

Call and Response Pedagogy: Working with Attention

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Abstract

Based on my experience as a psychotherapist, I've developed a set of pedagogical practices that focus on activating attention in the service of perception and reflection. With the former, the subject directs their attention to their circumstances. In the latter, the subject reflects on the frame of reference that conditions their perceptions. This emphasis on the skilful use of attention characterized my pedagogy when teaching counselling psychology in two postgraduate programs. The preliminary step was to engage the students' attention by addressing their existential need to belong without having to sacrifice their uniqueness. I chose to use ordinary language to express complex psychological concepts to communicate both with their conceptual minds and their pre-reflective selves. Their conceptual minds are quick to grasp the theoretical significance of the skills being taught, while their pre-reflective self has difficulty enacting those skills. I describe this condition as the difference between the ideal (in this case, theory) and the real (the students' embodied beliefs). Both teaching and counselling attempt to reduce this difference by devoting as much time to the acknowledgement and acceptance of the Real as to the teaching of the Ideal. This paper enacts and models the same intention for existential engagement by addressing the reader's pre-reflective self. The pre-reflective is both the site of one's sedimented, experiential history as well as the locus of one's most significant existential investments. Those investments are attachments to, and identifications with beliefs that promise to guarantee one's continuing existence. The degree to which those beliefs are addressed increases the possibility of transformation. Furthermore, I'm inviting the reader to test the concepts offered here against the touchstone of their experience. Finally, I describe in detail those pedagogical practices that instantiate the theoretical principles articulated at the beginning of the paper. For education to have pragmatic consequences, it needs to address that part of the psyche that generates action—the pre-reflective self and its preoccupations.

Keywords: pedagogy, attention, impersonal consciousness, pre-reflective self

Pedagogical Practice for Igniting Attention through Existential Engagement

“Attention is a name for the in-between.”

In the call for papers for a recent Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society conference (2023), the following question was asked: “To what are philosophers of education not attending?” I will limit my thoughts to one domain: the practice of psychotherapy. In over fifty years of experience as a psychotherapist, I’ve realized that working with attention—both mine and the client’s—is what enables change rather than repetition. To what is the client attending? What *significance* does it hold for them? That significance motivates them to pay attention—a necessity if learning is to occur. Because of its central role, I will devote my initial thoughts to a conceptual understanding of attention, including its various forms and functions. Once that has been established, I will describe how I apply these understandings in my pedagogical practices.

The Play of Attention: An Interactive Process

There has been a long-standing recognition of the unique, interactive nature of pedagogy that makes it difficult to *capture* and *represent* professional expertise as practised in classrooms (Murphy, 1996). The keywords “capture” and “represent” both convey an intention to fix or stabilize meaning by lifting it out of the flux of experience and codifying it in language. Improvisational interactions, because of their transient nature, are hard, if not impossible, to represent or capture. Likewise, a positivist paradigm with its clear delineation of independent and dependent variables is not suitable for conveying the shifting responsiveness that characterizes improvisation. As an alternative, I employ phenomenological process descriptions to convey how I call for students’ attention and invite their responsiveness. I hope that this same process of call and response will occur as the reader engages with this paper. Some readers may benefit more from going directly to the practices that I describe beginning on page 22. If what you find there stimulates your interest, then you can return to the more theoretical portion for a more nuanced description of the operations of attention.

As you read through this article, you will notice that I often assert my claims rather than constructing a supporting argument. Indeed, that is the criticism that I anticipate. However, my response is that I’m not making truth claims but rather articulating the premises that inform my pedagogy and my psychotherapy practice. I hope to reveal a through-line that connects these foundational premises to their instantiation in practice. In so doing, I am inviting the reader to engage in a dialogue—a dialogue in which they employ their own teaching experience as a reference point for assessing the potential usefulness of the pedagogical practices described later in this paper.

Furthermore, I think my writing style is not conventionally academic but rather closer to everyday speech. Choosing this style, I am enacting the message of this paper: attention is best secured by engaging with the other’s sense of personal agency. This goes beyond the traditional intent of informing the reader’s conceptual mind. Rather, I’m inviting the reader’s personal self to engage with the claims that I am making. To summarize my primary claim: for both the student in the classroom and the reader of this paper, existential engagement is necessary for any significant transformation to occur.

I surmise that often a more academic style addresses that imaginative space in which authors and readers engage in conceptual “thought experiments.” These experiments deal imaginatively with hypothetical situations to discover new possibilities. New theories are produced; older theories are elaborated. This process is intellectually stimulating but it doesn’t always produce ontological change. My inquiry, on the other hand, is directed at *therapeutic and pedagogical practices that lead to ontological change—a change that is capable of generating more effective action*. My claim is that such action is more likely when one engages with the pre-reflective self of the student. For me to employ a more formal, academic style for this paper would be to engage in a performative contradiction that would undermine its thesis. That is, that style would subvert my claim that influence is obtained through engaging the other’s pre-reflective self—a structure designed according to one’s existential commitments.

