

ON THE MEANING OF LEARNING: REFLECTIONS WITH DEWEY

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Abstract

John Dewey's educative process and Barer-Stein's learning process offer two perspectives that may enhance the adult educator's glimpse of the true meaning of learning. The congruency of these two processes provides a strong basis for speculating that learning and educating may be differing aspects of the same process; that the learning of children and the learning of adults may be congruent; and finally, that a form of reflective thinking may be central to each and essential to an outcome of *personally relevant meaning*. Some implications of these speculations for adult educators are offered; other implications are left for individual reflection.

Résumé

Le processus éducationnel de John Dewey et le processus d'apprentissage de Barer-Stein offrent deux perspectives qui peuvent élargir la vision qu'a l'éducateur d'adultes du sens réel de l'apprentissage.

La congruence de ces deux processus fournit une base solide à la spéculation sur l'idée que l'apprentissage et l'éducation peuvent être des aspects différents d'un même processus; que l'apprentissage chez les enfants et l'apprentissage chez les adultes peuvent être congruents; enfin, qu'une forme de pensée réfléchie peut être au centre de chacun d'eux et essentielle à l'atteinte d'un sens personnel pertinent.

Quelques implications de ces spéculations sont offertes aux éducateurs d'adultes; les autres sont laissées à la réflexion personnelle.

Introduction

One has to be aware of something in order to distinguish it from anything else. Being aware provides the access, it is the opening door... (Barer-Stein, 1987).

Adult educators become accustomed to their habitual tasks of assembling materials and services, projects and programs all for the purpose of educating other adults. Usually they are more aware of communicating information than they are in absorbing it themselves. It seems a truism that educators educate; learners learn. But the doing of one can provide us with an awareness of the other, providing we can distinguish between the two. Being aware of educating and of learning as processes of human experience may guide us to understanding learning itself. That there is a pressing need to move beyond an understanding of learning based on experiments with animals (Jarvis, 1983) towards an understanding of

human learning in the context of daily living, has already been strongly expressed by many educators (Bourgeault, 1985; Osborne, Charnley & Withnall, 1982; Cross & McCarten, 1981).

Thomas (1986) puts it this way:

The practice of adult education has allowed us to glimpse some of the true meaning of learning, freed from the context of schooling. The next and critical step is to glimpse it from a perspective that is independent of education, even of the education of adults.

Practising adult educators working in informal and non-formal settings and drawing on the experiences of adult learners as rich resources, already have an acute awareness that learning extends and continues beyond the formal context of schooling. They may have an uncomfortable awareness that such schooling may even have constrained learning. Within such musings, educators accept a link between educating and learning but find it difficult to complete the gaps. As such awarenesses accumulate to press forward our need to know more about learning itself, Thomas' remarks seem to suggest a practical way of getting yet another glimpse of learning from two perspectives other than adult education: one that is "independent of education" and another that is "independent of the education of adults".

The purpose of this paper is to offer examples of two such suggested perspectives of learning, as an inducement to adult educators to progress towards a more profound understanding of learning itself, and to explore the implications and practical applications of such understanding in each one's practice.

Most educators would likely agree with Dewey's conviction that the process of educating is "the art of guiding learning" (Dewey, 1933:266), but may balk at confronting the less familiar details of *how* this may be so. As adult educators, we are almost as familiar with speaking of educating and learning in the same breath as we are with our habitual educative tasks. Yet such a "halt to examine what is really ordinary" (Barer-Stein, 1987) must be recognized for its value in exhuming long-held beliefs, unexamined assumptions, and habitual behaviors.

A brief comparison of Dewey's educative process, as an example of learning that is "independent of the education of adults", with a process of learning studied by myself, offers not only a means of adding two more perspectives to our reflections on the meaning of learning, but also the opportunity to search for congruency or disparity between a stated "educative" process and a stated "learning" process. Since each of these is published elsewhere¹ in much greater detail, only aspects pertinent to this discussion will be presented. Dewey's educative process is taken from his work directed to teachers of children, while my own model of the learning

process is grounded in the crosscultural experiences in the everyday life of one individual.²

Within the comparison of the two processes, a congruency does emerge to provide a strong basis for speculating that learning and educating may be differing aspects of the same process: educating as offering the potential for guiding the learning of *others* to discover personally relevant meaning, and learning as the potential for guiding *self*-learning to discover personally relevant meaning. Further, such congruency may also provide a basis for speculating on the congruency of the learning of both adults and children—or learning at any age. Finally, it may provide a basis for speculating that a form of reflective thinking may be central to each process and essential to an outcome of *personally relevant meaning*.

It was in this reflective approach to exhuming meaning, that I came to see that we do not learn what we already know, but are repeatedly drawn to explore and discover meaning, to understand that which differs.

This brings us to the notion of meaning. Meaning does not exist as an entity or commodity. It is forever coming into being, shaped and reshaped by the peculiarities of the context in which it is sought and pressed to individual relevance. Meaning can only be sought by individuals and discovered through personal reflection. Like learning itself,³ it is individual and cannot be compelled; it is cumulative in its effects; it is associated with most human activities and characteristics; and at any age humans have the capacity to seek it. This helps to explain my emphasis throughout on 'personally relevant meaning'. *It may be that meaning is the impetus, the perpetuator, and the ultimate goal of learning.* Is it the goal of educators and education?

