

unfolding human potential



On behalf of NIVOZ and the editors, I generously encourage you begin reading, pondering, thinking and acting

by Luc Stevens

Introductory remarks about Unfolding Human Potential

'Stories – individual stories, family stories, national stories – are what stitch together the disparate elements of human existence into a coherent whole. We are story animals.' (Yann Martel *Beatrice and Virgil*, 2010, p.7)

'Storytelling does not necessarily help us understand the world conceptually or cognitively; rather, it seems to work at a "protolinguistic" level, changing our experience of events that have befallen us by symbolically restructuring them.' (Michael Jackson (the anthropologist; not the singer!), *The Politics of Storytelling*, 2006, p.16)

My personal starting point for participating in and organising the *Unfolding Human Potential Symposium*, is my ongoing fascination and concern for the *frei-schwebende* position of educational research. Ever since familiarising ourselves at NIVOZ with the works of thinkers as wide-ranging as from Van Manen to Varela and Hüther, we have become more acutely aware how *acting* and not *knowing* takes prevalence as our primary mode of being in the world. This would appear to make the position of academic knowledge even more flimsy and floating in relation to the work of educational practitioners, who work with our children in our schools every day.

It is widely reported that there exists a deep chasm between the worlds of educational researchers on the one hand, and of educational practitioners, on the other. Instead of despondently claiming that 'never the twain shall meet', it has always been my aim to bridge that chasm. For a long time, it was our wish to bring academics together to speak about educational practices – not in the sense of 'translating' scientific findings into practical tools, but rather to acknowledge that researchers and practitioners start out from different, sometimes even mutually-exclusive realities, and to make a brave attempt at making those paradigms into one reality.

If we were to give central stage to *acting* as our primary mode of being, how could that notion materialise within the setting of a symposium? With our partners at Learning for Well-Being (L4WB), we decided to turn the tables and to let our symposium emerge out of the lived experience in different classrooms. By means of short film clips, bringing our audience very close to a school's ethos and to pedagogical interactions, followed by elucidatory interviews with the teachers who with their students appeared as the main characters, we journeyed towards a shared knowledge – a vocabulary to speak of lived experiences; a grammar to forefront the pedagogical and the interactive in educational discourse.

This knowledge does not transpire straightforwardly out of exemplary schoolrooms or experiences. As Van Manen has it in his *Pedagogical Tact* (2015): “If teachers are requested to account for their successes, or if they are asked to convert their actions into verbal propositions then they will normally be tempted to reproduce the kinds of abstracted principles or theories they feel are expected of them. What else can they do? It is much more difficult to capture in language the kind of knowledge that inheres in our body and in the things of our world.” (Van Manen, p.137)

Starting from our film clips – these enthralling examples of educational practice – one immediately sees that we cannot claim that teaching is merely transmitting a body of knowledge to our students. Surely, one may attempt to find theoretical notions to speak of these classroom examples, but that immediately entails abstraction, a framing into less than its lived, versatile richness. To acknowledge *acting* as our starting point, we may keep the classroom experience whole and we may draw closer to the meanings that both teacher and students give to a certain experience. Hence, teacher and student may truly meet and recognise each other as subjects, come to better understandings of each other's concerns.

Although by no means disclaiming the fruits of analytic-empirical research, I see an urgency to stand up against the current dominant framework of neoliberal thinking, within which it has become the prevailing if not sole valid source of educational academic thinking. As Biesta has shown in for instance his *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (2011), the evidence-based methodologies that have been so effective in medical research, do not fit onto education, because their technological models of professional acting (including an instrumental thinking in cause and effect) are very much at odds with the ethical, democratic being of the education practice. The focus in evidence-based research on ‘what works’ easily eclipses vital questions into the why and what for of education.

To abet educational practitioners, it is vital that educational research recognises and appreciates that the teacher's reality is one of:

- Existence rather than essences
- Emergence rather than predictability
- Complexity rather than straightforwardness
- Open and serendipitous learning rather than closed curriculums

For this, a language is needed that serves as an antidote to an all-encompassing neoliberal effectiveness jargon, which prevents these notions to surface in any meaningful way at all. As our symposium progressed, my initial emphasis on the vocabulary and grammar required to speak of educational encounters, of what happens in education, of why and whereto, was shifted towards a more narrative approach. Storytelling as a means of making sense, and of transporting meaning from the singularity of a particular moment towards a more general shared understanding.

If we are to concentrate on teacher's education, on *Bildung*, on the becoming of a teacher or a school leader, we are bound to think, act and understand through their experiences. These lived

experiences that often take the shape of anecdotes, shared in the staffroom or at the dinner table, may at first appear to remain close to the singularity of the event; yet, their meanings oftentimes may take various shapes and colours over time and far exceed the particular – gaining substance and becoming the building blocks that comprise a teacher’s identity or personhood. It may then become the researcher’s and the teacher trainer’s task to help weave these stories and meanings into a grander tapestry (the term ‘master narrative’ was mentioned) in order to shape directions for teams, for a whole school, its direct environment or the community at large.

For me personally, it is here that I found the most valuable outcome of the symposium: to forefront narration, and to begin to find a grammar and a vocabulary in it. Our widely-divergent narratives are bound to be rooted – at least in part – in a common grammar, and many stories will reveal a shared vocabulary to speak of what is near and dear to our pedagogy. I discovered that a grammar itself already comprises of abstracted notions and concepts, and that it is only through an ethical, anthropological, phenomenological experiential storytelling that life is breathed into such notions.

Many, most, no: all speakers – all from their personal interests and concerns – brought building blocks to the various tables that were as much experiential as they conceptually helped to shape a new language. Potent anecdotes, new words, revealing notions – such as ‘school as a safe haven for unsafe learning’; the audacious mention of the aim of teaching as ‘touching the soul of the child’; the idea of two grammars that pervade a school: a grammar of rules, structures and routines; and one of relations, of trust, of seeing and being seen; or a plea to do away with nonsensical economic words in educational contexts, such as ‘accountability’ and ‘ownership’, and to substitute them for more tangible notions such as ‘shared responsibility’ and ‘authorship’.

I may easily credit each individual speaker or participant for his or her particular contribution, but readers will surely find their very own nuggets of gold in the various articles that have been published. Furthermore, I would rather acknowledge the shared effort by means of which all individual contributions were brought forth and often lifted beyond their initial meaning. In that sense, I witnessed several instances of Unfolding Human Potential in the course of our two days together.

Let me conclude – as did Rolf Winters, Renata Heinen and their children in their film *Down to Earth* – by bowing to the wisdom of the ancients: when NIVOZ was still in its initial days, I learned very much from the book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*, in which a number of Native-American elders described their way of helping derelict, destitute, despondent youngsters in their community, by introducing them to four traditional principles. In fact, they call it ‘growth needs for all children’. Parallel to Deci and Ryan’s widely-adopted basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, the authors introduced: independency, mastery and belonging.

However, it is the fourth growth need that I would like to end with: this American native ‘Circle of Courage’ was completed by the dimension, ‘generosity’. Where strength and vulnerability become one, we must bring equal amounts of courage and generosity to the table. On behalf of NIVOZ and the editors, I generously encourage you begin reading, pondering, thinking and acting.

Luc Stevens is founding father of NIVOZ. In the practice of education and child raising – beleaguered as it often is by political, social and economic claims – there is an increasing need for pedagogical thinking, pedagogical reflection and meaningful pedagogical theory. The NIVOZ Institute is one of the pivotal places in the Netherlands to address and supply this need.

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