirators and comrades at arms to everyone who found that playing around with systems in academic philosophy had become obsolete...From the Greeks one could learn that thinking in philosophy does not, in order to be responsible, have to adopt the thought of system-guiding, that there must be a final grounding for philosophy in the highest principle; on the contrary, always under the guiding thought that philosophy must be itself on primordial world experience achieved through the conceptual and intuitive power of the language in which we live. The secret of the Platonic dialogues, it seems to me, is that they teach us this. (Gadamer, 2007, pp. 11-12)

So, by his mid-twenties, Gadamer had found the themes and questions that would guide his long career. However, although he lived to 102, Gadamer’s early career was beset with difficulties that meant he could not write or teach as freely as he would have liked. During the Nazi era, he had to be very careful what he published, and, post-war, he found himself recruited as rector of Leipzig University in order to re-establish the credibility of the university. It was only after 1949, as a 49-year-old scholar, that Gadamer could concentrate on his scholarly work, work that culminated in *Truth and Method* in 1960 (Gadamer, 1989). Thus after a concentrated labour of 10 years, at age 60, when others may be entertaining retirement, Gadamer saw the first substantive published fruits of his scholarly studies – *Truth and Method* (henceforth, TM).

1.2. Truth and Method

Widely considered his *magnum opus*, TM is a large, complex, perhaps even flabby, text. In fact, there is wide agreement among scholars who have studied it closely that although its themes are individually clear and compelling, the overall architecture of the book lacks an unequivocally transparent focus. I can imagine Gadamer retorting that this is to judge him by the standards and genres of philosophy as system-building towards a single overarching principle, a standard he rejects. Yet, Gadamer himself admitted that Part 3, where his account of hermeneutics takes a more radical turn towards the ontological, was ‘under-done’. TM consists of three parts: Part 1 begins by articulating an ontological analysis of the forms of truth and knowing at work in the humanities and art; Part 2 analyses the ontologically grounded knowledge operative in human sciences such as history, law, theology and politics; finally, Part 3 argues that in fact all human experience and knowing is grounded in ontology via our fundamental and inextricable

embeddedness in vernacular language as public sociohistorical cultural institutionals. It argues that all human experience and meaning making, including theoretical scientific knowledge, is grounded in what Husserl called ‘the lifeworld’, a lifeworld that, for Gadamer, is carried by vernacular language – including theoretical and scientific knowledge. It was this claim that constituted Gadamer’s ‘language turn’. The difficulty in this final turn to language in Part 3 arises from the shift from arguing that *some* sub-domains of human experience and ways of knowing are grounded in the tacit experiential knowledge of insiders to the argument that *all* modes of human being are grounded in this tacit knowledge carried within vernacular language. Thus for Gadamer, the universalisation of hermeneutics included the universalisation of language as the medium of experience – a dual claim that Gadamer himself admitted he had not adequately argued in TM, but would continue to develop and elaborate over future decades.

Before outlining the structure, themes, and claims of *TM*, it is perhaps important to clarify the issue of its title, since it is this title that may give the impression that TM is formulating a philosophy or methodology for qualitative research. In his detailed philological study of the early handwritten drafts of TM, Jean Grondin (1995) also studied the history of the title. Originally, Gadamer had titled it “Fundamentals of Philosophical Hermeneutics”, but the publishers felt the term ‘hermeneutics’ was too esoteric to gain a wide readership. Gadamer then thought to title it “Event and Understanding” – which would have been the most accurate distillation of the central subject and claim of the text, but finally settled on “Truth and Method”, which as many commentators have pointed out is both ambiguous and even misleading. For in fact Gadamer’s central thread, as Grondin shows, was to argue for the radical difference between the conditions of truth in the Humanities which are grounded in a cultivated *habitus* compared with the truth resulting from the objective application of a scientific research method.

We could summarise TM by stating that what Gadamer is concerned with is trying to account for his belief that there are ‘truths’ available to us from outside the evidence-based methodologies of science – as long as we acknowledge the principled instability and ambiguity of the ‘us’ as it moves between ‘*some* of us in *some* of our domains in our lives’ to ‘*all* of us in *some* domains in our lives’ to ‘*all* of us in *all* domains of our lives’ as the book proceeds from Part to Part. In this way TM proceeds dialectically, following another of his masters, Hegel, in that to begin with it selects a specific domain to establish its claim and then gradually draws in more and more realms of human activity until finally claiming that his claims encompass the fundamental structures of *Dasein*, human existence.

