Merging Waves: The 'learning conversations' in worked based learning and transformation into action

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Abstract

This paper, jointly authored by a candidate and an adviser, illustrates what underpins our working alliance on a professional studies doctoral programme which makes it work. It explores what both of us bring to the encounter; positionality and intentionality; the importance of the conditions which need to be in place to support the co generation of synthesised, distinctive or new knowledge; the skill of interpretation across difference; the privileging of practice; an attitude of respect and the responsibility of research to the communities in which we live. It is our intention that this attempt to explicate what actually happens between us will contribute to thinking about the role of the adviser in this evolving and exciting area of higher education which seeks to engage more fully with work practices in a wide range of sectors.

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1. **THE ROAD OF A DPROF CANDIDATE**

As introduction, I think it important to state that life, for me, started amongst narratives that are played-out, in the cracks and holes of the structures of official society (Presdee 2000). Home was found within the margins of historically determined and structurally unequal contexts. I grew up in a working class, single parent household, which had seven children. In these early formative years I developed a strong awareness to the issues of inequality. Many of my earliest memories are related to themes connected to access and opportunity. For example, the consequences of not having a father or any money; but also the benefits of a very strong mother; three older sisters and three older brothers; and the wider Council estate community network.

These and other circumstances developed my initial interest into issues concerning resource distribution; representation; (self) advocacy and cultural politics. Hence looking back at the development of my work-based learning, it should come as no surprise that I found real meaning working amongst various marginalised groups. These places and experiences shaped my very understanding of work, learning and subjectivity.

Having left school, at the age of sixteen with no academic achievements, meant my earliest work experiences were found within low paid manual jobs. However by the age of eighteen I started to work alongside people with learning disabilities in various community settings. From this I went onto work with New Age travellers; homeless people and ultimately community development initiatives within inner city contexts. All of these developments not only strengthened my political critique of dominant norms, but I also began to recognise that work could be seen more as a vocation than pay packet.

In summary, these dwelling places shaped my perspectives and values, giving me a strong appreciation of the voice of the 'Other' and cultural contexts in which continual reciprocation, opportunity and learning take place in the informal. In terms of political positioning, I dwell within the social positions of left-libertarian movements, which have resulted in me being weakly related to and specific organization and rejecting of authoritative leadership figures as a matter of principles (Diani and Donati 1984). In other words I am deeply sympathetic to anarchic philosophy and praxis.

2. **WORK BASED LEARNING AND THE DPROF PROGRAMME**

I shall now turn to consider the advantages of developing my work based learning via the DProf at Middlesex. The focus of my studies is to explore the lifeworlds of activists, paying particular attention to the issues of contradiction and incompleteness. My research proposal suggests that:
- I am embarking on a self-examination, in which I hope to dislodge and disrupt my own lifeworld and work-based learning.
- I am seeking to strengthen the ability of participants to appreciate, reflect and learn from what they have achieved and how they have achieved it.
- This will lead to a sharpened analysis of the environmental factors shaping their own lifeworlds and the issues they most care for, the cultural incompleteness and contradiction that they struggle with on a day-to-day basis.
- This in turn shall create an invitation to explore the internal factors that shape their lifeworlds and the consequent contradictions and incompleteness to be found in their own identity.

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My decision to engage in the Work Based Learning at Middlesex is rooted in the strong listening and learning culture underpinning the course ethos. I immediately recognised that this ethos was very similar to my own working praxis within the context of urban social movements. During my working life I have developed considerable and considered experience in the third sector, working at the margins of society with those who are the most disenfranchised. This work has been informed by the constant exploration of ideas about personal autonomy; power; spontaneous ordering; equality and justice. These activities have resulted in me being fluent in a number of domain dialects – the dialects of the street, the academic, the advocate, the lobbyist and the political activist.

However it is important to point out that this has not left me in the position of 'the expert'. My epistemology is one based in fragility and contradiction, in other words 'the more I know the less I understand'. Similar to Bakhtin (2001) reflection upon:
Language exchanges are like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world. Thus we are forced to guess at and grasp for a world behind mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or single mirror.

