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# Recovering the Ontological Understanding of the Human Being as Learner: Exploring the Authentic Teacher-Pupil Relationship Through a Phenomenological-Hermeneutic Approach

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**ABSTRACT:** Meditating on the potential for inspiring authentic educational practice, this paper conceptualizes teaching and learning through a phenomenological, ontological, and hermeneutical approach. Ultimately, it theorizes a renewed vision for the design and management of a curriculum and classroom that promotes, supports, and facilitates a rich and fecund learning experience, which ultimately finds its inspiration within the type of teacher-pupil relationship that is grounded first and foremost in the ontological understanding that we are always already situated in the world as learners, this prior to any formalized or institutionalized enactment of “education.”

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, hermeneutics, ontology, education, teacher-pupil relationship

This paper responds to the deleterious influence that contemporary education, rooted in social efficiency ideology with its “press for efficiency and standardization,” has on the understanding of the human being *as* authentic learner and education’s patent reduction of the learner to *automata* (Pinar, 2004, p. 28). The issue around which my paper is organized emerges from the reconceptualist movement in curriculum philosophy and might be expressed in the following terms: Due to the depersonalization and alienation occurring in contemporary education, due to the saturation of market values and the leveling effect of standardization and high stakes testing in the curriculum, education has lost sight of and is moving further away from what it means to be truly human. That is, both students and educators are estranged from their authentic phenomenological sense of self-hood (Bonnett, 2009; Diamond, 2008; Greene, 1995; Grumet 1988; Jardine, 1992; Pike, 2003). For the sake of education’s potential reform, once made philosophically aware of this condition, educators should seek a return for appropriation to this forgotten ontological understanding of what it means to be human and which is, in the first instance, always and already a primordial way of Being-in-the-world in which life unfolds as an original “educative” process. I attempt to show that the ontological insights gleaned through personal practitioner-research emerging from phenomenological-hermeneutic inquiry holds the potential to inform and re-invigorate our educational praxis in a legitimate manner.


This essay is divided into five sections. Section one introduces the formal aspects of phenomenological-hermeneutic research in education and outlines a non-technical approach to phenomenology. Section two outlines the critique of traditional educational theory and concept empiricism theory, both of which emerge out of social efficiency ideology. This understanding of education obscures or covers over the primordial aspects of our Being, that is, the ontological ways in which we are in the world. Sections three and four provide a detailed analysis of the ontological constitution of the human being by revealing for thematic analysis the structures of meaning embedded in the lived experience of education or learning. I define education as a developing context of meanings built through communal relationships in which the most primordial mode of existing represents the collective task of interpreting, understanding, and discoursing in meaningful ways about the world. In this section, I also examine the authentic teacher-pupil relationship as it is informed ontologically through phenomenological interpretation and the unfolding of hermeneutic discourse. In section five, I conclude by speculating on how the conclusions drawn in section three might lead to a transformative understanding of educational praxis grounded in the ontological understanding of the teacher-pupil relationship. In this section I bring together philosophy and curriculum theory as related to my lived experience teaching Western philosophy.

## On Methodology and Intent: Inspiring Thoughtful Meditation on the Issues

Rademaker (2011) links the potential for educational reform to the educator's participation in practitioner research, which is "inquiry undertaken by teachers for the improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 1). Rademaker quite correctly suggests that such research is "inherently political" (p. 2). However, I argue that the phenomenological-hermeneutical approach to research in education also holds ontological implications for improving teaching and learning because it focuses on the essence (or Being) of the educator and student, and the authentic experience of learning. Rademaker also points out that qualitative research is often relegated to an inconsequential role when working to determine school policies, organizing and implementing curriculum, and evaluating the success of both pedagogical methods and effective learning. One reason for this skepticism regarding the validity and applicability of qualitative forms of research such as phenomenology and hermeneutics is the mistaken notion that educational research should provide predictable and categorically verifiable results. This is because, as related to this essay, "curriculum theory development is seen as an epistemological – not ontological – inquiry" (Brown, 1992, p. 55). Ontology, if it is considered at all in education research, is viewed as a nebulous and spurious field of philosophical inquiry. Since phenomenology cannot provide its conclusions in a way that satisfies the criteria of quantitative methods it often appears to be a highly subjective and inaccurate process, opening itself to the critique of epistemological relativism and subjectivism. However, as Morris (2008) points out, "far from phenomenology descriptions being untestable, we might say that our recognition is a *criterion for correctness* for a phenomenological description" (p. 29). I want to begin thinking about ontology in a way that is devoid of hyper-complexity and conceive it in terms of our existence in the world, which unfolds through the educative processes of interpreting and discoursing about the world, that is learning about our world, selves, and others.

This essay blends phenomenology, ontology, and hermeneutics in a philosophical and theoretical manner. This method of practical research emerges from my reading of Heidegger's (trans. 1962) *Being and Time* in which he employs a phenomenological-ontological and hermeneutic methodology in order to reveal and thematically articulate the ontological grounds of the human being (*Dasein*) through the descriptive analysis of lived experience. Heidegger's method is also hermeneutic because it seeks to develop through ever deepening modes of interpretation an understanding of the phenomena being investigated. In educational research this is precisely the dual-method that Huebner (1999c) adopts when analyzing curriculum in relation to temporality and amounts to a speculative, phenomenological inquiry into the ontological grounds of educators and students within the context of learning conceived in terms of individual-world dialectic. The individual-world dialectic is the educative process unfolding through the communicative discourse, or dialogical "conversation," of hermeneutic interpretation. It must be noted that Huebner does not formalize the process in terms of systematic research, whereas in Van Manen (1990) the phenomenological-hermeneutic method of research is formalized and likened to a "science" of the lived world. This move might be linked to the dominating historical influence of both Husserl's method of phenomenological investigation and Dilthey's notion of human science as related to educational theory. To be clear, human science in Van Manen, despite being critical and systematic, differs from natural and behavioral sciences in that human science and its subject of study, human phenomena, "require interpretation and understanding whereas natural science involves for the most part external objects and explanation" (p. 181).

I view phenomenology in a somewhat non-technical manner, and thus avoid formalizing in a highly systematic manner the modes of the phenomenological *epoche* and *eidetic reduction*. Unlike Husserl, I am not concerned with the transcendental consciousness and the intentional structures that constitute the *what* and *how* of the subject's (student's) cognitive experience (Brogan, 2005). Rather, I approach phenomenological research as a practitioner



I approach phenomenological research as a practitioner through observation, self-reflexive and retrospective analysis, and the incorporation of phenomenological literature, which fosters a reflective-reflexive discourse with the phenomenological traditions of both philosophy and curriculum theory.



through observation, self-reflexive and retrospective analysis, and the incorporation of phenomenological literature, which fosters a reflective-reflexive discourse with the phenomenological traditions of both philosophy and curriculum theory. Through analysis, I propose an interpretation of the phenomenon of education as related to my personal experience as an educator. In doing so, I discern differences and similarities in order to locate and recognize major points of convergence between the literary descriptions, empirical observations, and subjective modes of understanding those experiences in search for what is trans-subjective (transcendental-universal) about the lived experience. Van Manen (1990) argues that when engaging literature researchers encounter "powerful examples of vicarious lived experiences and insights normally out of range of the scope of our personal everyday experiences" (p. 74). Van Manen's work stresses the benefits of researchers turning to experiential descriptions in literature, and includes such authors of fiction as Dostoevsky, Sartre, Proust, and Kafka.

What are the beneficial contributions to the improvement of teaching and learning that this type of research might afford? Although a rejoinder to this query, this essay will not provide a list of new and improved standards and practices for teaching. Neither will it offer specific directives aimed at more efficient teaching techniques grounded in the above existential-ontological analysis. To produce a rigorously outlined program of education is counter-productive to the meditative and theoretical aims of this essay. Rather, in a thoughtful manner I will examine the ontological grounds out of which authentic education emerges in terms of the human's way of Being as learner and interpreter of her world and self. Education is an ever renewed, on-going process of self-overcoming. In other words, through the process of translation, transcendence, and appropriation we, as human beings, deepen our understanding of the world. As Van Manen (1990) indicates, through phenomenological-hermeneutical research we are "intentionally attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become the world*" (p. 5). Such research, if conducted properly, returns us to the world within which we are immersed, from which we are inseparable, in an enlightened manner. This preparatory insight indicates that authentic education is not reducible to cognitive studies, learning theories, or any sociology of knowledge. Education is far more than merely a means by which to organize an effective learning experience in which knowledge is assimilated and skill sets are efficiently imparted. I suggest that educators envision education, in light of the analysis to follow, as a holistic and integrated process in which knowing, acting, and valuing are all original ways of Being-in-the-world.