The reader’s engagement with the material discussed in this paper co-evolves with my own. That is, this engagement is characterized by existential risk for both parties. The author, therapist, or instructor is not a cipher or an empty presence. Instead, we take on a form—an authentic form which, nevertheless, is not presented as the “right” way to be. Rather, it is presented as an invitation for the reader, client, or student to take up and present their own form—sourced from their pre-reflective self.

The Pre-reflective: The Repository of Existential Investment and Resistance to Change

The reader’s pre-reflective self¹—the source from which they most frequently act—is also the locus of their greatest existential investment. This claim finds expression in the commonsense aphorism that “actions speak louder than words.” That is, behaviour is a pointer to beliefs or premises that the person trusts as a basis for reliable decision making and action. Essentially, that aphorism makes the claim that we can know, and, therefore, better predict, the other’s future behaviour by attending to their current actions—actions generated by their existential commitment to foundational premises. The other’s speech, on the other hand, is not always an accurate predictor of future behavior.

Existential commitment is implicated in the psychological concept of *attachment*. We attach to people, places, routines, beliefs, premises, and assumptions that we *trust* will support our ongoing existence. These attachments are trustworthy reference points for navigating the multiple decisions encountered along one’s life trajectory. For example, a person might have learned during their upbringing that their psychological safety was enhanced by keeping authority figures (mommy and daddy) happy: “Happy parents will take care of me.” Later, that premise is generalized and applied in other contexts—for example, “Satisfied supervisors will protect me.” However, the consequences resulting from enacting that “rule,” first developed in the family home, within a different context—in this case employment—won’t always produce the desired result. For example, one’s supervisor might be a narcissist or sociopath. Applying the same foundational premise in the context of employment would leave the person vulnerable to exploitation. The supervisor’s exploitative response to the subject’s “nice” behaviour should disconfirm their fundamental premise but often doesn’t. In many such cases, people invoke denial or claim that this incident was an exception to the general rule (premise), which is still

¹ I make use of the concept of *pre-reflective* in two distinct ways: pre-reflective *consciousness* and the sedimented pre-reflective *self*. Pre-reflective consciousness refers to the *flow* of unmediated experience. There is no self-consciousness. The sedimented pre-reflective self is the *ground* (habits, accumulated history—built up over time) that is the reference point for interpreting the flow of experience.

viable. *The attachment to their premise is so fundamental to their sense of ontological security that they prefer to refuse the evidence of their senses.*

At this stage, they are typically oblivious to the relationship between intentions and consequences. Having good intentions seems to be enough—unpleasant consequences can be attributed to other agents. Over time, however, they might notice a recurring, unsatisfying pattern despite varying contexts—despite changing partners or occupations. They begin to realize that the only factor common to all contexts is themselves. After reflecting on the matter, they suspect that they are somehow implicated in these unsatisfying outcomes. They now turn their critical attention towards searching for, and examining, the beliefs that generated their behaviour. This is the precondition for taking responsibility for their contribution to the interactional pattern that they find so distressing. Their existential commitment to their premise is being loosened through the process of reflection. That is, instead of looking *through* that frame of reference, they are looking *at* it. In the best case, such reflection leads to the question: “How can I handle this differently?” *Agency is being activated.* Decisions will be made that lead to different actions. I emphasize the importance of attachment because people’s identity often consists of a fusion of their sense of self with those primordial beliefs. That identification is the biggest source of resistance to critiquing and changing those beliefs.

When ontological change occurs, it is because the foundational premise has been explicated and critiqued. The motivation for doing so, is driven by its revealed inadequacy. This process of uncovering and critiquing is the prerequisite for creating fresh foundational premises that might prove more adequate across a wider range of situational challenges. This is the process articulated in Transformative Learning theory as developed by Mezirow (2000). I suggest that the creative source capable of such reflection and critique is impersonal consciousness, the source that constructed the personal, pre-reflective self in the first place. Whereas formerly impersonal consciousness fused with, and operated within, the confines of the pre-reflective self, it now separates from this personal habitat and stands outside its parameters. Impersonal consciousness positions the constructed self as its object for inspection. By making such a move, the architecture of the psyche can be accessed and modified.

A Preliminary Sketch

In this paper, I intend to draw an explicit line between conceptual theory and pedagogical practice. That is, I hope to show that these practices are embodied interactional patterns that instantiate theoretical abstractions. Making this intention explicit also functions as a request for the reader to ascertain how successfully I have integrated theory and practice in the remainder of this paper.