Nonetheless, this awareness of partial, limited sight has not deterred me from seeking to develop an approach of integrating grass root community development practice and academic theory. In particular I have a strong connection with social movement, anarchic and narrative theory. This has resulted in a commitment and conviction that activist and academic traditions need to collaborate to initiate social and cultural change. It is this belief that has brought me to embark on the DProf Programme.

3. DEVELOPING A LEARNING CULTURE

A key part of my ontology is a continuous journey of translation, interpretation and brokerage within various community settings. It is my suggestion that these are the key characteristics of any activist. As I have stated, within my Doctorate studies, I aim to explore the contradictions and incompleteness within urban social movements, via the lives of activists. This will entail a multi layered investigation into individual narratives and those of government, funders, networks and projects.

The perspectives and values, discussed above, have positioned me to witness the access to and distribution of resources between socio-demographic groups; and locate the creation of sites of resistance, oppression(s) and alternative possibilities. Paul Lichtermann (1996: 227) names this as 'a translation ethic':
A good translator has an obligation to the languages being translated and the cultures those languages articulate. A good translator practices a kind of universalistic obligation, but one grounded in specific cultures. A democratic community of diverse activists needs to translate not only diverse political ideologies, but also definitions and practices of commitment itself. By taking on a role of translator between political cultures, activists listen to the different ways that movements maintain commitment and community.

In one sense the DProf will bring a discipline to my 'insider action research', which has no clear beginning or, for that matter, ending point. Herr and Anderson (2005:36) state:
Research questions are often formalized versions of puzzles that practitioners have been struggling with for some time and perhaps even acting on in terms of problem solving. The

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decision to do more systematic inquiry on a puzzling issue is one of asking what issue or problem am I really trying to solve?

As my methodology shows, I aim to work in a collaborative manner using the de-centralizing Multi-Site Action Research (MSAR) approach. This will enable 'cross-site interactions' that 'are focused on information exchange and learning rather than on collaborative decision making'. Such a framework will enable me to locate myself in the research position of an 'insider in collaboration with other insiders' (Herr and Anderson 2005). In that I will aim to work alongside and in alliance with fellow activists.

Furthermore, MSAR presents a framework that connects extremely well with my personal perspectives and values; and my current work-based learning culture. My vocational activities entails continuous 'cross-site interactions', rather than 'on-hand' decision making. To be aiming at working amongst activists within multi-site locations and multi-purpose activities seems to be a very 'natural' thing to be doing.

Additionally, engaging in the DProf also resonates with Moore's (2007: 35) personal needs of embarking on action research:
I was probably in need of a mid-life upheaval in order to re-evaluate my personal priorities and career direction. By undertaking research I suppose I was sub-consciously seeking to assert my own autonomy and independence. After all, you don't do action research in order to simply maintain the status quo. Without really realizing it, I think I must have seen the undertaking of insider research as an opportunity to be self-directing, take the initiative and redefine the nature of my relationship with my employer.

My final reflections of the advantages of engaging within the DProf require me to return to my relationship with anarchic philosophy, theory and praxis. Colin Ward (1973: 8) writes:
Many years of attempting to be an anarchist propagandist have convinced me that we win over our fellow citizens to anarchist ideas, precisely through drawing upon the common experience of the informal, transient, self-organising networks of relationships that in fact make the human community possible, rather than through the rejection of existing society as a whole in favour of some future society where some different kind of humanity will live in perfect harmony.

The DProf offers a real opportunity to approach anarchy via the 'informal, transient, self-organising networks of relationship' that construct my work environment. I believe that there is a real need for the concept of anarchy to be rethought and (re)considered within the private and public, but particularly the academic sphere. Ward (ibid. :31) states that:
An important component of the anarchist approach to organisation is what we might call the theory of spontaneous order: the theory that, given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation – this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed authority could provide.