### **Technical/Hyper-Rational Knowledge in Research and the Curriculum: Teaching and Learning as an Inauthentic Exercise in Prediction, Abstraction, and Behaviorism**

Huebner (1999b) is critical of education philosophies that privilege a) empirical forms of curriculum research functioning methodologically as social science and above all other forms of educational inquiry, and b) technical/hyper-rational knowledge in the curriculum, a form of knowing that is expressed, proximally and for the most part, through abstract conceptualization. Education favors forms of curriculum knowledge classified as axiomatic and empirical because they are manageable and measurable by quantitative standards. Both trends emerge from a social efficiency ideology, which includes the views of both traditionalist and concept-empiricist curriculum making (e.g., Bobbitt, 1924; Gagne, 1965; and Tyler, 1949), and it values most greatly knowledge that is functional and instrumental. According to Spring (2008), contemporary education ignores "educative" goals and is more concerned with instrumental goals such as "preparation for work, control of labor, and economic development" (p. 5). Lipman (2011) claims that with current *neoliberal* thinking, education is still grounded in social efficiency ideology, for with the "rise of Arnie Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools, to U.S. Secretary of Education in the Obama administration," there is a push in education to employ "market principles" (p. 2). As Lipman reasons, this is an offshoot of a "global project to gear education to 'economic competitiveness' and to impose market discipline on all aspects of schooling" (p. 3). Hence, it is possible to state, along with Bonnett (2009), that education "shapes the selves of its learners in accordance with what are perceived to be current economic imperatives rather than, say, with what arises from their sense of their own existence," (p. 358) their own most ontological potentiality-for-Being.

Modes of curriculum inquiry and research inspired by concept empiricism, work under the mistaken belief that education theory as "practical theory" functions in the identical manner as empirical theory, namely, that it holds the power to accurately and legitimately explain, describe, and predict educational outcomes (Moore, 1978). Such educational inquiry is "concerned with developing a hypothesis to be tested, and testing them in a methodological ways characteristic of mainstream social science" (Pinar, 2009, p. 17). As Grumet (1992) remarks, such methods depersonalize and homogenize students, stripping them of their uniqueness and individual potentiality-for-Being by reducing them to cold "epistemological subjects of research," (p. 29) which sets them up for manipulation, control, and social conditioning. Reliance on this form of educational research presents a false picture of world, suggesting the existence of an objective and neutral plane from which to survey and accurately assess the so-called "truth" of our existence in a way that avoids the trap of relativism or subjectivism. Such methods inspire a product-process line of curriculum making in which research determines the pre-specification of essential content and pedagogy and the design of the learning experience in advance, and often times, at a proximal remove from the practical unfolding of learning in the classroom. Clearly, such a philosophy belies its positivist drive, because it seeks to reduce learning to the study of meta-cognition, basic cognitive processes, and the transfer of knowledge to students through ever-greater hyper-efficient strategies for processing information.

The second issue of privileging technical/hyper-rational knowledge in the curriculum deserves a bit more attention. Such privileging is directly linked to the unique ways in which we attempt to understand and communicate our lived experience about things that matter to us, namely, how we understand and care for our Being and the Being of others in the community of learning. Education's privileging of technical/hyper-rational knowledge, according to Jardine (1992), gives the "perception that one does not really understand the world, oneself, or others without such knowledge [and that] being alive becomes something to *solve*, and finding one's life difficult, ambiguous, or

uncertain is a *mistake* to be corrected” (p. 122). Grumet (1992) equates education’s refusal to acknowledge other forms of knowledge with *epistemological elitism* and this, I suggest, stems from education’s refusal to address the ontological issues that ground all educative endeavors. Thus, education, with its “emphasis on abstraction and rational thinking, underestimates the turmoil of desire, the force of ideology, all the conflict and tension in adult conceptualization” (p. 31). Huebner’s (1999b) great concern with the rise of scientific knowledge in the curriculum is that this form of knowledge provides an erroneous metaphysical and a highly restrictive epistemological view of the human and her world, it embraces Cartesian *dualism*, the subject-object divide. In Cartesian dualism the world stands as an object removed from the subject who must internalize her experience of the world through representation and abstraction. In this view, the human assimilates the world in knowledge in order to then act upon the world and the movement of knowledge-and-praxis is external-internal-external.

When Huebner was writing in the 1970s, math and sciences were privileged in the curriculum. Currently, however, as Diamond (2008) points out, there is a greater focus on math and language arts. At first glance this might appear as if the trend has shifted in a positive direction toward the inclusion of humanities-based learning and the reinstatement of the previously marginalized poetic/aesthetic epistemic cluster within the curriculum. However, a careful reading of Diamond indicates otherwise. In the age of high-stakes testing even though the content focus has changed, educators are still approaching their subjects from an exceedingly limited epistemological perspective. High-stakes testing, according to Diamond, is negatively changing the face of education. For example, Illinois state standards directly affect what teachers teach and how teachers teach that content. Since the bulk of the curriculum is grounded in the content of standardized tests, there is a narrow focus within curriculum content, a narrow focus within areas that are privileged, and a significant amount of valuable class time squandered on rote test preparation. Pike (2003) writing on the authentic aspects of teaching English, or literature, echoes these concerns when indicating that a major change in pedagogy related to high-stakes testing is evident when educators are forced to approach literature exclusively from the perspective of the Either/Or epistemological framework, thus validating knowledge (and literacy) by means of the correspondence model of truth and embracing the metaphysics of the subject-object divide. Pike observes that English teaching is being reduced to a calculative and explicit endeavor and thus the poetic and aesthetic merit of the literature is devalued. It is evident from this discussion that contemporary education is still haunted by the specter of Cartesian dualism.

As Huebner (1999a) points out, when we approach the world and others “enclosed in the framework of the subject-object attitude,” we tend to view others as objects, as “essentially predictable, controllable,” and as something to be “studied and known” (p. 88). This limited understanding of knowledge and the subject manifests itself in the Tyler (1949) rationale where the learning experience “refers to the interaction between learner and the external conditions of the environment to which he can react,” and directs the teacher to structure the learning environment to illicit the desired behaviors, which are “implied in the objective” (pp. 63-65). This bias toward technical/hyper-rational knowledge in education creates two problems, relating to epistemology and ontology. First, if educational theory concerns itself exclusively with quantitative methodologies, then it is constructing a disingenuous and severely limited view of educators and students and the process of authentic learning. For example, the learner is metaphysically removed from the world and learning is reduced to the acquisition of knowledge, skill sets, and habituated behaviors. Second, if the curriculum concerns itself primarily with the mode of world-disclosure associated with technical/hyper-rational knowledge, then it espouses an inauthentic understanding of the way in which the human relates to the world in terms of knowledge and understanding. For example, knowledge is an objective phenomenon and stands at an epistemological-metaphysical remove from the subject.

“Education,” as Jardine (1992) contends, “has turned away from the risks of self-transcendence involved in the exploration of many possibilities of understanding, self-understanding, and mutual understanding [i.e., hermeneutics] – an exploration in which one is engaged in confronting that which is Other” (p. 121). In other words, that which is recalcitrant and resistant to all epistemological efforts to pin it down once and for all. In suggesting the potential educational benefits of phenomenological-ontological understanding of the human being as learner, in light of what has been stated about social efficiency, it is not my intention to merely reverse the binary poles of the curriculum’s epistemological continuum in such a way that a reverse hierarchy is produced and in which the devalued minority or marginalized position assumes the dominant role, or becomes the new center of power. Derrida (1987) suggests that all philosophies should be accompanied by critical deconstructive readings, because all movements have the potential to become institutionalized with the concomitant danger of becoming authoritarian. With this inherent propensity, the danger exists of creating new and additional forms of alienation and marginalization.

Thus, I am not discounting the inclusion of empirical research in education. As Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) quite correctly argue “explicit theories of learning can help educators rethink their teaching procedures” (41). Rather, I hope to expand the epistemological continuum in the curriculum to be more inclusive, with the

understanding that various forms of knowledge all have their rightful place within a well-rounded education. Indeed, authentic education, according to Huebner (1999c), should provide a variety of epistemological experiences, because it is only when students begin to “recognize the values and uses of scientific ways of knowing and of artistic and poetic ways of knowing,” that they can specialize, that is choose a life-path, authentically by “taking and polishing the spectacles” of either the “scientist, artist, or poet” (p. 42).

This section dealt with a fairly substantial critique of social efficiency in education, which might be reduced in its essence to a philosophical view critical of forms of education and curriculum-making that adopt a limited view of knowledge and learning that smacks of scientific determinism. Such forms do violence to students and educators by obscuring the understanding that humans are free and have a conscious sense of phenomenological self-hood. It is now to the analysis of phenomenological self-hood and the ontological understanding of Being-in-the-world as Being-with others that I turn.