At its most basic level, attention is the subject’s consciousness connecting with certain object of interest or relevance. Subject and object are *coupled in a relationship* by attention. In this ideal case, motivation is intrinsic and is characteristic of the way attention operates in early childhood (or in adults experiencing a “flow” state). Something in the environment commands the child’s attention. However, with the passage of time, the activation of attention gradually shifts from being involuntary captured to volitional deployment. Instead of attention being “captured” by the surroundings, it is directed by the subject. This is agency in its nascent form. In early childhood, however, first parents, then teachers attempt to “train” or discipline the child’s attention. This is based on the belief that the child’s long-term interest would best be served by suppressing or disciplining intrinsic motivation. Something is to be gained and

something lost by so doing. For example, many students apply themselves diligently to topics with little intrinsic interest because they *want* a career with financial stability. This involves delayed gratification in anticipation of a satisfying future.

Nevertheless, I suspect that more learning occurs when motivation is intrinsic. The complex task of language acquisition is an example. It is a major achievement, yet most children accomplish it without formal training. They learn it incidentally because they *want* to communicate with their fellow creatures. With intrinsic motivation, the psyche is less divided or conflicted and consequently, attends more fully. This paper asks the question: *Is there a pedagogy that can access, rather than suppress, intrinsic interest?*

Next, I discuss how the functioning of attention changes over the lifespan: from its involuntary activation in infancy to its intentional usage in adulthood. Or, to state it differently, the newborn's consciousness is best characterized as *pre-personal or impersonal* (Deleuze, 1994). Later, as a result of multiple interactions with their environment, the child begins to develop a *personal consciousness*—one that is built up through accumulated experience. This process forms the sedimented, pre-reflective self that was referred to earlier. From that history, premises are derived that provide an adequate orientation for dealing with the relatively simple environment of childhood. However, as James (2001) points out, “Our acts of voluntary attention, brief and fitful as they are, are nevertheless momentous and critical, determining us, as they do, to higher or lower destinies” (p. 97). We employ voluntary attention to transcend the fate that our involuntary attention set in motion.

For the child to function effectively in more complex, sophisticated contexts requires revision or even replacement of their originary premises. For that to occur, the individual *detaches* from the foundational premises that governed their pre-reflective sense of self. That is, they temporarily *dissociate* from or suspend their attachment to their identity. This is a necessary step if they are to transcend the limits of their personal consciousness and access the creative power of impersonal consciousness. It is through the exercise of pre-personal or impersonal consciousness that more adequate premises can be founded (Green, 2022).

Next, I make a distinction between bound, or dedicated attention and surplus attention. The former powers the operations of the pre-reflective self from which both habitual and spontaneous behaviours are generated. Friesen (2024) offers support for this claim with his parsing of Kant's description of “logical tact”.

Logical tact for Kant is a kind of rapid reflection or cognition that takes place in the mind but that *remains below the level of our direct awareness*. It is nearly instantaneous but at the same time comprehensive.... this tact is capable of producing a correct result.... In this way, logical tact can be seen as a mental capacity or power that...brings *understanding and action, insight and decision* together with unique effect and rapidity. (p.378, emphasis added)

While Kant names this power *logical tact*, I find the connotations of this term imply conscious processing. Kant corrects that impression with his further clarification that its operations take place below conscious awareness. Yet Friesen seems to attribute agency to logical tact with his declaration that it is responsible for understanding and action, insight and decision. I, on the other hand, want to attribute agency to pre-personal or impersonal consciousness. (This is not to ignore or deny that personal consciousness also exercises agency).

That consciousness may draw on the sedimented pre-reflective but is not determined by it. To summarize, bound attention functions to maintain the sedimented pre-reflective self, whereas surplus attention, directed by impersonal consciousness, is responsible for creating new understandings and generating appropriate action for the never before encountered.

This surplus attention is “up for grabs” in the attention economy (Jennings, 2020; Lanham, 2008). The pedagogical practices that I subsequently describe work with both bound and surplus forms of attention. Next, I examine how attention is oriented externally, as in perception, and internally, as in reflection. Reflection is necessary for critiquing one’s current framework preliminary to its revision or replacement. Reflection is the action of looking *at*, rather than *through*, one’s frame of reference. Doing so may reveal “blind spots” and erroneous beliefs that are generating unwanted consequences. Once that is accomplished, creative agency (Green, 2024) is employed to construct a framework that can make a wider range of phenomena intelligible. Once the meanings of those theoretical terms have been established, I devote the rest of the paper to their pedagogical application.