The emergent dialectical development of TM over its 579 pages consists of compressed encyclopaedic analyses and interpretations ranging across the whole of Western culture, especially the history of philosophy and of art, literature, literary studies and philological studies. The topical coverage is overwhelming, based as it is on the 30 years of seminars he had never had the time or opportunity to write up into publishable form. It was as if a life-time of scholarship had to be crammed into a single text.

1.3. Finitude and the hermeneutic experience

Hermeneutics as a textual practice has always been concerned with

situations in which we encounter meanings that are not immediately understandable but require effort...The hermeneutical has to do with bridging the gap between the familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world. (Linge, 1977, p. xii)

The paradigm situations are canonical religious texts and also ancient laws: both need interpretation in order to be understood in a way that makes sense in a contemporary world. However, for Gadamer, as we have already noted, even the familiar world of today, of here and now, does not constitute solid transparent ground on which to stand. In our efforts to understand, we are already marked and formed by background sociohistorical horizons that have ‘always already’ formed the shape and limits of our experience and understandings – in short, our world. Nor of course are we directly aware of this background forming the condition

of our engagement with the world. Thus the hermeneutical situation in fact brings together two ‘unfamiliar’, two things that are unknown to us – the unfamiliar of ‘the other’ and the unfamiliar of ‘the familiar’ forming our own background assumptions. From an ALL perspective, one cannot resist glossing the situation of many, if not all, higher education students as subject to this hermeneutical situation, a situation in which they are trying to assimilate strange meanings that resist assimilation while also glimpsing the limits of their current understandings. This ‘to and fro’ of the ‘in-between’ is precisely the domain of hermeneutic activity and experience. This clash between two competing and conflicting world views would seem to be a hopeless case of compounded blindness, except for two key points. First, there is always *some* point of connection between the two horizons of meaning, even if initially it is only the merest overlap of misguided and prejudiced misunderstanding. Even this can provide enough purchase for a productive hermeneutic conversation or language game. Thus there is (almost) never a total or absolute alienation between subject and the other/object; this is especially the case in encounters between cultures, traditions or subjectivities. Unlike Habermas, Gadamer does not envisage the upshot of these hermeneutic encounters to be agreement, but rather understanding of difference.

An even more radical understanding of understanding was impressed on Gadamer himself after the writing of TM through his hermeneutic encounter with Derrida in which Derrida insisted on refusing to engage, thus playing the *absolute alien* by refusing even to enter into the work of finding common ground (see Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989). In fact, Gadamer had always insisted that hermeneutics has inherited an ethical imperative from the long humanist European tradition to search for shared understanding, *sensus communis* (Verene, 1997). But over time he extended this horizon to embrace the otherness of non-European cultures (Dallmayr, 1996; Gadamer, 1982a), of abstract art and the non-communicative poetry of Celan, the post-Holocaust poet who lost his family in Auschwitz (Gadamer, 1997). Thus, over time Gadamer, through his (non)dialogue with Derrida, came to a more and more emphatic and radical understanding of diversity and otherness – which ironically accords with his account of what we learn from experience (Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989). For Gadamer, we do not learn knowledge from experience, but learn to be open, learn to be open to learning that we are wrong:

Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation to new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experience but is also open *to* new experiences...[The experienced person is] someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 355)

Second, the background horizon is never completely determining; it is not the ‘iron cage’ argued by French structuralism. For Gadamer, *prejudices* ‘are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous...[they] are the biases in our openness to world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us’ (Gadamer, 1977, p. 9). What is important for Gadamer is that we can never escape having ‘conditions whereby we experience’ our ‘biases in our openness to the world’. All we can do is seek out encounters with ‘the other’ so that the limits of our current prejudices are transcended by a new set of biases. By means of the encounter with a different horizon of meaning, the limits of our existing assumptions are made visible and thus new assumptions formed – which will in turn also inevitably be overturned ad infinitum. Gadamer compares this trial-and-error movement from pre-judice to pre-judice as akin to Popper’s conjectures and refutations (Gadamer, 1989, p. 353).