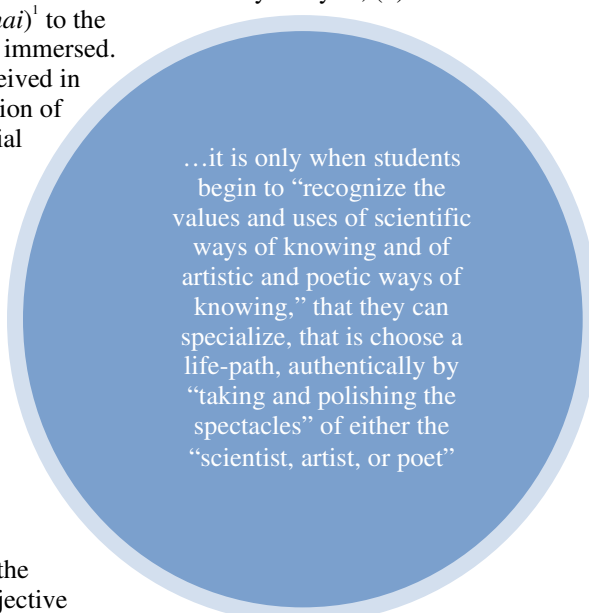
## Self-Hood and the Ontological Structures of Being-in-the-world as Being-with Others: The Primordial Modes of Human Learning as Understanding, Interpretation, and Hermeneutic Discourse

In this section, I elucidate for thematic analysis the ontological structures, or existential ways of Being-in-the-world, that empirical reality instantiates and emerge through a distillation of the major ontological themes common to thinkers in the phenomenological tradition. In addition to a foundational sense of autonomy, the ontological aspects of our Being include: (a) identity and the unique potential-for-Being; (b) the original sense of community and *historicality*; (c) the apprehension of temporality and finitude; and, what is distinctive about my analysis, (d) the primordial condition of always already being “stretched out” (*oregesthai*)<sup>1</sup> to the condition of learning (*as learner*) about the world within which we are immersed. Bonnett (2009) offers a powerful description of the human being conceived in its ontological grounds. The description is clearly at odds with the notion of the “self” as envisioned within educational models emerging from social efficiency, wherein the student is reduced to a product, object, or resource:

Self-hood is enduring, having its own life and identity; while shaped by its environment, it is not simply some sort of concrescence of that environment – it has an internal unity of its own and therefore a perspective on the world that is unique; it has feelings and a basic apprehension of its own existence – its experiences have the quality of ‘mineness’ and of privacy [but at once of its irreducible social connectedness]; it is finite, having only one life to live and this life is the sum of all that is possible for that individual (p. 359).

Forming the context within which this rich description of phenomenological self-hood pulses with life is the understanding that the human is always already immersed within its world and never at a subjective remove, that is, primarily and originally a Being-in-the-world. The world as conceived ontologically is anything but the impoverished world philosophized by Descartes. Rather, the world is a totality, web, or system of references, relations, and meanings that are constantly in the process of being established and reestablished in communion with others. As Being-with, through the process or practice of hermeneutic interpretation, we shape the world through our learning and the world in turn shapes our Being and understanding of it. Huebner (1974) also views hermeneutic activity as the primary practice by which we understand, interpret, and discourse authentically about our existence. Huebner calls this process of interpreting and understanding our Being-in-the-world the “individual-world dialectic,” a process within which “cause is effect, and effect is cause. The world calls forth new responses from the individual, who in turn calls forth new responses from the world” (p. 174).

Analyzing the conception of hermeneutics in Gadamer (1980, 1989) will elucidate and formalize the four ontological structures introduced above. This will set the stage for the move to concretize their relation to and



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<sup>1</sup> The notion that humans are “stretched out” in the world as truth-seekers was first developed as a detailed etymology by Professor Sean Kirkland in his reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the Graduate Seminar (De Paul University): 'The Emergence of Idealism from Socratic Questioning' (2006).

relevance for conceiving an authentic education. Philosophical hermeneutics, for Gadamer, is a practice and not a method. It is a practice because it is the most original and primordial way in which we are located in the world: our most basic way of Being-in-the-world is in the mode of seeking understanding about our world with-others. Thus, we are always already stretched out to the communal condition of understanding our world, which, according to Davey (2006), unfolds through the moments of translation, transcendence, and appropriation, wherein we translate “the strange and the foreign into a more familiar idiom,” (p. 51) and by doing so “effect a movement of transcendence in which we come to understand ourselves differently” (p. 51), and appropriate new and fresh readings of our lives. Importantly, the form of understanding that emerges through hermeneutic discourse is not akin to technical/hyper-rational knowledge. This is because the experience of hermeneutic understanding “stands in an intellectual opposition to knowledge and the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 355), and is, in fact, a more primordial way to comprehend the things around us. However, unlike empirical knowledge that has been validated, it is incomplete, limited, and ambiguous at times.

Hermeneutic understanding is bound up with Gadamer’s notion of *Bildung*, which happens through the process of dialogue. Davey (2006) states that *Bildung*, as related to authentic education, is the very opposite of “training,” or the filling up of empty vessels with knowledge, or the passing along of skills. Rather *Bildung* is a monumental “transformative educative process of formation through the engagement and involvement with others” (p. 39). Analyzing the term’s origins, Nordenbo (2002) states, “The suffix *-ung* on a verbal noun [*Bild*] in German indicates that we are dealing either with an act, a process, or an occurrence” (p. 342). Crucially, “as an educational idea, a person has acquired *Bildung* only if he or she has assisted *actively* in its formation or development” (p. 342, original emphasis). *Bildung* is the ability to resolutely and autonomously develop the “capacity, the ability to keep oneself open to what is other in order to gain a sense of oneself,” and this “preparedness or skill in changing mental perspectives” might be conceived as the essential condition of all authentic interpretive activity (p. 37).

Gadamer (1980) expresses this notion of *Bildung* through his hermeneutic reading of Plato by elucidating the distinctly “pedagogical aspects” of Socrates’ encounters with various interlocutors, all of whom experience a “formation” of their souls (*psyche*) through communal dialogue, or authentic discussion, as they work toward interpreting and defining the virtues, recounting in an essential and philosophical manner a mode of “human discussion which must be understood as discussion” (p. 21). This philosophical understanding of hermeneutics, “as a way of life represented by Socrates revealed the fundamental character of human existence as a whole,” which embodies a “formative educational effect,” wherein the primary purpose of the Platonic dialogues is “educational” (p. 72). Here, I suggest that we might understand Socrates’ claim in the *Phaedo* regarding philosophy as the supreme preparation for death in terms of philosophy “living” only as a way of life, a way of Being-in-the-world in which “care for the soul” in its essence embodies the process of an authentic education, a process of learning about the “good life” and the severe limitations of human knowledge in community. Zuckert (1996), in her reading of Gadamer, echoes this line of reasoning when stating that for Plato, “dialogue was not simply an essential feature of philosophical inquiry but of human social life as well,” and so the communal aspects of the “hermeneutics of facticity” must not be overlooked (p. 72).

The “hermeneutics of facticity” relates to Heidegger’s (trans. 1962) phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis (fundamental ontology) of *Dasein*. Heidegger claims “the phenomenology of Being is a hermeneutic in the primordial signification of the word, where it designates this business of interpreting,” which signifies the “rootedness” of *Dasein* within the world of its dwelling, as Being-in-the-world, and where its primary mode of Being is one of interpreting, understanding, and discoursing about the world in ways that have meaning for itself and its community. Risser (2000), commenting on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, stresses that our authentic interpretations always emerge from and return to our lived world. Authentic interpretations bring us back to the “situation” enlightened, changed, different in some sense of understanding, and this is properly the “operation of philosophy itself” (p. 22), as it works to “catch hold of life in its activity,” (p. 22) in its living practice *as praxis*. Hermeneutic activity, conceived as authentic educative dialogue, involves learning as an act of “interpreting itself,” as it is not a technical process *per se*, reducible to the “cognitive apprehension by a subject, but a kind of illuminative disclosing of life in the explicit actualization of a moment of factual life” (Ibid. p. 22).

Interpretation is the vehicle by which we, the readers, clarify what is given to us, but is always bound up within our own understanding of things. We approach interpretation guided in the first instance by both the text’s uniqueness as well as a preconception of what the text might be in order to clarify our initial veiled and unclear conceptions of it to eventually deepen and solidify our understanding of the text. This is accomplished through the practice of hermeneutics because all of our interpretations begin as something in terms of our *fore-having*, *fore-sight*, and *fore-conception* (Heidegger, trans. 1962). When things in relation to our Being are interpreted and understood “we say that they have meaning [*Sinn*]” (p. 192/151). Here, I want to explicate and punctuate a common theme within the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition: meaning always arises in connection with the understanding and

knowledge that we already possess and is dependent for its development and expansion on all that we do not yet have, all that is not solely dependent upon our own individuated Being, and thus on all that can be offered to us only through our participation in a living learning community.

