DIALOGICAL HERMENEUTICS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING:

Re-thinking the Divide between Environmental Interpretation and Education

DR PHILLIP ABLETT

School of Social Sciences
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of the Sunshine Coast
(VC’s Colloquia on Learning and Teaching: May, 2007)
ENVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETATION: PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

• “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media rather than simply to communicate factual information. Interpretation is revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact.” (Tilden, 1977: 8)

• “Interpretation is the art of explaining the significance of a place to the public who visit it in order to point out a conservation message.” (Aldridge, 1975)
ENVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETERS

A Role that grew out of the 19th Century Nature Study Movement and creation of National Parks in the USA

• Park Rangers
• Tour Guides
• Curators
• Naturalists
• Heritage Specialists
A PECULIAR DISTINCTION?

• Environmental Interpreters make a strong distinction between Interpretation and Education.

• The argument is made in terms of both ends and means.
EVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETATION VERSUS ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION?
(The Environmental Interpreters’ view, e.g. Ham, 1992:7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERPRETATION</th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Informal settings</td>
<td>• Class-room setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Voluntary Audience</td>
<td>• Involuntary Captive Audience</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Short Duration</td>
<td>• Extended Duration</td>
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<td>• Aims are Recreational and some Understanding</td>
<td>• Aims are Knowledge and Understanding</td>
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<td>• Assumes uneven attentiveness</td>
<td>• Assumes constant attentiveness</td>
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<td>• Informal conversation and presentation</td>
<td>• Formal sequential courses</td>
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<td>• Little formal training for “Interpreters”</td>
<td>• Extensive formal training for Teachers</td>
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PROBLEMS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETATION / EDUCATION BINARY

• The distinction exaggerates the differences and produces a caricature of both environmental interpretation and education

• Environmental educators in schools and universities are not that stupid (e.g. field-trips are common, collaborative learning is encouraged, good teachers are skilled in provoking interest)

• Environmental interpreters are not that trivializing (e.g. still concerned with promoting understanding of site or artifact)

MAIN ARGUMENT

• This distinction is only sustainable if one adopts a very narrow view of both education and interpretation. e.g. an information processing model of individual learning.
In more sophisticated versions (e.g. Ajzen, 1992) the receiver can elaborate but they are still expected to conform and bring their beliefs and behaviour into accord with that of the “interpreter” or “teacher”.
CRITIQUE OF INFORMATION PROCESSING MODELS

- Decontextualises the learner as an atomised (non-social) individual with no history or culture
- Learner is relatively passive
- Asymmetric power relationship between the interpreter/teacher and learner
- Reduces meaning to cognitive representations in individuals heads directly corresponding to external world. This implies that there is only one fixed and valid meaning for cultural and natural phenomena.

- Good for propaganda but not a sound theory of learning. We need an alternative...
• After the Greek god “Hermes” -- the Messenger of the Divine to Mortals. (Humans liable to mis-read the signs)

• Modern Hermeneutics grew out of the critical analysis of texts in the 18th century German Enlightenment.

• Schleiermacher called it the “Art of Interpretation”.

• The purpose of interpretation is to facilitate a fuller understanding of the meaning of some-“thing”.

• Interpretation seeks meaning by placing something within a wider context of intelligibility; unlike analysis which seeks meaning by breaking something down into its component parts.
THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

• The process involved in interpreting/learning the meaning of something is one whereby we refer the part to its whole or a text to its context.

• So, understanding is always in an apparent circle of interpreting any particular thing (eg. a tree) in relation to its broader contexts (eg. forest, ecosystem, timber industry, national park or culture). Knowledge of this context then sheds light on the particular and visa versa.

• In principle, all interpretation or learning is incomplete, partial and ongoing. It is always possible to raise new questions and so, re-activate the circle.
• Interpretation and learning are not specialist “methodologies”. Rather, they are a basic feature of the human condition, which hermeneutics explicates.

• We always stand in an unfolding historical “tradition” (“Horizon of Meaning”) that pre-interprets the meaning(s) of the world for us. Such tradition also resides in us as language and cultural preconceptions (“prejudice”).

• Not all “prejudices” are distorting. Some provide a vantage point and valuable sources of insight. The point is to be aware of, and not misled by, ones prejudices and assumptions. They are our starting points – windows onto the world.

• The source of meaning for learning resides primarily in cultural traditions and their transformation; not the individual’s head. This is why the ‘same’ artifact or site can have very different meanings to different groups of people (e.g. wilderness, countryside, the bush and ‘country’).
GADAMER II (1900-2003):

- Interpretation proceeds through dialogue about things we do not understand. This challenges us to question and change.

- We all interpret and learn but some of us have become unreflective or dogmatic about our “tradition” and need re-stimulating through engagement with others.

- Interpretation and Learning are social, ideally the outcome of a mutually corrective dialogue, that aims at a “Fusion of Horizons”. A cross-fertilization of new meanings acquired through dialogue with those granted by our cultural context (tradition).

- This has implications for learning as culturally situated, reflexive and dialogical. Two contemporary learning theories exhibit analogous elements.
CONTEMPORARY LEARNING THEORIES 1: CONSTRUCTIVISM

• **Constructivism**: Individual and/or Social emphasizes how knowledge is actively constructed, in different ways and at different levels, by learners interaction in the world.

• Tends to assume (but not always) that Learning is primarily conceptual or mentalist.
CONTEMPORARY LEARNING THEORIES 2: SOCIO-CULTURAL

• **Socio-cultural or Situated Theories:** emphasize the historical and socio-cultural context of learning experiences. It focuses on such things as social participation, relationships (e.g. novice/experts), the setting and history in which the learner is situated while learning.

• Tends to assume that the interaction is the learning and learning transforms our life practices.
THEORETICAL DILEMMA

• How can knowledge be both constructed and the outcome of a situated context?

• Education researcher Paul Cobb (1994) says “each tells half a good story”.

• I agree but how do we conceptualise it as a dynamic tension rather than a contradiction?
A FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING?

• Gadamer’s hermeneutics may help reconcile the contradictory tendencies of social constructivism and situated socio-cultural perspectives on learning.

• On the one hand, Gadamer stresses the active participation, through dialogue and self-reflection, of multiple participants that is essential to learning. In this sense, we do construct meaning and knowledge with others and multiple interpretations are possible.

• On the other hand, Gadamer insists that the evolving cultural traditions, in which we are always already, socially and linguistically situated, condition and limit the range of plausible meanings we can construct.
EXAMPLE OF A “TREE”

• For a Timber-worker it may be a resource
• For a bush-walker it is shade
• For a tourist, a thing of beauty
• For an indigenous Australian perhaps a sacred site.
• A number of interpretations are possible in constructing learning without succumbing to relativism.

• **BUT**: A tree is not a submarine!
WHY?

• Because there is no viable tradition, context or interpretive community that will sustain such a fancy. Our learning is constructed but all construction is simultaneously conditioned by the “traditions” of linguistic and cultural meaning within which we interact and construct.
CONCLUSIONS

• The alleged dichotomy between environmental interpretation and education dissolves in a culturally situated, reflexive and dialogical understanding of learning practices.

• The difference between learning in informal and formal settings is a difference of degree not kind – both presuppose an interpretive engagement.

• Gadamer's hermeneutics may also help reconcile the contradictory tendencies of contemporary, social constructivist and situated socio-cultural perspectives on learning.