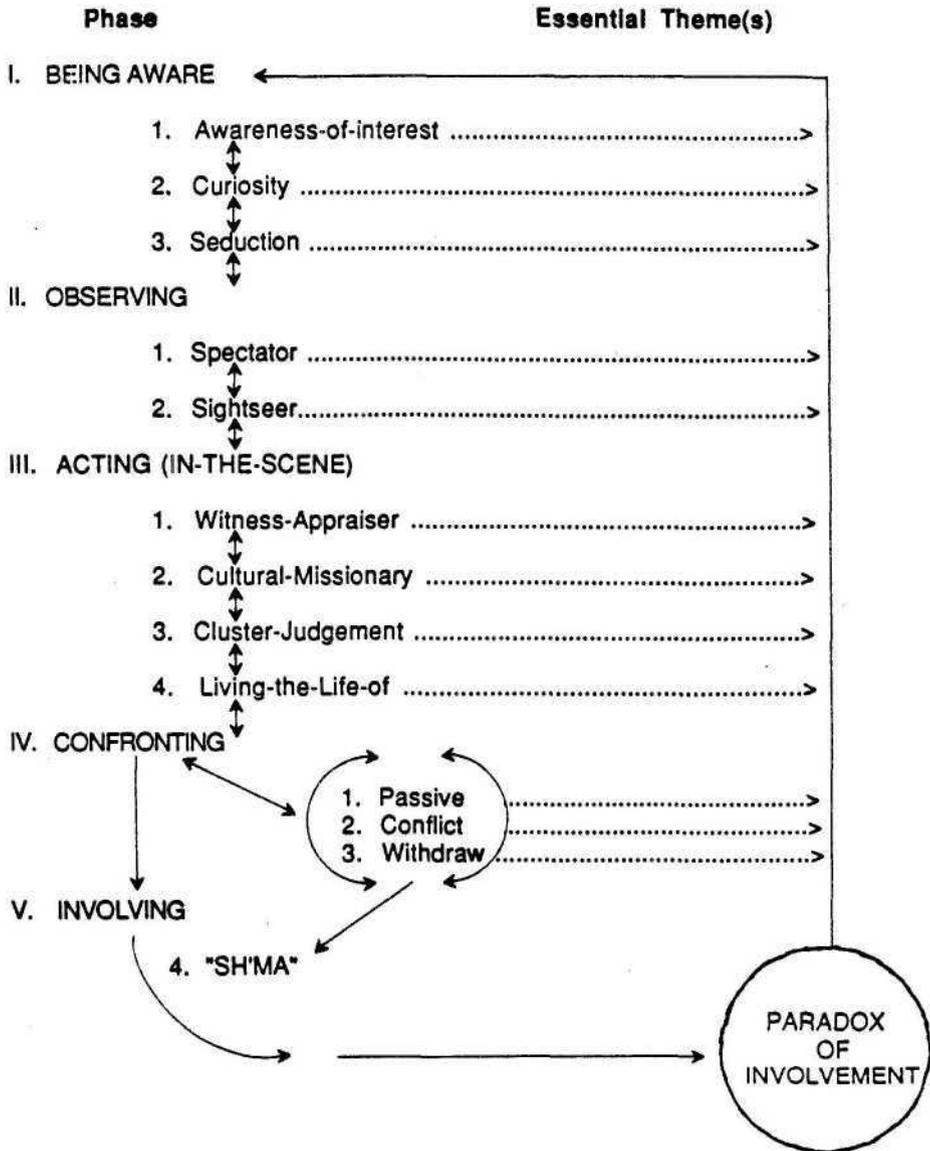
Examining the Relationship Between a Learning Process and an Educative Process

In order to create an understandable framework, the model of *Learning as a Process of Experiencing the Unfamiliar* (Barer-Stein, 1987) will be shown in Figure No. 1 and briefly explained below. Within this framework, excerpts will be quoted from *How We Think: A Restatement of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Dewey, 1933). It is important to note that while Dewey refers to a "constant spiral movement of knowledge" (Dewey, 1933:140), he makes no effort (at least in that work) to delineate such a movement or process. The quotes are selected for their appropriateness to stages of the model, from various parts of his book.

Introductory Comments on the Model

Originally seeking only to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the concept of culture, I set out to dialogue with English Second Language teachers, asking them only, "How did you learn to teach adults from differing cultures?" I felt their work seemed to exemplify immersion and communication with differing cultures. Of all the teachers with whom I

Figure No. 1: A Model of a Process of Learning as a Process of Experiencing the Unfamiliar (Difference)



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talked, noting how their interests seemed to coalesce around a central interest in people and places that were different, one ESL teacher's articulation of crosscultural experiences affected me profoundly. I found myself immersed within the experiences she related. In the ensuing analytical separation and interpretive reunion of details that formed this phenomenological work, I became increasingly aware of the inherent power of the questioning "How?" to strip away the surface details of time and place and to eventually reveal the structure of her process of experiencing that which was initially unfamiliar (different), to an outcome of profoundly relevant personal meaning: Involving.⁴

A first reading of a phenomenological work often proves disconcerting. Upon encountering a differing—highly subjective—mode of writing, and an often hyphenated grouping of words, the reader may feel such strangeness unwarranted. But such a differing use of language is necessary to indicate how I have gradually "transformed the meaning of the action" (Blum, 1970), which I am reflecting upon.

An attempt to depict the possible movements within this model of a learning process is indicated with arrows. The entire process is sequential; each phase can only come into being on completion of the previous one. *Each movement including the entry and exit from the process is always dictated by personal choice.* Each phase, and the sequential essential themes within it, may sometimes occur so briefly and close together that differentiation may be difficult. However, even a chance remark or gesture, or fleeting feeling, may be sufficient to mark the individual's transit, providing initial effort is made to distinguish a particular Awareness-of-Interest.

Solid arrows indicate the dominant possibilities of movement, while dotted arrows indicate the path of a waning Awareness-of-Interest and the movement out of one process into the start of another. Although Interests may be in some way related each to the other, the differing facet or aspect may be sufficient to begin the process anew. All in all, four possibilities of choice in movement exist:

1. progression
2. distraction to another Awareness-of-Interest
3. regression
4. remaining in a phase or essential theme.

Each segment of this process of learning as marked by the five dominant phases and the essential⁵ themes within each, represents the characteristic and essential behavior drawn directly from the grounds of experience in daily life.⁶ *Each represents a distinct change or shift from what was previously experienced.*

Finally, while behavior is commonly considered to be that which may be externally observed, in this work, behavior encompasses the totality of

overt expressions *as well as* what is being felt by the individual at the source of that behaving.

Phase I: Being Aware

One has to be aware of something in order to distinguish it from anything else. *Being Aware* provides the access, it is the opening door to the process of experiencing the unfamiliar.

That which is familiar requires minimal effort. That is why we so readily append certain meanings to that which is familiar: secure, safe, predictable and therefore comfortable. Facing the familiar or moving through its patterns is something we do with much confidence and little attention or energy, simply because it is already worn smooth with use and there are no snags to jar us.

But all this is quickly replaced with a flicker of attention when we note something different. There is a *Reflective Pause* during which a decision is made whether or not to move forward towards understanding this thing or not. At least three sets of interpretive practices occur:

1. a *collecting* of information
2. a brief *questioning* of that which is collected
3. a brief *comparing* with previous knowledge.

Each of these is based on superficial observations, readily attained. Dewey notes, "As long as our activity glides smoothly...there is no call for reflection" (Dewey, 1933:14), and reminds us that:

It is a commonplace of psychology that we do not attend to the old, or consciously mind that to which we are thoroughly accustomed (Dewey, 1933:289).