Attention: The Developmental Sequence

In this section, I will develop a more nuanced description of how acts of attention contribute to the development of a self. As sketched earlier, the newborn’s attention is exercised by an impersonal or *pre-personal* consciousness. Pre-personal consciousness is life’s endowment—we are born with it. It is what is referred to by the term “sentient,” in the sense that it distinguishes entities that are able to perceive, feel, and respond to their environment from those that cannot. With pre-personal consciousness, there is a kind of call-and-response relationship between the subject and their circumstance. The environment calls to the infant’s pre-personal attention ... captures it. Through that initial *engagement*, pre-personal consciousness begins to schematize its interactions with the world. Initially, attention is not deployed volitionally. Eventually, however, the subject will first notice, then recognize, a recurring pattern: “When I cry, someone comes and feeds and soothes me.” The baby is beginning to establish an interactional formula or script. Once that linkage is established, it becomes possible to cry intentionally. In this way, pre-, or impersonal consciousness, begins to build a personal consciousness which eventually provides the basis for their identity (Zahavi, 2019).

Bound Attention: Identity Maintenance. One’s sense of self is the product of *attachment* to those behavioural protocols. *It is the product of bound, not surplus, attention.* I conceive of it as dedicated energy that powers and maintains the form of the self. As such it animates the automatic interactional protocols that deal with stereotypical situations. In addition, it is the ground upon which their conscious experience is the figure. To disrupt such patterns entails an existential risk to one’s identity. Such disruption is also the prerequisite for transformation. In other words, it is both a danger and an opportunity. One senses that traditional education assumes that ontological transformation is beyond its purview. That is, the background assumptions of the student cannot or should not be tampered with. The engagement of surplus attention is the “leftover” available for classroom instruction. Later in the paper, I will challenge that assumption.

Once personal consciousness is provisionally established, it becomes possible to automate some interactional patterns. That is, we habitually activate a pattern as a script for dealing with familiar circumstances. This accumulation of repeated interactional patterns can be

referred to as one's sedimented, pre-reflective self. It differs from identity in that the latter is understood as a conscious and reflective understanding of oneself, whereas the pre-reflective self refers to the lived experience of being oneself spontaneously without the need for conscious reflection or calculation. That pre-reflective self has a tendency to interact on the basis of generic protocols rather than according to concrete circumstances.

Prototypical Enduring Patterns: Psychological and Epistemological

In this essay, I identify two types of protocols or interactional patterns embedded within the pre-reflective: psychological and epistemological. These protocols bind attentional resources. An example of an enduring psychological pattern occurs when a person internalizes a parent's critical voice. Initially, the subject criticizes themselves as an attempt to anticipate and pre-empt parental criticism. However, eventually, this internal voice "forgets" its origin and function and "speaks" with the authority of a truth-teller that must be obeyed. There, it operates beyond critique—limiting the subject's agency. In order to escape its tyranny, it must first be named or symbolized. In so doing, it is transformed from an internal state to which one is subjugated into an object of inquiry that can be critically examined (Kegan, 1982). This is a prototype of the process that the individual experiences as they move through the process of transformational learning: from subjugation, to naming, to critiquing, to replacing limited premises and assumptions.

A second limiting condition is epistemological, rather than psychological in nature. It concerns the boundary that distinguishes self from "other." The young, egocentric child assumes that others perceive the world as they do—there is no distinction between their points of view. After frequent disappointment and frustration, the developing child begins to understand that others have unique perspectives. Their friends' and acquaintances' behaviour manifests a uniqueness that the developing child experiences as confusing, even disorienting, because it doesn't conform to the child's egocentric expectations. Faced with this discrepancy, the child eventually begins to understand that social skills that acknowledge other perspectives will provide more interpersonal satisfaction. This marks an epistemological advancement.

The Disorienting Dilemma: When Protocols are Inadequate

In both cases, epistemological and psychological, the assumptions governing the pre-reflective responses are limited in their ability to address *every* challenge encountered. A disorienting dilemma results when a unique challenge arises for which no script is available. In such a situation, a person experiences their inadequacy. I suggest that the disparity between the response that the template activates and the response that the circumstances require *is registered by originary consciousness via the affects*. These include frustration, disappointment, surprise, and anxiety. Through affect, the body signals to the mind that its interpretation of the event, as well as its pre-determined response, won't adequately address the challenge. Instead, these affective signals can be read as a message to detach from the internal representation and its corresponding action logic. Instead, one employs perceptual consciousness to attend to, and engage with, one's circumstances. It marks a shift from operating from within the resources of one's sedimented pre-reflective self, to a more sensory-motor mode of functioning—from a personal mindset to an impersonal, or pre-personal consciousness. In this mode, one improvises a response and then assesses the resulting consequences: "Did my action bring me closer, or further away from, my desired goal state?"

After the immediate challenge has been addressed, the subject then has an opportunity to employ originary, pre-personal consciousness to reflect on and critique the assumptions on which their predetermined responses were based. This is a necessary step in the transformational learning process (Mezirow, 2000). One's limited foundational premises are critiqued and deconstructed in preparation for their eventual replacement with premises that have a wider range of applicability. Teaching students to attend to their affective responses prompts them to suspend their habitual functioning and, instead, shift to attending to their circumstances. Doing so will enable them to gather the necessary information to construct a response that addresses the unique situational challenge.