The DProf offers a clear opportunity to explore these ideas within the living narratives of those that I work alongside. However, Diani & McAdam (2003:1) suggest, the identification of such characteristic within an academic paper may prove far easier than the lifeworld of activists, as such formulations takes place in a:

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String of more or less connected events, scattered across time and space; [that] cannot be identified with any specific organization, rather consisting of various levels of formulation, linked in patterns of inter-action.

The flexibility and rigor of the DProf Programme offers the perfect framework to engage in such a sensitive journey of discovery. Nowhere is this better understood than with the dynamic relationship that has developed between Kate and I. Central to both of us is a strong desire to see a more just and equal society. However, this does not lead us to believe in some 'idealistic future', but more along the lines of what Valerie Fournier (2002: 192) identifies as: *utopianism rather than utopia, to emphasize movement over static visions of a better order'..... it's about journey rather than destinations. It's about opening up visions of alternatives, rather than closing down on a vision of a better future. It's about what moves us to hope for and cultivate, alternative possibilities*.

All that is stated above reflects the ingredient of the learning conversations that have taken place between the two of us. These conversations have moved on through both authors creating hermeneutic bridges between different realms of experience often requiring an exploration of commonalities in dialects, trying on each others glasses, working through the implications of change agency and the ethics of impact and caring.

4. THINKING ABOUT ADVISING

As Chris's adviser and adviser to many other candidates over the years I often ask myself what it is I do and how I do it beyond the contracting for time and contact. These are important questions when I am also in the position of selecting and developing advisers in this particular area of professional studies. I find myself saying to candidates, your consultant is your specialist supervisor and I am, as your adviser, someone who works with you to take care of the architecture of the piece which you want to create. I also ask my candidates those two questions and they tell me various things: you listen, you challenge, you get interested, you motivate, you map your way through our world which helps us map, you don't take over, you are there, you encourage us to be congruent with ourselves. It is very challenging to explain what you do and how you do it when it is a way of being and thinking about the world, when it is who you are now and who you are coming to be through your interconnectedness with others and the world. So I will attempt this through my own congruence using languages I have picked up and integrated on the way, those of social anthropologist, psychotherapist, third sector worker and researcher.

Today we may talk of working at the interface of different domains, of co producing knowledge, of transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge creation but these are not new. They are a process of recovery from the differentiation of disciplines which most markedly took place in the west in the eighteenth century in response to the specialist demands of a rapidly evolving, capitalist society scientifically and technologically based. Like communities on a land mass which fragment under the pressure of shifting tectonic plates, these communities of theory and practice separated from the mothership, developed their own languages, epistemologies, tribal systems, rituals and exclusive criteria for membership. These islands themselves have archipelagic satellites in the form of organisations which in turn develop their own mini cultures: some, entrusted with the resources of others, run amok like some modern day Lord of the Flies (Golding 2005) scenario becoming increasingly distant from values and community focussed responsibilities; others, strapped for cash, still desperately try to uphold values without support. All have made significant impacts on the way our world has evolved.

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Our movement to communicate, learn from and evolve knowledge through encounters and reengagement with each other's islands is not one of assimilation or colonialism but of creativity, of catalysts that regenerate and originate in response to the stagnancy of a managerialism which seeks to harness knowledge in functional bite size pieces to fit into pre conceived templates that can be managed, measured, priced and sold. Central to our movement is the communication between different realms of experience which has as its aim not the hegemony of one tribe over the other but an encounter which is, among other things, a prophylactic against stagnation and complacence. These islands are most comparable to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Fiske (1992: 155) reminds us that

Bourdieu's theory of habitus allows the possibility of such movement [crossable and crossed] *– we can after all, visit and live in habitats other than the one in which we are most at home. But though some tourist excursions can give us some inside experience they can never provide the same experience of these conditions as those who live or have lived in them.*

