

## **A Pedagogy of Cultural Awareness - A Phenomenological Approach to Knowledge and Learning**

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### **Exposé**

The need to grasp constant personal change forms the core of pedagogy. During adolescence personality is in continuous development: the significance of life situations and environments constantly changes; experiences and background knowledge are featured in new discontinuous ways; and personal abilities, subjective motivations and learning goals alter noticeably. Personality development is shaped by the interaction with cultural difference. Cultural awareness not merely concerns relating and comparing abstract contents of one's own cultural environment to other such environments, but foremost to understand oneself in foreign terms. Subjective and specific factors play a central role in this developmental process. The very task of pedagogy is to accompany, to grasp, and to bring about personal changes. How can pedagogical progress in terms of a personality development be understood as knowledge-based? This contribution argues against the positivistic view of knowledge and knowledge acquisition that currently predominates. Moreover, it argues that subjective and particular factors in pedagogy can be best understood as tacit knowledge. From this backdrop, it reframes some of pedagogy's conceptual references. In the interest of intellectual rigor, this reframing is achieved utilizing the body-phenomenological perspective on learning.

### **Knowledge as Object of Analysis: Methodological Reflections**

We usually speak of knowledge as both fixed, widely-accepted and attestable facts and information, and as awareness and familiarity gained by experience. In the English language, knowledge is also and equivalently understood as knowing: The gerund *knowing* means proving a hypothesis, perceiving and skilfully acting, gaining empirical evidence, performing skills and practices, applying methods, and getting insights by

thinking. In the field of pedagogy, the terms *knowledge* and *knowing* are often used synonymously. In pedagogy, foremost the definition of knowledge through genesis is indicated. When it comes to adolescence, however, singularities, discontinuity, and opacity play a central role in the genesis of knowledge. Thus, evident factors and features, such as skills, methods and reflections, are accompanied by tacit dimensions. Let us go more deeply into this idea.

In the first place, knowledge is supposed to be obtained through systematic enquiry that begins with clear objectives and applies methodical procedures imposed by a competent investigator (e.g. a teacher or pupil). The explicitness of knowledge and knowing thus implies the well-defined distinction of subject and object, as well as a clear relationship between the two: A person *knows something*, or *s/he knows somebody*, and *s/he knows that s/he does so*. Such knowing – the result of identification – offers a form of security. Accordingly, the state of not knowing carries menacing implications and thus appears undesirable. *Not knowing* not only expresses a clear sign of insufficiency; it may also imply a problematic (normal) personal intellectual or psychological state. In teaching and learning, not knowing results in repressions and accusations. On the part of the learner, it can lead to escapism. Thus, it appears as a problem and as a personality attribution, and is viewed negatively in pedagogical contexts. At best, it implies chance and a going-to-be.—However, once upon a time Socrates considered wondering and admitting one’s own ignorance to be the beginning of wisdom. To a certain degree, Socrates’ wisdom also seems to be needed for dealing with the problems of adolescence such as the singularities and breaks, the discontinuity and opacity in the maturation process of a personality.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002 [1947]) deliberate the explicitness of knowledge and knowing from a critical angle. They discuss the forced neediness of definite knowledge and the acceptance of reason as the primary source of social legitimacy and authority as the two fundamental ideas of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment. Their point is that these fundamental ideas led to the repression and concealment of the state of not knowing; such concealment also counts for the tacit dimensions of a positivistic understanding of knowing and knowledge. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, exclusive legitimation by reason is accompanied by momentous irrational fear of the unknown; they write: “Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no

longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization.” (Ibid., 11) They describe how, by extinguishing the unknown, the world and nature become enlightened<sup>1</sup>, i.e. rationalized; this counts not least for the nature within human beings: The shoving aside, exploitation, or destruction of the particular, the other, the different, establishes and justifies a clear order of domination, graspable as e.g. abstractly processed cultural contents. Horkheimer and Adorno (Ibid., 8) predict that a society exclusively pursuing such an idea of progress concomitantly develops superstition; “[...] with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology.” An example of such mythology is a collectively shared fetish, such as, e.g., a material object with only a speculative intrinsic value that is regarded with exaggerated reverence. Fetishes today are integral and well-promoted elements of the world of consumption, but not of education. However, the very personal experiences, feelings, and judgements, as well as the particularities of adolescence are represented neither by rationalization alone, nor by mythology. Instead, it is personal knowledge that is grounded in the specific experiences of familiarity, understanding, and recognition. Examples of such knowledge include: *mastering the finesse involved in successfully navigating a contentious argument, understanding propositional beliefs in expected behavior, and mastering socially accepted joy or suffering*. Personal knowledge is situated knowledge, personal competence, tacit knowing and knowledge, know-how, or knowing-in-action, practical and, not least, understanding oneself in foreign cultural terms.

