

*Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education*

# **PRACTICING EMBODIED THINKING IN RESEARCH AND LEARNING**

Edited by

Donata Schoeller, Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir,  
and Greg Walkerden



# Practicing Embodied Thinking in Research and Learning

This book delves into the embodied ground of thinking, illuminating the transition from theorising about the embodied mind to actively practising embodied thinking in research, teaching, and learning. The authors speak from immersing themselves in novel methods that engage the felt, experiential dimensions of cognition in inquiry.

The turn to embodiment has sparked the development of new methodologies within phenomenology, pragmatism, and cognitive science. Drawing on Eugene Gendlin's philosophical work on felt understanding, and Francesco Varela's enactivist approach, contributors explore innovative embodied thinking methods such as Focusing, Thinking at the Edge, micro-phenomenology, and mindfulness practices. They demonstrate the practical applications of these methods in research, teaching, and learning, highlighting their liberating and empowering potential for researchers and students. In an age marked by information overload and societal polarisation, methods of embodied thinking provide an innovative edge to critique, complementing more traditional approaches to critical thinking with listening skills and reflexive care.

This book shows how heeding the essential, yet often overlooked, embodied grounds of critical and creative thinking can deepen and strengthen each of research, teaching, and learning. It will interest philosophers of education and educators in higher education in particular, as well as researchers and postgraduate students from philosophy, and the cognitive and social sciences, who are curious about how embodied thinking can enrich research, teaching, and learning.

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# 1 The Leap

## The creative and liberatory potential of embodied thinking

*Donata Schoeller, Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir,  
and Greg Walkerden*

### **Beginnings of a daring leap**

During the conversations preparing this introduction, we noticed that what we call engaging an embodied ground of thinking started with happy coincidences for each of us. We bumped into something and only then realised how much we needed it. The pragmatist G. H. Mead lucidly describes how only after an insight has happened do we begin a process of working out rationally the many considerations that led us logically to this step (Mead 1932/2002). We did something similar. We began writing this introduction by giving all the reasons why what we call embodied thinking is the logical response to the turn to embodiment in the cognitive sciences and in philosophy, and why this can be considered a new mode of critical thinking within higher education, etc. We will still want to share our perspectives on all of that with you.

But we decided to not skip what came before: to acknowledge the lucky encounters with people, approaches and methods that were on the margins of our respective fields. Each of us – through different circumstances – encountered methods, such as Focusing, Thinking at the Edge, Micro-phenomenology, meditation practices, and practices of environmental immersion, which are not considered part of the disciplinary toolboxes of our fields. Each of us began to engage, going to workshops, and practising, with a sense of having hit veins of water in a drought-stricken landscape. These practices and engagements touched something at the heart of each of us. By “at the heart,” we mean the focal point in which the person we are is not separated from the researcher and teacher we try to be, in which the motivation for our work is not separated from how we live, in which our work is not separable from a wider situation and environment which we work in and for.

A sense of relevance, and a sense of perplexity, seemed intertwined for some time: wanting to, and not knowing how to, introduce such novel methods to our disciplines; wanting to, and not knowing how to, realise their potentials within the research and student communities we are part of. A sense of being highly motivated, and at the same time rather lonely in this endeavour, is also part of the story that lies behind this book. And there are anecdotes of clumsy beginnings, discouragements, embarrassments, and the like which we

will spare you here! Fortunately, all the valuable learnings on the way fuelled our courage and elaborated a growing know-how of what we call engaging the embodied ground of thinking, or just embodied critical thinking. We hope this book conveys some of the taste of it.

We also need to acknowledge the lucky circumstances that brought us together. They were not quite as accidental as the ones that got us acquainted with the methods we introduce here. It was this kind of practising, and the trials of articulating its relevance, that laid the path on which we met. Encountering each other became the foundation of a growing research, practice, and, later, training community, members of whom have contributed to this book, and who, more basically, have been an enabling condition for its coming into being.

Our journey was generously supported by the Iceland Centre for Research, as well as by the Erasmus+ programme for Strategic Partnership in Higher Education. With this kind of support, we gathered other pioneers to eventually establish a training programme and research centre on Embodied Critical Thinking, which has been running since 2019, and is now entering into its second phase with Training in Embodied Critical Understanding. The training programmes have been developed with European grants from Erasmus+, enabling a cooperation of European universities and research institutions. The universities cooperating in this programme are the University of Iceland, Ernst-Abbe University of Applied Sciences in Jena, the University of Groningen, the University of Ljubljana, the Technion University in Haifa, and the Micro-phenomenology Lab in Paris. Newcomers to the project are the Universities of Aarhus, Bielefeld, and St. Gallen.

For the last six to ten years, we – the editors and authors of this book, together with a growing team of researchers and students – have practised our way into new methods that are supporting us in this *leap* from theory into practice. Since 2021, we have trained around 30 participants annually (chosen from around 100 applicants) in the interdisciplinary methodologies, approaches, and the scientific and theoretical foundations of the leap we are trying to enact ([www.trainingect.com](http://www.trainingect.com)).

The leap that we practise involves a sort of challenge that is difficult to put in words. Aspects of this challenge are reflected in this book (e.g. in the chapters by Eisenberg, Krycka, Heimann and Bach, Sandberg, Schoeller). What is difficult to put in words is a sense of transgression of habitual demarcations of scholarly approaches that have been formative for us. A feeling of awkwardness comes along with introducing the *enactment* of the embodied mind in research and teaching contexts. Doing this is quite different from safely elaborating these concepts theoretically. This has made us understand the deep-seatedness of the tacit assumptions that cut between the personal and the universal, between feeling and rationality, between mind and body, between human and more-than-human, and how these cuts manifest in our own academic approaches, as well as in our thinking, teaching and research habits. Our project touches upon an implicit double bind that prevails in

academic research cultures. Of course, one is encouraged to think. Yet at the same time, one is discouraged from being personal or subjective. The people editing and writing this book needed to become beginners again. We have needed to learn, firstly, how to engage with a laboratory we each embody – an interiority that expresses entangled lifeworld-circumstances – and then, secondly, *not to disconnect from it* when we work on our research topics, and think in theoretical terms. All the scientists and philosophers of this volume stepped away from their habituated paths and out of their comfort zones, to begin to practise in new ways in their academic contexts. We have not abandoned the familiar paths. The prevailing traditions and schools of critical thinking continue to serve as the backbone of scholarly work, as Thorgeirsdottir and Haraldsdóttir show, in their contribution to this book, as they map the historical development of the various philosophical strands and practices of critical thinking. We have come to realise that embodied thinking has always been at work in good critical thinking, whether in its rationalistic-argumentative or social critical theory strands, without being adequately acknowledged or made methodologically explicit. What we discovered through taking the leap from embodied mind theory to embodied thinking practice was well worth the risk. It has enriched our theories, and it has re-energised our engagement in our research and teaching. We hope you will sense this in the following chapters.

But before that, we do now want to provide some more perspectives on backgrounds to, and reasons for, enacting this move. The more we practice the leap into novel embodied methods, the more apparent the reasons become for doing so. To begin with, we have to say something about the body.

### **What we mean by body**

Embodied practice has become a major term, covering yoga, qi gong, martial arts, different dance practices, different sports approaches, and meditation practices. Our meaning of embodied is in line with feminist, hermeneutical, pragmatist, phenomenological and enactivist epistemologies, and ontologies. We share a conception of the human body in terms of interaction and, to borrow a term from New Materialism, of intra-action. Every-body *is*, enacts, manifests, and implies interactions and intertwined relations that are constitutive of all dimensions of their physiological, personal, social, ecological and political existence. Every-body is, lives, breaths, eats, develops, and has developed, by interacting with natural environments. And every-body is also environment herself. Many processes within the body are environments for other processes, every change in a micro-process may affect some macro-process, and vice versa. The skin-line, as Eugene Gendlin poignantly says, “is not the great divide” (Gendlin 2018, 6).

An embodied approach to anything thus needs to be considered intrinsically as co-creative. The awareness of “horizons” (see Strle and Kordeš, this book) participating in our outlook, of past and present situational interactions functioning in our approach, makes an embodied approach intrinsically



self-reflective and naturally care-full. Micro-phenomenology demonstrates well how exploring any aspect of lived experience requires disciplined skills of getting in touch and being touched. This process makes borders between the so-called subject and the so-called object of inquiry permeable, while at the same time “experience subtilizes”: subtleties surface (Petitmengin, this book).

Because becoming more aware of one’s own embodied presence underpins all embodied approaches; reflexive care is an epistemological condition for the leap we practise (Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch 2003; Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019; see also Schoeller, this book). We learn to take in the felt dimensions that are holding the interactional complexity functioning in our decisions and reasons, and the interactional complexity functioning in our felt experience. Respect for what Gendlin has called the intricacy of experiencing is implied in our understanding of an embodied approach. Once noticed, the tacit dimension of experiencing is recognised as the water in which the fish – anything we do and think – moves. While being obvious, this experiential and embodied element of cognition is the least transparent, and in great need of skilful, care-full clarification. We need to learn to unpack the multi-layered meanings involved in its functioning, for instance, in rich motivations or fuzzy discomforts about our research projects (Ollagnier-Beldame and Servaise, and Sauke, this book).

Acknowledging interaction as characteristic of embodiment, and thence of embodied thinking, brings along with it acknowledging a transformation in the process of research. Objects we research change as we do, during the process. Noticing this transformation, and reflecting on it, involves non-focal forms of attention, forms of attention that do not just focus on recognising an object but on how one recognises it, that do not just focus on what is experienced but on how it is experienced. This attentiveness blurs the lines between scientific and artistic perception. A self-reflective embodied approach is a handling of a responsive intertwinement with what we call an “object” or “subject matter.” Rhizome-like complexities, webs of connection, open up, if objects and topics of research are approached without abstracting away from how approaching them impacts us (see Jóhannesdóttir, this book).

The methods we use and develop allow us to become aware, in experiential and embodied ways – not just in theoretical terms and through models – of interaction’s role in the coming about of phenomena and problems.

### **Theories backing the embodied practice of thinking**

Obviously thinking is a physiological process, as the correlations between brain activity and thinking processes show. However, what this co-occurring involves – *how* physiology and phenomenology are aspects of the one process – is a matter of profound complexity, and fundamental orientations towards this are highly contested (e.g. Chalmers 2007; Dennett 2003; Varela 1996; Oizumi et al. 2014; Polis 2023). But from a practitioner’s perspective – from a thinker’s perspective – the importance of the somatic grounding of our

thinking is surprisingly accessible. Practices like mindfulness, in which returning to noticing breathing is often used as a support for slowing down, relaxing, and being aware (Kabat-Zinn 2018a), and Gendlin's (2003) focusing, in which a bodily discomfort can evolve into a fresh understanding of how to act, illustrate this. The relevance of somatic sensitivities to skilful thinking has been identified in diverse contexts, including research into creative thinking, e.g. "body thinking" (Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein 2001) and reflective practice (Schön 1987).

*Practicing Embodied Thinking in Research and Learning* focuses on this second territory: somatically oriented thinking practices. We are exploring practices for bringing interoceptive felt-sensing practices (Gendlin 2003) and more generally awareness of how we are experiencing presence (Kabat Zinn 2018b), self-consciously into researching, learning, and teaching. In this way, we are stepping into a gap: a gap between the research traditions that demonstrate the cognitive functions of embodiment, and the research settings that give few opportunities for researchers to *use* these functions, as they contribute to scholarly discourses.

Recent research in the cognitive sciences into the embodied ground of thinking can be read as implying this kind of lacuna, including, specifically, a gap in training in critical and creative thinking. Traditionally training of scholarly thinking within higher education has taken for granted that there must be embodied features to the ways in which we fall into confirmation bias, ignoring awkward data, reacting in kneejerk ways, rather judgementally, and, on the positive side, how we come to recognise cognitive dissonance or intuitively grasp something new. However, it has offered few methods for enacting these realisations in learning and teaching.

The growing body of evidence of embodied features of thinking that sheds light on everything from impulsive action to deliberative, reflective thinking includes Dewey (1931), Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991), and Gendlin (2018) for the felt-sensing dimension of cognition, and Damasio (1999) for the somatic markers that include emotions, situational learnings, and that direct assumptions. Jung's (2009) work on the interactional dynamics of affect, everyday experience, and abstract levels of thinking points to the possibility of developing methodologies to promote awareness of the different sources of our thinking more systematically. This complexity can help in critical and creative thinking in universities and broadly within research and professional settings of diverse forms of knowledge production.

It is well known that the contemporary experiential and embodied turn in the cognitive sciences and philosophy has its roots in the pragmatist philosophies (Peirce, James and Dewey), in philosophies of embodiment and hermeneutics (Nietzsche, Dilthey), in feminist and new materialist thinking (Beauvoir, Braidotti, Haraway, Irigaray, Muraro), and in phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty). These traditions – both individually and through their encounters with each other – pre-figure our leap into practices for engaging the embodied ground of thinking. The pragmatist emphasis on

the functions of actual experience, qualitative feeling and situations, the phenomenological emphasis on the body not as an object, but as a multi-layered space, and flesh as a term that does not separate humans from the materiality of the more-than-human world, conceptualise cognition beyond traditional narrow epistemological framings focused on the human mind – a tacitly quasi-isolated mind. Furthermore, the feminist emphasis on gender, specificity, and the situatedness of cognition breaks open a concept of universality and truth that excludes the lifeworld of the “other sex,” and excludes our minds’ entanglement with cultures, traditions, other species, histories, and materialities (Haraway 2007). Furthermore, the contemporary Western mindfulness movement (an adaption of a Buddhist form of meditation) is being drawn in to strengthen contemplative dimensions of thinking in phenomenology (Ferrarello and Hadjioannou 2023).

The methodologies emerging out of these diverse traditions are a concrete and practical response to calls for “slow philosophy” as a way of “reading against the institution” (Walker 2016), for thinking as an enactment of “resonance” (Rosa 2016), for thinking “beyond philosophy” (Tuana and Scott 2020).

The enactive strands of cognitive science, especially as developed by Varela and his team, which led to the practice of micro-phenomenology, and Eugene Gendlin’s process philosophy, which he developed at the intersection of philosophy of language, pragmatist, phenomenological philosophies, and humanistic psychology, are the main inspirations behind the methodologies introduced in this book.

These latter two traditions have played a special role in our explorations of embodied thinking. They were our cornerstones. They gave us ways of exploring the practical implications of embodied mind theories, and then to become creative, developing and elaborating our own methods. A major inspiration for this shift into practice has been Gendlin’s development of the practice-based concept of a “felt sense” (Gendlin 1997; Schoeller 2020), his Focusing technique which foregrounds felt sensing, and his method of Thinking at the Edge (TAE) developed from his course on building theories at the University of Chicago (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004; Schoeller 2021). This work provides practical guidance for heeding how thinking *feels* (meaning by ‘feels’ thinking’s somatic aspects, e.g. the play of atmospheres, “*Befindlichkeiten*,” shifting inner landscapes, relaxing and tensing), in a conscious sustained way. Gendlin’s work shows how heeding *felt* understanding can contribute to problem-solving, theory-building, and creative work generally (Gendlin 1991). If this appears a puzzling notion, consider how shifts in comfort and discomfort play a grounding role in writing and editing: we let words stand that feel like they fit – that say what we mean. Gendlin has provided many examples of processes that demonstrably involve illuminating functions of somatic aspects of meaning, for example finding an alternative way to define a term, explicating the meaning of a work of art, having an understanding of another person (Gendlin 1997; cf. Walkerden 2005; Schoeller 2021; Krycka, this book). Gendlin and colleagues have provided extensive empirical evidence that shifting one’s thinking style

to foreground somatic aspects of thinking has a transformative effect in problem-solving processes (most of this work relates to problem-solving on therapeutic contexts; cf. Klein et al. 1970; Hendricks 2001).