Huebner (1999c) describes hermeneutic interpretation in terms of our temporality and historicity in the field of curriculum study. However, it is Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1989) who initially detailed the notions of time and history in relation to the hermeneutic unfolding of dialogue in both a synchronic and diachronic fashion (the development of meaning and deepening of understanding through interpretive acts occurring over and across time). Prior to understanding ourselves as individuals we need recognize that self-knowledge is grounded in our social-cultural identities that are given in terms of “horizons,” or contexts, of meaning. Gadamer calls the historical view to the world our “horizon” and this locates us within a context in which past, present, and future are interdependent. We depend on the past as heritage or tradition in order to project an authentic historical future. Our development as humans represents the expansion of our horizon through interpretive acts in which we essentially encounter those things and entities that are different, or radically Other, than ourselves. The context of our horizon includes, as previously stated, the fore-knowledge, fore-understanding we possess as historically rooted beings with “pasts” that we bring to the context of the dialogue, or our engagement, with texts. Texts, in this sense, can be works of art, historical artifacts, social institutions, educational resources, or other human beings and each possesses their own unique horizon. When these horizons merge or fuse, new possibilities emerge which would not have been possible otherwise.

When we understand that the past is alive and it speaks in the present moment, and that the past is necessary for the authentic projection of our potential self-understanding into the future, we possess a *historical consciousness*: “Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between text and the present” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 306). Consciousness is not made available to the individual in terms of static reflexive knowledge, but in terms of self-understanding. Self-understanding emerges as the horizons that we engage, within which we are immersed, and are interpreted. For Gadamer, understanding is always linked to dialogue and occurs, as I have described, through a fusion of historical horizons, that of the interpreter and “text,” that forms the context wherein past and present intersect. Although we might imagine the fusing of horizons in terms of a “confrontation,” the fusion is not to be understood as a combative engagement in which one or the other is either usurped in a power discourse or transcended in dialectic synthesis. Rather confrontation should be understood in terms of the counter-striving movement wherein the interpreter, for the sake of understanding, which is expanded in the present, contributing to the growth and development of the interpreter, takes up the Other’s horizon.

This foregoing section on the ontology of the human in the world *as* learner should allow the reader to gain insight into what might be essential or common to all activities bound up with the processes of teaching and learning and without which the empirical and formal experience of education (teaching and learning) would be impossible. Based on the foregoing analysis of Being-in-the-world as Being-with, as presented within a discussion on hermeneutic interpretation, I move to explore the authentic teacher-pupil relationship by formalizing the following fundamental question that emerges from the understanding of the ontological structures: How is it that we are authentically in the world with others when learning? In response, I identify three ontological aspects that emerge from the analysis as they relate to education: (a) the concern with temporality and history (*heritage*); (b) the concern with interpreting and understanding our world (hermeneutics as bridge between self, Other, and world); and (c) the concern with our existence as social beings in caring, solicitous relationships who are ecumenically involved in the project of “world-building.”

### **The Authentic Teacher-Pupil Relationship as Informed Ontologically: Authentic Learning Conceived Through the Unfolding of Hermeneutic Discourse**

The teacher-pupil relationship in education represents the experience of educators and learners within the ecumenical task, or process, of engaging that which is to be learned. Here, we would include the normative concern with the most valuable types of things that ought to be learned: things comprising the curriculum’s content. In essence, the relationship between educators and students must have as its *raison d’être* the conception and understanding of an authentic education, and the relationship itself needs to mirror, or better, embody the overarching view to education that serves as the philosophical grounding of and scaffolding for the curriculum. The context of that relationship—a world grounded in translation, transcendence, and appropriation is related to *Bildung*—is guided and directed by “poetic” activity. Heidegger (trans. 1977) states that *poiēsis* denotes a “bringing forth” of something in conjunction with a foreknowing, as in the case of the work of art, which is brought forth as work (*ergon*) through a process of “making” (poetics) guided in advance by a foreknowing (*techne*). In the case of the poetic pupil-teacher relationship, in terms of dialogue and social intercourse, most specifically, through acts of



hermeneutic interpretation, learning is really an informed aesthetic making. It is a bringing into existence a form of understanding that is in turn instrumental in bringing forth, or engendering, the transformation of the Being of those involved in the activity. Thus, this occurrence relates to what I have stated about *Bildung*, which might be termed “authentic education” in terms of the formation of the student’s soul or Being. Bonnett (1996) gives us insight into the authentic pupil-teacher relationship when stating that authentic dialogue is the “personhood” of the educator communing with the “personhood” of the student, moments in which the ontological aspects of Being as outlined inform and inspire “the teacher’s desire to enable authentic learning” (p. 35).

To begin, we might imagine the authentic teacher-pupil relationship that grounds the lived experience of learning as including and making space for students’ reflective and reflexive activity. This, in turn, means that autobiography and the lived world of the student’s emotional and intellectual experience as indispensable components of the educative process. This activity is grounded ontologically in the awareness of temporality and historicity, which includes the understanding of heritage (as past) and its contribution to students’ authentic and immanent possibilities for their indeterminate future as historical beings. This relates to Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutic interpretation as a “fusion of horizons,” wherein our development as humans occurs through the expansion of our unique horizons within interpretive acts that depend on the fore-knowing and fore-understanding we possess as historically rooted beings and which form our present existence. To embrace autobiography—in terms of the student’s unique intellectual and emotional life-story—as integral to the process of learning, opens opportunities and possibilities in which students acquire a deeper vision of things. Through the processes of translation, transcendence, and appropriation of the hermeneutic learning experience, authentic education might return the student to her “lived world” with a new sense of self-understanding. Grumet (1992) stresses that autobiography should never be conceived as monadic; for all self-knowing is “self-as-knower-of-the-world” (p. 33) within the world with others. By embracing the contributive effect of autobiography to the learning process, we are already engaging in the communal activity of interpretation through “conversation” with others. As Grumet writes, “autobiography is a story that is told to someone,” and in autobiography, every notion of self is “necessarily preceded by a relation to another” (p. 36).

To embrace autobiography—in terms of the student’s unique intellectual and emotional life-story—as integral to the process of learning, opens opportunities and possibilities in which students acquire a deeper vision of things.

When we bring “self-understanding” to the context of our dialogue, whether with texts or others, new possibilities emerge not otherwise possible. Thus, in an authentic learning experience, through the inclusion of autobiography, students learn about their own lived world and their own unique possibility-for-Being as it manifests in the authentic, communal world they share with others. Bonnett (1996) stresses that the authentic pupil-teacher relationship is never “driven by some set of detailed pre-determined outcomes, it must take its start from a sort of *listening*,” (p. 35) in anticipation of the Other’s (the student’s) unique voice as an authentic “*response* to what calls for attention, a *sensing* what is at issue, what is ‘on the move,’ as it were, in an engagement with a living tradition of thought” (p. 35, *emphasis original*). Huebner (1999c) claims that such understanding, in terms of anticipating what requires “attention,” or intuiting what is on the approach, is defined in terms of the educator’s ability to

envision his own projected potentiality for Being as it exists in the past-present-future. The value in this understanding rests in its ability to allow humans to accomplish things that have meaning for their Being. This is a uniquely human quality of the [educational] environment and requires the presence of human wisdom (p. 141).

Envisioning one’s potentiality-for-Being is grounded in an understanding of temporality and historicity. The so-called “presence of human wisdom,” which might be equated with ontological insight into our Being-in-the-world as Being-with, reveals a vision of learning in terms of time and the past (as heritage). In this view we embody our past, as heritage, and stand out in projection toward an indeterminate future, which returns to meet us in the authentic present when our authentic possibilities in relation to our past are opened up for appropriation. Huebner (1974) states that authentic curriculum should be concerned with the memories and valued traditions (culture-language) educators and students bring to the classroom. The role of the past as heritage within the authentic learning process cannot be overstressed within the authentic teacher-pupil relationship. This is because learning it is not about forgetting the past, lionizing the past, or unconditionally accepting the past as that which is simply unchangeable, because it was once here, and now, is irretrievably gone. Instead, learning is about confronting the past as our living heritage in light of our future. If learning is conceived as one’s destiny, then the authentic teacher-pupil relationship facilitates confrontation with past through interpretive activities, opening the potential to assess and reassess its worth for one’s unique potential-for-Being, to accept certain aspects while rejecting others as they relate and mean specifically and authentically to our life projects.

