

Remembering and Un-Forgetting with Existential Phenomenological Pedagogy

Brian Kelleher Sohn

Carson Newman University

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

Remembering and Un-Forgetting with Existential Phenomenological Pedagogy

As an adherent to a developing existential phenomenological pedagogy, I frequently employ procedures in my course that call on students to share their personal lived experiences and share many of my own. Through our stories, we can integrate and appropriate academic material while countering the dominant postpositivistic approach to knowledge generation. But while stories can be effective at disrupting problematic structures like traditional classroom hierarchy and competitiveness, the conference theme challenged me to critique my methods not from post-structural points of view, which I have explored informally, but from the conceptual ground of forgetting. Lewkowich (2016) calls us to examine the “ghostly traces” of “forgetting’s invisible moves,” which are “always obscured by...the typically unquestioned and seemingly permanent products of remembrance” (p. 573). With this in mind, it may be fruitful to develop within a phenomenological pedagogy a complement to the typical hermeneutics of empathy: a hermeneutics of suspicion that allows for critique that may include, among other things, what in lived experience was forgotten. The danger of such a move is that without high levels of trust among class members, the inclusion of the hermeneutics of suspicion may reduce levels of genuine rather than perfunctory participation. Boler’s (1999) suggestions for collective class efforts to eliminate the dichotomy of innocence/guilt may serve to support students’ collective efforts to examine forgetting’s “ghostly traces.”

I begin here by describing one of my practices and what may distinguish it from other similar pedagogies. The hermeneutics of suspicion, less well known in phenomenology than the hermeneutics of empathy, may help address the issues and help students gain some exposure to forgetting. In the end I consider the fall-out of employing the hermeneutics of suspicion and call on suggestions from Megan Boler.

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

In my class

Our version of existential phenomenological pedagogy draws largely on four principles of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (1945/1962). The first is to elevate the importance of description. Explanation, long heralded as the higher order thinking, is set aside while my students and I attempt to give primacy to the deceptively complex task of revealing the ways an object of attention (like a memory) appears to us. The second, encouraged by the first, is to disrupt the "natural attitude" with ambiguity. The natural attitude, according to most phenomenologists, is the everyday experience of going through the motions of life. It is living in the autopilot mode. Description can help disrupt the natural attitude, particularly when many students describe outwardly similar experiences in distinct ways. One student's description can be a hiccup or outright train wreck for another. The third is the Gestalt psychology principle of figure and ground. Objects of perception appear as figural, emergent from a ground that is contextual and often implicit. Figures and grounds are at times multiplex and ambiguous, but with this principle I highlight the contextualized nature of our awarenesses, like sociocultural norms. A corollary of the figure-ground nature of perception is related to the fourth principle: embodiment. Merleau-Ponty emphasized the experience of having and being a body: we are in the world and part of the world. Our bodies and the world co-constitute each other. The implication in the classroom is to avoid enshrining the brain and mind as unique sites of knowledge acquisition. In order to illustrate these principles—how I help students describe, disrupt, contextualize, and embody the known—I share a description of an activity I use that I call *launching the world*.

Launch a world, making our own theories

Launch a world activities (LAWAs) begin with an open-ended question not unlike the kinds of questions that may be asked in phenomenological research interviews (Sohn, Thomas,

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

Greenberg, & Pollio, 2017). The intent is to compel students into an experience combining their world with that of the course content. In my teacher education courses, I often prompt them with the following: “Think of a time in school in which you were motivated or unmotivated.” I model phenomenological interviewing with a volunteer student. I proceed with few questions and try to have them focus on *description rather than explanation*—I never ask *why* they were motivated. I follow up on potentially ambiguous wording or metaphors. I then ask the other students to describe my interviewing technique, summarize it with the phrase “follow, don’t lead,” and then students pair up and interview each other. When interviewers allow interviews to unfold, *disruptions* can occur and discoveries can be made for participants. Students proceed from mini-interviews to compare and contrast what they heard and felt in three interviews: the model interview, their own, and their partner’s. Sharing similarities and differences can assist in *contextualizing* the stories in the broader context of experiences of schooling. The intersectionality of student identities tends to multiply perspectives: what is figural for one may be unacknowledged by another, depending on power, privilege, and particular bodies.

These descriptions give students lived, contextualized examples of motivation. Since many theories of motivation were developed in laboratory settings or settings outside of schools, through stories we complicate the typical motivation dichotomies of intrinsic vs. extrinsic, cognitive vs. humanist, or performance goals vs. learning goals. For some students, this step helps them bind their formal and informal knowledge more rigorously to further a personal theory of motivation.

Hermeneutics of empathy

It is a gentle questioning and trust in experience that make up a common phenomenological interpretive stance: the hermeneutics of empathy. Empathy of this sort is one

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

in which listeners take on a stance of humility, assuming students are experts in their own experience. I encourage this cognitive and affective stance when students share stories in LAWAs. I encourage stories because I hope that the story, in one way or another, calls to the teller, other students, and to me.