Another major inspiration has been Micro-phenomenology ([www.micro-phenomenology.com](http://www.micro-phenomenology.com)). With roots in meditation and mindfulness, as well as phenomenology, this practice scaffolds fine-grained sensitivity to our experiences, to explicate experiential processes. There is striking research that demonstrates how this is illuminating for first-person research. Petitmengin-Peugeot's (1999) work on intuitive thinking echoes Gendlin's discovery of sustained felt sensing (Walkerden 2005); the two discoveries reinforce each other. Petitmengin et al.'s (2013) work on improving the reliability of first-person research demonstrates that disciplined microphenomenological explication is a reliable method of enquiry into first-person experience (cf. Petitmengin 2006; Petitmengin et al. 2019). At heart, microphenomenology is a research method. However, it has proved useful for deepening practitioners' understandings of their own experiences, for being able to step away from conceptual ruts, and to free oneself from constraining conceptualisations about what one's experiencing is (Petitmengin 2007, Petitmengin this book; Schoeller 2021; cf. Walkerden 2021). Crossed with Thinking at the Edge and other practices, it has considerable potential as a method for helping practitioners develop their own thinking, helping them to orient and reorient towards their research, and helping in their self-understanding as researchers (Ollagnier-Beldame and Servais, this book).

### **Engaging our embodied-experiential grounding as a form of critical thinking**

The title of the training programme that many of the authors and editors of this book contributed to is called 'Training in Embodied Critical Thinking and Understanding'. This name points to our gradually developing understanding of the way that the methodologies we practise are contributing to our capacities for critical thinking. Obviously, the embodied approaches do not add new elements to the set of principles and rules for logical thinking and rational argumentation (e.g. Toulmin 1958; Flew 1989; Foresman et al. 2017). Rather, the embodied approaches add a new dimension to the practice of logical thinking by supporting sustained, sensitive exploration of its embodied – that is entangled and interactional – situated grounds. Embodied thinking as understood here strengthens theoretical understandings of logical thinking. More conventional understandings of critical thinking, with their foci on providing evidence, warrants and backing to support claims (Toulmin 1958), and on testing the dependence of conclusions on premises, avoiding circularity, etc. (Flew 1989), depend upon an unexplicated ground of insights gained with a prior layer of experiential understanding. How to make this prior level fruitful in thinking is not explained in textbooks on critical thinking: how to connect, become aware of and clarify the messy soil from

which one's intuitions, thoughts, reasons, judgements and claims grow. Using methodologies at the intersections of philosophy, psychology, cognitive sciences, and phenomenology, methods for describing and explicating first-person experience provide strong support for a deeper understanding, explication and clarification of the participating grounds, on which standpoints stand.

Systematically engaging the embodied grounds of thinking is centrally deliberately and methodologically getting in touch with what, for the most part, has either been taken for granted and not reflected on, or that has been traditionally discussed in rather disembodied terms, for example with references to spontaneous insights, distancing and abstracting, to having ideas, serendipitous thoughts, and sparks of genius. From its starting point in ancient philosophy, there has always been a contemplative tradition within philosophy, the core of which was described as the challenge of knowing oneself: *gnothi seauton*. From Socrates' description of being a knower who does not know, to accounts of philosophy as a way of life (Hadot 1995), to descriptions of following a hunch or a not yet articulate vision (see Haraldsdottir and Thorgeirsdottir in this book), to philosophers of the 20th century like Luce Irigaray, Iris Murdoch, and Simone Weil who present philosophical thinking as a special form of attention and intensity of concentration, philosophising, down the centuries, has entailed more than using the skills of argumentation and reasoning. In contemporary phenomenology, research into meditation and mindful approaches as entry points for developing first-person descriptions of lived experiences is growing.

Thus, we consider practices for engaging the embodied ground of thinking as critical to understanding and solidifying the underpinnings of formal requirements for good argumentation such as logical consistency and coherence. Being able to analyse correctly, infer, and follow logical rules is not enough. In a time of environmental crisis and polarisation, the capacity for thinking for oneself, by embracing embodied thinking methods, is a capacity for uncovering multiple relations to, and deeper connections with, familiar, diverse, and vulnerable others, and the more-than-human world. Our leap cultivates a thinking that can account for the wisdom we experience in empathy, grief, excitement, joy, pity, and perplexity. We believe education needs to find ways to enhance reflective skills for facing and clarifying the utter confusions that underlie heated and hateful debates, by helping people to attend skilfully, and think *with* the felt sources of what someone – a researcher, student, citizen – experiences as meaningful.

### **Societal needs**

A sense of the urgent timeliness of embracing embodied methods of thinking and understanding plays through this book (see the chapters by Sandberg, Sauke, Schoeller, and Walkerden). In an age of rapid growth of artificial intelligence and its calculative forms of thinking, in the face of the polarising effects of social media on public debates, and the 'post-truth' stances in play in

current disputes over public and scientific truth claims, as well as plurality in a multicultural and globalised world, and finally in the face of prevalent patterns of thinking and living that are disconnected from the embodied realities of a more-than-human world, critique needs to facilitate radical transformation. As educators, we strive to contribute to systemic changes that work against the play of political self-interest in public life at the expense of the common good, and the corporate takeover of politics, and in particular the shaping of policy, and the manipulation of public opinion, through ownership and control of media outlets. Education needs to foster independent thinkers, who are able understanders of subject matters, but also of other people, and of themselves, who can thus become empowered citizens and a force for the advancement of institutions that protect free speech, freedom of opinion, and vibrant, pluralist democracies (Dewey 1980, 1988; Kitcher 2022).

While a great deal of grant money is available for boosting digital skills, very little is provided to boost attention to, and care for, organic, non-linear movements of unfolding of human understanding. Little interest is invested in fostering the slow emergence of ideas and of socially relevant questions in research practice; few initiatives we know of undertake to strengthen the capacity to bear the felt dimensions of differing positions; little know-how is offered that supports genuine processes of becoming clearer about something, and coming to terms with the tensions of a complex world. How do we teach our students to transform powerful emotional triggering into thoughtful standpoints? How do we help them learn to “stay with the trouble,” as Haraway (2016) puts it in a nutshell, while learning to care – for oneself, for others, for a world?

### **Transformative practice implements critical insights**

Critiques of the epistemological, political and environmental consequences of a disembodied understanding of cognition have been formulated by many different philosophical schools. The call for different ways of thinking however is trans-disciplinary and trans-institutional, uniting philosophers, scientists, and also politicians. The environmental philosopher Nancy Tuana calls for the development of “new sensibilities” (Tuana and Scott 2020; cf. Walkerdén 2019), the cognitive scientist Varela for the need of a radical re-learning (Varela 1996, 346–347), to name but a few.

A century ago, Whitehead’s term “bifurcation of nature” pinpointed the powerful split science and philosophy have induced in our sense of reality by separating the “subjective” experience of a glowing sunset from the so-called objective grasp of reality (Whitehead 1920, chapter two). This kind of critique has been reformulated in many ways, drawing out the uses of power implicit in the seeming neutrality of an objective observer, identifying ways in which ‘objective reporting’ has supported versions of power, privilege, and entitlement. Critique of the scientific blind spots in conceptions of objectivity and descriptions of the cultural and gendered situatedness of knowledges imply the

question: how can these appreciations of situatedness and first-person experience be enacted in research practices? Francisco Varela captures the crux of the challenge we are confronted with in the following poignant way:

In our usual training and practice as Western scientists and philosophers, we (. . . I) ask, “What is mind?,” and “what is body?,” and proceed to reflect theoretically and to investigate scientifically. (. . . I)n the course of these investigations we often forget just who is asking this question and how it is asked. By not including ourselves in the reflection, we pursue only a partial reflection, and our question becomes disembodied. . . . It is ironic that it is just this attempt to have a disembodied view from nowhere that leads to having a view from a very specific, theoretically confined, preconceptually entrapped somewhere.

(Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991, 27)

Even though we may agree with these kinds of critiques, in research and teaching we may well, habitually, keep ourselves, personally, out of the picture. Education still strongly supports methods of positioning oneself as an appropriately disciplined objective inquirer and thinker. However, *including* ourselves in the picture comes with big questions. How to inquire into what seems too close, too obvious, too banal to be worthy of serious inclusion: our own experience, fuzzy felt dimensions of thinking, the more than often confusing “soup,” or “mesh,” that functions in the backgrounds of our questions and claims (Varela 1999; Gendlin 1991)? There is a nervousness in the air, when we invite trainees for the first time to become interested in their own backgrounds participating in their research. Is this still science? Is this still philosophy? Why should personal stuff be relevant? Is this therapy? Even though the philosophical critique of the naïve self-understanding of the objectivist scientist is widely accepted, literally implementing it, by not looking away from one’s own involvement, seems like going a little too far.

A primary step into practising a more inclusive stance is to strengthen what embodied minds bring along: a unique experience of an interest, a perplexity, an intuition, a frustration, an excitement, a sense of lostness or stuckness, a sense of grief or anxiety, and the richness of one moment of lived experience. When starting any project, engaging the embodied grounds of thinking means inviting students and researchers to slow down, to ask questions that lie beneath the surface, and to take courage to ask.

Methods like Focusing, Thinking at the Edge, Micro-phenomenology, and mindfulness begin from here (and not from nowhere). These methods have one thing in common: they make you realise how challenging, and at the same time how worthwhile, it is to attend to the fuzzy lived experience, the vague felt sense dimension which tacitly accompanies what we think and do, and is so characteristic of the human mind. The methods we have collected and developed also have something else in common: a moment of pausing, skilful questions focusing on *how* we experience anything, and listening skills to facilitate the close “reading” and unfolding of relevant situational and experiential

backgrounds functioning in one's conceptual understandings, approaches, and interests (Schoeller 2019).

Practitioners grope for words when it comes to describing a short moment of lived experience or unfolding the experienced meaning of a situation, or finding expressions for a situated grasp that builds on a web of insights in which many situations are implied. Our *felt* understanding integrates in surprising ways and is a platform for much more creative, responsive thinking than thinking constrained by familiar conceptualisations and canons of argumentation (Walkerden 2005, 2019, this book; Schön 1987).

A major condition for such thinking is creating an intersubjective space in which one need not be prematurely clear. We allow each other to dwell with how one experiences a situation or problem that moves one's thinking in multiple ways. Precise rules of listening and non-interference need to be learned, to jointly hold a reflective process which allows for shifts and, at times utterly surprising, movements to happen – instead of beginning with a clear position, claim or hypothesis that one needs to 'defend' or prove. Protecting a pre-argumentative phase of thinking is what we call this skill (Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019), in which researchers and students learn to, and allow each other to, tentatively articulate still vague, yet important seeming ideas that need a chance to find language.

Eugene Gendlin's work has emphasised the responsive dimension of the embodied mind, and how it cannot be controlled. Stuckness is an example of embodied stubbornness. To give one example: In one of the trainings, a senior researcher involved in environmental studies could not proceed, she felt a blockage – no matter how she tried to approach the subject matter in her habitual ways. She was utterly surprised by what happened when she stopped ignoring the feeling of being stuck. What seemed to her to be private and annoying, a bodily felt blockage that stood in the way of her going forward with her work, turned out to be a somatic knowing that opened up her semantic frameworks, step by step, in new ways. This opening did not proceed in a deductive, analytical way. It needed acknowledging of a felt dimension that was processed in words, in long pauses, but also in tears and laughter. Reflecting on the process, she said:

By paying attention to the bodily felt sense, a wider implicit situation opened up than I was explicitly aware of. My focus was narrowed down on data and theoretical frameworks. I did not allow myself to feel an encompassing dilemma that my body carried. When I did, something started to speak that had been muted, and it seemed to me to be muted similarly to how animals and plants [are] – that we do not hear even if they try to speak to us.

(Schoeller 2023, 299)

Krycka's, Sandberg's, Eisenberg's, and Walkerden's chapters in this book each show how emphasising embodied modes of thinking can have striking, emancipating impacts on learning and teaching.



While the movements of a more embodied experience of thinking and research are not simple and easy, because in heeding our own experiences we may encounter grief, frustration, internalised harsh critiques, feelings of hopelessness, confusion, etc., they also let us encounter a kind of joy rarely experienced in academic work. A number of the chapters in this book illustrate this. Krycka, and Eisenberg, Haraldsdóttir and Thorgeirsdottir delight in students' joy. Heimann and Bach, and Ollagnier-Beldame and Servais, speak to the joy that can arise in the researcher making sustained use of embodied thinking methods. The joy of realising something, the delight of a surprising insight, and the relief of a shift into deeper understanding is the other side of the coin of allowing oneself to feel and process more fully confusions and discouragements that hinder going deeper.

So, now that you are here, on this last page of this introduction, before continuing to read this book, take a moment to breath, to feel how you sit, to notice your posture – just for a moment. And if this text is in your hands – can you feel its weight and textures? If it is on your screen, are you sitting or standing, tired or alert? Can you – just for a moment – appreciate the silent kind of experiential and situated knowing that functions implicitly in your state of curiosity, subtle interest, fatigue, excitement, impatience, frustration or cautious hesitation regarding what you have read so far? Vast numbers of experiences, learnings, and situations – layers and layers of lived experience – are functioning tacitly in your way of understanding this text. It needs slowing down and interoceptive connecting to realise just a fraction of the richness that is very close by.

These invitations to you as the reader are not meant rhetorically. To become aware and describe phenomena of experience in ways that do not diminish them is a central practice of engaging embodied grounds of thinking. For this reason, we invite you, and our students and fellow researchers, to explore any important concept, not just from the perspective of definitions and logical implications, but also in regard to the experiential effects the concept has on you, a thinking and feeling organism using it. Can you, for instance, notice what happens in your experiential organism when you hear the word “body”? Most of what you find might not be that easy to put in words. And what happens if you say the word “thinking” to yourself? Something else, something similar? Imagine exploring other major concepts by way of how you experience them, involving countless situations, contexts, and instances, intertwining your personal life with a body of knowledge, a history of ideas, and incorporated cultural framings. Finding your own words for what makes an important concept meaningful to you, here and now, is not a trivial thing to do. You will see that a word you explore in this way changes during this experiment. And you might too.

The fostering of awareness, which is implicit in the leap into embodied methods of thinking and research, generates a space for which we think we have no space and time for becoming present to what is important to us as vibrant organisms within discursive academic systems. This is an “Act of

resistance” – as Claire Petitmengin (2021) puts it in a nutshell, in order to foster educational conditions that allow birthing of fresh, viable, and liveable alternatives.