Huebner (1974) focuses on the teacher-pupil relationship as it grounds the unfolding of education through what has been identified as the individual-world dialectic. He claims that the educator is at once teaching the individual while simultaneously aware of her role as contributory member of a community engaged in ecumenical world building. Teaching lives at two levels: it is at once “the futuring of the person and the futuring of a society” (p. 37). Teaching always includes “the evolving biography of the person and the evolving history of the community or society. . . [grounded in the individual’s] freedom to participate in public life” (pp. 37-38). Since we might imagine education as working to build our public world, there is transcendence, liberation, and emancipation only when educators and students confront and interpret their heritage for “appropriation.” For Huebner, this entails the “sharing of memories and intentions,” along with the “embodied traditions, the technologies, and the institutions that make up the diverse public world” (pp. 39-40). However, we must be aware that this confrontation with our past as heritage requires that we scrutinize the types of issues to which this endeavor gives rise. As a result, we must ask with great concern the following types of questions: What aspects of our past should be retrieved, preserved, and enacted? Who should decide what these aspects are? Who is either granted or denied access to the collective wealth of memories and values that comprise the past as heritage within our educational institutions?

It is possible to read Huebner’s (1974) analysis of the various components of reading instruction in relation to the student’s ontological constitution as a temporal-historical being with a “living” history, or heritage, and to understand how traditional approaches to instruction ignore the ontological aspects of authentic learning as conceived phenomenologically. For example, “when the memories, traditions, and intentions of the educators do not coincide or fit with the memories and intentions of the students, power comes into play in the guise of manipulative activity” (p. 43). As opposed to changing the materials or the approach to reading, (subject matter, level of difficulty, choice of material), traditional reading instruction seeks to change and manipulate students by implementing techniques to develop “readiness” and strategies to “motivate.” When these psychological interventions fail, the educator then implements strategies to “discipline” students now viewed as a problem because they failed to respond to the aforementioned strategies. Thus, the educator in this instance is not facilitating the student’s sense of existential freedom, her active participation in the community of authentic learning as a salient individual with a legitimate past or heritage. That is, the student is excluded from participating in the continuous reproduction of the “public world,” in this case, the continuous reconstruction of the traditions and artifacts of reading.

Noddings (2009), in her critique of Adler’s *Paideia* Project, claims that the Great Books Program is highly constrictive of student’s freedom as a result of both the restrictive curricular content and the method(s) of pedagogy. One of the most pernicious aspects of the project is its drive to totalize and level down difference while it “elevates intellectual life above that which it should serve (the social communion of human beings), and it assumes an essential sameness in human beings and values that suggests, logically, a sameness in education” (p. 40). The *Paideia* Project selects a “form of education traditionally associated with an academically privileged class” and then “prescribes it for all children, regardless of home influences, individual interests, special talents, or any realistic hope that all can participate in the sort of professional life that such an education has traditionally inspired to” (p. 42). In its desire to prepare students to be participatory members of the democratic society, it “sacrifices the first principle of democracy: In the pursuit of eventual freedom, it denies students any freedom whatsoever in the choice of their own studies” (p. 42). In line with my concern, Noddings proposes that our schools embrace and legitimize “multiple models” of excellence, for example, “artistic, physical, productive, academic, and caretaking. Standing over all these should be the ethical, for what we need far more urgently than intellectual prowess is ethical goodness” (p. 43). In order to provide an authentic education as I am conceiving it, Noddings suggests that educators need to hold a “variety of [students’] talents and legitimate interests to be equally valuable” (p. 45).

As the above critiques indicate, when traditions values and memories of the educator and the institution are placed above those of the student, there is a “denial of the subjectivity of the child for the reaffirmation of the teacher and of those associated with available reading goods and services” (Noddings, 2009, p. 43), and include everything from the educator’s choice of primary readings, text books, basal readers, workbooks, assessment material. When considering such issues as control of tradition and the preservation and passing along of memories within education, it becomes not only an issue of equitable access to the past, but also an issue relating to the past as heritage, in terms of the foregoing ontological analysis. Huebner (1974) poses important questions for educators to consider relating to the traditions that are bound up with our reading programs: What are we passing along to students in terms of traditions? Who is being allowed access to the archive of collective memories comprising our heritage? What students are denied access to those traditions? Are the reading materials appropriate for various ages? And, as linked directly to heritage, “What traditions conserved in print are available to the six-year-old child in Appalachia, the Spanish-speaking six-year-old in Manhattan, the deaf six-year-old child in a school for the handicapped, the six-year-old child in the bush of Uganda?” (p. 45). With something as basic as developing reading materials, we must be aware that “there are communal traditions accompanying print” (p. 46). We must ask,

What communal traditions are present when the only print present to the child is that of one textbook in the presence of thirty other like-age children? What oral reading traditions accompany the textbook in schools? What kind of individual or collective memory, image, or intention is found in a textbook? (p. 46)

To continue, we might imagine the authentic teacher-pupil relationship that grounds the lived experience of learning as including and making space for students' construction of meaning. The authentic educative experience embraces and is grounded in the development of interpretive (hermeneutic) understanding as opposed to exclusively focusing on the acquisition of knowledge. Learning unfolds in a dialogic counter-striving activity between interpreters and a text. In this process meaning emerges through a "fusion of horizons" that necessitates the space for student autobiography, history, and heritage. Thus, in contrast to knowledge, in which finitude, incompleteness, and uncertainty are stressed above the academic certainty associated with positivistic notions of education, learning embraces the limited nature of understanding. For Huebner (1974), hermeneutic activity is a communal art, a "way of getting at pedagogical method and interpreting what goes on in the classroom or other educational places" (p. 47). It is central to the dialectic between individuals, their history, and world, and unfolds, to reiterate, in terms of "confrontation." The dialectic is best described as the rhythmic continuity and change of the individual's understanding and involvement with her world and others, wherein there is reciprocity between educators and students. For Huebner the classroom is a place where the old influence the young and vice versa: "a place where the past as present may be used, interpreted, rethought, and reworked" (p. 52). As Bonnett (1996) argues, the dialogue associated with hermeneutic activity is "poetic" in that it is grounded in "and thus celebrates receptivity and participation" because it is an engagement that is "open to the call of what is there to be thought in its summons of individuals," is "fluid and creative in that it is open to whatever arises in its interplay," and conditioned by a "set of values and organizational principles of procedure which express a concern to achieve authentic understanding" (pp. 35-36).

In essence the practice of all learning is hermeneutic, and hermeneutic interpretation is "the pedagogical process, is educational method, as in reading, which is in essence, on all levels, interpretation" (Huebner, 1974, p. 48). For example, in the presence of print the child is confronted with "something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience," and the problem of method—or as I prefer, *practice*—is to make it "familiar, present, comprehensible" (p. 48). To engage in phonetics represents an interpretive act of *translation* because educators and students take "strange symbols in print and [make] them comprehensible by translating them into sound" (p. 48). Through this "translation" the student simultaneously experiences the formative phenomenon of "transcendence" (as in Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutics) through educative, heuristic enlightenment, engendering the student's becoming other than she is at present. The process of instruction itself is communal and interpretive, a "tradition carried on by communities," and "whether by asking questions, establishing written assignments, reading to the child, or processing words for [her], is introducing [her] to traditions of interpretation" (p. 48). When engaged in reading we are dwelling within a context of living traditions of interpretations that come to us through texts and the encounter therewith. For example, even "various exercises in workbooks and independent skill development activity are forms of interpretational activity, hermeneutic forms that have been embodied in software rather than in social relationships between students and teachers" (Ibid. p. 48).

As stated, there is an undeniable difficulty, unsettledness, unquiet, and danger bound up with hermeneutic interpretation and which is expressed in the tradition's understanding of interpretation as an ongoing practice (Davey, 2006; Gadamer, 1980, 1989; Jardine, 1992; Smith, 1991; Zuckert, 1996). As stated, the form of knowledge as understanding (insight) that emerges from philosophical hermeneutics is not verifiable through traditional epistemological means, for "unlike reason, understanding does not seek wholeness or completeness but ever-new interpretive relations. . . [Thus] becoming whole and complete would involve understanding stepping outside the ever-changing between the withheld [concealedness-untruth] and the disclosed relationships that constitute its Being" (Davey, 2006, pp. 183-184). Zuckert (1996), in her reading of Gadamer, explains that the dialectic inquiries in which "Socrates engaged with his interlocutors were both literally and in principle unending. . . [because of] the finitude of human existence and hence knowledge" (p. 78) and which makes a complete understanding an impossibility.