Let us at first focus on tacit knowledge. Harry Collins (2010) distinguishes between relational, somatic, and collective tacit knowledge. Thus, he describes the contingent features of knowledge relating to interpersonal interaction or attention, knowledge based on the physical properties and limitations of the human body, and knowledge that is located in a group of people. Tacit knowledge or knowing is neither generalizable, nor articulated and articulable. It is an integral part of the perceptions, skills, practices, methods, and thought processes that prove a hypothesis, or that put realities into effect,

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<sup>1</sup> They refer back to the Enlightenment concept of social progress as source for the idea of reason as primary source of authority and legitimacy.

not least constituting awareness and familiarity. Tacit dimensions are unspoken, silent, corporal, spatial, material, barred or alienated features and factors which are not overcome by evidence and proof.—However, the concept of tacit knowledge also meets critique; for example, Kjeld Schmidt (2012, 163) rejects it, calling it, “[...] a conceptual muddle that mystifies the very concept of practical knowledge.”

In short, just as knowledge should not be understood as an unalloyed positive, so, too, is it important to avoid the occult, insubstantial and unfounded aspects of particular, e.g. practical knowledge. The argumentation that follows offers a rigorous philosophical approach to knowledge based on the concepts of Bernhard Waldenfels and Käte Meyer-Drawe, both of whom draw upon Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach.

### **The Body-Phenomenological Approach to Knowledge**

At first glance, the aforementioned neediness for knowledge seems to resemble the fundamental intention that Husserl (1960 [1929]) provides for phenomenology, i.e. its aim to “go back to the things themselves;” in German “zu den Sachen selbst zurückgehen.” *Sache* in English is a thing, an object, item, an issue; however, in order to set his sights on a *Sache*, Husserl does *not* choose positivistic knowledge as his central reference. On the contrary, he explicitly criticizes positivistic knowledge. Moreover, in order to “go back to the things themselves,” he proposes to systematically put all prejudices, expectations and common everyday views into brackets. He calls this Epoché. By carrying out the Epoché, the arousal or genesis of a *Sache*, the phenomenon is supposed to *come into view*. The thing is a phenomenon (φαίνομαι, Ancient Greek: to appear). The central question of *what (the fact) is* (philosophically: what is truth, *the act-matter*), is replaced here by the question of *how (something) is* (how is truth, the act-quality). Husserl (Ibid.) epistemologically distinguishes the things at which the consciousness is directed (the intended things) from the acts of consciousness (their phenomenality). A thing is what *comes into being, what comes into view*.

In the epistemological turn from the focus from *What?* to *How?*, Bernhard Waldenfels (1992) modifies Husserl's approach by pointing out that one does not arrive at the things themselves by mere abstinence of judging (i.e. Epoché). He reminds us that the constitution of a thing in one's perception is no explicit process, but that it takes place tacitly, unintentionally and en passant. A phenomenon is thus actualized as sensual

effects under diverse distinct conditions, such as verbally inexpressible feelings or perceptions, subliminal notions. Waldenfels (Ibid., 15) writes: “The object is not simply one and the same: It renders itself the same in the alternation between modes of being and of intention, in which it is viewed from close up or at a distance, seen from one angle or another; in which it is perceived, remembered, expected or fantasized about; in which it is judged, handled or striven for, in which its existence is claimed, proposed, doubted or negated.”<sup>2</sup> This means that when we first encounter things we do not perceive them rationally; instead we perceive them experientially, holistically and with all our senses. By contrast, this sort of experience plays a relatively minor role in school-based instruction, in which the learner is expected first and foremost to rationally acquire the content of schooling. Moreover, it is the circumstances or conditions of a thing’s constitution *that make a thing into what it appears to be*; it is *being constituted as something*. Definition and a firm subject-object-relation are two constitution modes among many others. The expression *to be constituted as something* is a definition for a cultural phenomenon: we learn from a social context *how to perceive and understand* physical, immaterial, or social structures by relating and comparing abstract contents of one’s own cultural environment to other such environments, as well as by understanding oneself in foreign terms.

From the body-phenomenological perspective, Waldenfels (1998) regards not Epoché, but rather the language games of difference (such as displacement, deformation, condensation, alienation, which identify something differently than before) as adequate approaches to understanding *how* something is perceived *as* something. The intentional base of our perception is then ciphered out as a heterogeneous field. The epistemological clue to this is that our perception is phenomenologically seen as a *perceiving as*. Correspondingly, a special act of consciousness is needed to make the arousal, becoming and genesis of something an object of our understanding.—To come back to the examples of *grasping the finesse involved in successfully navigating a contentious*

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<sup>2</sup> In German: “Der Gegenstand ist nicht einfach ein und derselbe, er erweist sich als derselbe im Wechsel von Gegebenheits- und Intensionsweisen, in denen er aus der Nähe oder aus der Ferne, von dieser oder von jener Seite erschaut, in denen er wahrgenommen, erinnert, erwartet oder phantasiert, in denen er beurteilt, behandelt oder erstrebt, in denen er als wirklich behauptet, als möglich oder zweifelhaft hingestellt oder negiert wird.”