Here is a more existential way of characterizing the primary function of attention: attention *connects subjective consciousness with objective reality*. I am referring to attention in the service of perception rather than reflection. When attention is exercised perceptually, one feels *in touch* with something beyond oneself. Think of the security one experiences when receiving an affectionate touch, or being held, or hugged. Touch is the unmistakable experience of making genuine contact with otherness—with the Real. Smell is also intimate, immediate, and indubitable contact with reality. Taste is even more primordial because it means ingesting and metabolizing otherness. This is true, but to a lesser extent, of the other senses. I'm suggesting that these examples reveal that this orientation is built into our biological nature. Contact with reality is a primordial need—with attention as the means toward that end.

However, as we move through the cognitive developmental stages (as documented by Piaget, 1952), our direct contact with reality can, and often does, attenuate. We gradually substitute our symbolic representations of the world for the things in themselves. Representations are static, whereas reality seems to be dynamic—constantly evolving (Thompson 2007; O'Connor 2000). Because of that difference, and over time, the correspondence between representation and reality can become tenuous or non-existent. Beck (Beck & Willms, 2003) referred to such representations as zombie concepts: they live in the *word* but are no longer present in the *world*. In my own education, the conventional wisdom was that adults have limited contact with reality. This is in accord with the view that our contact with reality is a mediated one—mediated through symbols, representation and language. If that were true, then our primordial need to connect with reality would gradually be “starved.” Instead of living in the world, we would be inhabiting a symbolic world of concepts. Solipsistic isolation would be its ultimate expression. Reification is the compensatory attempt to give those concepts ontological status.

Detaching from Limiting Protocols. However, I find myself questioning the view that adult contact with reality is mediated. I address this question by turning my attention to dissociative states that many adults experience. For example, when I've been in situations where violence seemed imminent, I responded with a kind of hyper-consciousness that had no fear associated with it. That is, there was no fear because I had dissociated from my personal consciousness. “I” was able to read slight changes in my adversary's behaviour and made use of those perceptions to gradually defuse the situation. My responses weren't stereotypical but were exquisitely responsive to the emerging situation.

What is transpiring when dissociation occurs? My provisional explanation is that consciousness is withdrawing from its personal habitat (the constructed, rather than the creative, self) in favour of its original, pre-personal state. That is, consciousness dissociates or detaches

from the psychic structure that it usually inhabits and animates. As a result, the *person* is no longer at risk because the personal self is “offline.” Instead, impersonal consciousness registers and responds to the immediate circumstance. Contact with reality is immediate and direct.

Taking this further, we can get a better understanding of dissociation’s functioning when we consider persons who intentionally cultivate the ability to enter that state. I suggest that people who practice meditation suspend their personal will and consciousness to re-enter this ordinary state. Meditation is a gradual process of withdrawing one’s investment in, or *attachment* to, the protocols that *maintain* the pre-reflective self. In other words, *it makes available previously dedicated or bound attention*. As a result, that attention is available for new learning.

Implications for Education

Is this dissociated state similar to the unattached state that the newborn experiences—a simple presence in the world? Is it possible to engage an adult’s attention in the way that a neonate’s attention is captured? It seems to me that Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (2000) addresses that possibility. According to his theory, transformation is preceded by an encounter with a *disorienting dilemma*. The subject realizes that their personal consciousness lacks the resources needed to effectively address their dilemma. As a result, they lose the orientation that previously guided their responsiveness. The confounding dilemma ejects the individual from their familiar habitus (Akram, 2023) into direct contact with reality—with no schema for addressing it. That direct access reveals that one’s current frame of reference is too narrow. Furthermore, it doesn’t register much of the *particular* information present in the situation. That information must be considered if one is to adequately address the situational challenge. Those who are able to do so, find themselves back in a “call and response” relationship with their circumstance. Doing so, is the precondition for transcending the limitations of their previous framework. Eventually, the individual might construct a more inclusive frame of reference that can acknowledge and account for the disorienting dilemma that initiated the change process.

How does all this relate to education’s place in the attention economy? Attention is a resource...a limited one. Education tries to compete for the attention that cell phones, social media, and video games have largely co-opted. I suggest that the compelling advantage enjoyed by Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and video games is that they offer possibilities for *interacting*. Traditional classrooms offered fewer possibilities for interacting and, thereby, lessened the chance of *influencing the outcome*. In those classrooms, the teacher’s expectation of students was passive receptivity. The student, however, might respond with, “If I can’t make a difference, why participate fully?” Disengaged students are the inevitable result. One way to re-engage these students is through dialogic interaction.