This poses a problem within education and curriculum studies, as Jardine (1992) points out, for in education "technical images of inquiry have come to hold sway, and we have become inundated with research that is aimed at pinning down the life of the developing child in such a way that, in the end, nothing more needs to be said" (p. 117). Education demonstrates a frantic sense of being out-of-control without knowledge that provides foundations, firm epistemological ground. For example, Smith (1991) reasons that the "critical tradition" and the "tradition of consciousness" in educational philosophy share the desire to get things "right." These traditions presuppose that truth is objective and that it can be acquired via the application of the one correct methodology which results in a

war between traditions over who has privileged access and right to those things taken as truth (p. 197). But, as Smith points out,

Hermes [hermeneutics] is neither concerned to make a word mean one thing and one thing only, nor is only one preconceived way of doing things the only way. The hermeneutic imagination constantly asks for what is at work in particular ways of speaking and acting in order to facilitate an ever-deepening appreciation of that wholeness and integrity of the world which must be present for thought and action to be possible at all (Ibid. p. 197).

To continue this point, Jardine (1992) calls for education to embrace all that is difficult about understanding our lives and world to focus on the “dispossession of understanding from its methodologically prepared self-security,” in order to “return inquiry in education to the original, serious, and difficult interpretive play in which we live our lives together with children; it returns inquiry to the need and possibility of true conversation” (p. 124) along with all the inherent dangers that the language we embrace to communicate our lives invariably carries. Hermeneutics resists the desire for finality, completeness, and control. It renounces the lust to reduce the power of language to functioning and meaning in a singular, linear fashion and recovers the view of life as inherently problematic, mysterious, question-worthy, and difficult. The very nature of hermeneutic interpretation necessarily “prevents understanding from ever completing its task” because there is the recognition and enlightenment that its task, *as* authentic task, “can never be fulfilled” (Davey, 2006, p. 13). And, certainly, this notion of “difficulty” or the impossibility of ever securing a single correct interpretation relates to the profundity of literature and the arts, for the power of literature *as* art lies inherently in its ability not only to mean in a multiplicity of ways to a variety of individuals and communities, but as well, to cut across cultural and religious boundaries in ways that “analytic” philosophical texts fail to accomplish (Gadamer 1989; Greene 1995; Heidegger, trans. 1971; Nussbaum 2001).

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To conclude this section, we might imagine the authentic teacher-pupil relationship—which grounds the experience of authentic education—unfolding within a communal environment dedicated to the respectful and charitable task of learning and that includes erecting and sustaining a creative and ethical dwelling. A phenomenological picture of the human and world is complex and contains a multiplicity of perspectives and situations in which the needs, wants, and desires of the human play out in manifold and diverse ways. Just as one cannot divorce epistemology from its ontological grounds, educators can not simply subscribe to the “fact-value distinction” when it comes to teaching curriculum content. This is because experiencing and understanding the values that emerge through our educative endeavors are as much a part of an authentic education as is our arriving at collective and reasonable solutions to the problems we confront. Huebner (1974) reminds us that when education embodies the reciprocal interaction between human and world and embraces hermeneutic meaning-

making as the “bridge between self and other,” students arrive at the “mutual understanding in the conduct of their public affairs” (p. 37). This serves as the link between past, present, and future, establishing the phenomenon of a “caring collectivity in which individuals share memories and intentions” (p. 37). The world of education therefore consists of the individual, the society, and *ethos* (cultural traditions). For Huebner, we experience these “presences” most profoundly through “our hermeneutical and world-building arts” (p. 41).

Clearly, Huebner is referring to *ethos* in the sense of habituated behaviors or traditions that have been passed along as heritage. However, within the intimate relationship between student and educator, we might imagine an even more primordial notion of what is commonly translated and transliterated from the Greek as “ethics.” Therefore, I suggest that its meaning is found in the term *ethos* as it relates specifically to dwelling, habitation, one’s welcoming abode, and/or a primordial way of Being-at-home-in-the-world. To authentically dwell “ethically” with others, in terms of the primordial understanding of *ethos*, while engaged ecumenically in the historical unfolding of education or learning, entails learning how to participate as a caring, solicitous member of a community wherein memories, values, and intensions are shared and debated respectfully. As Davey (2006) reasons, “Whenever I understand, I come to understand through the mediation of another. It is the other who (in the form of person, text, or painting) brings me to understand something” (p. 9). Understanding through interpretive acts, as a practice of *Bildung*, emerges only through the mediation of the other who brings about an authentic sense of self-understanding. The conception of authentic learning as presented, which might be expressed as the poetic unfolding of *Bildung* (an

informed bringing forth which is at once a mutual and participatory act of formation) has an undeniable ethical (normative) dimension that is linked to the process of understanding when learning.

For example, Risser (2000) broaches the axiological realm when focusing on the communal aspects of hermeneutic interpretation. Risser marks out the crucial difference between “community and mere association, that is, in sharing there is an opening, presumably between one and another, where the world becomes larger, not smaller” (p. 20). Thus, in addition to the epistemological issues embedded in the ontological understanding of learning, there are also normative concerns that relate directly to the pupil-teacher relationship. Authentic learning emerges out of the teacher-pupil relationship that evolves and develops in terms of a mutual ethical responsiveness and in which each participant plays a crucial role in forming, sustaining, and reforming when necessary the authentic context of its unfolding and which marks out the original ethics of dwelling in the midst of learning as Being-in-the-world as Being-with.

This section focused on the teacher-pupil relationship as ontologically informed and the manner in which the notions of translation, transcendence, and appropriation in the process of learning function in terms of an authentic education. Moving into the final section of the essay, the following points that I have distilled from the foregoing analysis should be considered. First, self-understanding as described in phenomenological terms embraces personal intellectual and emotional experiences are indispensable to the processes of learning. Self-understanding as described depends on the interpretation of historical-linguistic traditions and practices (as heritage) shared with others as well as those markedly different than our own. Second, self-understanding involves the active and ongoing construction of meaning that unfolds in terms of a conversation that requires a critical encounter with the Other within a context, or “horizon,” of historical interpretation. Third, self-understanding involves a process of negotiations within an ethical dwelling of radical difference that embraces respectful, civil agreement and disagreement between participants in the dialogue. Because hermeneutic understanding is always limited and finite, respectful disagreement is stressed above the goal of epistemological consensus in discourse.

## **The Potential of Phenomenological-Hermeneutic Research: Informed Transformative Educational Practice**

In this final section I focus on the three aspects of the authentic teacher-pupil relationship as might be grounded in the lived world of the classroom and as related to the preceding ontological analysis. When considering the potential of phenomenology and ontology to contribute to the improvement of our educational practices, I am not suggesting that it is possible that such thinking will inspire a sweeping transformation of democratic schooling. Rather, in light of what has been presented, I envision poetic/aesthetic practices in the classroom inspiring small moments of change, wherein educators and students alike are enraptured in the grip of *awakening attunements* that carry them out of the world of the ordinary, beyond the commonplace dwelling of the classroom and into the proximity of our ontological potential (Magrini, 2010). It is possible to imagine the educator’s transfigured vision of educational praxis, grounded in the understanding of the teacher-pupil relationship emerging from this phenomenological and hermeneutic study, in the following ways.

### **Authentic educators demonstrate the insight that learning experiences should be organized in such a way as to embrace the “lived experience” and potentiality-for-Being of students.**

Practitioners should encourage students to inhabit and interact with the world of the classroom in terms of being open to the world they encounter within the experience of learning. Students should be attuned to the manner in which things come to presence in the light of their own self-showing, and most importantly, in ways that matter to them, in ways that have existential meaning for their Being and unique potential for their individual transcendence. Educators participate in the formation (*poietic-Bildung*) of students by making space for their unique possibilities of Being. This runs counter to the notion of teacher as authoritarian or as ultimate possessor of knowledge and opens an alternative view of the educator who embraces the student as legitimate contributor to the development of a formative education. To be attentive to the student’s lived world is to be attuned in an authentic way to what the educational experience means for the student. This calls not only for careful and acute observation, but also for the facilitation and sustaining of a heuristic discourse in which the primary mode of attunement is one of receptivity. This discourse engenders a “listening” in advance of education’s “conversation” for the call of the student’s voice, the call of her Being, in anticipation of her needs, wants, and desires as they relate to her unique potentiality-for-Being. Educators should be resolutely open to the student’s unique possibilities, which are on the approach from out of the indeterminate future. Students are ontological embodiments of human potential and, as such, they disclose for educators the primordial aspects of existence in ways that contribute to a developing sense of phenomenological

self-hood. If educators approach the educative process in an authentic manner, informed ontologically, the potential to learn from students about themselves as educators and human beings is present.