I'm not alone, of course, in using stories to build empathy, even if my theoretical basis for it may be less common. Kasl & Yorks (2016), anti-racist adult educators, say that narrative and other alternative expressions of knowing can create "empathic space" that challenges post-positivistic ways of knowing that value only the rational, the hypothetico-reductive, and the detached.

Rousmaniere (2000) helps teacher education students to engage in autobiography as a starting point for exploring their relationship to schools, schooling, curriculum, and policy. She highlights her own journey and those of her students as hearing school-related personal stories in her course helps them build empathy and a base for future action.

For other scholars, a generalized empathy is not the primary goal of sharing stories. Edwards (2014), in an unpublished manuscript, shares an example of how stories, if left at face value, if un-challenged, can reify socially constructed categories of difference such as helper and helped and perpetuate rather than disrupt social injustice. Edwards describes the need for "critical storytelling" to counter the dangers of unquestioned student narratives. Says Edwards, it is important to give students and teachers permission to "[disrupt] the dominant belief that personal experiences cannot be challenged" (p. 18).

Likewise, Shabazz's (2016) Active critical engagement (ACE) framework provides educators with a technique to call students into *dispositional* critical thinking through a hermeneutic that helps students focus on various layers of narratives. As Shabazz points out

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

through the medium of film, primary narratives are accompanied by a complex set of secondary narratives that, if students are trained to pay attention, can open up new interpretations.

Lewkowich, too, values student stories for their power, but, like the conference theme, challenges me to go into a completely different realm of critique and possibility. He says we must be more aware of the background of the un-remembered ghostly presence of forgetting. And that is where I think the hermeneutics of suspicion can come in.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, according to Ashworth (2003) and Robinson (1995), rests on an attempt to "go beneath" (or above) an account using a theoretical lens such as Freud, Marx, or Nietzsche. These "masters of suspicion" provide scaffolds of a sort to build alternative interpretations from ones in traditional phenomenological interpretation.

But while a Freudian or neo-Freudian interpretive lens may come closest to a forgetting-based interpretive lens, suspicion could combine a psychoanalytic perspective—one that may speculate about emotional memory of birthing experiences, for example—and the commonsense notion that humans forget. So a traditional hermeneutics of suspicion provides filters that could make the structures of class, subconscious desire, or power more apparent in stories, but my suggestion is that beginning with a more innocent perspective on forgetting may be the way to begin approaching deeper levels of suspicion

I am afraid that deeper levels of suspicion will increase inhibition considerably. In order to implement it, then. I call on some theory from Boler (1999) regarding collective inquiry and the phenomenological tenet of ambiguity.

Boler (1999) offers a potential antidote to the silence that might ensue in a classroom in which suspicion is integrated as a way to enrich student reflection on personal stories. She talks of avoiding the innocence/blame dichotomy through a collective pursuit of ambiguous selves in

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

her pedagogy of discomfort. Guilt is an inward turn that inhibits future action. And innocence, too, is a stance that relieves one from the burden of accountability. With students conservative or liberal, a forward-thinking call to action in classrooms may be the means by which they move from guilt or innocence to a powerful collective self-reflection that a hermeneutics of suspicion has the potential to encourage.

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

References

- Ashworth, P. (2003). The phenomenology of the lifeworld and social psychology. *Social Psychological Review*, **5** (1), 18–34.
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York: Routledge.
- Lewkowich, D. (2016). Teacher education in memory's light and shadow: Autobiographical reflection and multimodalities of remembering and forgetting. *Educational Studies*, **52**(6), 573-591. DOI: 10.1080/00131946.2016.1231682
- Edwards, K. E. (2014). Critical storytelling for social justice education. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/34538874/Critical_Storytelling_for_Social_Justice_Education
- Kasl, E. & Yorks, L. (2016). Do I really know you? Do you really know me? Empathy amid diversity in differing learning contexts. *Adult Education Quarterly* **66**(1), 3-20.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1945/62). tr. C. Smith. *Phenomenology of perception*. New York: Routledge.
- Robinson G.D. (1995). Paul Ricoeur and the hermeneutics of suspicion: A brief overview and critique. *Premise II*, 8, 12 (electronic journal <http://capo.org/premise/95/sep/p950812.html>).
- Rousmaniere, K. (2000). From memory to curriculum. *Teaching Education* **11**(1), 1-12.
- Shabazz, S. A. (2015) Active critical engagement (ace): A pedagogical tool for the application of critical discourse analysis in the interpretation of film and other multimodal discursive practices. Unpublished PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2015. http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/3607

REMEMBERING AND UN-FORGETTING

Sohn, B..K., Thomas, S..P., Greenberg, K..H., Pollio, H. R. (2017). Hearing the voices of students and teachers: A phenomenological approach to educational research. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 6(2), 121-148. doi:10.17583/qre.2017.2374