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# Part I

# Foundations

Foundation implies something solid, something not moving, stable, that you can construct something on. Foundation in an academic context seems to naturally pull the word theoretical along. Theoretical foundations are needed to stabilise main concepts, to justify definitions and methodological approaches, to support hypothetical claims. Of course, we draw on a lot of important theory and theoretical breakthroughs in feminist and critical theories, 4EA cognition, especially enactive-ecological theories of the mind, embodied theories of meaning, theories of artistic and aesthetic thinking, and so on.

However, the main feature about the foundation we uncover, work from, and within this book contradicts such an understanding of foundation. This is a challenging transgression which at the same time inspires our entire effort. Still, there is no need to be concerned that our foundation is built on sand. It is more complicated. Our foundation is not something more or less solid. Rather, our grounding implies a new understanding of foundations for scholarly work altogether. In which way? Simply acknowledging that every theoretical foundation *works within* and *into* a context of understanding, experiencing, thinking and acting bodies, no matter how abstract its language and research devices may be, is nothing new. What is new in our case is that we do not stop at the critical implications this has concerning knowledge systems as always being situated, culturally specified, and thus limited in ways the theory cannot account for, etc. We do not acknowledge situatedness as a *conditio humana* in mere theoretical terms, by discussing what acknowledgements theories do and do not make. We *enact* this acknowledgement by learning to attend how concepts, questions, theoretical approaches *work* into an embodied-experiential (back-)ground that we, as researchers, teachers, and learners, always bring along. We enact this acknowledgement by learning to listen to ourselves as organisms, embodied, responding to our thinking and the thinking of others, and by learning how to understand these responses, and re-think, re-formulate, or pause, if necessary. The foundation of our work is thus a practice. A practice that involves becoming more aware of a non-predictable, yet very precise responsiveness that constantly plays out when theory meets lived experience of researchers, teachers, and students. It is this very meeting point that guarantees

creativity, different ways of understanding, furthering, critiquing, or dwelling in an issue or problem. It is this very encounter that opens levels of meaning we lived, yet did not feel, we felt, but did not think, we thought, but not in words. Obviously, the pioneers who have done this before, and whose innovative theories have grown from such foundations, help us in understanding better the implications and the meaning of what we do. The three chapters that follow bring out strands of how embodied thinking is foundational in our work and point towards the work of many others whose innovations provide us with both practical and theoretical inspiration for embracing embodied thinking practices.

Schoeller's chapter surveys many of the precursors, in the Western tradition, of the embodied thinking practices that are the focus of this book, including classical pragmatists, and phenomenological and hermeneutic thinkers. She then goes on to explore a transformative movement of meaning and experience involved in embodied thinking, and how this supports emancipation and freedom from limiting framings. Thorgeirsdottir's and Haraldsdóttir's chapter surveys three ways being a critical thinker has been approached: focusing on the forms of arguments, on the social grounding of arguments and ways they shape and constrain people's possibilities, and on the embodied grounding we are each living, which, because it is vastly more complex and intricate than any of our schemas, keeps providing fresh opportunities for refreshing and reorienting our thinking. Jóhannesdóttir explores her own responses to Gendlin's embodied thinking practices, with their echoes of aesthetic receptivity, and shows how sensing how we respond to words, and letting our responsiveness lead our thinking, opens pathways to beauty and joy in philosophical thinking, and generally.

## 2 Transformative and responsive power

### Potentials of embodied thinking

*Donata Schoeller*

#### Tentative formulations: what are we talking about?<sup>1</sup>

Heinrich von Kleist wrote in his famous essay on “The Gradual Formation of Thoughts during Speech”: “If there is something you want to know and cannot discover by meditation, then, my dear, ingenious friend, I advise you to discuss it with the first acquaintance whom you happen to meet” (Kleist 1951, 42).<sup>2</sup> Kleist recommends speaking about our “obscure preconceptions,” because thoughts, as the famous title of his little essay says, gradually form and complete while we speak.

Scientific conversations also apply this method, even though one does not read about it in methodology textbooks. The physicist Werner Heisenberg created a kind *talkative approach* to yet unclear problems or ideas. His student, the physicist Hans Peter Dürr, describes how in the centre of these conversations was the “joint problem and the wish to grasp and clarify it.” He described the careful handling of the problem in these conversations, “passing it on, like in a friendly ping-pong game, where each one only has to take care that the ball stays in the game.” The point of the speaking was not convincing each other. Rather, the

whole attention was directed towards really understanding the conversation partner, and not making him trip by some sophisticated critique of his inadequate means of expression. One was allowed to stutter, one could be vague, one could not make sense, and the other would guess what one wanted to say, say it with other words, so that one could say with relief: ‘Yes, exactly . . . !’ During such an extended and intensive exchange of thought the conceptions and notions became more precise, so that their contours became more clearly recognizable.

(Dürr 1981, 1)

Another physicist, David Bohm, introduced and wrote on a method he called “Dialogue” (Bohm 1996), which as a way of speaking he contrasted with discussion. In the latter, one responds mainly to the other. Opinions meet and the objective is to convince the other or to win an argument by pointing out



the weak points in each other's positions. Bohm's "Dialogue" in contrast is set up for something different to happen, which can occur between two or more people, or even in only one person. Bohm describes this as opening up a space for meaningful development. One develops a field of joint attention, listening to each other and to oneself, while a tacit and vague sense of a topic can evolve into an emerging understanding, leading to something that was not given at the starting point (*ibid.*).

The phenomenon that Kleist described and which Heisenberg used as a method among his team, and which Bohm explored and experimented with, contradicts advice often given to children: to first think and then to speak. It contradicts a major feature of the classical Cartesian understanding of the method, which is to begin with clear and simple cognitions that cannot be doubted (Marion 1992). It contradicts the imperative of the young Wittgenstein, who claims that "what can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1922, 23). And it even seems to contradict a philosophical concept of meaning. According to speech act theory, a clearly identifiable intention is *the* precondition for conveying meaning. Cases in which one cannot clearly say what one means – the most important being vagueness and incompleteness – are thus considered as "not essential" for linguistic communication (Searle 1969, 20).

Meaning in philosophical and linguistic contexts is mostly conceived of in the context of an intersubjective exchange, with language being considered primarily as a tool for exchanging information. The use of language that Kleist and the thinkers above engage in does not exactly fit this framework. The objective of these "tentative speech acts," as I call them, is not communicating information or clear intentions from one person to another (Schoeller 2018). Kleist said this 200 years ago in the following way: "If you speak clearly and logically, you may aim to enlighten others. However, when attempting to express an unclear point, you may aim to enlighten yourself" (Kleist 1951, 43).

For this mode of language use, I have also coined the term "close talking" as an analogue of "close reading" (Schoeller 2019). Philosophers and people in the humanities are trained in a slow, thoroughgoing reading process which stays close to the text, going back and forth, lingering with certain notions. During this process, surprising and rich connections open up that remain inaccessible when reading quickly. "Close talking," by analogy, is a kind of formulating that carefully speaks or dips into, or touches an *experienced* intricacy of connections or relations that sometimes needs considerable time to be accurately formulated and unfolded. The best counterexample to "close talking" is small talk.

In the following, I want to indicate how this phenomenon inspires the new Erasmus+ research initiative and training programme called "Embodied Critical Thinking and Understanding" (ECTU).<sup>3</sup>

Petitmengin (2007) suggests touching is a more appropriate metaphor than observing for what we do when we direct our attention toward an experiential process. A similar point has been made by Matthew Ratcliffe, who describes

the similarities of tactile sensation to being in touch with one's experience. In both cases, there are no clear boundaries between what is noticed, experienced or felt and the person noticing, experiencing, and feeling (Ratcliffe 2008).

Words, phrases, and sentences in "close talking" have a similar effect: what touches and what is being touched is impossible to separate. In the very act of clarifying our thoughts, what we think, feel, and experience becomes more real – such realisations of course are not separable from ourselves. Harry Frankfurt in his book *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting This Right* describes this activity as deeply characteristic of us human beings: always needing to clarify what we really think, feel, experience, want, and strive for (Frankfurt 2006, 8). The intimate connection of clarifying and realising has a noteworthy implication: when what one thinks and experiences becomes clearer, it also becomes more concrete. Philosophically addressing "close talking" thus also involves an implicit recognition of the first-person perspective as a complex kind of experience and reality, in need of attention, clarification, and cultivation. This departs from the Cartesian assumption that there is "some kind of *privileged* access to experience. No presumption of anything incorrigible, final, easy or apodictic about subjective phenomena needs to be made here" (Varela and Shear 2000, 2).

In the Western tradition, classical pragmatists and phenomenological and hermeneutic thinkers opened our eyes to the highly intricate texture and complex patterns of experience. One speaks of the pragmatist, hermeneutical, or phenomenological turn, but let me group them together as an 'experiential turn.' Thinkers of the 'experiential turn' courageously began to describe, pushing back against powerful epistemological traditions, *how* experiences are actually experienced. William James contrasted taking sense perception as the starting point of discourse on experience, with the "stream of consciousness," and began by describing its "teeming multiplicity of objects and relations" and showed that "what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree" (James 2012, 224). Edmund Husserl also speaks of "strömendes Erleben" (flowing experience) (Husserl 1995, 36), describing a subtle experiential continuity in every moment played out in tacit ongoing reference to prior experience (retention) and tacit anticipation of further experience (protention). Husserl demonstrated that the more one begins to phenomenologically explore an experience, the more aspects – and aspects of aspects – come into view. John Dewey emphasises "actual experience" as "pregnant with connexions" and far more complex than the theories about it can account for (Dewey 1917, 7). Wilhelm Dilthey, in turn, reminds philosophers that reducing experience to singular or discrete experiences overlooks a connectivity which he calls the "Lebenszusammenhang" (life-continuity). The connectivity of *experiencing* does not have to be created conceptually; it is lived. This lived kind of continuity informs selfhood, encompassing aspects that may seem logically incompatible – different selves, young and old, for instance. This kind of continuity, Dilthey reminds his fellow thinkers, is the theoretically forgotten basis of all understanding and thinking, without which logical thinking has no foundation (Dilthey 1982).

Thinkers from other schools contributed to these insights with other vocabularies and further approaches, bringing into the picture the cognitive contributions of embodied practice. Michael Polanyi has famously termed them the “tacit dimensions” of knowledge (Polanyi 1966), Gilbert Ryle speaks of “knowing how” (Ryle 1949), and Searle of the “background” (Searle 1993, 16) of propositional meaning, all of which are largely preconceptual and prepropositional. Other thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway, and Charles Taylor could be added to the list.

Cognitive scientists who have made this “turn to embodiment” and “enactivism” today, are taking the understanding of the complexity involved in the embodied-experiential grounds of cognition further. They demonstrate how much sensorimotor activity and kinaesthetic learning, proprioceptive registry, and intra-actional whole-body attunement are involved in every simple sensory perception (Fuchs 2017). Damasio demonstrates how in feeling a situation former feelings are felt and also felt responses to what we feel (Damasio 1999). Micro-phenomenological research today shows the amazing transmodality involved in perceiving perceptions or thinking thoughts (Petitmengin 2007). Alva Noë today describes how we need more than eyes and a brain to see what we see, but a life of lived experience, infused with knowing how to read the ever-shifting sense perceptions in precise relation to our constantly moving and feeling bodies, in order to come to “see” the world as linguistically structured, for instance, to see a tree as a tree (Noë 2012). Accordingly, Varela and his team summarise the challenge of researching experience from the first-person perspective:

it starts out from this soup, the entire organism in situation, and then it gives rise to this surge, which gradually spreads out like peaks of mountains. That’s why experience . . . is so hard to articulate, since a large chunk of its base is pre-reflective, affective, non-conceptual, pre-noetic. It’s hard to put it into words, precisely because it precedes words. To say it precedes words does not mean it’s beyond words. It’s the opposite, it’s because it’s so grounded that it has not yet become the elements of reason that we tend to think are the highest expression of mind.

(Varela 1999, 89)

Coming back to Kleist, Heisenberg, and Bohm, this helps us understand what they do with words, and why it makes sense (literally) to speak into a felt complexity, even though there is nothing clear to speak about, yet, or to put it in technical terms: speaking is not ‘representing’ something ‘given’ here (Saller and Schoeller 2018). Neither does it seem satisfying to speak of a mere ‘construction’ of meaning happening in these processes. One clearly cannot say whatever one wants. Something is at stake in “close talking.” Heisenberg says it sharply: it’s about keeping the ball in the game. This ‘ball’ is not understandable as some inner entity. It might involve contexts and constellations,

experimental settings, “knowing-hows,” and “tacit knowledge,” sometimes specific details and vague feelings, immersed in a vast background of knowledge. In order to speak of these kinds of complex points of reference, John Dewey introduced the term “qualitative whole of a situation,”<sup>4</sup> while Eugene Gendlin introduced the term “felt sense”:

A felt sense can implicitly contain arguments – about the world. It is not just private, because we live – sentiently, bodily – in the world. A great many factors cross in such a single felt sense. Some have been separated out before, many have not. Your felt sense implicitly contains all you have ‘heard’ (. . . about something), . . . much that you have thought and read about these topics over the years, and your own work in all its many relevances – and much more, all crossing so each implicitly changes, governs and gives relevance to the others. And also, such a felt sense can lead to something new about the world.

(Gendlin 1995)

### **Enacting the movement of formulation**

Language in relation to such complex ‘objects’ as felt senses plays a special role: it can make us miss, or it can help us make, the point we (felt-)sense. In the following, allow me to unfold this a bit more to say how and why this is a key to understanding the approach of Embodied Critical Thinking and Understanding, and the practices involved.

Earlier than Dewey and Gendlin, William James had started to notice the methodological difficulty in describing points of entry of explication:

has the reader never asked himself what kind of a mental fact is his *intention of saying a thing* before he has said it? It is an entirely definite intention, distinct from all other intentions, an absolutely distinct state of consciousness, therefore: and yet how much of it consists of definite sensorial images, either of words or of things? Hardly anything! Linger, and the words and things come into the mind: the anticipatory intention, . . . is there no more. . . . It has therefore a nature of its own of the most positive sort, and yet what can we say about it without using words that belong to the later mental facts that replace it?

(James 2012, 253)

James is a pioneer of careful phenomenological descriptions of what happens when we formulate. He notices that an ‘anticipatory intention’ is not replaced by words, yet it shifts as a whole with the coming of words, welcoming, rejecting, and making us try again. By contrast, a commonplace orientation in the philosophy of language is to recognise the conceptuality already inherent in every kind of experience, thus moving in the direction of equating the experience of a world to concepts or to verbal construction.