The lessons I employ when teaching philosophy incorporate and depend upon the lived experience of my students: They bring their stories and “self-understanding” to the context of the critical dialogue comprising the course. Looking to Jaspers (1959), I begin from the perspective that in addition to primordial learners, we are always already engaged in doing philosophy as existents for our “own humanity, our own destiny, our own experience strike us as a sufficient basis for philosophical opinions” (p. 9). Through personal and imaginative engagement with works of philosophy and philosophical literature and film, such seemingly simple, yet extremely profound, questions as, “What does it all mean for me?” open up the potential for creative interpretations grounded in personal lived experience. There is a sense of epistemic ownership established as the student brings the understanding from the classroom to bear on the issues of her life. At the end of the term, it is not uncommon for me to receive written communication from students that powerfully and dramatically testifies to the value of personalizing the curriculum. For example, one student enthusiastically exclaimed in a letter she had written: “*This class made me reevaluate all of my actions in life!*” When the issues, problems, and proposed solutions of philosophy are personalized they are brought down from the abstract heights of theory to live as visceral, authentic modes of critical problem solving. When in a resolute manner students are freed to relate the philosophical issues to their lives in meaningful ways in ways that relate to their own unique potential for developing existentially as free, autonomous individuals, there is a deepening of their self-understanding. This occurs, primarily because through evolving philosophical interpretations the notion of self-understanding is constantly renewed in terms of a *question*, in terms of its question-worthy nature.

When educators are attentive to the lived experience of the students and the ontological aspects of existence they also recognize the temporal and historical unfolding of authentic learning and understand that the freedom of their students depends on viewing education as a dynamic and indeterminate process. Social efficiency ignores our authentic relation to time, or temporality. As a result, planning and implementation of curriculum is directed mainly toward the future where goals, aims, and purposes are posited in advance of the practical enactment of learning. Product-process models for curriculum, inspired by Bobbitt (1924), focus on the student’s future behavior, which is viewed as determinate and thus predictable. The student’s potential and possibilities are defined in advance of the unfolding of her Being in the process of learning within terminal educational objectives. This view demonstrates the inauthentic understanding of time and the historical unfolding of learning, and it obscures the student’s genuine potentiality-for-Being. In contrast, the authentic understanding of temporality and historicity, as previously suggested, facilitates and nurtures the student’s autonomy, which in turn empowers students to make authentic choices when appropriating and enacting on their unique possibilities through self-directed acts of interpretation, transcendence, and appropriation. In line with the phenomenological method, we might imagine goals and aims for the curriculum emerging through a process of hermeneutic interpretation that follows a spiral structure rather than a traditional linear model for curriculum making. Curriculum making inspired by a phenomenological approach to education, which might be termed “process-product,” understands that goals and outcomes begin at the existential level of “lived experience.” Educators begin the process of curriculum design in a manner inspired by hermeneutic interpretation, i.e., with a fore-conception, or presupposition, of what goals and aims might be best for students. However, they possess the concomitant insight that initial goals and aims are fluid and protean in nature, they change, evolve, develop, and are reworked as knowledge and understanding of the student and her needs, desires, and abilities are revealed in praxis and interpreted and reinterpreted by the educator. The process of education, in such a view to curriculum, embodies the hermeneutic quest to clarify and eventually deepen the educator’s understanding of what is indeed best for the student in terms of her own-most potential for Being.

**Authentic educators demonstrate the insight that learning experiences should be organized so as to develop and evolve through dialogic interchange in which authentic understanding, or meaning, is constructed.**

Inauthentic learning is primarily concerned with knowledge that is both instrumental and of a distinct variety, namely technological/hyper-rational. Thus, education living in the shadow of positivism runs the risk of degenerating into a form of curriculum-making in which technicalization and hyperrationalization dominate. Technicalization focuses on the utility of our knowledge while excluding concern for why we do things and why they are meaningful to us. Hyperrationalization, on the other hand, favors applying reason to our analyses of the world while excluding concern for the emotional and spiritual dimensions of our Being. Inauthentic learning situates the source of knowledge outside of the learner in the objective world, which leads to the erroneous and dogmatic mind-set that truth is a possession of those employing the proper methodology to facilitate its categorical access. Truth, in such a view, is reified; it is viewed as immutable and eternal, giving the false and dangerous perception

that it lies beyond any and all interpretation. The types of inauthentic learning experiences that accompany the era of standardized, or “high-stakes testing,” in education are instances where knowledge begins situated removed from the student, is then imparted to the student, and which the student becomes responsible for identifying and recognizing on the test. To assess reading comprehension or contribute to the determination of literacy based on a standardized norm grounded in the Either/Or epistemological cluster ignores constructivist knowledge and understanding that emerges from hermeneutic interpretation and meaning-making as strong indicators of higher-level understanding.

The construction of understanding and meaning in the hermeneutical process of dialogic interpretation presupposes that in addition to the student’s heritage, she also brings a vast store of intellectual and emotional experience to the learning context that which holds vast potential to contribute to the ever-growing, ever-developing communal archive of student knowledge. As previously outlined, meaning is constructed within the shared horizon of perspectives, which importantly includes the perspectives of both educators and students. Through the unfolding of hermeneutic and heuristic activities, wherein interpretations are composed of clusters of interpretations, individual interpretations develop along with and indeed because of those with whom we participate with in the process of authentic learning, which is defined in terms of an ever-deepening communal understanding of world and self. Thus, there is an all-important bridge constructed between prior knowledge and that is valued as legitimately contributing to the learning, and new knowledge. This allows a view of education that eschews the privileging of empirical and axiomatic knowledge in the curriculum and instead recognizes various knowledge forms permeate the authentic learning experience including poetic/aesthetic varieties of knowledge. As related to this point, educators embracing hermeneutic, interpretive meaning demonstrate a genuine concern for the seemingly intangible aspects of the learner’s Being-in-the-world, which cannot be quantifiably measured or validated by means of traditional epistemological models. Authentic education embraces human wisdom, meditative thought, and aesthetic insight. Authentic education thus allows educators and students to approach the ontological aspects of their existence in a philosophical manner through a legitimate and autonomous form of non-conceptual and non-systematic thought and avoids the “subjectivist” trap of dualism, the scourge of social efficiency.

It is for this reason that I do not rely only on the philosophical treatise that is so extremely common in many Western philosophy courses. Instead, I incorporate non-traditional media such as literature and film in the philosophy curriculum. Such aesthetic works allow for the possibility of meaning to emerge by means of the poetic/aesthetic cluster, in a multiplicity of ways, all of which are open to further interpretation because such a view of literature and film (art) transcends a single, canonical, or authoritative reading. Greene (1987) insists that since no great work of art fully discloses itself, no one (and here I include the educator) has the authority to exhaust the “meanings of a work by identifying all of its possibilities” (p. 220). This method renders the type of pedagogy associated with product-process curriculum models insufficient as a model for accurately and holistically inspiring the students’ learning. Teaching philosophy through literature and film, a model employing hermeneutic interpretation, avoids the rote transmission of textual meanings to students, which is later regurgitated for a grade. As opposed to searching out the correct interpretation, my concern is with the ingenuity, depth, and legitimacy of the interpretation. For example, incorporating contemporary films into the curriculum such as Abel Ferrara’s *The Addiction*, a film about vampires who are university graduate students in philosophy, stimulates the students’ pop culture sensibility and engages them in an inspiring interpretive debate on a wide range of weighty philosophical issues including determinism, autonomy and the potential for ethics, the quest for self-knowledge and identity, and the burden of existential freedom and responsibility. What is crucial from the perspective of hermeneutic meaning-making in the curriculum is that the film inspires a multiplicity of philosophical readings. That is, the film might be read in terms of a secular meditation on Sartre’s existentialism or in a rich and deeply (decidedly Christian) theological interpretation. Engaging the film opens up instances wherein personal, emotional, and associative elements of the students’ autobiography are integrated in a legitimate way into the discussion and which unfolds heuristically with the student as an active participant and contributor to the processes of interpretation.

The experience of literature and film in the classroom inspires meaning in new ways: in perceptual ways and through imaginative emotional encounters with works of art. The aesthetic experience opens students to new and fresh ways of understanding that language functions in the epistemological realm of the aesthetic/poetic, which transcends empirical and axiomatic models of knowing. Experiencing the transformative power of the poetic and imaginative reading of texts holds the potential to “release the pupil into her own language,” which manifests a form of language that names and transfigures the deepest and most profound aspects of the student’s personal existence (Webb, 1987, p. 92). But, as Webb is careful to point out, the experience with literature as an aesthetic encounter is not an esoteric experience of a closed off, inaccessible subject, Rather the experience thrusts the student into communication with others because engagement with literature induces a “sympathetic understanding of our experiences in ways that always exceed the merely egocentric” (p. 83). The type of world in the curriculum inspired by aesthetic media nurtures a communal context in which students not only assume responsibility for their own learning, they also contribute to and benefit from the contributions of others. Hermeneutic activity, in terms of



procedural knowledge-construction, or better, the development of self-understanding, grows most authentically within a communal context for learning that is structured by a shared language emerging and developing from the encounter with alternative forms of aesthetic media. In community with others, through a poetic encounter with symbols, metaphors, and metonymy, there emerges “an awareness and understanding, through the art, of one’s personal world” (p. 83).