This engagement with different horizons of meaning is critical because genuine hermeneutic experience is inherently a process of negating by showing up the limits, inadequacies and illusions of existing understanding: “‘experience’ in the genuine sense is always negative. If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing

correctly and now know it better” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 353). But unlike Hegel, Gadamer does not imagine any end to this movement. In terms of human lifeworlds, its end would entail that everyone in the world past, present and future all lived within the same horizon of meaning. That is, there would no longer be any realms of cultural otherness. For Gadamer this would mean that the entire world shared a single vernacular language since our lifeworlds are largely formed by vernacular language. To Gadamer, this postulation of a single universal lifeworld is a utopian, even dystopian, fantasy. However this does not mean that he rejects the ethical and moral imperative to understand others and find commonality. In fact, he strongly believed in the notion of *humanitas* and its drive to forge *sensus communis*, shared understandings – but this did not have to mean shared agreement.

1.4. A Gadamerian construal of ALL

This section ‘applies’ Gadamer. That is, it interprets him by formulating a faithful interpretation of his position *from the point of view of a situation and context he never had in mind* – the work of ALL. In this way, I am involved in precisely the hermeneutic situation as Gadamer describes it. But, of course, it is not that this ‘application’ is a later phase that takes place *after* the prior work of understanding and interpretation. Gadamer is adamantly opposed to this theoreticist understanding of the relationship between theory and practice or application (Gadamer, 1982b). So, the fact that textually I have first expounded Gadamer’s views in their own right prior to relating them to the ALL context of application and use is simply an artefact of the way in which this paper has been structured.

1.4.1. Hermeneutic experience and learning

Gadamer views engaging in discursive ‘language games’ (Wittgenstein, 2009) as central to both life and learning. He frames human praxis, human life, as inextricably interwoven with languaging. Language pervades our lives, especially our lives as learners, which is almost a definition of life itself. Life is that which is open to learning, open to change, and for human beings this openness, this attunement and awareness is pervaded by language, especially when we try to put our understandings into words, or try to share our understandings, or try to think about our understandings. We live and function in regions of meaning (cultures, assumptions, world pictures, disciplines, discourses, ethnicities, identities) that we only become explicitly aware of when we encounter ‘other’ competing regions of meaning.

Thus, for Gadamer, we are ‘always already’ situated in a world, a discourse, a social context, a culture and so on. But unlike structuralists, Gadamer does not think of this as a ‘prison’. We are not condemned to remain within this world. For Gadamer, our basic assumptions are invisible and taken for granted until they bump up against competing assumptions. At that point, we are forced into awareness of how we are situated, and can begin to grapple with deciding who is right. For Gadamer, we only enter into true hermeneutic consciousness when struck by the thought: ‘Perhaps they are right and I am wrong’. This grappling over the truth is what Gadamer calls ‘hermeneutic conversation’. Gadamer construes all learning as a to-and-fro interchange between these intersecting regions of meaning. He insists that learning is a matter of hermeneutics, a matter of engaging with, trying to understand a world framed differently from our present frame. This encounter with ‘the other’ reveals to us the partiality and limits of our current understandings. Thus it is inherently self-critical: learning involves unlearning; realising that what we thought we knew we don’t; and this realisation is what opens up the possibility of learning, of engaging with ‘the new’, the different, the other. Putting our current assumptions in question allows us to entertain other possibilities. This dialogic encounter institutes the possibility of what Vygotsky (1978) would call a zone of proximal development, an activity whereby we find ourselves able to see the world from a different vantage point.

This work of enlarging our regions of meaning takes place when we open ourselves up to conversations with ‘the other’, with other perspectives and framings of things. It is the ‘to and fro’ of these hermeneutic conversations that shifts our horizons of meaning. This work of enlargement happens because we get caught up in what is being said and meant and eventually find that we have changed in some way. We find we can see or understand the world differently;

we can see the world through the eyes of the legal system or the medical system or through the eyes of ecology, biology or gender studies.