For such encounters to have a chance of providing the conditions for new knowledge to emerge, we need skilled interpreters, what I will call knowledge hermeneuts, the descendants of Thoth and his later incarnation, Hermes Trismegistus. The ancient Egyptians appreciated the boundaries of communication between different realms of experience and the skills required for negotiation and progress. They recognised that they did not want to be gods and the gods did not want to be human but that their co existence was core to a more fulfilled existence for both. From such an observation emerged the embodiment of this complexity in the form of Thoth, the interpreter god, a trickster, a builder, an artist, a scientist, a thinker, the interplay of which was manifested in architecture, monuments of evolving complexity and integrated knowledge. The pyramids of Thoth may look stagnant but they have challenged us for millenia and we are still excited by them.

5. ATTRIBUTES OF A KNOWLEDGE HERMENEUT

Weaver
The notion of interpreter, or hermeneut is key to what defines the good school teacher, the inspirational tutor, the informed manager, the enabling facilitator, the safe psychotherapist, the professional coach. In professional studies, it is the capacity to be the knowledge hermeneut that we look for in advisers for our candidates. The hermeneut listens, is transparent about what he/she brings to the encounter, privileges the phronesis or practical wisdom of the candidate, engages, seeks often through tricks to open up and be open to knowledge connections the way neural pathways are stimulated and developed between different areas of the brain. Living in our world, our world as the externalisation of the nature of our brains influenced by both our biological inheritance and the transformed dynamic of what we externalise, is a sometimes macabre, sometimes ecstatic, sometimes quite ordinary dance which is played out at an individual level in the relationship between candidate and adviser facilitating connections not only between other realms of knowledge but between the disparate parts in the individual themselves.

Anthropologist
The knowledge hermeneut is also the anthropologist evolving from the 'observer', trying to bracket off their own experience, to the 'participant observer' recognising the reflexivity required to fully comprehend human impact on each other and the world, to the 'advocate' who can no longer separate themselves from what they have encountered once they have

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uncovered the internal connection which Bruns (1992:252) believes is a prerequisite for understanding.

... basic to hermeneutics both ancient and modern is that idea that there is no making sense at a distance; one must always work out some kind of internal connection with what one seeks to understand.

The knowledge hermeneut can also be the ethnographer going through these different stages of knowing with various candidates, all the time accumulating and processing these knowledges in a form of ethnology which distils commonalities and differences from a range of encounters and perspectives, a process which in itself contributes to new thinking.

And maps. I always find myself making maps of where I am with my candidates and as a way to navigate through their world, their practice, their culture, their rituals, their organisational frameworks, the different personalities, the impact of change, the threats and opportunities. We compare our maps and the map of the outsider, who has perhaps seen the shoreline from a different perspective and can bring stories of other cultures, can throw a light on what is in shadow or reduce the size of a tribal god as it becomes set against a wider terrain. Their maps improve as they signpost for me, the stranger, bringing more clarity for themselves. We become each other's guides.

Translator/interpreter/facilitator

To be a skilled knowledge hermeneut is an aspiration for me. The experiences I bring personally and professionally to my encounters with a wide range of candidates on a professional studies programme are those of my personal and professional lives. After many years of visiting tribes I have found a home in professional studies, in this open space of multiple languages and experiences, welcoming to all kinds of visitors willing to explore with each other and with their advisers their various experiences then go on their way to pollinate others with their evolving knowledge in an ever growing creative network. Here we meet the American scientist drawn to Malaysia to learn about boat building who says he can never look at science in the same way again; the designer of aeroplane wings which keep you and I safe now questioning why the optimisation principles in engineering do not include a human one; the hard working manager who wants to advocate change in her organisation to improve the work environment finding rationales and solidarity among the many writers she would never have known and accessed before; the unsung hero who has quietly dedicated twenty years to widening participation in higher education at last finding his voice through a critical reflection of his achievements; the woman who has brought dance, education and business together rejoicing that she has managed to do so without compromising on the creativity and spontaneity which define dance; my co author who weaves informed and creative connections in a level of society which most of us only read about in the newspapers who will leave with something which is still evolving.