**Authentic educators demonstrate the insight that authentic learning experiences embody the ethical aspects of social dwelling. Thus, education, as opposed to being strictly epistemological in nature, is also bound up with ontological and axiological concerns in the form of values.**

Authentic educators are aware of the monumental ethical implications associated with dwelling within an educative community with others. If the vision and design of the curriculum is grounded in the ontological understanding of temporality and historicity, then it is possible to imagine authentic learning transpiring within an inclusive, multi-cultural environment and even within a context of dwelling that depends for its authenticity on educators’ embracing the inclusion of the language and the cultural forms of knowledge that each student brings to the context of learning. Through language we communicate our unique stories in ways that bespeak our historical roots. The notion of heritage as embodying our living past, the unique collective ethos of the student’s given culture, our collective ethos as members of a state and nation, the store of unique cultural possibilities that allow for the authentic projection into our future as a historical people, testifies that education must avoid the “totalizing” effect of leveling down or excluding the diverse cultural histories and values of our students. This “totalizing” effect in education ignores the fact that our vista onto the world, our understanding of phenomenological self-hood, is always mediated through our relationship to the Other, to that which is radically different. Thus, we are always already and in advance beholden and ethically bound to those with whom we share the space of learning. Understanding heritage as the legitimate founding ground for our future growth and development should awaken educators to the necessity of transcending unethical and inauthentic practices and policies that socially, culturally, and linguistically marginalize students.

Advocates of critical pedagogy (Giroux 1997; Jardine 2005; Kincheloe 2008) address the issues of resistance and agency in the topics of “power-knowledge” and epistemic regimes as related to educational institutions (Foucault 1980). The challenge associated with pursuing human agency and emancipation in Foucault, is that he was not, at least until he began seriously considering the “care for self,” concerned with prescriptive philosophy. In fact, it is not inaccurate to state that the pall of determinism, and in the extreme, fatalism, envelops much of Foucault’s writings. What I am suggesting with the turn to ontology is that the phenomenological subject as I have described has far more agency than Foucault’s writings might indicate, and that there are ways in which to enact authentic and ethical human agency within the daily practices of education, even if on a small and limited scale, in ways that might inspire new thinking about educational practices. For example, we must be acutely aware of the values that they are modeling for students and enacting within the classroom. When we choose and modeling values, we are also choosing for others; we are stating in effect: “I value X, you too *should* value X.” Educators must at all times resist the potential, in light of their position of power and advanced knowledge of course material, to override and marginalize the arguments and perspectives of students. This would represent a non-inclusive and unfair exercise of power.

The greater part of our philosophy class unfolds through student-led, peer-initiated discussion groups, in which students actually present lessons to the class. This includes a critical interpretation, a critique and corrective, and an interpretive commentary regarding the potential relevance of the position for the lived world by answering, “Does the philosophical position live existentially, and if so, how?” Thus, on a daily basis the students assume the role of educator, and I work as a facilitator to provide assistance when the discussion stalls or falters. However, it is not my intent to simply provide the “correct” answer when the discussion encounters an aporetic breakdown. This is what a domineering educator, who views students as inferior, or a dotingly overbearing educator, who is an enabler for dependent students, would do. Rather, in an effort to respect their freedom, there is the concern, or care, to give their freedom back to them, to facilitate its preservation and ensure its continued flourishing. Thus, it is my practice to encourage students to attempt to formulate their own solutions to the learning quandaries encountered in the course of the lesson. In addition, as related to fore-knowing as authentic hermeneutic understanding, I try to anticipate learning obstacles and then, in an act of projecting myself ahead of students, assist them in finding what is needed in order to overcome the problems on their own.

I initiate discourse within the philosophy classroom as a form of communication that strives to eliminate unethical advantages so that the discussion proceeds according to a criterion to which everyone can subscribe in advance. Hermeneutic interpretation as I practice it in the classroom is enacted within an inclusive context structured



according to just, equal, and equitable rules for discussion, engagement, and argumentation. The context for discourse includes a participatory aspect along with an epistemic aspect. However, when interpreting this notion of equality as related to discourse, it is not my intention to indicate that all interpretations, claims, and arguments carry the same or equal weight. This would amount to the leveling down of the discussion, or more radically, to the obliteration of the crucial distinction between interpretations that are informed and critically constructed and those that are of a spurious and uncritical nature. It is possible to envision the authentic classroom in terms of a developing and legitimate democratic community in which students and educators are involved in the process of interpreting texts through a process of hermeneutic interpretation while inspired and guided by a pedagogical method that engenders an environment for making-meaning that resists oppression and prejudice by means of providing an equitable space within which to engage others in a respectful, yet highly critical and informed, manner. In this type of classroom, the ethical notions of equality, equity, and justice are not merely represented but are also embodied in the unfolding of the discourse itself, which is all-inclusive, non-coercive and ecumenical in nature. After all, authentic discourse is never based on the participant's social position but rather on the legitimacy and relevance of the interpretation.

Authentic learning, within the dialogue of hermeneutic interpretation as outlined above, embodies the ethical aspects of social-based learning in which students learn from and teach each other in a variety of ways. Authentic learning is concerned with the respectful exchange of ideas in ways that demonstrate care, tolerance, and a critical conscious awareness. The communal character of the classroom, as described above, includes the all-important concern for moral development. It engenders learning through a process of arduous and respectful discourse that plays out in the process of accepting, rejecting, refining, validating, and honing the various interpretations that are offered up for debate in shared moments of problem-solving, which stress self-development and group development through communicative debate. There is recognition of the strengths and weaknesses that are either beneficial or detrimental to the personal development of the self and group. Educators and students work to arrive at common, agreeable solutions to the problems they attempt to solve through a process of critical debate. Such a debate is always rooted in their ever-changing needs, which manifest in light of their historical reality, representing an ever-renewed ethical quest for knowledge, understanding, and meaning. This represents a dwelling in which all students might feel at home within the "world" of authentic learning, which is built upon the respect for the ethical traditions that have been passed along to us, which through assessment and reassessment, through interpretation and reinterpretation, represents authentic appropriation and transcendence in learning.

## **Concluding Remarks**

According to Huebner (1974), the most valuable type of knowledge that education should concern itself is the understanding that facilitates the student's transcendence, liberation, and emancipation. As opposed to asking questions such as, "What is an effective teacher?" or, "What is an efficient curriculum?," perhaps educators should be asking more primordial questions such as, "How is it in the first instance that an authentic education unfolds in its essence?" or, "How is it that we are authentically in the world with others when learning?" These are precisely the types of questions grounding phenomenological-hermeneutical research. Responding to such questions, as I have attempted to show, holds the potential to afford us with insight and understanding rather than knowledge in the traditional sense of truth-as-correspondence. This is because, truth is neither closed-off nor categorical in nature, and defies traditional epistemological modes of verification. However, as Gelven (1972) points out, such ontological insight "is not a mere emotional intensification of attitudes," because one can learn about ontological issues in a way that is both "rational and non-arbitrary [...]" and the more one comes to understand, the more problematic and more inquisitive becomes one's search for a deeper understanding" (p. 80).

This paper offers an interpretation of education of an alternative nature to quantitative research in order to present a vision of what an authentic education might look like if teaching and learning are approached through the understanding of phenomenological ontology. To reiterate, this essay is not intended as a prescriptive recipe for designing, making, or implementing curriculum, or for that matter, organizing a classroom or defining pedagogical methods based on reified and indelible ontological precepts grounded in the existential structures as discussed. Rather, it is my hope that in engaging this essay educators and educational professionals will find inspiration to begin to think in other directions that move away from curriculum models and philosophies of education that endorse positivist values, where pedagogical methods, classroom management, and the entire scope of curriculum is grounded in the view that technical/hyper-rational knowledge is capable of providing categorical solutions to the problems of education. Within contemporary education there is a need for a renewed vision for the design and management of a classroom that promotes, supports, and facilitates a rich and fecund learning experience and which ultimately might find its home ground within the type of teacher-pupil relationship intimated herein for the reader. Phenomenological-hermeneutic research offers the potential for us to become immersed in legitimate "practical reflection in the concreteness and fullness of lived life" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5), illuminating what is right before us

but has previously gone unnoticed, misunderstood, or unappreciated. This allows the ordinary world to become more fully part of the world of education, and beyond, it allows the ordinary world to “actually *become* the world” (p. 5) of education as it is embodied in the personal, caring relationships we have with our students.

Editor’s Note: Although contrary to APA formatting, the use of the feminine in referring to gender is a philosophical writing custom that we have preserved in deference to the author’s background and wishes.

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