He therefore takes this opportunity to chastise teachers who insist on beginning lessons from the familiar and find the children "apathetic".

Accordingly, unless the familiar is presented under conditions that are in some respect unusual, there is no jog to the thinking, no demand is made upon hunting out something new and different (Dewey, 1933:290).

Within this phase of Being Aware, three essential themes are evident: Awareness-of-Interest, Curiosity and Seduction. It is *Awareness-of-Interest* (no matter how brief or fleeting) that gives birth to the powerful potential of *Curiosity: the need/desire to know more*. The power of Curiosity is an intensely personal, intensely internal one. It may be 'piqued' as we say, externally, but it resides in and derives from the specific *cultural matrix* of the individual.

Dewey equates "natural desire" with curiosity and the human need for "a fuller and closer knowledge of persons and things" (Dewey, 1933:248). He believes in the existence of three stages or levels of curiosity: a ceaseless display of exploring and testing, as social stimuli (e.g. the child asking, "Why is that?"), and the third stage of "intellectual...when curiosity is transformed into interest in finding out for oneself the answers to questions aroused by persons and things" (Dewey, 1933:37).

The difficulty in separating *Seduction* from both Curiosity and Awareness-of-Interest may testify to their interwoven relationship that tends to make them virtually indistinguishable. Seduction is commonly understood to include one or more inducements or enticements. More bluntly, it is the bait: *it is what you think you want and believe you can get*. Like the unwary fish, we each cling to the belief that we will be able to take the bait and avoid the hook. This may help to explain some of the disillusion occurring when learners discover that the beginner's course was just that; they may have felt it would make them an expert. Literacy education, workplace courses, parenting classes and weight loss programs seem to exude the promise of a better life, a better person or job, only to give way to the reality that the promise requires lifelong effort and vigilance.

Phase II: Observing

Dewey opens a section of his 1933 book with this title: "Observation Impelled by Sympathetic Interest in Extending Acquaintance" (Dewey, 1933:249). I have described the behavior of an individual moving into the second phase of *Observing, as just looking*. In a very real way, Dewey's "extending acquaintance" provides the link between Being Aware, which could be seen as that 'flicker of attention', and Observing, which suggests a longer hold of attention. Observing has no real focus at first, and no commitment or responsibility even to continue. But a certain *sustained awareness that gradually intensifies* becomes obvious in the essential theme of *Spectator*. Attentive, but distant from the scene of action, the Spectator's building Curiosity soon moves him/her for a closer look. Further persistence now becomes exemplified in the *Sightseer*, indicative of the transformed Spectator who now moves with the *express purpose of seeking out and focusing on an Awareness-of-Interest*. The Spectator, and increasingly the Sightseer, carries an air of confidence, discrimination and persistence.

Phase III: Acting (In-the-Scene)

The behavior in the Acting phase is clearly different from the previous two phases, which depicted various ways of looking in at something from the outside. *Acting* depicts *the entry into the scene (or thing) of interest*.

The Reflective pause used only occasionally in the previous phases now becomes the dominant behavior of the *Witness-Appraiser* busily collecting all that may be observed, and questioning and comparing it with what is

already known—and telling others about it too. In the process of doing this, since the comparisons are based on the individual's accumulated store of knowledge, the Witness-Appraiser is repeatedly delving a little deeper into that accumulation and increasing knowledge of self as well. The increasing personal confidence has been developed by superficially observing, yet the quality of such knowledge seems less important than the busy accumulation of quantity. The behavior of the Witness-Appraiser seems to melt into the *Cultural-Missionary*⁷ fired with the zeal to want to do something. The world seems clearly divided into two: those who have similar collections of knowledge and confidence about a certain something, and those who do not. It seems as clear as saying a have-culture and a have-not culture complete with values, behaviors and attitudes.

Eventually, so complete is this dichotomy of 'cultures' that individual differentiations blur as all others are seen as being alike. Such a judgemental sweeping up of other individuals (or things) into one indistinguishable mass, I have named as *Cluster-Judgement*.

More precisely, the intertwining of the essential themes of Cultural-Missionary and Cluster-Judgement encompass these aspects:

1. a clear sense of differentiation between one's own culture and that of others (thing or group of things);
2. the conviction of the rightness of one's own culture;
3. the two-fold capacity which enables one to see no fault with one's own culture, and thus its appropriateness for all others lacking it; and at the same time one's unquestioned assumption that others need or want this *right away* ;
4. the conviction that those who do not share one's own culture (or thing) really have nothing, so better-with-mine-than-with-nothing-at-all;
5. an overpowering charitable desire to share one's culture with others less fortunate (or impose?).

Dewey does not use this terminology of Cultural-Missionary or Cluster-Judgement, but he has strong words to say about the essential narrowness of vision and dogmatism and even authoritarianism that they depict. In particular, he rails against the authoritarian and superior teacher, the incessant demand for letter-perfect memorizing and subsequent reciting, the use of ready-made (and unquestioned) definitions, and the deadly effect of routines upon the intellect (Dewey, 1933:58-64).

...verbal and mechanical memory...versus judicious memory: the latter seizes the bearings of what is retained and recalled; it can

therefore use the material in new situations where verbal memory would be at a complete loss (Dewey, 1933:79).

But in themselves these definitions are second-hand and conventional; there is danger that instead of inciting one to effort after personal experience that will exemplify and verify them, they will be accepted on authority for direct observation and experiment (Dewey, 1933:162).

The cumulated behaviors are present throughout the process, yet give way to the dominance of certain behavior that presses the shift into the next phase or essential theme. Seduction may now, for example, emerge more boldly and flirtatiously than before. The essential themes of Cultural-Missionary (or authoritarian teacher) and Cluster-Judgement (students are ignorant alike), even though the bearers of negative traits, have served both to increase self-knowledge and to bring the individual closer to the Interest. As Interest and Curiosity intensify, Seduction may actually originate (or increase) from within the individual's own daydreaming and imagination that serves to expand the Interest (and the believed enticements) beyond reality.

The ballooning qualities of all-knowing confidence, the embellished self-conceived image of reality, together with "thinking it is what you want and believing you can get it"—all based only on superficial observation and superficial reflection (Reflective Pause), push one into the essential theme of *Living-the-life-of*.