And yet, for Gadamer, all understanding is “understanding otherwise” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 96). That is, understanding is productive, not reproductive; it is more accommodation, than assimilation; more appropriation, than agreement. Thus, for Gadamer, there is no such thing as a simple hand-over of transparent, unchanged ‘information’ or ‘knowledge’ from teacher to student. Students learn ‘otherwise’ (that is: more, differently, less) than their teachers intend. This is because students use their current frame of understanding, their current ways of being in the world, their current discourses, to ‘interpret’ and understand what they are encountering.

1.4.2. *The mode of meaning of Human Being*

It is important to note that Gadamer does not believe that anyone can simply be critically reflective regarding their own ‘pre-judgements’ or assumed background. This rejection of ‘self-consciousness’ is precisely what he had learnt in his twenties from Heidegger (as noted earlier). We are not transparent to ourselves. So, learning or shifting our understandings to encompass wider, deeper or different horizons is not simply a matter of deliberately or self-consciously changing our views or assumptions. In place of this rationalist picture of logical epistemological development, Gadamer argues that epistemological change is not a matter of epistemology or knowing alone, but also a matter of ontology. As a consequence, he argues that we learn or change our views in an ontological medium as well. He argues that just as we get drawn into a different world through experiencing art, so too in ‘hermeneutic conversation’ we ‘experience’ a different way of seeing or experiencing the world. He argues (in a way that is difficult for Anglophone non-Hegelians to understand, let alone accept) that in true ‘hermeneutic conversation’ neither party to the conversation is in control of the conversation: both parties to a genuine hermeneutic conversation emerge changed and with different understandings to those they possessed when entering the conversation. The world emerges with a different shape, different horizons, different highlights and backgrounds.

At different times in his life, Gadamer drew on different metaphors for expressing the mediality of interlocutors in a hermeneutic conversation, the sense that the parties to the conversation are not fully in control, that the topic of conversation itself becomes a player guiding the conversation beyond the agency or control of the participants. In this difficult notion, Gadamer is reprising the grammatical concept of ‘the middle voice’ in ancient Greek, a grammatical voice that is situated between the active and passive voices. It is a voice in which the participants are willingly and actively caught up in some much larger movement over which they do not have control (Eberhard, 2004). In this sense it is beyond subject and object, a notion embodied in Hegel’s ‘Objective Spirit’ (Pippin, 2002, pp. 225–246), in Heidegger’s early notion of *Dasein* and its mode of ‘being in the world’ (Heidegger, 1962) and in ‘late’ Heidegger’s notion of ‘clearing’ as the ‘disclosure of Being’ (Heidegger, 1993).

Other more contemporary metaphors he draws on include Huizinga’s (1971) notion of play (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 101-110) and Wittgenstein’s (2009) notions of ‘language games’ as elements carrying and formative for ‘forms of life’. Late in life he returned to this theme and drew on the metaphors of ‘festival’ or ‘ritual’ (Gadamer, 1986), even linking these to the ritual displays of animals (Gadamer, 2000; Grondin, 2000). What is common to all these metaphors, what they all point to, is the way in which we are shaped, formed and changed in ways that are not totally within our control. In this he is opposing the Enlightenment view that we should and can easily set aside the ideologies, myths, and *doxa* that have formed us and rationally deploy ‘critical thinking’ in order to reach new, better, more scientific understandings of the world and ourselves.

As noted earlier, Gadamer does not construe coming to see the world differently as a matter of methodically following conceptual reasoning or argument. (This is where he and Habermas radically part company, even though Habermas later changed his view of reasoning to one of conformity with procedural norms) (see Habermas, 1984). It is not that Gadamer is suggesting that we should reject ‘reason’, that we should just follow our feelings or passions; it is that we are not totally in command of our reason. Phrased in terms of ancient Greek attitudes, reason or

logos does not come from us as self-conscious and self-controlled individuals; it is something that overwhelms us – an erotic experience, a conversation led by Socrates, attendance at a Greek tragedy or at the festivities of a neighbouring city. Although there is no space to pursue it more fully here, I would suggest that the embodied notion of argument carried by the rhetorical tradition is a more appropriate picture of the kind of reasoning and learning in play here than the rationalist tradition of Aristotle and Descartes (Smith, 1998).