Discussions about the attention economy typically revolve around how we deploy our *surplus attention*. I contrast this with bound, or dedicated attention. With the latter, attention is already pre-occupied (intentional misspelling) with unfinished business and unmet needs and activating behavioural protocols. Sometimes, in the role of psychotherapist, I address this directly: “Pay attention to what you’re paying attention to.” I’m asking the client what themes come up in their daydreams, their fantasy conversations, their resentments, etc. What unsatisfied desires are insisting and persisting with their claims for the client’s attention...desires that haven’t been addressed with action but are waiting in a cognitive queue to be acted upon. Every

student and teacher experiences some degree of pre-occupation—this is an aspect of the human condition. There they act as a filter if not a distortion of one's perceptions. Later, when I discuss my pedagogical practices, I describe an exercise that helps the student become aware of those preoccupations enabling them to account for their effect on their experience.

Attention's Orientation: Perception and Reflection

The object of our attention can be external, as in perception, or internal, as in reflection. With the latter, we examine our psychic architecture—looking *at*, rather than through, our frames of reference. Or, to employ a previous vocabulary, we consciously attend to the templates that we've been employing habitually. With reflection, we employ attention to first identify and then critique assumptions. This is one of the steps that Mezirow (2000) identified as part of the transformative learning process. The following Buddhist aphorism encapsulates the process: "You should be grateful when you are frustrated or disappointed because it means you are getting news from reality." In a more psychological vocabulary: the affects—in this case, frustration and disappointment—signal the mind that its pre-reflective assumptions are inadequate for addressing the situation. The body (or is it pre-personal consciousness?) senses the gap between the specific demands of the situation and the mind's generic responses. To correct for this, one should adopt a more sensorimotor form of functioning: call and response.

Resistance to Change: Existential Investment

What the practice of psychotherapy has revealed to me are the nuanced attitudes and processes that promote or inhibit adaptive responses. For example, resisting change often is an attempt to preserve stability, whereas curiosity expresses an intention to explore new territory. These orientations, while implicit, produce explicit outcomes that the client regrets or enjoys. Most people are aware of the outcomes but often not of the orientations that produced them. To produce more desirable outcomes, the student or the client needs to attend to, recognize, and track the sequences that those attitudes or dispositions produce. For example, they might notice that their default intentionality is the preservation of the status quo. They might not recognize how that relates to their complaint of feeling "stuck." They are simply unaware of the connection between the two.

The first rule of psychotherapy, and, I will argue, of pedagogy, is to "meet the client/student where they are existentially committed." Acknowledge their subjective preoccupations because that is *where much of their attention is currently bound*. When that existential investment is explicitly acknowledged, it becomes more available for critical thinking. By so doing, their commitments are considered rather than ignored or usurped by the teacher's agenda. For example, I've identified two root existential desires: the desire to belong (we are social creatures) and the desire to individuate (to be and express our uniqueness). I design the class in such a way that increases the possibility that both desires will be satisfied. Later in this paper, I will give concrete examples of how I facilitate that outcome.

For now, however, I want to sketch a larger framework within which these specific pedagogical practices operate. The journey from immature to mature consciousness is developmental. The student evolves from stage to stage through critical examination and revision of their core assumptions. For example, earlier in the developmental process, individuals often experience their need to belong as conflicting with the need to be their unique self—they believe that one of them must be sacrificed. "Either I deny myself to fit in, or I assert myself and find

myself all alone.” However, at later stages of maturity, this apparent conflict is often resolved by fashioning an assumptive framework that doesn’t demand agreement with others as a condition of inclusion. That is, the person comes to understand that truth can be additive rather than exclusive. Seen this way, one welcomes the other’s point of view because it helps to understand their behaviour. In addition, their point of view might disclose another facet of the issue being discussed. As a result, it is no longer “your truth versus my truth” but rather “my truth plus yours gives a more complete picture.” A limiting assumption has been replaced by a more inclusive one...one that allows for both belonging and individuality.

Perry’s (1970) work on moral and ethical development in college students is exemplary. His work makes it clear that learning isn’t an “add-on” of concepts but rather a fundamental revision of the self’s foundational premises. For example, initially, those students frame issues in binary terms: right/wrong, good/bad, etc. Knowledge is considered to be *absolute* and consists of discrete facts. The experience of certainty is produced. In the next transitional stage, they begin to recognize that in some areas the answers are not known and that legitimate disagreements and multiple opinions exist. Some students progress from there to relativism where they realize that knowledge is not absolute but contextual.

Such reconfiguration is more likely when learning is experiential because it requires participatory knowing—as contrasted with propositional knowledge (Vervaeke, 2017). This gains support from Dewey’s (1938) admonition, “An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory.” Participatory knowledge refers to knowing *how to act* in the “agent-arena” environment. That is, *it focuses on the “fit” or appropriateness of the agent’s behavioural response to their situation*. This is a dynamic process rather than a search for closure, explanation, or conclusion. The agent’s action is going to alter the situation, and this, in turn, will call for new responses to keep the situation moving forward. Thus, participatory knowing can be characterized as interactive and cybernetic. This is the culmination of the developmental journey from an absolutist position to one of context-appropriate responsiveness—from rule-based behaviour to effective improvisation.