Edifying conversationalist

How such individual changes take place which impact professional environments and how new knowledge emerges is through what may be called learning conversations, or perhaps more appropriately, edifying conversations (Rorty 1979: 360) as this stresses the enriching potential of encounters between difference. Another attribute of a knowledge hermeneut can be found in Rorty's (1989:73) explication of the Aristotelian notion of ironist. Rorty sees the ironist as fulfilling three conditions: someone who has 'radical and continuing doubts' about her own vocabulary and is open to those of others, realises that 'any arguments in her present vocabulary cannot resolve the doubts' and 'does not think her vocabulary is closer to reality than others'. To have an edifying conversation requires an openness to change, to synthesis, to new chemical compounds and catalysts, to evolving vocabularies.

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Such conversations arrive at understanding aspects of each other's culture, the fusion of which generates something new. Such conversations are in fact, to borrow from Gadamer, the very conditions of understanding. It is not about prescribing *a procedure of understanding but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place*. (from Truth and Method cited in Bruns p.12)

Listener

Listening is another attribute of the knowledge hermeneut which contributes to the edification of each participant in the learning conversation, but not any kind of listening more a Heideggerian notion of what happens when true listening occurs.

In true listening one enters not simply into another's subjectivity but into what is said... It matters to Heidegger that in German the word for listening and hearing is also the word for belonging. "We have heard (gehort)," Heidegger says, "when we belong (gehoren) to what is said." When one listens one steps out of the aggressive mode of grasping and knowing into the mode of belonging (Bruns:157)

Added to this there is the type of active and reflecting back listening first brought to our attention by Carl Rogers (1996). This listening is tuned into what is not said as much as to what is said through an attitude of observation, respect and engagement of the heart and mind which Bettelheim (1991) believed was at the core of understanding what we do and why we do it. These forms of listening begin to access implicit or tacit knowledge and the trickster encourages, among other things, various forms of metaphor enabling the articulation of what is implicit.

Trickster

Trickster to many implies deception and in fact the later derivatives of Thoth, Hermes and and Mercury, seemed to have lost the balance of their role as interpreters to become tools of the gods who seemed eminently content with making a fool of mortals through cunning and deceit no longer as a learning exercise for mutual and progressive co-existence but from the will to dominate and be amused at the limitations of the 'other.' Little did the gods know that this was a prelude to their annihilation, the end of an old paradigm. Trickster in the hermeneutic sense is the story teller, the maker of parables, the skilled practitioner of metaphors which Aristotle said was a natural human ability. Metaphors are in themselves bridges of and to understanding. As a psychotherapist I have used metaphors with patients who had survived such extreme experiences which everyday words could never hope to convey, they were bridges they built for me to cross into their experience as safely as possible. As an anthropologist I have been seeped in the metaphors of the meaning making poetry of existence. So when I ask myself what it is I actually do with candidates I find myself resisting a deconstruction, for what I do is fundamentally a part of me or who I have come to be. It is through edifying conversations with candidates, colleagues, literature, people of my past and present that I have come this far in trying to explain it without separating myself from my autonomy and my own meaning making creativity which I see as always in a dance with others.

Values

The knowledge hermeneut is an ethical practitioner as a way of being more than from following a code of conduct. It is highly likely then that they will have a sense of justice, balance and social responsibility. I am not saying that these are the prerequisites of a good adviser/knowledge hermeneut only that they are in a sense an occupational hazard if one meets the other with an openness to understanding and to belonging in the Heideggerian

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sense. Bruns (1992:263) sums this up well when talking about Whitman's *ethics of the open road* and Kateb's explication of it

...as a readiness to convert tolerance to recognition; to admire and appreciate, especially that which may be overlooked or despised; to acknowledge that one is not the only real thing in the world, and that others are just as real to themselves...The effort to live outside oneself, to lend oneself to the acknowledgement of other persons, to creatures and things, exists and is underwritten by the sense that one is multiple, various, full of contradictions, full of moods that 'do not believe in each other'.'