The philosopher Eugene Gendlin makes us see the other side of the coin: formulations are experiences in themselves. In alignment with James, Gendlin's work demonstrates with great phenomenological care how a pre-conceptual, what he calls a felt-sensing process, is not replaced by language. Rather, language "comes" with and *occurs* back *into* the experiential process it arises from, having multiple effects and functions (Gendlin 1970, 1997a, 2017). One of them is an effect he calls "carrying forward": thinking can be carried forward by the occurring formulations (Gendlin 2004, 2017). Or we could say, the formulations do not bypass the experiential process involved in thinking, but *take it along* (Gendlin 2004, 134). Taking experiencing along, and carrying, or developing it further, not in random ways, rather in clarifying ways, that one can also *feel*: *this* is a way of saying how language can help us make our point.

What is taken account of in this phenomenological description is that the experience of languaging affects the experience it comes from. It 'touches' it. And let's remember that what is touched is not an internal entity, like an inner template of the meaning of what is said. Rather, it is a situational context, a 'mesh' of lived experiences *functioning* in what we feel we have to say (Gendlin 1997a, 2017). Such entanglement (a felt sense) is in need of being *developed* into a clear conception. Therefore, formulating 'it' can be challenging. It involves naming the issue, problem, question, crux etc., and clarifying the implications and reasons for 'its' importance and relevance. *Saying what we mean* is not a trivial affair at all (Casey and Schoeller 2017).

As with Hegel's dialectic, experience speaks back while we formulate, but not according to the patterns of the concepts used. Here, an embodied-experiential dynamic branches off from the dialectic (Schoeller 2018). Convoluted paths, a very specific, apt formulation, at times a surprising simplicity, allow further aspects to emerge, making vague and fuzzy connections surprisingly clear. Success is not guaranteed. No matter how logical and clear the sentences we use might seem, we can "feel stuck," unhappy with what we formulate. On the other hand, a strange phrase might work in unpredictable ways, moving our thinking forward, and allowing us to see more clearly and say more.

Looking closely into the experiential dynamics of such formulating processes, Gendlin's magnifying glass demonstrates what he calls a "responsive order" (Gendlin 1997b). Subtle transformations and specifications of the meaning of words happen with the words occurring into, and thereby shifting, the ongoing experiential process of thinking (Gendlin 1991). Refining the Wittgensteinian lesson on the interdependence of the meaning of words and the situated contexts in which they are used, Gendlin shows how the situated plasticity of meaning depends on an *embodied* enactment of speaking, writing, and understanding. In numerous examples, Gendlin demonstrates shifts of the meaning of the same word happening during the very act of formulating a point. These shifts are conceptually or logically non-predictable, yet decisive for how one can think and speak on (Gendlin 1963).

### **Responsive order at the basis of creative-critical thinking**

The point I am trying to make in this section is not easy to formulate. Let me try to summarise it as follows: the *condition* of the power of a concept such as Gendlin's "responsive order" is its having been *successful* in working *into* the experience it strives to make explicit. ECTU researchers and practitioners often say, they newly experience criticality as creativity. What do we mean by that? I think it is the gratifying effort of explicating an experiential aspect in a way that lets us think beyond available conceptual boxes. Let me say it even more generally than I just have: successfully explicating an aspect of experiencing that we do not miss it, but rather take it "formulatingly" along, contributes to thinking beyond the conceptual implications of the concept we use. Take Gendlin's concept of "responsivity" itself. Usually, this implies an intersubjective setting, different living beings responding to each other, a communication framework set up between A and B. Occurring into the experiential process of formulating, this notion takes on a different meaning. It now functions to let us 'see' an intra-subjective happening (Gendlin 1997a, 1997b). Only by 'working' in this way does it obtain its discerning and critical power. Not only does it discern a characteristic of the human agency of formulating, but it also enables us to see beyond several traditional frameworks. For instance, as a philosopher I might be tempted to say that the movement implied by the development of a thought is 'dialectical'. Dialectic means a movement of thinking initiated through conceptual implications, which, by having their consequences thought through to a logical endpoint, turn the meaning of the concept and its implications, opening pathways of thinking that contradict its conceptual starting point. The dialectical understanding of the movement at stake here however fails to acknowledge the specificity of embodied experience working within the shifting of meaning happening during "close talking," in ways that cannot be conceptually derived. Rather, this shifting needs careful phenomenological attention to come up with formulations that work to describe it, in order to not be caught or dominated by the conceptual patterns we use. In terms of methods and approach, to speak of a pragmatist "reversal of the philosophical order" does not seem exaggerated at this point (Gendlin 1997a, xviii). *Attending* to the experiential process is the enabling condition of such conceptuality, instead of outsourcing the experiential process to the concepts we describe it with, for instance, dialectics. This is how the concept of "responsivity" also allows us to see beyond the limitations of the powerful concept of "representation." The latter implies given entities that are represented by language, in order for us to say what we mean. As noted earlier, this understanding of meaning assumes one needs to be clear from the outset to have something to say, making everything that is not clear seem irrelevant for communication. Such a concept misses out on the experiential-embodied process participating in successfully formulating something, and also on the change of conceptual meaning happening thereby, which does indeed make it possible and essential to speak and write into a rich

yet unclear felt sense of an issue. Finally, as a philosopher I might be tempted to say that such formulations are “constructions.” This again misses out on the experiential function of a stubborn dissatisfaction one has to endure when failing to express something one senses as relevant. Formulating a thought would be easy if we could just construct our experience of it with language.

However, our main work is not criticising models of meaning, our main work is to conceptually and practically go beyond the confines of such disembodied concepts. Disembodied concepts of meaning and mind are concepts that do not take account of the body. The creativity we experience in doing so does not arise by narrating, confabulating, or constructing experience according to our own likes, ideas, or ideologies. The creativity within such embodied thinking arises from a responsive movement between language and experience. I should rather say: it arises from enacting this movement with more or less awareness. Languaging-from experience and letting this inform our next moves mean learning to loosen the conceptual control of the movements, transformations, and progressions involved. At the same time, it means staying attentive to the ongoing happening of the movement, which involves noticing different sense-making registries. Shifting meanings of concepts that emerge by *working into* and making sense of an experiential process, shifting felt-senses, that might be strongly somatic or more like subtle atmospheres. An argument may seem clear but come with an irritating pressure. A formulation may seem catchy but come with a feeling of dullness. A conclusion may seem sound but come with a sense of disappointment. While staying in touch with the responsive ground from which formulations ‘come-from’, this movement engages more than theories, conceptual implications, and logical rules. It works with our embodiment, tacit dimensions of knowing, involving a multitude of backgrounds, socio-cultural practices, histories and situatedness, body–environment interactions, an embodiment immersed with feelings, somatic markers, emotions, images, and memories. By deliberately acknowledging and becoming aware of the subtle movements of the experiencing body responsively “moving” with language, frameworks emerge that support a thinking outside of conceptual boxes and conceptual practices that do not account for the richness and intricacy of this ground.

### **Cultivating a fragile freedom of realisation**

Let me expand on the challenge involved a little further. Obviously, a rudimentary phenomenological and embodied-experiential practice is always at play when we think and inquire. The formulating process is something all creative and scholarly thinkers know how to enact, while often being largely unaware of their own process. Lately, this process is being described thoroughly, and also placed centre stage, in work on anthropologies of expression (Jung 2009). Matthias Jung writes: “The back and forth between the emerging form of expression and the accompanying changes in felt sense, as an indicator of the appropriateness of the form of expression is decisive here” (Jung 2023, 258;

translation D.S.). This back and forth, as the same author describes, manifests a tension, or a “conditioned freedom” of meaning. It moves within the mutual restraints of a specific qualitative whole of a situation, a felt problem someone experiences here and now, Jung calls this the “vertical grounding” of meaning (ibid., 298), and it is accompanied by the “horizontal stabilization” (ibid., 117) of meaning within the possibilities and confinements of inferential networks set up in the language system within which one is raised, and in which one is trying to make sense of one’s experience. The challenge I am highlighting concerns exactly this: the cultivability of this intricate freedom of formulation, and the subtle choices and moves involved (Schoeller 2023). Explicating this freedom in terms of a movement of realisation spells out the challenge more concretely, as it – naturally – *also* transforms certain conceptual implications that are coming along with the term freedom, for example the connotation of “anything goes,” which clearly does not fit *this* use of ‘freedom’. (I am pointing to the languaging processes I am writing about happening in my own thinking-writing here.) Fresh realisations can happen while we formulate something from the experiential intricacy which grounds our thinking. However, worthwhile realisations can just as well not happen, and everything stays roughly the same. A non-controllable possibility of realisation, of making something experientially more present, is at stake in the precise interplay between a thoughtful experiential process and the words that come from and occur back into it.

With notable humour, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson distinguishes creative and ingenious thinkers from others just by a degree of “stubbornness.” This implies a choice and suggests a fruitful kind of stubbornness-practice. These thinkers seem to be able to hold on to something, the specificity of their sense of something, without giving in to a way of speaking that might make sense of it in a way that loses their point. In view of the challenge involved, the robust convention of ‘small talk’ is better understood, functioning as a network of habituated “language games” customised towards many different situations. The purpose of small talk is to be able to talk persistently and light-footedly ‘about’ topics in such a way that there is no danger of dipping too deeply into an underpinning messy experiential ground. Small talk stably bridges the complexity opening up as soon as one turns to the actual experience of a person, a situation, a topic, a problem, etc. Expert jargons, theories, and discourses often function in similar ways. They can work like well-established avenues of thinking, like solid planks over the all too entangled grounds of lived experience and the “soup” of our own, still unclear thinking (Varela 1999). The efforts of the embodied thinkers who came before us have provided us with rich perspectives, connections, turns, and implications that further our own thinking, without having to go through the process of their arising. However, these established and theoretically stabilised pathways can hinder our access to, or even function as a protection against, the challenging richness of how our own situated bodies sense the complexity of an issue, or a problem, or a fuzzy question. The latter might not even make sense, seem irrelevant, or lack a language, within the coordinates of an established theory or discourse.



The cultivability of the conditioned freedom to make sense (Schoeller 2023) could be formulated in terms of Jung's horizontal and vertical network of meaning: which of the two do we engage with more when we think and inquire? Pursuing a point of interest, do I mainly follow what others have said about it, letting my own sense of the issue only work indirectly in critiquing or praising their positions? Formulating an idea or intuition, do I give in to phrases that 'come' quickly, making it easy to speak about it, and easy for others to follow, while ignoring something distinctive that is difficult to articulate? Sensing dissatisfaction with a position, do I mainly follow the theoretical implications, without 'dipping' deeper into the qualitative dimension involved in my dissatisfaction with it? Or, being triggered by an opinion or position, do I let this fuel my rhetoric and debating style, without attending to the intricate structure of that experiential trigger? My point is that by thoughtfully attending to and engaging one's experiential grounds in thinking, one can learn to navigate between both of Jung's dimensions of meaning more deliberately. One can learn to listen to the mutual responsiveness of both dimensions, allowing for subtle transformations of both the experiential movement and the inferential implications of the language system one uses. In other words, attending to the lived experience in my interests, questions, or puzzlements supports a kind of tentative engagement with language that enables one to notice this interplay more distinctly, precisely, by the degree of realisation happening, or not. In the next section, let me look some more into the challenge involved.

### **More than critique involved**

Not a philosopher, but a famous writer of the 20th century, Thomas Mann, has his hero Hans Castorp say in the *Zauberberg*: "I would rather talk nonsense, and babble a little and try to express something difficult, than always just deliver flawless platitudes" (Mann 1926, 766; translation D.S.). With his nonsensical sentences, Castorp risks his membership in a community of language users that use language mainly to exchange reasons, information, claims, justifications, and arguments. Castorp cannot claim something yet, yet he tries to get at something. In trying this, success is not guaranteed, and all he can do is try. Researching this phenomenon, I came across Castorp-like phrases at the margins of canonical philosophical texts. Just a few examples:

Montaigne describes: "I have always an idea in my soul, and a sort of disturbed image which presents me as in a dream with a better form than that I have made use of; . . . ." (Montaigne 2006).

Immanuel Kant complains:

It is unfortunate that, only after having occupied ourselves for a long time in the collection of materials, under the guidance of an idea which lies undeveloped in the mind, but not according to any definite plan of arrangement – nay, only after we have spent much time and labour in the technical disposition of our materials, does it become possible to

view the idea of a science in a clear light, and to project, according to architectonical principles, a plan of the whole, in accordance with the aims of reason.

(Kant 2003)

Thomas Nagel notices:

We can feel the question apart from its verbal expression, and the difficulty is to pose it without turning it into something superficial, or inviting answers that may seem adequate to its verbal form but that don't really meet the problem beneath the surface. In philosophy the question is never just what we shall say. We can reach that point only after considerable effort has been made to express and deal with inchoate perplexity.

(Nagel 1986, 56)

And Luce Irigaray, with mild irony, encourages her readers and fellow thinkers to:

Come back. It's not so hard. Stay right here, and you won't be absorbed into the old scenarios, the redundant phrases, the familiar gestures . . . Try to be attentive to yourself. . . . Don't be distracted by norms or habits.

(Irigaray 1980, 69)

These testimonies, of which I could list many more, describe a kind of thinking that does not seem to fit either what Kahnemann describes as "slow" or "fast" thinking, if the former is understood as rational and logical thinking, disregarding embodiment, and the latter as stereotypical thinking in functional short-cuts (Kahnemann 2012). The process alluded to above is characterised by a creative and often difficult-to-endure double bind between knowing and not-knowing, active and passive, attempts at formulation, collecting material, discarding, failing, moving on, new formulations. This kind of work does produce not only output but a transformed embodied grounding. If one can finally formulate the point or the problem, it might have changed, or now one can say, see, notice and think more than before. What happens during such processes is the clarifying of experiential backgrounds that might go hand in hand with a re-working of habituated inferential networks and implications that are wired into the way we experience and understand things, that are set up in the language and theories we learned to think in. What I mean to say is something similar to what I said before, but now it becomes more exciting to say it: when experience and language touch each other, both are transformed. The meanings of the words, phrases or sentences, used are re-formed by the way they work into, or occur back into, the experiential process they come from. Conceptual implications change in this very process.<sup>5</sup> We have seen this happen here, in this chapter, with the concept of responsiveness, functioning

as a way to get at an intra-actional happening in the context of the formulating process. We have seen this happen here with the concept of a conditioned freedom, as a term functioning to touch the promising challenge involved in such intra-action. Finally, we have seen this happen here with the double connotation of the term *realizing* with which I highlight the promise within such challenging freedom. Realising and clarifying something important, relevant, disturbing, inspiring, etc., on the grounds of experiencing a lifeworld, is making the latter become more vivid. This realisation needs to be enacted by having language and experience work responsively together, to carve out a meaning that relies on the richness of embodied living and thinking. All the above terms have become slightly, yet decisively transformed, and specified, gaining new implications, further meanings, and novel inferential possibilities along the way. I have only scratched the surface of the implications opening up this set of experientially specified and subtly transformed concepts.

Being able to dwell with the experiential process, and endure the difficulty of finding the right words for it, seems to be the *key* to opening up the inferential linguistic and theoretical systems that condition and restrain our freedom of formulation and close down our pathways of thinking. Jürgen Habermas, without however acknowledging the contributions of the experiencing body, has defined the transformative effect of such endeavour as expanding the human discourse-possibilities. By making explicit pre-reflective habits of thinking, immersed in practices and entanglements of a lifeworld, we can say and think more, and in this way think beyond their limitations and transform lifeworlds. Critical theory here meets with phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty emphasises precisely this process of unhabituated formulations, arising from grounds of a yet pre-verbal experience, that have a special cultural value, because – on an individual or collective level – they generate expanded or new pathways of thinking.