Living-the-life-of represents the ultimate expression of believed familiarity with the Interest. (Margaret Lawrence, the great Canadian novelist told the story of the brain surgeon who, after telling her that he enjoyed one of her recent novels, remarked, "When I retire, I think I will write novels". To which Lawrence remarked wryly, "Yes, and I will become a brain surgeon!") Participating "like the natives", seemingly accepting and accepted, this theme represents comfort without present commitment, ongoing concern or even any past rootedness. It provides (like the entire phase of Acting) a means to appear to be really a part of what is going on, to be fully participating/experiencing not only to oneself but usually to others, but without any responsibility, commitment or connectedness: in short—without becoming involved. In other writings (Barer-Stein, 1985; 1987) I have used the analogy of the entire phase of Acting as a talented actor upon a stage, or better, as a potted tree whose presence adds a decorative note to the scene, but upon removal leaves no trace.

Intermittent Reflections

Throughout the learning process depicted so far, the subtle shifts in behavior and the exhuming of the essential themes within (all from the crosscultural experiences of one ESL teacher), became apparent through the persistence of two questions:

1. what is the individual *really* doing?
2. what differing behavior marks each shift?

Being Aware, Observing and Acting are common behaviors in everyday life. Some of the essential themes may be enlightening but overall there is a familiar ring. *But that is precisely the point that must not be overlooked.* For what I have done here is simply to "halt to re-examine (meticulously) what is really very ordinary". It is in the examination of the ordinary in our everyday life—that which makes it what it is—that we can hope to gain an understanding of that everyday life in which each of us is immersed:⁸ our cultural matrix.

All of these phases are characterised in greater or lesser degree by passivity, distancing from Interest, willing acceptance of superficiality (even its cultivation in terms of outward gestures and behaviors, appearances), and the misconception that the Reflective Pause is synonymous with reflective thinking. At the very core of these first three phases is the soporific passivity that unquestioningly seeks and accepts authority, dogma and even routine and ritual; in fact the opposites, shared responsibility, flexibility and a questioning stance, are considered to be disquieting. ("Just tell me what you want me to do...") Heidegger (1962:163-168) speaks of this quality of "averageness" almost as of an all-pervasive and oppressive blanket of inertia militating against any spark of Curiosity in the individual. Dewey (1933:194) clearly depicts this phenomenon as well:

Certain men or classes of men come to be the accepted guardians and transmitters—instructors—of established doctrines. *To question the beliefs is to question their authority; to accept the beliefs is evidence of loyalty to the powers that be, a proof of good citizenship.* Passivity docility, acquiescence come to be primal intellectual virtues. Facts and events providing novelty and variety are slighted or sheared down till they fit into the procrustean bed of *habitual belief*. Inquiry and doubt are silenced by citation of laws or a multitude of miscellaneous and unsifted cases. *This attitude of mind generates a dislike of change* and the resulting aversion to novelty is fatal to progress. What will not fit into the established canon is outlawed; men who make new discoveries are objects of suspicion and even persecution. Beliefs that perhaps were originally the products of originality and careful observation are *stereotyped into fixed traditions and semisacred dogmas, accepted simply for their authority* and are mixed with fantastic conceptions that ... to have won the acceptance of the authorities. (italics mine)

Initially I had mentioned that it was possible to remain in one phase. Acting seems to be the most comfortable, requiring the least effort (little effort past the initial ones) and seeming to yield the most in outward appearance of participating/experiencing. (This calls into question the enormous research efforts in adult education directed towards studying

'adult participation' (Courtney, 1981), especially since these were largely conducted as scientific *observations*.) As "average" and as "public" as this phase has been described, it exemplifies the self-ness of the first three phases all together: being self-satisfied with brevity, superficiality, unwilling to expend great effort. Any surge of Curiosity to be different or to do different things is readily suppressed with the assertion that 'nothing is really new' or with 'everyone knows that'. Over all, the self-conceived image of reality is easier than the effort to confront or understand the true reality—or the authentic self.

To shift from comfortable security and familiarity deliberately into something that is none of these things, is difficult. It means a change. It is a voluntary choice to move toward and into the unknown; a position always clouded with anxiety if not fear. Above all, to make a conscious choice to shift away and out of the familiar into (or close to) the unfamiliar is an implicit if not explicit willingness to accept the possibility of change.

The commonality of the first three phases share the special quality of togetherness that resides in 'averageness' and in mediocrity. Never to aspire to be different, to do differently, or to think differently, at least assures one of a company of equals and the security of sameness. Dewey (1933:238) expresses it like this:

...to get and give correct answers, to follow prescribed formulae of analysis, the pupil's attitude becomes *mechanical rather than thoughtful*; verbal memorizing is substituted for *inquiry into the meaning of things*. (italics mine)

And it was Dewey who emphasized that "Learning in the proper sense is not learning things, but the meaning of things" (Dewey, 1933:236-7), and stated further that:

...ability to repeat catch-phrases, cant terms, familiar propositions, *gives the conceit of learning and coats the mind with a varnish that waterproofs it to new ideas*. (italics mine)

Phase IV: Confronting

It is possible that even the comfortable individual, long a resident in the Acting phase of any particular Interest, momentarily driven by a surge of Curiosity and perhaps Seduction, may move forward to the *Confronting* phase. Commonly, 'confronting' is taken to imply conflict. Its essential meaning, however, *is a coming face to face*. This expresses exactly the closeness and the sudden silent realisation that occurs when two entities face and thus really see each other for the first time (of course it is possible that recognition may occur). Face to face and in this fullness of direct close attention is what I mean by Confronting.

But what has happened here that has not happened previously? What can draw one from complacency to the anxiety of unfamiliarity?

Faced with something or someone unfamiliar, quite inexplicably the application of familiar well-used 'tools', (the Reflective Pause) *does not yield meaning*. The explaining tools don't work: a hammer will not turn a screw. This fact of 'not-working' alone may precipitate wide-eyed Confronting and even increase Curiosity. It is jarring, startling. Nor is this unusual, for others have noted in some way that perplexity, doubt, confusion, the unexpected—each stimulate focused attention and subsequent reflection. Gadamer (1975:237) speaks of this as the "experience of being brought up short"; Mezirow (1981) has named such an experience "a discordant experience"; Dewey (1933:13) speaks of "whatever...perplexes and challenges the mind so that it makes belief at all uncertain...".