In the knowledge hermeneut, one looks for the value of respect for the experience of others, the value of seeking to engage and co create not to dominate and swallow up, the value of not separating a human being from their autonomy and their creativity, the value of a commitment to usefulness, to the idea of social responsibility and making a difference, the value of respect for difference and to cooperate in solutions which are appropriate for the habitus of other, not the habitus of that with which one is most familiar. I am reminded of a story I heard many years ago when I was training as a psychotherapist which was used to demonstrate the pitfalls of being a solution focussed therapist. I later found out that it was most probably one of the wise tales originating in Africa. A writer was walking along the road and saw a monkey jump from the tree into the river. It picked up a fish and placed it on the tree. The writer asked the monkey, 'What did you do that for?' The monkey answered, 'I am saving the fish from drowning'.

This respect for practice, for difference, for new knowledge generated through cooperative understanding and for the application of knowledge in fulfilment of social responsibility takes not only individual academics out of their habitus but the whole university. In a recent soon to be published paper by my colleague Professor Paul Gibbs called *The Pragmatic University* he explores ideas about the university itself being the hub of social responsibility and change through edifying conversations across different domains and habitats.

Coleman sees such a university as "an institution that in all its aspects is singularly animated and concerned, rhetorically and practically, with the "solution" of the concrete problems of societal development" (1986:477)... I will develop the specific category of university, the pragmatic, where the notion of disciplinary no longer forms its legitimacy but where knowledge is created in and through, but not restricted to, competences, capabilities, practices and judgement in ways which shift the focus away from the epistemological hegemony of disciplinary knowledge to ontology of praxis. I then consider this wider application of the activities and actions of such universities in the workplace and their realizing knowledge which is practical and relevant. Gibbs, 2011
I look forward to such a future for universities.

The conditions for new knowledge to emerge
If the conditions are right and I suggest edifying or learning conversations supported by the skills and attributes of a knowledge hermeneut are essential conditions, then we will begin to understand and co- generate new knowledge within an ethical frame which is defined by this approach. The excitement then is not knowing yet what we will come to understand, what we will come to know. Working with my co- author has taken me to islands I last visited as a hippy wearing some very rose tinted glasses indeed. He has renewed my interest in anarchy and social movements, his work reframes mine. I spoke to him of Gramsci, he contacted me one day and said he had discovered Lacan. I had never thought that this would help him so had never mentioned Lacan. This challenged me on the assumptions I had made about his final vocabulary which were in fact the limitations of my own. Now he has taken Lacan to

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the level of an interpretive frame for his research on lack and fantasy, on the notion of incompleteness, his synthesis not mine but one we have had edifying conversations about. There is lack and fantasy in us all whether we look at that in a Lacanian frame or not. Edifying conversations, which do not separate the participants from their creativity which emerges out of the complexities of their knowingness, have the potential to fill the lack and transform the fantasy into creative realities for the individual and for the islands they go on to visit and inhabit.

Last word (for the moment)
And humour, do not forget a sense of humour, the ability to stand back and smile, have a good laugh even, at some of the absurdities we deal with everyday and at some of the systems which, rather than provide the conditions to nurture knowledge, restrict the art of laughing. Humour too is a facilitator of learning and knowledge generation, it takes the focus away from preoccupation with 'I' to the belongingness of 'we'. The young know that very well and as the future belongs to the young I thought I might leave the final word of this paper to an insightful young man (Rosetti 2999:66) still at school who is part of a writing club which one of our candidates runs to encourage self esteem, which he says also plays that role for him too.
Having added the final brushstroke, I stepped back to gaze admiringly at my handiwork. I had finished my painting. My masterpiece. Proudly I showed it to everyone within shouting distance.
'The aim is encourage the viewer to question,' I told them.
'What is it'? they asked.
'Exactly,' I said.

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