Now I have (also) arrived at a richer explication, and transformation of the concept of creativity used to describe such a *realizing* way of thinking that engages the embodied ground of thinking. Creativity here is not inventing. Still, it contains dimensions of surprise. Insights emerging from embodied grounds of one's thinking make tacit dimensions of experiential knowing become more alive and vivid. What is surprising here is that this process can let you see beyond constricting, at times also alienating beliefs, understandings, and identifications held on to before. This creativity relies on cultivating this fragile freedom of language users (users of symbolic systems), which manifests in the interaction of so-called well-rehearsed language games, scientific jargon, accepted ways of speaking, handed down discourses, transmitted concepts on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a specific, personally experienced perplexity, confusion, intuition, grown from a lifeworld. This is a fragile, precarious, and vulnerable space. It exposes itself to what discourse theories term the 'power of discourse'. The term indicates nothing less than the danger of embodied, situated realities being crushed by handed down ways of thinking and speaking. The term itself can reinforce this danger if it turns into an ideology that mutes the power of human experiencing – ceding power too one-sidedly to 'discourse'. This is why our practices must provide conditions of safety described in this book,

care-full listening practices, time, and non-judgemental spaces of “close talking,” welcoming tentative speech acts, development of thought, and the surprising creativity implied.

### **Reflexive care as a condition of embodied thinking**

Today, cognitive scientists, in particular, who are heralding the “turn to embodiment,” are introducing a new aspect in relation to experience, which, in turn, manifests as an expansion of scientific formulations. Alva Noë sums it up as follows: “The world shows up for us in experience only insofar as we know how to make contact with it, or, to use a different metaphor, only insofar as we are able to bring it into focus” (Noë 2012, 2).

The thinkers I have quoted, from Kleist to Bohm, from Kant to Irigaray, demonstrate what “making contact” implies: being busy with tackling something from different perspectives in the most diverse turns, formulations, approaches, in never-tiring activity, and thus bringing themselves and us into contact with something in experience we were not consciously in touch with before, opening up novel realms of understanding. Noë shows how much subtle sensorimotor activity basic experiential skills require, and how much skill is needed “in opening up the world for experience” (*ibid.*).

In our embodied critical thinking research and training programme, we collect practices that help with opening up to the world of experience, with getting into contact with the intricacy we can experience and feel, which is so easily reduced and covered up by the conventional way we use language. “Opening” is itself an unusual formulation I borrow from Adorno. It occurs, in the context of his critical theory, when he is circling around possibilities of how to escape identity-creating conceptual constraints, in which everything that could be said about experience is to be reduced to extant concepts and categories. Adorno suggests a practice in which conceptual control is put on the back burner in this phase, in order to “literally immerse oneself in the heterogeneous . . . without reducing it to prefabricated categories” (Adorno 1975, 24). This includes practising a non-determining, but initially close approach and staying in contact.

The success of this practice does not lie in justification, but in discovery. For this practice, Gendlin recommends a basic move (among others): to slow down significantly, to make a pause, to stay right there, where it becomes more difficult to speak. This he calls “the edge.” It denotes nothing mysterious, it is a common experience. In ordinary language, we might be tempted to say at this point: “Never mind!” It seems too complicated. Gendlin however encourages us right there:

We hope that the person will enter further into this ‘. . .’, this edge. [. . .] When what wants to be spoken is only partly formed, if you can stand it as a ‘. . .’, then odd and quite newly formed phrases soon come from it.

(Gendlin 1999, 205)

Learning to “stay” there, or to “come back” to it, as Irigaray recommends, requires conditions I summarise as “reflexive care” measures. This involves a skill set which complements the usual skills of critical thinking. Instead of fast critical debates, in which one’s mind is set on sharpening one’s next argument, we practise skills in listening extensively. In addition to cultivating the precision of our concepts, we also cultivate attention to the “edges” of understanding that are still unclear. In addition to playing all registries of possible internalised critique, we practise the attitude of empathy and solidarity with ourselves and each other while daring to face our own uncertainties, real perplexities, or fuzzy important intuitions which are difficult to express. Care and solidarity are an epistemological condition not many philosophers have stressed. Hannah Arendt is one of our role-models in doing so. Too easily one can get discouraged when facing the dense and entangled situations that make us think; too easily one can get lost and lonely if one really starts to think and formulate from these situated and experiential grounds from which important questions or intuitions arise. Embodied critical thinking methods make it possible to not be lonely and lost in genuinely facing, engaging, and clarifying the experiential embodied ground of thinking we bring along.

In today’s world, driven by digital speeds, the amount of information to be processed and compliance with examination procedures, there is a great danger that students, and researchers, will become discouraged about bringing greater clarity to issues that are important to them and to our society, because of lack of time and opportunities. What is at stake in such discouragement is, with Kant, the first commandment of emancipation, the necessity of thinking for oneself. This is why encouragement is such an important component of embodied critical thinking.

As novel as this approach is, it corresponds to classical indications of critical thinking. Acknowledging human experience as always again in need of a clarification harmonises well with a definition of philosophy based on Kant’s three core questions of the Enlightenment: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? The contemporary philosopher and phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz has undertaken a differentiated formulation of these three questions, encouraging us to work with these critical questions in a genuine and creative way:

Philosophical questions that. . . cannot be adequately answered by any positive science. . . are such as: What concerns me? What of the pressing realities will or must I take seriously and accept as my business. . .? . . . What can I believe? Where should I doubt. . .? To what extent do I have reasons to participate in the life and activity around me. . . or to hold myself back from it? . . . What do I skip when I allow myself to follow someone? What do I ignore, what do I trample underfoot without paying attention? Where do I get the courage to go on living despite death, misery and guilt? . . . Who am I myself, beyond everything that has been carried into me and taken over by me? . . .? What is lasting and permanent in my life?

(Schmitz 2007, 9f.; translation D.S.)

The recognition of the fundamental ambiguity of what really concerns us and what is at stake in the contexts of lived experience illustrates *processual clarification*, a core characteristic for embodied critical thinking, as well as a core characteristic of embodied, experiential and situated realities. Bearing this processual character of critical thinking and embodied realities in mind leads us back to an ancient practice, older than Kant's questions. In the twists and turns of pursuing something meaningful, something apparently familiar changes into something not easily definable. This is exactly what the Socratic dialogues involve. Socrates, through his way of asking questions, quickly brought the citizens of Athens to the limits of their convictions, erasing any premature certainty about a known concept or virtue (bravery, justice, beauty), and this begins to cultivate and initiate a different mode of awareness and reflection. Obvious terms, categories, ideas, or preconceived opinions that we are habituated to, too often fall short. However, and this is also something Socrates has emphasised, it needs maieutic conditions to bear such creative and transformative criticality.

We use practices such as Thinking at the Edge, Focusing, and the micro-phenomenological interview technique, meditative methods, environmental immersion methods and others, which provide reflexive care, allowing us to develop our embodied critical thinking capacities. In a time when artificial intelligence is being energetically developed and applied far more widely, we do indeed need to swim against the mainstream, with our emphasis on the slow, unpredictable and creative process of realisation of the embodied thinker. Aligned with ecological, embodied, and feminist philosophy, we do not conceive of the embodied thinker in terms of an autonomous subjectivity; rather we conceive of them as a rich and unique manifestation of interactions with environments, cultures, and socio-political entanglements (Gendlin 2017; Haraway 1988; Pelluchon 2019). That is why embodied thinkers have something very real to say that might clarify the ground of thinking for everyone else. And that is also why embodied thinkers need to cultivate the grounds on which we use our technological prowess, in ways that carry forward the living process of the entire planet, of which embodied thinking is such a responsive and responsible manifestation.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is a further elaboration and development of an approach to what I call tentative speech acts that was published in 2018, "Tentative Sprechakte: zur erstaunlichen Entfaltbarkeit von Hintergründen beim Formulieren," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 66 (2): 183–201.
- 2 I retranslated the title, based on a comparative analysis of possible translations of Kleist's key term "Verfertigung" by Jill Anne Kowalik (Kleist and Kowalik 1989) in her article "Kleist's Essay on Rhetoric".
- 3 See [www.trainingect.com](http://www.trainingect.com) for more information on the research initiative Embodied Critical Thinking and Understanding.
- 4 See, for example, Dewey (1938, 68): "Recurring to the main topic, it is to be remarked that a situation is a whole in virtue of its immediately pervasive quality. When we describe it from the psychological side, we have to say that the situation as a qualitative whole is sensed or *felt*."

- 5 This finding builds on the therapy research conducted by the team around Carl Rogers at the University of Chicago, in which the young philosopher Eugene Gendlin played a major role, see: Gendlin, E. T. & F. Zimring, 1955, "The qualities or dimensions of experiencing and their change," *Counseling Center Discussion Paper* 1(3), Chicago: University of Chicago Library (27 pp.); Gendlin, E.T., 1958, "The Function of Experiencing II. Two Issues: Interpretation in Therapy; Focus on the Present," *Counseling Center Discussion Papers* 4 (3), Chicago: University of Chicago Library; Klein, M. H., P. L. Mathieu, E. T. Gendlin, and D. J. Kiesler, 1969, *The Experiencing Scale: A Research and Training Manual* (vol. 1), Madison: University of Wisconsin; Gendlin 1970. These experiencing scales will play a role in Rannis' funded Excellence Grant: *Freedom to make sense: Embodied, experiential and mindful research* (2024–2026), in which experiencing scales will be revisited, in the context of researching the impact of attending to first-person experience, in the process of thinking within research, in order to explore how dwelling with the experienced meaning of a problem impacts conceptual meaning, implications and differentiation of language use.

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### 3 Vitalising critical thinking

#### Embodied critical thinking in a philosophical context

*Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir and Elsa Haraldsdóttir*

In introductory courses in philosophy, we ask students to write essays about topics to exercise philosophical and critical thinking. To train them in this, we ask students, in the first step, to raise a question and put forth an idea or a hypothesis and support it with arguments. In the second step, we ask students to bring an outline for their paper that we discuss with them before the student embarks on writing it. In our view, there is a missing link in this process. It is common to ask *if* critical thinking can be taught and that question points to the question of *how* it can be taught. That, in turn, calls for articulation of methods, but these are, in our view, not explicated well enough. Apart from usual guidelines for structuring an essay, as teachers we tend to assume that students will figure out how to come up with an idea, question, or hypothesis, and how to elaborate it into a written philosophical text. Our research into theoretical foundations and methodologies of embodied critical thinking and understanding enables us to shed light on the missing link in the writing process where students are forming an idea and planning the structure of a paper. We make this claim based on our experiences of employing methodologies of embodied critical thinking and understanding to help students, as they are forming their own philosophical and critical thinking about a topic at hand.<sup>1</sup>

Critical thinking is more than adhering to rules of rational argumentation. It must involve an element of discovery, sparking a deeper understanding. These are the moments we repeatedly go back to because they give us confidence and faith in our ability to be inquisitive, scholarly, and creative thinkers. Higher education should have as one of its goals that students experience such moments because there are few things as empowering and encouraging.

Exploring the question of how we can better cultivate critical thinking skills to actively ignite understanding, we are delving here into this often overlooked embodied dimension of critical thinking. It is a dimension that is hardly – indeed often not at all – acknowledged in prevailing theories and practical training in critical thinking. We discuss methodologies that have been developed from a deeper understanding of it, from being attentive to the first-person perspective of an embodied, situated human being. To frame our exploration, we will discuss embodied critical thinking in the context of a conventional philosophical understanding of critical thinking by dividing critical thinking into three main

strands, introducing our own theory of embodied critical thinking as the third strand of such thinking. The three main strands are rational argumentation, social critical thinking, and embodied critical thinking.

Before we elaborate these strands, let us make a few remarks about the concept of critical thinking, thinking particularly about how it is often or normally taught, and how embodied critical thinking adds to this. To do this, we need to provide a brief overview of the historical development of “critical thinking” within Western philosophy and its conceptualisation as a delicate navigation between thinking and feeling; from there, we can delineate the three distinct strands of critical thinking more clearly.

Please note that the tripartite division we present is not intended as a hierarchical categorisation, indicating lower to higher forms of critical thinking, or a progression from a narrow to a broader understanding. Rather, this threefold classification is intended to underscore that embodied critical thinking, alongside rational argumentation and social critical thinking, represents different facets of the same conceptual coin.

Moving forward, we will elaborate on how embodied critical thinking finds its roots in phenomenology, feminist epistemology, pragmatism, and methodologies developed on those foundations. While avoiding any lengthy exploration of various methodologies related to embodied critical thinking, the final section of our discussion will centre on listening to oneself and others as a pivotal starting point for embodied critical thinking.

### **“Critical,” “thinking,” “embodied”**

Before proceeding, we would like to issue a disclaimer. Concepts like “thinking” and “critical” possess a distinctive resonance in scholarly discourse due to the intricate and precise nature of academic thought, and this calls for clarity in word choice and use of concepts. Our emphasis lies in understanding “thinking” as a lived experience, delving into the embodied foundation of thought referred to as the “felt sense,” a term we will elucidate later. Embodied critical thinking commences with a vague, indistinct felt sense that provides a “material” or “ground” within ourselves for contemplation and articulation, that aids in the clarification of thought. We concentrate on what activates our own thinking and fosters understanding. Other concepts like “embodied reflection” highlight experience-based learning, and the interplay between thought and feeling and reflection; we prefer the term “thinking” (Michelson 2020).

We term this process the pursuit of understanding through thoughtful exploration, contending, as we have already said, that it is frequently overlooked and neglected in the training of critical and philosophical thinking. We use the term embodied critical thinking to refer to the personal exploration of what everyone brings to their thinking, that, given their unique preconditions, enables the introduction of novel perspectives to a topic. When we intertwine body (heeding embodiment) and thinking (finding words) in this manner as a practice, embodied thinking transcends being understood as mere analysis

of an object. The object cannot be treated as something external, captured by concepts and definitions. Philosophising is not a matter of regurgitating philosophical positions obtained through reading and rearranging the fragments obtained. If that were our objective, we could delegate knowledge production to artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT and future language models, relinquishing genuine thought as sentient beings. By contrast, in cultivating critical thinking our goal is to think independently, articulate our ideas, and contribute original thoughts. It is in this capacity that we authentically embody being with the words we seek and find because words and concepts encompass both logical and affective dimensions.

Comprehending a concept such as ‘embodied critical thinking’ becomes possible only when one engages in sensing, experiencing, and cultivating it within one’s own thinking. The thinker is intricately woven into the act of thinking; the questioner is an integral part of the question; the one who touches is simultaneously touched by a thought, and the analyser is immersed in the analysis. The embodied, living aspect of thinking distinguishes us from intelligent machines. It is high time that we contemplate how we are living and embodied in our thinking and what it adds to and modifies in traditional conceptions of the critical thinker.