Finally, it is very important to note that Gadamer does not view ‘hermeneutic consciousness’, that is, the experience of coming to understand the world differently, as simply a matter of being inducted into disciplinary knowledge. More important for Gadamer is the shift in one’s mode of ‘being-in-the-world’ from having had one’s existing horizon of understanding relativised many times through hermeneutic encounters with ‘the other’. We become open to learning that what we think is limited and that there are other ways of understanding matters that reveal other meanings. Gadamer suggests that rather than being something that confirms what we already believe: “‘experience’ in the genuine sense – is always negative. If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing correctly and now know it better” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 353). Over time, if we allow ourselves to be subjected to this negative dialectic, we gradually form a comportment conforming to Gadamer’s notion of *Bildung*; one gradually becomes what Gadamer calls an “experienced person” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 355). This ‘experienced person’ is not someone who knows everything, nor someone who is cynically never surprised by anything, but rather is someone who is open to transformative encounters with ‘the other’, someone who is keen to experience new ways of seeing the world and open to exploring commonalities between their own horizons and those of others in hermeneutic conversations:

Experience stands in ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation towards new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences. The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call ‘being experienced’, does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 355)

1.4.3. *The mediality of understanding*

Much of our work as ALL educators is focused on assisting students to throw themselves into the language games of, around or in response to the discourses circulating in academia – whether as reading, writing or in reasoned speech. Our work, especially 1:1 consultations, re-acknowledges the background meanings upon which students draw in making sense of their world, whilst at the same time we try to re-phrase the disciplinary discourse or practice so that the student can engage, take up the struggle of understanding, a struggle which inevitably puts at risk their current identities and understandings. That is, we are trying to help stage a hermeneutic conversation between the student and the disciplinary discourse they are grappling with. This encounter with foreign discourses and allowing oneself to get caught up in their play is captured in Burke’s (1974) famous parlour metaphor of a discourse community or culture as a matter of ‘unending conversation’:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had

gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (p. 110)

This Burkean parlour mirrors Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic conversation in that learning possesses a dimension beyond the subject-object metaphysic of modern knowledge in which learning is simply an acquisition of additional knowledge or skill, an acquisition that does not fundamentally impact on the identity of the learner. It also takes us beyond the socialisation or induction models in which students must abandon their existing identities, commitments and worlds of meaning in order to enter the disciplinary worlds of higher education. Instead Gadamer frames learning as entering into the discursive interchanges of a larger sociohistorical order. Even thinking by the individual is characterised by Gadamer as inherently dialogic, not monologic; "we ourselves are a conversation" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 95)

1.4.4. *Phronesis as well as knowledge*

This emphasis on the dialogism of learning captures nicely the praxis of ALL. As ALL practitioners, we do not simply *repeat* or *reiterate* messages that students have failed to hear or learn from faculty lecturers. Instead, we *rephrase*, *reframe*, *re-voice* disciplinary messages in a different key, a key that is remodulated so that the message is more readily heard or understood or enact-able for the student – which is why ALL work cannot be reduced to a collection of generalised rubrics, workshop activities, or flyers. ALL work is a matter of working what Gadamer calls the hermeneutic region of 'in-between', the region concerned with the misunderstanding, ambivalence and confusion that arises at border crossings and the interface between cultures. Akin to translators and interpreters, ALL practitioners must creatively conjure, almost on-the-spot as it were, a local 'interlanguage', a creole of metaphors, vocabularies, diagrams or gestures that can help students make sense of the puzzlement, alienation, resistance, boredom or confusion they feel whilst at the same time making sense of the target discourses they are grappling with, and, moreover, doing this in a way that brings both together into some sort of intelligible or productive proximity – into a Gadamerian hermeneutic conversation.

Insofar as Gadamer rejects the self-sufficiency of scientific knowledge, he tends to foreground everyday life-world experience, vernacular language, and the language games of quotidian cultural life over against the abstract technical languages and language games of scientific knowledge (Gadamer, 1982b). He views scientific knowledge as in a sense parasitic on everyday life-worlds and also as inevitably needing to translate itself back into everyday discourse at the point of application or policy. This privileging of the vernacular as a lens on disciplinary knowledge also fosters an alignment and identification with the standpoint of the novice student faced with understanding disciplinary knowledge, a necessary alignment for ALL if we are to function as cultural interpreters trying to help midwife an engaged interchange between discipline and student.