The abrupt confronting of difference or the unfamiliar is not always an externality, it may be the discovery of the unfamiliar in one's self rather than in one's everyday life. Either way, this can be devastating when Living-the-life-of has become believable and entrenched. The security erected on the shifting sands of superficiality topples when faced with the deeply-rooted unfamiliarity that has now emerged from the depths of Submerged Knowledge.⁹

As at every point of a shift in behavior, the individual has a choice:

1. to choose to be *passive*: to ignore the Confrontation or at least to meet and pass in a way that expresses no apparent reaction or forward movement;
2. to choose to engage in *conflict*: to engage in verbal or physical battle (including the subterfuges of battle such as distraction and surprise attacks) in the hope of winning one's way through strategy to prove that there really is not a differing way or thing;
3. to choose to *withdraw*: usually implying a retreat from this source of anxiety into oneself, one's past familiar world; and may also represent a halt to forward progression.

In the work from which the account of this learning process has been taken (Barer-Stein, 1987), I have compared this whole phase of Confronting with the possible interplay of its choices, to the behavior of a cat suddenly confronting the twitching end of his tail as though it were a quarry to be stalked and caught. Round and round it goes, to no avail; a pause and then it tries the alternate direction. Suddenly bored with this useless exercise, it seems to abruptly notice something much more important and stalks haughtily off, tail in the air.

The individual engaged in this interplay of choices (now trying one and now the other) is actually playing the cat game. The pretence of distraction is

easier than closely examining the reality that the tail is part of oneself, one's daily life, one's culture. It is worthy of close scrutiny.

How frequently the matter of choice is presented as an absolutely random or arbitrary movement, yet the choice of a choice is not at all arbitrary. *The initial entry into any Awareness-of-Interest represents but one of countless possibilities of Interests each linked with the other by virtue of their emergence from one and the same ground: the individual's cultural matrix.* Elsewhere I have explained this in detail (Barer-Stein, 1985, 1987); suffice it here to recall that while there are many ways of considering the meaning of culture itself, I have come to my own expression (1985:2):

...culture is expressive of the many unique ways in which individuals group together, compose, understand and live their daily lives and in so doing, transmit a way of daily living to others.

Such a means of expressing culture permits the possibility of its including socio-economic status, gender, age, profession, and so on, even to being considered as a series of sub-cultures, each augmenting the individual's identity and connectedness. In this way each person is a conglomerate yet unique composition of the sum of culture and sub-cultures *without which the individual could not be that which he/she is.* One's world is viewed through the glass of this lifelong implantation of values, beliefs and attitudes; reality is made sense of, and language and behavior shape its expression. In this way, through verbal and non-verbal transmission enveloped in the primal need to belong, the expression of cultural norms becomes the 'stuff' of learning. Montagu (1968) emphasizes that cultural identity is not inherited but is learned. It is also dynamic and continually evolving with the human experiences that it exemplifies. From this deeply imbedded cultural matrix does Interest emerge and ignite that flicker of initial attention.

Dewey, too, reflects on the links between experiences, and in many instances in his 1933 book, purportedly directed to teachers of children—about children—he refers to adults:

...the carrying over of skill and understanding from one experience to another is dependent on the existence of like elements in both experiences (p. 67).

And more to the point:

Adults normally carry on some occupation, profession, pursuit and this furnishes the stabilizing axis about which their knowledge, their beliefs and their habits of reaching and testing conclusions are organized (p. 49).

Accompanying choice, as close companions on all occasions, are questions. The matter of choice itself implies an implicit question. Figure No. 2 offers another way of seeing the learning process, as well as the educative process, in terms of a series of such questions.

Figure No. 2: Characteristic Questioning Within the Phases

	Phase	Dominant Question
I	Being Aware	"What is this?"
II	Observing	"How does this compare with what I know?"
III	Acting	"Shall I try it out?"
IV	Confronting	"Do I know this?" "Do I want to?"
V	Involving	"How did this come to be?" "What are the possibilities?" "Which make sense?" "What is the relevant meaning for me?"
	Paradox of Involvement	"I understand this—what else (awareness-of-interest) is there?"

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Phase V: Involving

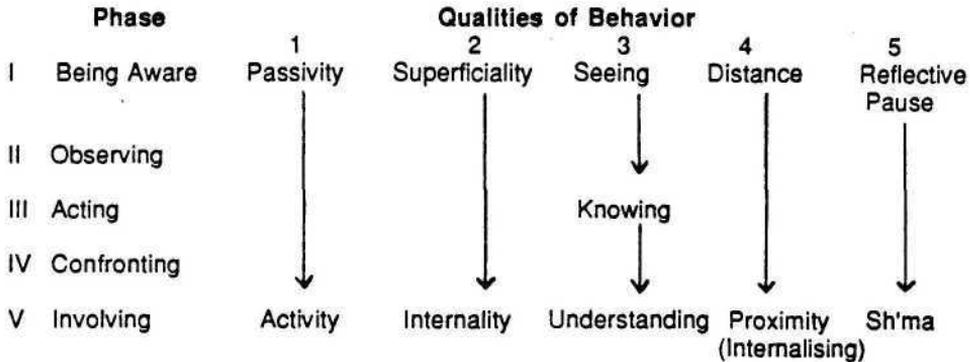
With the Curiosity-driven questioning of "How did this come to be?", the individual has side-stepped the cat game and catapulted immediately into Involving. To ask *how* something different and unfamiliar came to be that which is, to ask such a question that can only find answer in the peeling away of layers of meaning until the innermost essential quality is laid bare, is to show an openness to that fourth choice that lies beyond passivity, conflict, and withdrawal, that is:

...to choose to engage in the *Sh'ma*—that process through which Submerged Knowledge may be disclosed in order to make possible the discovery of personally relevant meaning. This four-fold behavior encompasses: hearing/listening, reflecting/heeding.

This "deeply burrowing inward reflection" (Barer-Stein, 1985), so like the careful exhuming of the field archeologist, removing and sifting layer

after layer, also shares the archeologist's inability to predict the outcome. The archeologist seeks hidden treasures from the past, the Involving individual seeks understanding, and its special place together with all other personally relevant meanings.

Figure No. 3: The Sequential Intensifying of Behaviors



Also: -from 'easily removed' to 'rootedness'
 -from 'minimal information to profound information'
 -increasing accumulation of the 'thing'
 -increasing interest of the 'thing'

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Perhaps the most significant aspect of Figure No. 3 is the distinction between 'knowing' and 'understanding'. For educators such distinction is crucial. Dewey (1933:148) noted:

It is assumed too frequently that subject matter is understood when it has been stored in memory and can be reproduced on demand. The net outcome of our discussion is that *nothing is really known except insofar as it is understood.* (italics mine)

To emphasize this difference between 'knowing' and 'understanding', and to pursue Dewey's thoughts above, one can imagine the "subject matter stored in memory" as so many books stored on a shelf: we may know where to find them and even something of what is written within, but we do not really understand their content until we have reflectively grasped their expressed meaning in our own everyday life.