### **Philosophical context of critical thinking**

When talking about critical thinking we discuss it in philosophical terms, not only because it is our field, but more importantly because philosophy has been the discipline that has made the training and defining of critical thinking a core feature of its curricular and academic agenda. The goal of teaching philosophy is to enhance students’ capacity to think for themselves, in an independent, critical, creative, and morally responsible way. Philosophical ideas about “man” as a thinking being are therefore the background against which we develop our ideas about embodied critical thinking and their implementation in classes. Historically, we are part of a tradition that has elaborated a traditional understanding of critical thinking that has emphasised a disembodied and male-centric notion of the autonomous rational being. This notion of the thinking and knowing being needs to be enhanced by an understanding of how we are, as embodied and embedded beings, situated, relational, and emotionally dependent on others who are also affected by us. Moreover, embodiment implies a profound interdependence between the body and its environment, a synergy underscored by findings in cognitive science. This dynamic relationship holds significant implications, not only for our comprehension of cognitive processes, but also for the cultivation of philosophical, critical, and creative thinking.

These findings have, as we argue, important implications for the didactics of philosophy given that it has the training of critical thinking at its roots. Although the concept of critical thinking is usually understood to be a product of modern, Enlightenment, critical philosophy, most notably associated with

the critical philosophy of Kant, philosophical thinking has, from the times of Plato and Aristotle, been synonymous with critical, scholarly, and scientific thinking. It is definitive – as an evolving orientation – of the Western intellectual tradition. Critical thinking stretches from how Socrates guided the little boy in solving a geometrical problem on his own (Plato 1901) to Kant’s invocation to have the courage to think for ourselves in his famous essay answering the question of “what is Enlightenment?” (2013), to Arendt’s reflections on having a dialogue with ourselves as if we are two-in-one thinking beings (1978). In these examples, thinking is connected with the existence of others as well as the experiences of the individual. It is therefore rather awkward that introductory books on critical thinking are at times quite dry and technical, even sporting cover images of a mechanical toolbox, as if the thinker has the task of taking an object apart and putting it together again.<sup>2</sup> When our model of critical thinking highlights a toolbox with screws and pliers so intensely, it is as if the person who thinks is excluded, as if it does not matter *who* uses the tools. This imagery also seems to imply that if we each use these tools in the right way, we will come to the same conclusion. But what are these tools?

They are:

- Capacity to analyse and distinguish an issue to elucidate it.
- Ability to come to a well-founded conclusion about what position one should take.
- Argumentation that shows the ability to offer good reasons for a position.
- Coherence in argumentation and the context of reasoning.
- Skill in posing valid questions and expressing a clear understanding of issues.

More pronounced examples of comparable approaches to the above can be found in the discourse on educational sciences in the United States in the latter part of the 20th century. There, critical thinking is defined as a process of thought, where the main objective is to approach objective knowledge and enhance understanding through logical methods (Haber 2020, 35–36). Earlier scholars had already noted that by emphasising reasoned thinking and rationality, other ideas of thinking, such as those influenced by emotions or intuition, were often marginalised. At times these other aspects of thinking were even associated with supernatural elements and seen as having no connection to real science (Lecky 1910).

From this standpoint, trust and reliability in science are found in measurability and methods of capturing objective reality. Here, a sharply outlined, and yes, somewhat caricatured, image of the critical thinker emerges, as well as ideas of sensibility, objectivity, and reasoned thinking that are not contextualised with the circumstances from which they arise. It is indeed questionable if it is generally possible to make people rational by teaching them logic in such a detached manner. In the worst case, such an image of the critical thinker, as Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (2013, 56) points out, describes the approach to

thinking of a narrow group that may even “involve the oppression of various minority groups.” She argues that these ideas of critical thinking are defined too narrowly,

with the interests and worldview of the powerful (who are usually privileged men of some kind) as a guiding light, and that the characteristics described are characteristics of these powerful individuals’ approaches, even though many others have just as much to contribute.

(Brynjarsdóttir 2013, 56, our translation)

This strict and narrow idea of critical thinking that “limits it to the play of applying logical rules” has moved a long way from the original ideas philosophers had about critical thinking. Originally, it was seen as one of the main features of humanity. It is obviously worth paying closer attention to the concept itself (Brynjarsdóttir 2013, 56). One should also keep the limits of such narrow concepts of critical thinking in mind, limits that are apparent in the way scientists disagree about important matters, for example. The aliveness of critical thinking is fostered by deep-seated values and presumptions that generate disagreements and critical debates that clarify divergent positions.

Whether as part of a specific theory or as a methodology in general, there is a need for a more precise definition of the method itself – namely, the application of critical thinking – in the sense of critical thinking as a practice that ignites understanding. Currently, when it comes to imparting knowledge about critical thinking or defining methods for thinking critically, the discussion diverges into even more threads than were apparent in the discussion about the origins of critical thinking. We therefore suggest understanding critical thinking as a kind of umbrella term for various manifestations of thinking that converge towards a common goal of clarification or increasing understanding, whether it be from a logical, an ethical, or an embodied first-person perspective. In the case of embodied critical thinking, we are dealing with systematic, rational thought rooted in experience. The experience here encompasses everything that a human, both mind and body, encounters. This understanding of experience has been richly described by feminist, phenomenological, classical pragmatist, and hermeneutical traditions of thinking. In embodied critical thinking, therefore, the aim is to approach embodied experience and personal knowledge as a basis for critical thought. It is not a tool that we apply, but a method of harnessing the knowledge and insight that first-person experience provides. One of the roots of this approach is John Dewey’s ideas about experience and education. They continue to exert a profound influence on theories and practices in this tradition of critical thinking, particularly through the way his thinking has foregrounded experientially based reflection (Dewey 1988). The fundamental premise of critical thinking, from this perspective, is the individual’s independence and their ability to participate in and shape their own reality. Critical thinking is here understood as both a prerequisite for and a consequence of education.

Critical thinking is part of the National Curriculum of the Ministry of Education in Iceland which outlines the essential subjects, content, and learning objectives that students are expected to cover at various educational levels. The idea of the ‘critical’ is meant to encompass a rational argumentative aspect as well as social awareness and ethical responsivity and responsibility. Critical thinking in such a broad understanding of the term is seen to be of importance for educating citizens so that they can take part in democratic culture and debates.

The main philosophical theory of critical thinking underlying the National Curriculum in Iceland stems from the philosopher Páll Skúlason, who wrote an influential article on the question of whether it is possible to teach critical thinking (Skúlason 1987). In Skúlason’s opinion, critical thinking is important for the validity of sophisticated opinion formation which is important because our views and attitudes shape the quality of our lives. As with the Enlightenment perspective, the goal of critical thinking is to resist dogma and prejudices. However, Skúlason also emphasised the interplay of emotions and reasoned thinking, suggesting that emotions can be either rational or irrational. This idea has roots in philosophical theories about the value of intuition and emotions, such as in ideas about empathy in ethics, concepts in phenomenology about the holistic nature of the human bodymind, and theories about the cognitive content of emotions, that is that emotions are discerning and based on deep-seated attitudes or beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

### **Emotions in thinking**

Based on all this, it is necessary to simultaneously emphasise training in reasoning skills and emotional intelligence. What mattered most for Skúlason “is that people are taught to pay attention to their emotions because emotions are part of reason and reason is part of emotional life” (Skúlason 1987, 82, our translation). Although this is a common stance in theories of critical thinking, there is a lack of explanation of what this involves. There is often a reference to emotions without explicitly outlining how emotions, mental states, and associated behaviours are activated and processed in critical thinking. Similarly, critical thinking is often described as creative, although it may not be precisely clear what makes it creative, aside from shedding light on previously unknown aspects of issues or presenting matters from a new perspective. In point of fact, discussions involving critical thinkers often manifest as engagements focused on arguments, where emotions are deemed valid only insofar as they are grounded in reasoning and explained as the taking of a cognitively articulated stance. Somehow, amidst all of this, a portrait of “the thinker” as having a relatively disembodied existence emerges, prompting one to wonder where on earth this thinker obtains its ideas, how they can be creative, and even be somewhat wild in its thought? Moreover, one may ask how this concept of critical thinking as a skill caters to a diverse group of students.

We, the authors of this chapter, struggled to adapt to this image of the philosopher. It often seemed to foster competition over who could be the most

eloquent and sharp-witted, rather than creating conditions for exploratory thinking that advances, hesitates, pauses, wanders, and perhaps finds its way back on track. It is as if the friendly aspect of being a lover of wisdom (*philosophos*) was forgotten when it comes to critical thinking. We need to be friends with ourselves in our pursuit of wisdom, to exhibit empathy for our own thoughts, not to be too harsh in self-criticism, while also being considerate when engaging in critical discussions with others to support the development of their thinking.

Many philosophers of the 20th century still described the man of philosophy as if he were a standardised entity, impartial and objective in his pursuit of knowledge and thought. How does it feel for students who find themselves only to a limited extent in such a standardised form, and who experience, in response, a feeling that has been termed the imposter syndrome? The competitive style of critical dialogues nurtures the inner critic, that internal voice within us telling us that we are not good enough, not clear enough, have nothing to contribute, and do not belong in a success-oriented debating class. The fact is that a significant number of students and teachers experience imposter syndrome in academic settings. Perhaps they experience it without putting it into words. To experience it is an awareness of an emotion even if it has not been articulated. This is a very clear example of how the feeling about a matter is an integral part of critical thinking about that matter. In reflecting on this emotion, we may learn that the challenges are more a matter of the conditions of the discussion, than of our own seeming inability to participate in it. One of the most important aspects of critical thinking, and often the most neglected, lies precisely in recognising the limitations and conditions of our own perspective. The concept of embodied critical thinking always includes the emphasis on sense-oriented thinking in reasoning skills in addition to:

- self-reflection that delves into our own motivations, biases, and what matters most to us in a specific matter; and
- the ability to identify underlying, preconceived thought patterns that influence our attitude to some extent.

### **Embodied thinking**

The word ‘embodied’ in the context of critical thinking implies the awareness that our thoughts are embodied in various ways. The cognitive sciences and especially neuroscience have demonstrated how the human mind is embodied and how thinking is not confined to the brain alone. The entirety of our body contributes to thinking in some sense; thought is an interplay of emotions, sensations, mental states, and specific, articulated, symbolic thinking (Damasio 2021).

Our bodies make each of us unique. No one has the same perspective because we are all situated differently in time, space, and circumstances. Every student deserves that we, as teachers, are curious about who they are, what they have to offer, and that we are not just interested in them repeating and reiterating the content of the curriculum at hand. As bodies, we are situated in



an environment, and the body is also what embeds us in the environment. As embodied beings, we are dependent on others, and other people are emotionally and materially dependent on us. The survival of our species also depends on us realising how vulnerable we are, ecologically, if we do not learn to live in greater harmony with other living beings. This awareness of human embodiment raises questions about conventional understandings of knowledge, many of which carry the legacy of a disembodied model of thought that entails ideas about an objective knower who seems to be able to think critically and make judgements as if they were detached and arelational. Contemporary understanding of the embodied nature of cognition demands a transformation in our ideas about the nature of the epistemic knower and critical thinker. We come to understand that objectivity is situated. Critical thinking attempts to make truth claims that, with awareness, it must recognise can hardly be impartial, as it posits having a point of view from nowhere.

Central to our approach is the idea that exploring how our cognition is embodied expands the scope of and the potential for broader and deeper knowledge. This confidence is grounded in the understanding that we exist as bodies engaged in interactive relationships, with both ourselves and others, within human-made and non-human environments. Before delving into a more detailed exploration of the parameters of embodied critical thinking, let us revisit our tripartite division of critical thinking to contextualise it within our framework.

### **Three strands of critical thinking**

*Rationalist critical thinking.* This tradition traces back to the philosophy of Descartes and his rationalist methods. Another significant chapter of this tradition is Kant's appeal at the pinnacle of the Enlightenment. He advocated for using one's own reason to think critically, along with the best available information about specific matters. Its nascent democratisation supported the French Revolution, emphasising not relying on the authority of clergy or kings. This rationalist tradition is still at the core of critical thinking, even though its form has continued to evolve, responding to perceived shortcomings.

*Social Critical Theory.* In the early 19th century, thinkers such as Hegel emerged, critiquing Kant for a lack of historical awareness regarding how rational thought develops. This recognition suggested that our ideas about critical thinking are always rooted in a historical and socio-political context. Karl Marx embraced this, further elaborating on Hegel's insight, asserting that what is considered rationality at any given time is conditioned by power – that is the forces that determine what is accepted as knowledge in any given time and circumstances are working to maintain the powerful in their positions of power. This strand evolved further, reaching a high point with the Frankfurt School social critics who leverage Marxism and psychoanalysis to expose oppression, showing ways that defining 'knowledge' is exploited by the institutions and power structures of society.

Social critical theories, such as feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism, disability studies, and environmentalism, have continued this tradition by applying criticism to various social and cultural realities. Within the realm of the social sciences, critical thinking – specifically critique – is often positioned as a component or goal of a theory. One of the aims of critical theory is to illuminate critical thinking as a social phenomenon. Within this framework, social values and norms are identified as the underpinnings for individuals' values and norms. Consequently, it is the process of socialisation itself that demands scrutiny when applying critical thinking to social realities. An overarching objective is to contribute to increased equality in society by influencing those social values and norms that perpetuate inequality. Within philosophy this approach has been developed as an analytical approach by thinkers such as Sally Haslanger, who combines conceptual analysis with social critique (Haslanger 2017, 35).

Michel Foucault seeks to reconcile the two forms of critical thinking within the tradition of social theory. On the one hand, he critiques power and demonstrates the limits of critical thinking to the extent that power conditions it. Thus, Foucault shows that we must always be vigilant to the interplay of knowledge, power, and interests and question which specific knowledge is being utilised and for whose benefit. On the other hand, Foucault adheres to the Kantian idea of autonomy and underscores the significance of independent thought as a counterforce to the authority of knowledge that oppresses or excludes (Foucault 1984).

Feminist epistemologists have developed the tradition of social critique in resonant ways with their criticism of socially blind objectivism that assumes there is a knowable objective reality for which there is one ultimately true description. Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway introduced standpoint epistemology, demonstrating how one's position (context and standpoint) shapes thought and knowledge, and how one should scrutinise aspects of it that perpetuate differentiation and injustice. Awareness of one's position allows us to transcend imagined objectivity (which will always be positioned in unrecognised ways) by considering its conditions in context (Haraway 1988; Harding 2009). Haraway also highlights how computer and information technology increasingly influence our lives and societies, and she, as a result, proposes a broader concept of knowledge. She sees interconnectedness, and the boundaries between humans and other organisms, as well as between humans and technology, becoming less distinct. In response to this, she encourages us to develop critical thinking in a new direction. In that spirit, it is not sufficient to only think about things; we should also learn to think with them and in awareness of how artificial intelligence shapes and directs thinking. Most importantly, the future of humanity on earth depends on our ability to think more cohesively with all that lives and moves.