Human being is not defined for Gadamer as a purely cognitive mind within a conceptual world of disciplinarity bent on accumulating knowledge, but rather as a practical ethical being engaged in forging and finding common ground with other disciplines, theories, cultures, and finding a ground for mutual action grounded in rhetorically forged practical wisdom or situated judgement (*phronesis*), not through making deductions from abstract theory (Gadamer, 1982b). In ALL work, students reveal themselves to be far more richly contexted and situated than when they are posited simply as audience at academic lectures, as readers of curriculum materials or writers of academic assignments. This means that our work demands, not the application of some kind of generalised or templated reiteration, but a nuanced judgement of the particularity of students and their distinctive 'take' on what they are learning and its potential meanings.

This emphasis on the practical reasonableness of *phronesis* over against the demonstrative rationality of scientific knowledge flows out of Gadamer's adherence to the humanist cultural tradition. As a philosopher and classicist, Gadamer tries to keep alive the ancient educational notions of *paediea* and *bildung* (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 9-18), concepts woven deeply into his life-work as an interpreter of ancient philosophy, concepts that emphasise education as a formative activity, as an activity that enables people to 'become who they are' – with the proviso that who they are is not a stable or finalised identity:

Bildung requires and enables one to see things through the eyes of others. Wherever it holds sway, it prevents the particular kinds of one-sidedness that go with school practice, the knowledge gained at college, the mere talent of copying, the pure training of memory. (Gadamer, 1998, p. 121)

We are ourselves conversations (Gadamer, 1989, p. 95), open to listening to other perspectives that bring our own assumptions into question. This sense of being fated to being situated 'in-between' – interestingly aligned or misaligned with Sartre's 'condemned to be free' – is not only the fate of the students we engage with, it may also be the fate of ALL itself.

ALL is not currently constituted as an academic discipline with a body of knowledge and research-based practical application; perhaps it should be wary of hastening towards instituting itself as such. Rather than seeking to constitute ourselves as a disciplinary community applying theoretical truths, Gadamer, without denying the importance of knowledge or skill, would instruct us to concentrate on cultivating our 'tact' and judgement, our practical wisdom (*phronesis*), through experience so that our *habitus* becomes more open and attune-able to the particularities of different students, disciplines, educators, and forms of reading and writing. A Gadamerian view of ALL would enjoin us to ground our interventions on this intuitive understanding, a 'feel' or wisdom honed by hermeneutic conversations with students around the intellectual challenges facing them. Perhaps, rather than trying to transform ourselves into a legitimate academic discipline with its own distinct and delimited field of knowledge and action, we should try to retain some of our more dislocated marginal status, not as a claim to a metaphysical or philosophical framing of the university and its disciplines, but rather as a site and practice in which we can act more effectively and authentically as cultural interpreters mediating between students encountering a strange land and the anxieties of educators that they are being overwhelmed by students unsuited to university study. This Gadamerian framing of ALL seems to align well with the notion of 'ALL as cultural guide', a key metaphor formulated by the early pioneers of Australian ALL (Taylor et al., 1988).

1.4.5. *The linguisticity of understanding*

Gadamer has a different understanding of language from that posited by much contemporary linguistics and applied linguistics. Gadamer frames reading and writing not as mastery of language or literacy skills, but as engagement with 'what is at stake', the issues, the matters at issue – in German, *Sache* which according to Gadamer inherits the ancient rhetorical notion of *res publica*, issues of public disagreement and difference where discourse is required to enable different perspectives to find some accommodation or consensus (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 18-28). For Gadamer, the reader is not endeavouring to understand the author's meaning, but is bringing their understanding of the *Sache* to bear on understanding the author's rendering of the *Sache*. Thus the text always points beyond itself – to the *Sache* or matter it is about. This non-Saussurian understanding of language is important for ALL: it means that we should not substitute reading the conventions or structures of the text for reading the *Sache* of the text, a trap that ALL is prone to lapse into by the construal of reading and/or writing as linguistic skills that precede or ground engagement with *Sache*. By contrast with much contemporary linguistic-based language education, for Gadamer, language is most truly functioning when it is transparent and invisibly enabling a student to be in the flow of ideas, engaged with the *Sache*; a view shared by Halliday (1985) who also emphasises that text is 'language in action' fluently creating meanings that both construe and construct social situations and activities.