To move from Acting (knowing) into Involving (understanding) can only be achieved through the Sh'ma. Taken from the Hebrew word *shema* which means 'to hear' but which also commonly implies to hear and to heed (as in the central prayer of Judaism, *The Shema* (Hertz, 1972:920-924), the Sh'ma is not a body of knowledge to be learned nor even a method to be memorized. It encompasses a broad grasp of reflective thinking that

includes what is necessary to come to that thinking, what may be involved within the thinking itself, and its outcomes. It is most akin to phenomenological thinking¹⁰ that seeks to unfold and to exhume and disclose meanings and possibilities of meanings. Its ways are groping, angular, circular and even looping back and forth. Since the act of thinking transcends any depicted methodology¹¹, such reflective thinking transcends any methodological limitations and must also be as uniquely engaged in and enacted upon, as the individual doing it. Because my use of this term, Sh'ma, is intended to embody the totality of such an individual process, it can only be explicated in broad brush strokes as: hearing/listening, reflecting/heeding:

1. the *hearing* represents the awareness and immediate recognition of what is heard¹², pressed forward by the intensity of Curiosity and likely past experience of the enticement of such knowing;
2. the *listening* represents the close attentiveness of a dialogue with the thing: an opening of oneself, a willingness to see differently¹³;
3. the *reflecting* represents on the one hand a playful freeing of the mind to imagine, to project, but also to collect from Surface and Submerged Knowledge¹⁴, from comparisons and inferences a display of all possible possibilities. Then begins the 'trying out' to see which fits best and "makes no sense to doubt" (Blum, 1970). Such reflecting continually moves forward and loops back with the questioning of

How did this come to be?

What possibilities made this possible?

Which possibilities make sense?

In this context: Which is relevant for me?

4. the *heeding* represents the new-found appreciation and understanding of the thing and the consequent vigilance for its appearance, care and use. It represents the now effortless movement to embrace and enclose the 'thing' precisely because of the effort of discovering its meaningful place for the self.

Within itself, the Sh'ma represents and reflects the larger PROCESS OF LEARNING AS A PROCESS OF EXPERIENCING THE UNFAMILIAR in the phases it shifts through of Being Aware, Observing, Acting, and Confronting embraced with Involving in the Sh'ma. Confronting the unfamiliar with a confident shift to Sh'ma, and thus to Involving, forms the central point of the entire process of learning.

For Dewey, reflective thinking in some form is also central and essential to the educative process he is encouraging teachers of children to understand (Dewey, 1933). From his title *How We Think*, to his many explanations of reflective thinking, he, too, stresses the necessity of "unconstrained mental play in the early stages of acquaintance with a subject" and the alternation of "projection and reflection" (without

recognising that projection is an aspect of reflection) and even "random experimenting" (Dewey, 1933:282) as the beginning of "thinking". Two techniques within reflective thinking are particularly stressed by Dewey:

1. *Inference* is the process of arriving at an idea of what is absent on the basis of what is at hand... Inference involves a leap...a jump from the known to the unknown (p. 95).

Inference relates to what is possible rather than to what is actual. It proceeds by anticipation, supposition, conjecture, imagination (p. 104).

2. *Abstracting* gets the mind emancipated from conspicuous familiar traits that hold it fixed by their very familiarity. Thereby it acquires *the ability to dig underneath the already known* to some unfamiliar property or relation that is intellectually more significant because it makes possible a more extensive reference (p. 201). (italics mine)

Dewey alludes to what I have previously depicted (Barer-Stein, 1985, 1987) as Surface and Submerged Knowledge. In another part of his 1933 book he even refers to the five phases or aspects of reflective thought as: suggestions, intellectualizations, hypotheses or ideas, mental elaboration of those and finally testing by overt or imaginative action (p. 107). Finally, to emphasize the centrality and the crucial quality of reflective thinking to the educative process of children, Dewey himself has italicized this section:

The function of reflective thought is therefore, to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious (p. 100).

It seems that within one sentence, Dewey has anticipated and almost described the process of learning that I would observe fifty-two years later. In one articulate expression, he has condensed Confronting and Involving, the central aspects of the learning process—yet he is speaking of an *educative process*.

To continue the analogy of the tree that I presented to clarify the notion of Acting, it could be said that Involving is represented by a deliberately planted tree with its spreading roots burrowing into clinging and nourishing soil. Those intertwining roots and soil represent a reciprocal connectedness from which extrication would prove wrenching, even damaging. Furthermore, Involving is a willful shift, not just towards something but *actually becoming one with the thing itself*, the movement in itself connoting willing, inextricable, and meaningful connectedness (Barer-Stein, 1985, 1987).

Dewey, too, had a strong notion of this sense of oneness, completion when he wrote:

To experience a thing fully is in familiar phrase to get a 'realizing sense of it':...to have it come home to one, to have it take possession...Barriers and obstructions that have previously come between the mind and some object, truth or situation, fall away. The mind and subject seem to come together and unite. This is the state of affairs that is designated by the word 'appreciation'...experienced with a heightened intensity of value (1933:277).

The Paradox of Involving

I have attempted, in Figure No. 1, to show that the Paradox of Involving is not another phase, but a phenomenon that commonly occurs with the entrenchment of the Awareness-of-Interest into the deeply worn ruts of understanding. The more deeply the Involving becomes, the more has the Interest now become internalized as an inextricable part of oneself, and the more insidiously it threads its way within the common, habitual daily activities of the individual.

This is the same as saying that to be truly Involved would be to be able to take something for granted, or to say, *the better you know something the less you are aware of knowing it*. Seldom really noticed, it is this growing familiarity with which the final phase of Involving is gradually tipped and then tilted towards a new Awareness-of-Interest.

And in 1933, Dewey was saying:

It is significant that one meaning of the term 'understand' is something so thoroughly mastered, so completely agreed upon as to be assumed: that is to say, something taken as a matter of course without explicit statement. The familiar "it goes without saying" means "it is understood" (p. 280).

And was this another way to describe learning itself?

There is no end to this spiral process: foreign subject matter transformed through thinking into a familiar possession becomes a resource for judging and assimilating additional foreign matter (Dewey, 1933:291).