Experience is immediate. The situation either deteriorates or improves depending in part on the efficacy of the agent’s behaviour. Theory, on the other hand, tends to be more static, general, and abstract. Theory favours the structural over the dynamic. As a result, it doesn’t foreground the interactive process. The most useful theories are experience-near and make explicit the processes at work. Gendlin’s work (1997) is exemplary in its articulation of process concepts. Furthermore, his thought identifies the locus of investigation as the interactional field between the agent and their context.

Pedagogical Practices

To give these generalizations a concrete form, I will briefly describe a practice with which I begin each class.

1. I begin with a mindfulness exercise whose primary objective is to prepare the class to enter a state of quiet receptivity. Its secondary objective is for the student to notice what is interfering with the primary objective: their preoccupations. *Those preoccupations reveal where their attentional resources are currently invested or bound.*

2. I then ask them to journal what they've discovered. In doing so, they employ attention (*in the service of reflection*) to convert inchoate experience into well-formed meaning. They have symbolized their pre-occupations, thereby making them explicit. Two things are accomplished: they can subsequently evaluate how their preoccupations interfered with or facilitated their learning. Secondly, they can begin to build a theoretical understanding of how preoccupations and assumptions condition conscious experience.
3. Next, I give them an overview of the theoretical material and experiential exercises that will structure that day's class. Then I ask them to document their intentions vis-à-vis that agenda. These intentions require the mobilization and deployment of *surplus* (as opposed to previously dedicated) *attentional resources*. I'm asking them to consciously formulate their intentions alongside their preoccupations in their journal.
4. I ask them to choose a dialogue partner with whom they share as many of their intentions and preoccupations as possible. By doing so, I'm encouraging them to bring their private self into a social domain through dialogue. This provides the opportunity to give voice to their *unique* experience to a partner who listens without judgment. *In this manner, they experience being in a relationship that welcomes their individuality.*
5. Next, the whole class reassembles, and I ask if anyone has discovered something that might be useful for others to hear. This contributes to the sense of a *community* of learners. *This addresses the existential need to belong.*
6. At the end of the class, I ask the dialogic partners to reconvene and compare what they experienced during the class and how that might be a product of the interaction between their conscious intentions and their preoccupations. *That is, I'm asking them to broaden their attention span in order to identify the sequence that produced their learning outcome.* Intentions, preoccupations, and results form a coherent whole.

Enactment is a Pedagogical Strategy. During the remainder of the class, I alternate theoretical exegesis with experiential exercises that instantiate the theoretical principles just taught. For example, if I'm teaching a course on counselling practices, I will explain what makes a particular skill effective. For example, a nuanced paraphrase of the client's utterances has the effect of grounding the client in their pre-reflective self. That is, an objective representation of their concern, without judgement, validates their experience and, often, encourages them to explore further. Next, I will demonstrate that skill via a role-play with a student. By so doing, I am providing an embodied enactment of the process concepts being taught. Like all enactments, it won't be perfect, but it will be largely effective. This undermines the student's inhibiting expectation that the skill must be performed perfectly the first time. Furthermore, role modelling provides the student with an image that instantiates the concept being taught—an image that the student can summon and then inhabit imaginatively when they are called upon to practice that skill.

I ask that the student who is volunteering for the role-play to present an actual issue that they would like to resolve. My rationale, which I state to the class, is that a real issue will be

expressed both in the dialogue as well as in body language, voice tone, pacing, and volume. It is these paralinguistic cues that give some evidence of the affective states being experienced by the “client”. *Those affective signals can inform the “counsellor” what issues are “hot” and have existential import.* Furthermore, when students volunteer personal issues—versus role-playing a generic script—then it is more likely that both the language employed and the embodied responses will be generated from the same source. If the body language is at odds with the verbal productions, chances are that the “client” is unaware of the discrepancy. This can be a fruitful avenue for further exploration toward integrating what has been previously left out of their narrative. After the role-play, the whole class will debrief the encounter. Care will be taken so that no diagnostic categories will be attributed to the student who volunteered. Such categories privilege a static and often pathologizing construal of reality. Instead, I want students to become familiar with a *process depiction*. This emphasis on process aligns with the belief that *reality is emergent rather than static*. Toward that end, I ask, “Was their movement in the role-play? Was the client’s conception of their dilemma modified by the interaction?” I also provide a guideline for their interpretations: “You don’t have to demolish someone else’s interpretation to make room for your own...just offer your perspective.” This supports my intention to address their *need to belong via contributing their unique point of view*.