*Embodied critical thinking.* This is a form of critical thinking that not only entails awareness of the social conditions of thought but is also based on the idea that the body, with its emotions, sensations, and movements, is actively involved in thought. The concept of embodied thinking is based on a radical reconsideration of the subjective self, and thus, the concept

of situatedness is enriched by incorporating perception and experience of objects and phenomena into the idea of cognitive processes. Embodiment involves ‘knowing’ our social and biophysical situations in all kinds of ways that are not apparent to us (at least at first) consciously.

The theory of embodied critical thinking, to which we subscribe, has deep roots in phenomenology. Edmund Husserl set out to develop a philosophical method that he described as a return to the things themselves. By this, he meant that philosophical critical thinkers should set aside conventional ideas about objects and phenomena and strive to understand them based on perception and experience. To some extent, we have lost this connection to experiencing, due to how we have objectified and technologised reality, influenced by computational thinking. Simone de Beauvoir builds her analysis on Husserl’s phenomenology and the phenomenology of the body in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. Her words resonate with the idea that the body is “not an object but a situation: it is our place in the world and contributes to our intended actions” (Beauvoir 2010, 123). Phenomenology introduces the body as the place where experience and perception of the world take place and knowledge is grounded.

### **Methodologies of embodied critical thinking**

Two main methodologies are foundational for training embodied critical thinking and understanding within the *Training Embodied Critical Thinking* programme. In contemporary phenomenology, a precise methodology called micro-phenomenology has been developed, which delves into the deeper layers of experience, focusing on increasingly detailed aspects. The micro-phenomenological interview method is a cornerstone of embodied critical thinking. Phenomenology asserts the importance of the researcher’s first-person perspective for scientific investigations by challenging traditional ideas about subjectivity. Micro-phenomenology enhances this approach using methods that leverage the knowledge stored in the deep layers of experience.

The philosophy of Eugene Gendlin is the second major root of embodied critical thinking methods. Gendlin’s methods, Focusing and Thinking at the Edge, based on pragmatism, active listening, and phenomenology of the body, are designed to evoke a bodily felt sense with unarticulated meaning, then listening to the words, symbols, or movements emerging from it, and noticing how the bodily felt sense shifts in response. Both these methods, the Gendlinian and the micro-phenomenological, enable us not only to think about the body but also to think with the body. This involves thinking with, from and past the patterns of meaning that have developed through our bodily experiences, perceptions, and sensations.

In the practice of embodied critical thinking, it is not sufficient to be aware of the body; we must also utilise this awareness in a precise, methodical, and accurate manner in the thought process. The skills required for embodied critical thinking need to be learned, trained, and cultivated. This includes skills

that are analytical, perceptive, and logically oriented as well as those focused on receptivity, listening, and sensory orientation. Similarly, there is a need to cultivate the ability for these multifaceted aspects of thinking to intertwine and resonate together as a whole, rather than keeping them separate (Rosa 2019).

When we disclose how critical thinking is embodied, we better understand its interwoven, creative nature. Both creative and critical thinking have their roots in bodily perception and experience – to feel, listen to, and examine our own responses to reality as it manifests and unfolds with us in our lives. Both seek a new perspective, and for that, they require multiple perspectives. They need to explore numerous sides and edges of topics until something new emerges, bringing a transformation in thought, attitude, and perception. Access to this new perspective occurs through the body. When we give our felt sense of the situation attention, scrutinise it closely, and follow where its edges lie, new perspectives appear.

We recognise many instances of this happening, often unexpectedly, when we have, for example, immersed ourselves in a subject for a while, then taken a walk, gone for a swim, or engaged in conversation with someone. Suddenly, the new perspective, the new thought, the new solution to the problem we were dealing with appears. A felt sense is evidently more than mere feelings, emotions, or sensations because it is more unstructured, broader, and more multifaceted – essentially a person’s feeling for the entirety of a subject. That’s why Damasio asserts that the nervous system is the foundation for the development of emotions, and emotions open the path to consciousness. As Gendlin writes, a felt-sensing process is not merely stopping and thinking and “to feel” something. That, he continues:

would leave our feelings unchanged. Focusing begins with that odd and little known ‘felt sense,’ and then we think verbally, logically, or with image forms – but in such a way that the felt sense shifts. When there is a body shift, we sense that our usual kind of thinking has come together with body-mind, and has succeeded in letting body-mind move a step.

(Gendlin 2007, 191)

Gendlin developed the focusing method as an aspect of his psychological research in collaboration with Carl Rogers, a pioneer of client-centred therapy within humanistic psychology. As a philosopher, Gendlin’s main interest was applying this method of inner listening to felt senses of philosophical intuitions. His life’s work revolved around exploring the puzzling reality that meaning is *felt*, and that heeding felt meaning directly is generative: new insights flow. He developed practices for philosophising and on their foundation practices for use in therapy and for self-help. In psychology, he developed theories for many aspects of human processes and led key empirical research. In philosophy he developed his thinking about thinking in epistemological and ontological directions, showing the very active character of the creation of meaning in terms of its felt and experiential aspects (Gendlin 2017).

### **Inner listening**

What the methods of bodily critical thinking do is provide us with a way of working purposefully and specifically to reach an edge of new thinking. This approach, based on Gendlin's methods, involves learning to think openly through slowing down, directing our attention to an internal landscape or movement within us, letting the attention on the subject unleash, and allowing the voice to emerge in search of words that fit the felt sense and allow it to evolve even further. We also need to learn to listen in a new way. We listen to our inner felt sense for the circumstances/subject we are dealing with and listen to others' thinking openly in the same way. When we listen to others, we listen with our whole body, with all our attention, which we use to keep space for those who speak, not to think up suitable and interesting responses to what is said (as we are prone to do).

While we listen, we say nothing but are present in silence, fully conscious and curious, except that we regularly repeat what was said to assist those who are speaking to get closer to the edge of the new thinking that is emerging. In addition to this close inner listening where we listen to ourselves, we also apply methods such as micro-phenomenology to precisely examine those instances of experience, that vitality, from which our thinking springs and which our thinking relies on. Thus, the ability to think for oneself is created precisely in dependence on collaboration and listening; we think ourselves by thinking together.

By considering our life-world as learners and researchers, and consciously integrating the context of the society and environment in which we live into the process of critical thinking, we can better support critical thinking's potential to be a developmental process that opens up fertile pathways to thinking for ourselves.

Logical thinking stays within whatever 'conceptual boxes' it starts with. It has only the different, competing interpretations, assumptions, viewpoints – and one must stay within one of these. When felt sense is the touchstone, one can try out all kinds of different concepts without being locked into any one set. This is what scientists (now rarely) do when they come up with something new after living with a problem for a long time. Rather than using concepts only, one can return to one's unsplit felt sense of whatever one is working on.

(Gendlin 2007, 191–192)

### **Embodying training of critical thinking**

Critical thinking is not only a fundamental philosophical, scientific, and civic capability but also a cornerstone of democratic and academic culture. Those of us who teach critical thinking have encountered limitations of traditional methods of teaching it, which have usually been based on texts and training in argumentation skills and social criticism. The limitations of these traditional methods seem to be that they often do not motivate students enough to think independently and critically.

Our experience as teachers of critical thinking has been that students go through the following five stages if we consider the process from the beginning of university education until completing a doctoral programme and becoming a scholar. We can only provide a simplified and standardised representation of these typical stages, as a more detailed and confirmed description would require extensive research. This is essentially a preliminary hypothesis based on our own experience as teachers and mentors.<sup>4</sup>

**Gathering:** Gathering data about something. Copy–paste information. Insecurity experience.

**Combining:** Learning to think analytically/rigorously *about* something. Pro/ contra position. Learning the moves and patterns of mainstream discourses and suppressing one's own movement.

**Positioning:** Learning to judge *about* something. The level of the expert, situating and establishing oneself in the discourse in power. Self-esteem gained in representing a position within the accepted mainstream. Still however experiencing imposter syndrome.

**Disorientation:** Deep discouragement. Self-alienation in the system. Expertise at the cost of one's own voice.

**Liberating:** Coming to oneself in thinking. Learning to think from one's own universe of experience with empathy, courage, and precision. Thinking and articulating oneself and laughing and crying oneself out of the limitations of mainstream discourses. Generating new ideas and fresh concepts for oneself and others. Changing a discourse. Self- and socially transformative.

In the course of these stages, the student/researcher finds their own voice and learns to express it. Finding one's own voice is not only about presenting oneself well in front of others and expressing oneself clearly and comprehensibly. The prerequisite of having a voice is the ability to listen to one's own intuition on issues that are under consideration or discussion each time. We are talking about touching the embodied levels of thinking, touching what moves us in thinking. Finding one's own voice involves learning to trust one's own judgement and coming into one's own in thinking. It is this inner listening, listening to and recognising one's own intuition on matters, that plays a crucial role in our efforts to find our own voice. Intuition is here not to be equated with emotion, emotion is a narrower term and usually depends on an opinion or intellectual stance, such as getting angry about something we consider reprehensible or being disgusted with something because we think what is occurring is based on a faulty understanding or misjudgement of circumstances.

Felt sense is a broader term than emotion; it is like an unformed emotion towards a matter or an issue we are trying to grasp. Felt sensing allows us to contemplate a certain issue as a whole and thus it can give access to philosophical thinking.<sup>5</sup> When we think philosophically, we consciously or non-consciously depend on a felt sense for an issue. When we do it consciously, felt sensing allows us to reflect emotions that can either guide or

mislead us. Therefore, we need to recognise them and explore whether an initial emotion is the right one or if there is something deeper and more complex behind it that needs to be examined more thoroughly. An example of this is the emotion of anger that can flare up. If we allow ourselves to contemplate anger, we can connect with its deeper layers and discover, for instance, wounds that can broaden our understanding of what causes anger. Anger is often a driving force of critical thinking, and therefore we need to learn to contemplate it better to think deeper and further about the issue at hand. Felt sensing requires contemplation because it demands that we find the words that best express our felt understandings. Indeed, we must acknowledge that in order to find the right word to articulate something it needs to be tested against a felt sense.

The ability to listen to oneself is a necessary condition for being able to listen more intently to others. That's why we start most of our teaching in embodied critical thinking with exercises in listening. By listening carefully to others, paying attention to what they say, and trying to understand it, we also strengthen the ability to listen to ourselves listening to others, because we notice whether we are good or poor listeners. Do we sense impatience and are we just waiting to express our own idea or opinion? Are we waiting to judge and categorise immediately what other people say, rather than seeking to understand what they are really saying and meaning? Sometimes it can be very difficult to listen to someone we strongly disagree with, and then we are required not to judge and disqualify the person immediately, but rather to seek to understand what is causing them to adopt views that seem unreasonable to us. There are various types of listening attitudes that we cannot go into here, from bad listening to methodologically refined ways of listening that are integral to productive scholarly thinking and dialogue. At this point, we mainly want to underscore internal listening as forging a connection with our own thinking – as a point of departure for embodied critical thinking.

## Notes

- 1 This article is, in part, based on a longer paper published in Icelandic in *Hugur* 2023, written by us and our collaborators in the Embodied Critical Thinking research and training project, Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir and Donata Schoeller.
- 2 See, for example, the cover of Baggini and Fosl 2011. The content of the book is far less dry than the cover image indicates.
- 3 This is evident in the theories of sympathy and moral passions in David Hume, Catharine Macaulay and Arthur Schopenhauer.
- 4 Donata Schoeller and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir collaborated to formulate this model of five stages.
- 5 A felt sense for a scholarly issue or problem has some likeness to Heidegger's concept of "mood" ("Stimmung") as a sense for the whole of an issue. For Heidegger, certain moods can therefore offer an experiential, embodied access to metaphysical aspects of human existences, as he discusses in his lecture "What is Metaphysics?" (Heidegger 1993).

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## 4 Sensing and thinking from within

### Aesthetic perception and embodied thinking

*Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir*

As so many others have sensed when they first encounter felt sensing through learning about Focusing or Thinking at the Edge (TAE), I sensed a voice saying “I know this!” when I started reading Gendlin’s (1982) book *Focusing*. Felt sensing had somehow always been present in me, as it is in all children, yet this strong presence had been hidden under layers and layers of not having a name, not being valued, not being appreciated and applauded. This moment of experiencing it being recognised, named, and described as this important source of thinking that it had always been for me was transformative.

In this chapter my aim is to further unpack this transformative moment and share my journey of reflecting on, practising and teaching Gendlin’s methods since then. My situatedness as a researcher in environmental aesthetics and landscape studies and teacher at the Iceland University of the Arts is a decisive factor in the path this journey has taken; a path of understanding the relation between the felt and aesthetic dimensions of embodied thinking, as well as understanding the transformative power of making an implicit and silent process explicit and heard.

This implicit and silent process I’m referring to here is something we all share as living organisms, it is that moving, pulsating, vibrating pull, urge, attraction–repulsion response in our bodies that we share with plants and animals; that guiding voice from within that we are sometimes fortunate enough to follow. Our listening to this felt dimension of our being is what allows us to survive, it allows us to attune with our parents and the environments we were born into like we are attuned to the rhythms of the amniotic fluid and the movements, sounds, and sensations that we were inseparable from in the womb as we are inseparable from the landscapes we dwell in through our senses. But while this felt dimension was the primary dimension of our existence in the womb and in our early childhood (Bornemark 2016; Stern 1985; Petitmengin 2007), it became less and less immediate to our awareness as we grew older and complex systems of language and culture started to conceal it in their entanglements.

I was one of the lucky ones, who somehow were enabled by their situations to hold on to a tiny bit of that listening to the felt-sensing voice, although those moments of listening became more and more hidden and silent (as voices

become when they get used to not being listened to). The moments that allowed me to hold on to this type of felt sense listening were the moments I had the opportunity to tap into the creative process of the world; that is, the moments when I was engaged in aesthetic perception through either creating or enjoying art; playing music, drawing, or art making through any other means, reading a book, listening to music, experiencing any kind of art; or any kind of situation where I had the invitation to open up my senses to receive the aesthetic qualities I was being immersed in. In other words: the moments that invited me to come into contact with my experiencing body. Having the privilege that should not be a privilege, access to art and nature, was the decisive factor for enabling me to stay in contact with my felt-sensing living body, although this contact became hidden to my awareness and silenced more and more as I learned to ignore it by not naming it and keeping it implicit.

This is why my initial response to the experience of using TAE (Gendlin 2004a) and Focusing was: this is what I have always done in my philosophical process practice. As a philosophy student, I somehow never felt that I could write a philosophical text or enter a philosophical process unless I felt something in the topic move me or touch me inwardly. My philosophical thought has always moved forward through an inner feeling of exploration, I have felt the next step of my thought suddenly emerge when I'm immersed in the thinking process, when it suddenly makes sense to me; I can sense it in me that this is the right direction. My thought has never moved forward only through calculative argumentative steps, like the ones I was taught to use in logic classes, rather it has moved forward through something being ignited within me. A part of this characteristic of my thinking process has always been that I could never write about anything that I didn't feel a personal connection to, I have to find a connection, a relevance to my life and the life of the society I'm living in; I have to find something move within me that wants to explore this topic and move it forward. I have to feel passionate about what I'm doing. Looking back I now see that this process of thinking and doing is the process I learned through my music education, through all the time I spent reading and drawing, through participating in the theatre club, and through going to theatre, concerts, and art exhibitions. It is also a process I learned through spending time in nature and attuning with and listening to the horses I was so lucky to have as companions along with the river and the wind. My situatedness as a childhood art and nature lover, as a researcher of environmental aesthetics, and a teacher at an art university thus play important roles in the reason why an extended notion of the aesthetic has become a core part of my understanding of the embodied approach to thinking. The experiential background of attending to my senses through art and nature, which means attending to the aesthetic dimension, was the foundation for the way in which I approached philosophical thinking as a young student.