*argument; understanding the propositional beliefs in socially expected behavior; mastering socially accepted joy or suffering: Said finesse, understanding and mastery can be realized as a perceiving as (a contentious argument, socially expected behavior, socially accepted joy or suffering is perceived and interpreted as... etc.). Knowledge about how a thing is constituted precedes explicit knowing and knowledge. It is situated, and it catches the turning into reality of a thing in statu nascendi.*

As mentioned above, following up constant change and bringing that change about form the very core of pedagogy. The ways and conditions in which someone grows up, how s/he performs, acts, judges, learns, and matures are crucially interesting for pedagogy; and so are the possibilities to knowledgeably intervene with pedagogical intentions. According to Husserl (Ibid.), we grasp the way an adolescent acts and judges by first putting our own knowledge into brackets and distancing ourselves from our expectations. Only then can we figure out the adolescent's *perceiving as*, in all its possible singularity, discontinuity, and opacity. Different perspectives can then be played through and explored in a performed and varied *perceiving as*, which can even be named. The variations of the perspectives and the modi of identification are of central importance for learning, as they allow for the possibility of gaining insight into *how something becomes true or valid*. As subjective and specific factors play a central role in a personality development, the very task of pedagogy to accompany, to grasp, and to bring about such changes can be figured out foremost as gaining insight into *how something becomes true or valid*.

Hereby, knowledge and insights are seen here as responses, as resonances, even as hypotheses that are dependent on diverse factors, including situational conditions such as the social interactions constituting and shaping them. In methodological terms this entails leaving aside unconditional objectivistic claims of truth and establishing a view that mainly gives thought to heterologies. Heterologies grasp another person in terms of discursive orders of knowledge allowing for certain social identities, marginalizing others (de Certeau 1986). In didactic terms this perspective of cultural awareness helps by allowing insight into the diversity and heterogeneity of experiences and phenomena.

## **The Body-Phenomenological Approach to Learning and The Pedagogy of Awareness**



To give a didactic example of a practical phenomenological approach: a tree is not the same to a biologist, a forester, a gardener, or a child, because they each look differently at a tree, *regarding it as* a biological niche (biologist), as part of a wood (forester), as a basis for building a tree house (child). *How (something) is* for somebody, its act-quality, governs knowledge construction and acquisition. I have worked out this insight out elsewhere (most recently in Kraus 2016) as a basic idea for Didactics by explaining it as the core of the didactic principles *constituting corporality* and *performative play*. In doing so, I see *open* classroom situations, i.e. student-centered and -governed learning settings, in terms of the different modi of *staging knowledge* in order to gain insight into *how something becomes true, valid, or common sense*.

However, the present contribution is not about Didactics, but instead concerns learning from the phenomenological standpoint as an occurrence and cultural awareness *in statu nascendi*. Learning is always an individual process embedded in sociality and sociability. Seen from the body-phenomenological perspective it is a becoming and a heuristic grasping of something *in statu nascendi*. Käte Meyer-Drawe (2008) explains the experience of learning as an imperceptible, tacit phenomenon. As it arises spontaneously, it can be shaped only roughly, with reference to either its circumstances, or to its results. All learning is occurrence, even as its beginning is never obvious. We can only know the results or the subject of our learning in detail if we have learnt them. At the same time, we realize that we know more than we are able to express (Polanyi 1966, cited in Meyer-Drawe 2005, 190). In a learning process, the learner has to be able to attain distance from his/her prior knowledge; alien features invade familiar contexts. Thus, we do not merely gather or collect acknowledgements, insights and understandings, as if they were goods. From the body-phenomenological perspective, moreover, the contrary is true: as Meyer-Drawe (*ibid.*, 31) writes, “Human learning starts with a rejection.” Learning involves a great deal of not-yet, of ignorance, unfamiliarity, disruptions, chiasms, fissures and distance.—Perturbations, irritations and imbalances are inherent to all human experience as they are part of fundamental inner alienation. Meyer-Drawe (2008) relates this to the notion that we are befallen by our experiences. We encounter (or learn) something, in the first moment, just by being committed to the own learning, and without being able to do anything about it. Learning

implies success in that the learner understands something, or performs a skill better than s/he did before. However, seen as a process, learning is a blind spot or contour in our experiential field, like a fissure inside each learning subject, which functions as a steady and inevitable clash and fault line. Thus, diverse conflicts inescapably arise within a person during the learning process. This leads me to the interpretation that the situation of learning is somewhat narcotic, necessarily including a distressing encounter with oneself. When we learn something in this encounter—all of a sudden and without traceable systematics—things make sense in a kind of archaic and persistent way, as if this sense had been there forever.