Or was Dewey anticipating the movement towards "Lifelong Learning"? The striking congruency between the various aspects of the learning process and what Dewey has explicated as an "educative process" leaves little room for argument that each process not only validates the other, but enhances the meaning of teaching as "guiding learning." The congruency of these two processes and the centrality of reflective thinking in each is further emphasized in Figure No. 4.

Figure No. 4: Explications of Learning Process Compared with Dewey's Explications of Educative Process

LEARNING PROCESS

I. Being Aware:

"Something here is different"

Reflective Pause:

- Collecting)
- Questioning) Superficial, Brief
- Comparing)

Occurs When:

1. Something is different or unfamiliar
2. Some aspect of the familiar seems different
3. Deliberate effort to reflect: "halt to examine the ordinary"

Essential Themes:

Awareness-of-Interest:

- the glance or pause that denotes "something different or unfamiliar"

Curiosity:

- a desire/need to know more (anticipation, excitement, suspense)

Seduction:

- the bait: what you think you want and hope you can get

II. Observing:

"just looking"

Spectator: Distant sustained awareness

Sightseer: With purpose of focusing and seeking out interest

III. Acting In-The-Scene):

"entry into the scene of interest"

Witness-Appraiser: busy with many

"reflective pauses", collecting, questioning, comparing (superficial, brief)

Cultural-Missionary: "the zeal to want to do something--and belief in self as best"

Cluster-Judgement: "inability to differentiate individuals from groups, parts from whole"

Living-The-Life-Of: Accepting & Accepted

"ultimate expression of believed familiarity"

EDUCATIVE PROCESS

"As long as an activity glides smoothly, there is no call for reflection" (14)

"The familiar and the near do not excite"(289)

"We do not attend to the old, or consciously mind that to which we are accustomed" (289)

"Reflection begins with significance, expectations of characteristic behaviours, a filtering process of selection of meanings...he tries to apply in every new experience whatever result of his old experience will help him understand and deal with it" (156)

"all persons have a natural desire--akin to curiosity-- ...for a fuller and wider knowledge" (248)
(aware = acquaintance)

"observation is impelled by sympathetic interest in extending acquaintance" (249)

"accepted on authority as substitutes for direct observation and experiment"

"but only information acquired by thinking can be put to logical use" (64)

"external standards manifests itself in the importance attached to the right answer" (66)

"passivity of mind" (261)

"habitual belief" (194)

"accepted simply and solely on authority" (194)

BEING AWARE) "public-ness, average"
OBSERVING) -Acceptance of Authority
ACTING) -Passive
) -Accept Dogma, Ritual,
) Routine

"whatever requires little effort or reflection"
"quantity more important than quality, depth"

IV. Confronting:

"as a coming face to face"

Occurs When:

"this unfamiliar thing will not yield meaning
through the (superficial) Reflective Pause"

Choices:

1. *Passive*
2. *Conflict*
3. *Withdraw*

"the 'cat-game' of distraction rather than
examining the reality that is part of one's
life"

V. Involving/Understanding:

"discovery of personally relevant meaning"

Choice:

4. *SH/MA*: understanding, internality,
proximity to interest from engagement in:

HEARING/LISTENING
REFLECTING/HEEDING

Paradox of Involving:

"the better you know something the less you
are aware of knowing it"

"...threading its way deeply within the
common, habitual daily activities"

"Passivity of mind dulls curiosity and
generates mind wandering" (261)

"the origin of thinking is perplexity, doubt,
confusion" (15)

"the difficulties of an experience are to be
cherished as the natural stimuli to thinking"
(87)

"thinking begins with a disturbance to one's
equilibrium" (15)

"nothing is really known except insofar as
understood" (100)

"to experience a thing fully is to have it take
possession...mind & subject seem to unite
(277)

"function of reflective thought is to transform
obscurity, doubt,...to a situation of coherence,
clarity, harmony" (100)

"projection & reflection should alternate"
(282)

"thoughtful persons are heedful" (76)

"meaning of the term 'understand' as so
completely mastered & agreed upon as to be
assumed"—"it goes without saying" (280)

"habits that introduce coherence into our
experience without our being aware of their
operation" (161)

TOTALITY OF THE PROCESS:

"Understanding of a subject or of a new aspect
of an old subject must always be through acts
of experiencing directly" (162)

Collected Reflections and Possible Implications for Adult Educators

Since Thomas (1986) has suggested that further glimpses into the "true meaning of learning" may enhance the practice of adult educators, this paper has attempted to provide such glimpses within the two perspectives suggested by Thomas (1986): one that is independent of any educational system (Barer-Stein, 1987) and one that is independent "even of the education of adults"—hence the chosen educative process as depicted by Dewey for teachers of children. Using the framework of "Learning as a Process of Experiencing the Unfamiliar" (Barer-Stein, 1985, 1987) selected excerpts from Dewey's 1933 work, *How We Think*, were discussed.

Initially, this very juxtaposition of two philosophically reflective works seems to add credence to Dewey's contention that "philosophy should be cultivated to deal with the problems of men" because "philosophy is a phenomenon of human culture" (1933:cover). It also seems to strengthen speculation of a strong relationship both existing and necessary between education (what educators do) and learning (what learners do). For as Dewey noted, the process of educating children is "the art of guiding learning" (1933:266).

Nor does he leave any doubt as to *what* that learning must entail:

There is nothing educative in an activity, however agreeable that does not lead the mind out into new fields (p. 217).

And finally, his memorable words:

Learning is learning to think... (p. 78).

Learning in the proper sense, is not learning things, but the meaning of things... (p. 236).

If we concede that this examination of two perspectives of learning, one independent of education and the other independent of the education of adults has yielded a further glimpse of learning itself, we still must ask, "What does this mean for adult educators?" A relationship between educating and learning has long been a cherished assumption that has now been shown to have some basis in human behavior. If educating and learning can be seen as congruent processes that may progress through like phases, what can be gained for the adult educator through understanding these phases and their essential themes? How might the understanding of the centrality of a form of reflective thinking practically affect the tasks within the educator's practice?