However, it is true that lack of language fluency in English language or written discourse can create a screen of opacity between student and the *Sache*, 'the matters at issue', such that they

cannot 'be' ontologically captured by the to-and-fro flow of meanings around the *Sache*, the movement of ideas and language at play in the language games of the academy. This image of unblocking the language barriers that gate-keep the disciplinary language games needed for students to lose themselves in order to participate in and be able to imagine themselves as speaking on behalf of new ways of framing matters, sits well with the work of ALL, work in which we are continually re-translating disciplinary voices that have been misheard, misspoken, misunderstood by students – because they have been framed in a language (a wording, a grammar or discourse) foreign to them. As ALL workers, clearing gummed-up channels of communication, on both sides of the dialogue, is key to our work. Our work is inherently hermeneutic insofar as it is continually dealing with misunderstanding, with preconceptions, assumptions, inter-cultural misalignment, linguistic miscommunication.

In a review of How's (1995) reconstruction of the Gadamer-Habermas debate, Sandywell (1996) succinctly captures Gadamer's notion of the 'linguisticity of being' and why language and learning implicate ontological matters, not just epistemological matters, in terms that make sense to contemporary ALL practitioners:

How comes down on the side of Gadamer in urging a more 'ontological' understanding of hermeneutics as the key to an adequate conception of the finitude of social existence. His reconstruction hinges on the idea that the 'linguisticity of being' should be taken in its strongest sense in that 'the symbolic' always-already 'mediates' the fabric of social existence. 'Reality' and 'discourse' are not mutually opposed categories. Forms of communication are a constitutive part of the movement of societal self-understanding. In a fundamental sense we cannot prise language (as a form of self-interpretation) from social practices and institutions. The field of social forms is already reflexively mediated by discourse formations. (Sandywell, 1996, p. 728)

Gadamer's insistence that language functions most powerfully when it is transparent and invisible is a critical reminder to our field not to allow ourselves to be pigeon-holed on the 'language only' side of the ALL label and allowing the 'learning side' of our work to be assigned elsewhere. It is true we work both *in* and *on* language, but it is on language as the locus of understanding and misunderstanding. Our work is a matter of dissolving or resolving the blockages to learning that *result from* or *show up* as language issues. In other words, misunderstanding reveals itself when we can't say something, when we are speechless or speak confusedly or when we can't connect to something we are reading or listening to. *Language becomes visible at the point of breakdown*. Whereas some may interpret this breakdown as a matter of laziness or lack of effort in the student, or as demonstrating the need for a rigorous metalanguage, a Gadamerian construal of ALL would point us to suspect a deeper miscommunication at work here, that the incommensurability present is in this case too radical or too disorienting for the student even to find a language for expressing it.

This cognitive disconnect between discourse and student shows up as a language issue. But this does not mean it is a matter of treating the language issue *as a linguistic matter or topic in its own right*, as warranting deploying a theoretical metalanguage in the hope that the student will use that as a ground for engaging with the *Sache*. The danger is that the metalanguage shifts the student to an even further remove from the *Sache*. To become aware of our language *as language* can be a moment of insight or a moment of blindness; a moment of seeing the world differently, or a moment of turning away from the world, turning away from meaning and focusing on language itself as a supposedly formal normative order capturable in rules of grammar, dictionaries or linguistic theories. Gadamer's fundamental advice to us in our ALL work would be not to simply turn ourselves into applied linguists intent on abstracting language away from its role of expressing universes of discourse, but to help students get back into the hermeneutic conversation, into the flow of language and meaning construing and constructing the field of discourse and its world.

To conclude, we could perhaps distil the distinctiveness of a Gadamerian approach to ALL by adducing Wittgenstein's famous metaphor (Wittgenstein, 2009, para 107): *The goal of a*

Gadamerian hermeneutic ALL would be to help students off the slippery ice of self-conscious language and back into the rough and tumble of the unselfconscious play of language at work in the ongoing communal activity of forming and reforming understandings, concepts and discourses.

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