Nevertheless, because cultural awareness is not only an effect, but also a precondition for learning, it follows that learning has to be aspired to or desired in order to take place. Such willingness is intention, disposition, and a happening at the same time. On the one hand, to aspire to something, one must know the thing to which one aspires—or at least, one must have potential access to it. It is therefore available in some sense. In contrast to that, it is also the case that one has to be able to allow oneself to be surprised by the thing to which one aspires. If that were not necessary, one would already have it. Unlike things, events have an inchoate character which individuals have to accept (Meyer-Drawe 2005, 155). Our consciousness and explicit knowledge are neither the starting point, nor the center of our learning. Andreas Dörpinghaus (2003, 456) proposes a solution to this logical paradox: “A beginning without a beginning is possible as a response: the human being as responder is a mover who is moved.”<sup>3</sup> Waldenfels (1998, 44) describes responsiveness as “[...] responding to that which stimulates and speaks to us.”<sup>4</sup> Learning does not in the first instance mean reacting to the demands of others, but responding to diverse stimuli, including conditions and explanations, prior knowledge, and orders of knowledge. The concept of responsiveness as mutual relationship therefore replaces the concept of intentionality as the unidirectional relation of a distinct subject to a defined object. In the mutual relationship of responsiveness there is always “responsive

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<sup>3</sup> In German: “Ein Anfang ohne Anfang ist möglich als Antwort; der Mensch als Antwortender ist ein Beweger, der bewegt wird.”

<sup>4</sup> In German: “[...] Antworten auf das, was uns anregt und anspricht.”



difference” (Ibid.), meaning that a given response will necessarily be unequal in quality to the appeal that preceded or instigated it. This difference is why manifold responses and perspectives are needed. The mutuality of responsivity means that the more knowledgeable perspectives unfold, the more responsivity is displayed.

Openness to pedagogical impulses and a willingness to respond is then our only conscious awareness of learning. The experiential rupture that takes place in learning, however, traverses this willingness. Willingness and clash are conflicting experiences; the multiple disruptions, chasms, fissures, perturbations, irritations, imbalances and the distance that are inherent to learning processes cannot be mastered through willingness alone.

Given that willingness indicates a subject-object relationship, willingness may in fact be supported by a pedagogical relationship: seen phenomenologically, every learning situation is fundamentally a social situation. Social interaction is based upon the individual agents, upon the qualities of their experiences, upon their actual moods and/or intentions, and, not least, upon their sociability. After all, learning requires individuals to be responsive, but fear of failure, fear of the unknown, and even superstitions can hinder individuals’ responsivity even in cases where they seek to use rational structures to dissolve such fears. This in turn results in diminished sociability. For Waldenfels (1998), responsivity counts as an analytical term in order to grasp different approaches to sociality (and to the irrational fear of the unknown etc.). Responsivity is thus the central pedagogical concept allowing for the formulation of the aim and modi of pedagogy, as well as the main reference when analyzing knowledge forms.<sup>5</sup>

According to the phenomenological perspective, tacit knowing and knowledge is not a kind of fundus, but rather a steady associate or acquaintance, intermingling with all our endeavors in various ways. In this regard it is part of our successes, as well as of our failures. It is not merely a guaranteed part of every learning process, but in fact the central part.

To define or describe such tacit dimensions of learning and knowledge empirically, we thus should take a close look at *how* something comes into play (in a certain situation),

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For further reading, see Nowak 2016, Woo 2007.

and how it turns into reality. Then we can ask which parts could be signified as *tacit*. Repression, suppression, displacement, non-observance, fading out, unexpected emergence, irrelevance or pettiness, contradictions and variations are some of the many terms that describe the evolutionary character of knowledge and learning. When we learn, we experience our inadequacy; this is what happens when a teacher observes a pupil engaged in study. The content might be inaccessible to the student—for example, s/he may be busy daydreaming, or may be underachieving, s/he may be experiencing loss, may be behaving insensitively, or be working through trial and error. On the other hand, Epoché, or abstinence from judgement, might free the teacher to recognize learning as a difficult, fragile and amazing achievement. However, from the body-phenomenological perspective, a systematic and broad *perceiving something as something* is the appropriate approach to knowledge, to learning and to the phenomena at hand. In this sense, pedagogy of cultural awareness including relating and comparing abstract contents of one's own cultural environment to other such environments, as well as understanding oneself in foreign terms, describes learning as a process. One can say that this describes pedagogy as such, always also dealing with learning as a process.

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