It is possible that such understanding (not resting at a mere 'knowing') may enable an adult educator:

1. to recognise the phase of teaching and the phase of learning attained at any point by both educator and learner;
2. to determine if the learner's interest is progressing or waning;
3. to frequently introduce challenges of doubt, perplexity, unfamiliarity;
4. to support, encourage and guide the learner's progress in a forward movement;
5. to offer assurance to the learner that each shift of behavior is simply a part of a process;
6. to help the learner reflect on their choices of possibilities;
7. to present information and skills as incomplete, unformed, undefined, requiring—demanding—the reflective engagement of the learner (encouraging the explorer or detective approach);
8. to guide learners towards seeking relevant meaning for themselves, in their own contexts (family, community, world);
9. to encourage projects and activities that create links with what is known and familiar and what may be enticingly explored;
10. to provide time for thought within each project or program;
11. to be open to pursuing related topics, relevant concerns;
12. to retain a personal awareness of what it means to be aware, to be observing, to be acting, to be confronting and to be involving;
13. to recognise the role of reflective questioning (the 'how' questions) towards understanding and appreciating.

Educators must reflectively question their own tasks of planning, administering, marketing and teaching. While adult educators speak so familiarly of 'needs' and 'participation', a vigilant awareness of the phases and essential themes within a learning process as shown here, may help to develop a hesitancy about both concepts, since each must be continuously appraised in the light of the inherent dynamism of all human experience. Do I 'need' today, this moment, what I expressed as a 'need' yesterday, a month ago? Is there a possibility that my 'participation' (a euphemism for learning?) waxes and wanes even as my Curiosity?

The recognition by adult educators that their own task of educating others may be more effective, more efficient, and more exhilarating if they themselves could come to grips with the fact that each group, each class, each situation or project or program, is never quite the same as the one

before; there is always at least an element of difference, of unfamiliarity—and therefore an entry into a process of learning for the educator! Add to this that each group of people differs by virtue of the unique individuals within each and there arises added and growing incentive for the adult educator to confront each difference with the Sh'ma.

But we must return to the fact that a learning process as depicted herein is grounded in the everyday experience of an adult, whereas Dewey's educative process is intended for teachers of children. Can we derive any implications out of the congruency of these two processes about the possible relationship of education and learning in the everyday lives—within the context of schooling and outside of it—of adults and children? Dewey's main thrust was the singular aim of awakening the child's innate Curiosity and of helping to guide and sustain it towards and through a reflective thinking experience. Can we substitute 'adult' for 'child', or might we progress by a more serious and practical application of the term 'learner' to replace either adult or child?

Presenting the incomplete, the unexpected, avoiding routine and dogma and eschewing the temptation of control and authority, what then remains for the educator?

What remains is a clearer picture of what educating could be. It could be given the willingness to risk, the willingness to be flexible and the willingness to be open to change synonymous for both educator and learner. It could be a collaboration of experiences, ideas, imaginings, projections and inferences. So-called¹⁵ experiential learning could be a mutual experience of deciding, planning and doing. Most importantly, regardless of the subject at hand, each excursion into the unfamiliar could be a reinforcement and an expansion of individual Sh'ma: a more intensified hearing, a more open listening, a broader display of possibilities within reflecting, and a more vigilant and conscious heeding.

Notes

¹The sources of discussion and quotations, and all figures except Figure No. 4, are taken from previous publications:

Barer-Stein, Thelma, "Learning as a Process of Experiencing the Unfamiliar", *Studies in the Education of Adults*, U.K. N.I.A.C.E. October 1987.

Dewey, John, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*, Boston: D.C. Heath, 1933.

²The original research detailing the grounds of the findings and the research approach are to be found in Barer-Stein, 1985.

³The listing of the "Universal Aspects of Learning" are taken from Thomas, 1983 and also quoted in Barer-Stein, 1987.

⁴See Barer-Stein, 1985 for the detailed grounds of these findings.

⁵The use of the term 'essential' in a phenomenological work is derived from Husserl, 1913. He stated that what is essential to a thing is "that

- without which the thing could not be what it is".
- ⁶The grounds of our experience in daily life become the 'stuff' of investigational research in a phenomenological work. No experimental situation is contrived, no variables are deleted or limited. What attracts the researcher, what commands attention and demands explanation—is how some matters dominate while others recede: it is a matter (as in daily life) of relevance.
- ⁷Throughout this work the term 'culture' is to each individual as water is to each fish; we exist within it, we are shaped by it and we cannot live without it. Used as in "Cultural-Missionary" it refers to the broadest possible interpretation of culture.
- ⁸Immersion in culture (as in the note 7 above) is not a matter of choice or selection it is what we are and what we have emerged from, and it is within us and around us—our baggage, our identity, the sum total of our daily living.
- ⁹My use of Submerged Knowledge and Surface Knowledge is more detailed in Barer-Stein, 1985 and 1987. Briefly, Surface Knowledge is that knowing of which we are readily aware, while Submerged Knowledge refers to each individual's storehouse of knowings which requires varying degrees of effort to exhume (literally dig out and bring to light) in order to discover relevant meaning.
- ¹⁰This description is quoted from Barer-Stein, 1985:44-45:
 To think phenomenologically is to force aside the natural reticence of thinking about what is *not* exposed and of what has *not* been said (as well as what has):
 It is to reflect on that which is known and visible (Surface Knowings) as well as what is not (Submerged Knowings);
 And it is to call forth an assembly of all possible facets of these Surface and Submerged Knowings for concentrated reflection;
 It is to encompass within each act of reflecting an analytical separating and then an interpretive reunion into new possibilities of meaning 'that it makes no sense to doubt'.
- ¹¹The notion that thinking transcends method may be easier to grasp when we realise that methodology is derived from reflective thinking, and similarly is improved or changed. Thinking can be directed or temporarily constrained by a methodology, but thinking cannot be limited to a particular way. (See also Gadamer, 1985:25).
- ¹²See Heidegger (1962:206-207) for an elucidation of the notion of hearing as existentially primary and that what is first heard is readily identified as the 'what' of hearing. Whether or not we progress in this 'what' dependent upon individual interest. I have felt that hearing seems to draw a little more individual attention than does 'seeing', also "existentially primary", but which may be more cursory than it is possible to be with a hearing.
- ¹³From Barer-Stein (1985), the subject expresses openness:
 I think there is a quality of the mind, a willingness to move into a different way of seeing, a willingness to understand a different point of view at least to entertain it, to listen...
- ¹⁴See Note 9 and 10 above.

¹⁵I have used "so-called" with the intent to raise at least a questioning eyebrow. Each educator must ask him/herself the extent to which an individual has really had meaningful (thoughtful) participation in any 'learning experience'. Who decided it was needed? Who planned it and organized it? Who actually did it? Who made sense of it?

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