Rationale for Role-Play. It is a shared experience rather than a lecture. Consequently, everyone experiences the same compelling reference point—a live interactional process. This stands in contrast to a class where an instructor “downloads” conceptual knowledge. When that happens, the student might grasp the logical connection between the theoretical terms but will lack the experiential substrate from which those terms were abstracted. Consequently, the student counsellor will have difficulty applying theoretical abstractions in a practical context. Secondly, role-plays invite students to engage perceptually while suspending premature conceptualization. Thirdly, I ask them to attend to the process or sequence of events. Doing so helps to unveil the mystery of how certain outcomes are produced. Fourthly, and most importantly, I ask them to notice when attunement or rapport between therapist and client thickens and when it ruptures. After the role-play, the whole class participates in a debriefing. Role-plays supported by subsequent discussion refer to observable behaviours as supporting “evidence” in the process of theory building. That is, I am asking them to draw a connection between conceptual understanding and concrete behaviour. All interpretations are welcome. Ones that express the best fit with the role-play are picked up and others are discarded without overt criticism.

Next, I ask them to form groups of three with a “client”, a “counsellor” and an observer. I ask them to practice and experiment with the skills that I demonstrated. They retire to a private space where each participant takes turns in all three roles. The observer’s task is to notice moments when attunement was building and when it was weakening. After the role-play, all three will participate in a debriefing facilitated by the observer. The observer will point to a particular sequence in which attunement increased or slackened and then ask the “client” to recall and express their subjective response to the “counsellor’s” offerings. I caution the observer against overtly characterizing the sequence as either strengthening or weakening rapport. I don’t want the client’s response to be prejudiced by the observer’s evaluations. With this guideline in place, the “counsellor” hears experiential feedback from the “client” (the one that really matters) rather than the observer. Moreover, when this approach is used, the exploration of the “client’s” reality begins to go much deeper. The “client” is encouraged to continue their exploration through the observer’s questions regarding their experience in those “turning points”.

Where do we find ourselves now? Not a Conclusion but a Rest Stop.

This paper began by commenting on one of the many emergent challenges facing education: increasing competition for students' attention. This is critical to the educational project because learning outcomes depend to a large degree on students' *engagement* with the curriculum. Toward that end, we need to develop pedagogical approaches capable of *attracting and holding* students' attention. I laid the groundwork for that outcome with a theoretical inquiry into the phenomenon of attention. I did so to provide an explicit throughline of the relationship between theory and practice. Firstly, this paper identified two primary existential needs that, if met, establish a classroom culture conducive to attentional engagement: the need to belong and the need to express one's unique point of view. When that culture is established, the collective IQ of the students—as evidenced by the quality of the discussion—becomes noticeably higher. The next strategy is designed to reveal and articulate preoccupations *that bind the student's attentional resources*. Those preoccupations are lined up in a cognitive queue awaiting action on the part of the subject. This typically limits the amount of free or surplus attention available for learning. However, awareness of those preoccupations shifts them from their previous existence as background “noise” into objects for inspection. This exercise mobilizes attention in the service of reflection. At the end of the class, I asked them to reflect on how their preoccupations interacted with their intentions to produce their learning experience. Next, role modelling by the instructor provides an *embodied exemplar* of the skill being taught. As stated earlier, attention, in the service of perception, is the coupling of the subject (the student) and the object (the role model). The drama of the demonstration captures students' attention in ways that the didactic imparting of concepts only partially achieves. That “capture” forms an internal reference point or image that can intuitively guide the student as they practice the skill previously demonstrated. During those practice sessions, the observer's function is to attend to the transactions between “counsellor” and “client”—taking note of those interactions where rapport is enhanced or ruptured. In so doing, they are learning *to attend to the interactional process or sequence*. That is, attention is being employed in the service of sensory-based perception rather than conceptual analysis. During the subsequent debriefing, rapport is enhanced when the observer refers to those transactions and asks the “client” to recall and describe their experience. Inevitably, the exploration, which may have been previously stalled, begins to move to a more profound inquiry. Finally, our examination of bound attention revealed it as the “engine” or energy source that maintained identity and sense of self. We are *attached* to our protocols, premises, and preoccupations. For transformational learning to occur, we need to *detach* or dissociate from those premises and protocols that constrain the individual within a limited belief system. That is, we detach from our *personal* consciousness to inspect those premises with impersonal, unattached consciousness. In addition, that impersonal consciousness has the capacity to forge a new, more expansive framework and identity.

This approach can be applied to course content other than counsellor training. It could be applied to any professional school where negotiation and dialogue are required between team members and between members of an organization and their end users. I will conclude by acknowledging what has been understated to this point: rhetoric and style. As Lanham (2008) points out, “In a world where everyone can produce content, the winners are those who *command attention* through style, performance, and persuasion” (p. 89, emphasis added).

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