However, what I felt all through my philosophy education until I came to the PhD level was that there wasn't room for my way of doing philosophy, this type of philosophical process that felt somehow natural to me. This is perhaps

the reason why I was badly inflicted by what is called the impostor syndrome in philosophy. I felt that this way of doing it, finding a personal connection to your topic, allowing your felt sense to move your thought forward, was not valued as much, or not thought to be as important as finding all the possible logical arguments and counter-arguments related to my topic, and producing solid arguments that provide some final answer. This is what many of my teachers asked me to do (especially when I was studying in the UK where the analytical tradition of doing philosophy is very strong), but I was never interested in mere one-sided logical arguments or final answers; I was much more interested in opening something up, unfolding new aspects of something, making new connections between different strains of thought. Embodied thinking through methods like TAE and Focusing (Gendlin 2004a, 1982) not only gives room for this rooting of thought in your own personal experience, it assumes or implies that this is an inherent part of the philosophical process.

So what does this mean for the philosophical process then? There are two aspects of rooting your thought/your process in your own personal experience: Firstly, that the topic calls out to you – there is something in you and your experience, your way of thinking, that pulls you towards this topic. Secondly, that in the process of dealing with this topic that you have chosen or has chosen you, you are able to engage with the bodily experience of thinking through this topic and thus allowing your previous experiences to feed into the present experience you are having of thinking through this topic. So what does that involve? It involves listening to your own responses to different formulations of thought, hearing when you go: ahhhh, that's it, or when you start talking faster or slower, and listening to that feeling that comes with that, the feeling of the thought moving forward, bringing you to the next step. And what is that ahhh feeling? We could call it the forward-moving character of experiencing and thinking; thought always implies the next step – it has a forward-moving character; it is a carrying forward process (Gendlin 2009, 341–342). In the following, I will take the reader through my journey of thinking with and experiencing TAE and Focusing in my research and teaching and explore the understanding of human beingness that this process has carried forward.

### **Beyond a narrow understanding of the aesthetic**

My approach of linking embodied thinking and aesthetic perception has grown out of two instances: the experience of my PhD project and the experience of teaching at the Iceland University of the Arts. My PhD was based in phenomenology in two ways: firstly, I went to the things themselves, or to the experience itself; in order to understand the aesthetic value of a given landscape type I studied the aesthetic experience of the landscape, studying my own experience, observing other people experience the landscape, and then interviewing them about their experiences.<sup>1</sup> What I learned from this was not only what characterised the landscape and the aesthetic experience of it but

also I learned through this what an aesthetic experience is in general, what aesthetic perception is, and I learned that such experience, such perception, is a source of knowledge. I found that the people I spoke with about their experience of glaciers and geothermal landscapes gained ethical knowledge of their place within nature – they felt their responsibility in relation to climate change when hearing the sounds of the glacier melting, they felt how small they are when confronted by the forces of nature that are so visible in the geothermal and glacial landscapes, they felt that they were a tiny part of a bigger whole. They felt their own relational being, how they are intertwined with the environment. The other way that my PhD became based in phenomenology lies in the conceptual frame I used to understand the experiences I was studying. The project was not only about understanding the experience and value of specific landscapes but also about understanding the concepts of landscape, beauty, and the aesthetic. Merleau-Ponty's (1968) perspective on perception and the creation of meaning, in or through the flesh of the world, was central in my search for an understanding of these concepts that would help me deepen my understanding of the data that I had collected through observations and interviews.

Walking on a glacier or touching chunks of a glacier melting in a square in Paris during the climate conference in 2015 (Eliasson 2015) are arguably more effective ways of mediating knowledge about climate change than showing graphs and numbers about the melting of glaciers to people. What we need in a melting world today is knowledge that hits home, knowledge that hits us in the hearts, and knowledge that we experience and sense in our bodies. What we also need today is being aware of how information and knowledge are received into our bodies at each moment, whether we are aware of it or not.

So this is the first instance of why I have felt the need to connect embodied thinking with aesthetic perception: after finishing my PhD what stood out was the fact that an aesthetic experience does not only provide people with pleasure, its content can also provide people with deep ethical knowledge that seems to be able to reach their core in a more direct way than other forms of knowledge mediation, and in Merleau-Ponty's writings I found some ideas about the artist's way of creating knowledge that seemed relevant to this.

The second instance has to do with the teaching job I took on after finishing my PhD; I started teaching at the Iceland University of the Arts where a big part of my role has been to teach research and writing courses for MA students, overseeing their process of finding a research topic and then designing their research methodology and putting their work into theoretical and practical contexts. Witnessing a rather new art university develop their MA research programmes opened my eyes to something that I had not realised before and I think many of us in philosophy and in other traditional academic disciplines have not yet realised fully: Creating art is a form of knowledge production in very much the same way as creating philosophy is, and artworks can in the same way as landscapes be a source of experiential knowledge that is very important. This has always been a fact, but I think the rather recent

development that art schools have become art universities has revealed this more clearly, since the artists who study and work there are required by academia to do something that many of them had not done much of before: to describe their methods and their research processes that lead up to the results we perceive in their artworks. Although there have always been artists who have done this, many have chosen not to, and many still choose not to, but the requirement to do this is there if you choose to work on your art in an academic context of the art universities.

So these two instances are my starting points for becoming interested in what thinking and knowing are, becoming interested in how we think, how we gain knowledge, how we produce knowledge, and in the question: what does the philosophical process of thinking (which is practised in some form in all academic disciplines) have in common with the artistic process of thinking?

From the perspective that I take on embodied thinking the common root is aesthetic perception. Some readers may be surprised by this claim and if so, it is likely because of the narrow understanding of the aesthetic that has been prevalent in Western thought. Richard Shusterman has traced

three major modern tendencies in construing the aesthetic: as a special mode of sensory perception or experience that is relevant to life in general; as a special faculty or exercise of taste focused on judgments of beauty and related qualities such as the sublime; and as a theory (or essential quality) of fine art.

(Shusterman 2006, 237)

The two latter tendencies represent what I view as a narrow understanding of the aesthetic. Is perceiving something aesthetically just to perceive something and make a judgement about whether that something is beautiful or sublime, ugly or boring, or to perceive fine art to be able to classify it into categories? No, the aim of aesthetic perception is not just to categorise and name an experience or an artwork, but rather to become embedded or immersed in the perception itself, and receive meaning from it. The terms landscape and aesthetic perception do not refer just to the visual beauty of a surface but also to our lived experiences of resonating with that surface and the feelings and relations that those experiences uncover.

Aesthetic perception refers to those moments when we open our senses to receive meaning or allow meaning to unfold in a situation. In this receptive state, we pay attention to our sensations and feelings as we are affected by our environment – our sense for how this artwork, this landscape, this sound, this colour, or this word makes us feel in the moment. What does it tell me? How do I respond? How does what I sense outside of me actually resonate inside of me? When we breathe in a situation as a whole, breathe in how we sense the environment resonating in us, we speak of landscapes. Landscape is thus any kind of internal or external, visible or invisible environment, perceived aesthetically.

This bodily response, this sensing of how something you are perceiving on the outside resonates and creates responses inside you, is aesthetic perception. Aesthetic perception is when we perceive only to perceive, and that means that we are perceiving in an open way, not with any agenda where we are projecting predetermined meaning onto what we perceive, rather we are perceiving only to perceive and notice how what we are perceiving affects us, we are allowing it to affect us, allowing it to be, or letting it be, like Heidegger (1991, 110) described it. He said that at the heart of the experience of beauty (and the aesthetic) is letting-be (*sein lassen*).

Aesthetic perception is the root of all knowledge, values, and thoughts (Berleant 2010), aesthetic perception is always at play at every moment – at every moment we are responding in a bodily way to our environments, and these responses affect the way we sense, think, know, and value the world we are in. When we notice this, we call it aesthetic experience and name it as an experience of beauty, the sublime, ugliness, or whatever. But even when we don't notice it, or don't name it, it is still at play.

This fact really hit home with me when an artist who was interviewing me about the aesthetic experiences of landscapes asked me whether I ever had aesthetic experiences with academic texts. At first, for a few seconds I thought it was a very strange question to ask, but then I immediately knew that I had, because I could recall such experiences very strongly when I started to look for them inwardly. You might know this feeling, when you encounter a philosophical text that makes your face lift up, makes you smile, even makes your heart jump? Or encountering a text that makes you uneasy, you sense that something doesn't fit. Someone once said somewhere in ancient Greece that philosophy starts with wonder. Well someone once said in a classroom in Iceland that philosophy also starts with frustration. I guess both are true. All philosophy, all thinking starts in wonder, frustration, or other sensations – it starts by being pulled by the world, pulled to think with the world.

### **The artistic and philosophical processes of thinking**

The reason why I want to emphasise aesthetic perception as the source of thinking is that this type of perception gives an agency to the world. According to Pierre Hadot (2006), we approach the world in three different ways: the practical/everyday approach where we perceive the world through the lens of how it can provide us with ways of moving from A to B, getting food and finding shelter; the scientific approach where we perceive the world through the lens of classification, categorisation, analysis, and the aesthetic approach where we are perceiving the world, just to perceive. In the first two approaches, we are the agents, we are in the role of projecting meaning on to the world from the perspective of our very specific and predetermined intentions. In the third approach we are more passive in our agency, and the world we perceive is active, it has agency that moves us and affects us, in such a way that we receive meaning rather than project it. In aesthetic perception, we are pulled towards

something that we perceive, we open up to sense how it affects us, what type of responses it creates within us, and sometimes we create a response; finding a way to share what we have perceived or to continue it, carry it forward in some manner.

The model that aesthetic perception gives us for thinking is a model that fits very well with the new understanding of the human being that is gradually becoming more and more settled. This is the understanding of the human being as a relational being, in a relational world full of interactions or intra-actions, vibrant matters, rhizomes, all sorts of new materials, and object-oriented ontologies (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Harman 2018; Morton 2013). What seems to be lacking in these understandings that have been emerging in the last decades is the first-person perspective, its inner experience; the first-person experience of being a body in the world. It is this bodily being that is at the heart of aesthetic perception and at the core of embodied thinking/philosophical thinking/artistic thinking. In aesthetic perception, we are tuned into noticing how what we are perceiving makes us feel, how it resonates with us, and how we become intertwined with it so that something new is born.

Dewey describes this aesthetic, felt dimension well in a chapter on “Qualitative thought,” where he speaks of how all thinking starts with sensing a “dominating quality in a situation as a whole” and

All thought in every subject begins with just such an unanalyzed whole . . . something presents itself as problematic before there is recognition of *what* the problem is. The problem is had or experienced before it can be stated or set forth; but it is had as an immediate quality of the whole situation.

(Dewey 1984, 249)

This sensing of a dominating quality in a situation is what I was referring to in my example of having an aesthetic experience of reading a philosophical text. The dominating quality in the situation of me reading that text is an unanalysed whole at first, maybe characterised by wonder or joy or feeling that something fits, or it could be characterised by uneasiness or frustration. It is important to recognise this source of thought, because this implicit but precise felt sense of the situation as a whole is the source of the emergence of a new thought, a new idea, and a new response to the world. It is the source from which more and more detailed and explicit formulations must grow. As Dewey makes explicit by relating this sensing of the quality of the situation to what we know as intuition:

The word “intuition” has many meanings. But in its popular, as distinct from refined philosophic usage, it is closely connected with the single qualitiveness underlying all the details of explicit reasoning. . . . Bergson’s contention that intuition precedes conception and goes deeper

is correct. Reflection and rational elaboration spring from and make explicit a prior intuition. But there is nothing mystical about this fact, and it does not signify that there are two modes of knowledge, one of which is appropriate to one kind of subject-matter, and the other mode to the other kind. Thinking and theorizing about physical matters set out from an intuition, and reflection about affairs of life and mind consists in an ideational and conceptual transformation of what begins as an intuition.

(Dewey 1984, 249)

I think this connection with intuition is important if we want to explore why this dimension of thought has been mostly ignored in philosophical thinking. The relation between the felt sense of a quality of a situation as the source of thinking and words like intuition have stood in the way, because like beauty, the aesthetic and emotions, intuition has been strongly connected to the feminine and the subjective. This also relates to how this dimension of thinking has been seen as part of the artistic process of thinking which is thought to be opposite to the theoretical or philosophical process of thinking. What we are realising more and more is that in both processes of thinking, the artistic and the philosophical, the root is the same. The root lies in the aesthetic perception of the theoretical, ideological, political, emotional, natural, and cultural landscapes that the philosopher or the artist is immersed in. For both, the thinking process starts with a bodily response that we are constantly having towards everything that we sense, whether we are conscious of it or not.

The Gendlinian (Gendlin 2017) concept of the organism–person–environment process and the Merleau-Pontian concept of the flesh of the world are helpful here – as bodies, as organism-persons, we are co-creating a continuous process of becoming with other organism-persons in and with the environments and situations we are in process with. Merleau-Ponty quoted Paul Klee saying: “Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me. . . . I was there, listening” (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993, 167). In this mutual listening between Klee and the forest, meaning is born. This is how thought and meaning come into existence, they are co-created in an organism–person–environment process; the source of meaning and thought lies in the interweaving of all the sides of the world that vibrate into it, whether they are organism–person–environment processes or other forms of vibrant matter.

It is important to acknowledge this common starting point of thinking in artistic and philosophical processes of knowledge creation because by doing so we are also acknowledging and putting into practice the new ontologies and the new understandings of the human being that have been emerging in the last decades. Jane Bennett, who wrote the book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), gave a lecture at the University of Iceland where one of the things she was calling for was how to use words like things. In embodied critical thinking (ECT) that is what we are doing; sensing into how we perceive words, sentences and concepts, and using that sensing as a starting point,



or rather noticing how it is the starting point, acknowledging and embracing it rather than hiding it. In ECT, we acknowledge the vibration of words and this is at the core of our different way of thinking about thinking. We are learning “how to use words like things.” We are paying attention to the first-person inner experience of sensing the agency of words/concepts/texts just as if they were buildings/forests/glaciers or streets.

The body and the perceptions it allows us to sense, the situatedness it puts us in at each moment is the source of all thoughts, ideas, and values. Páll Skúlason uses the concept of a feeling of situatedness (icel. *aðstæðnatilfinning*) in his book *Merking og tilgangur* (e. Meaning and purpose) to describe how the self has “always-already-felt-itself” – “it feels (good or bad) among things, feels its situation” and then he goes on

the feeling of situatedness stands for our position in the world as an original encounter with the world and our self, this encounter is the basis for our emotional lives . . . the feeling of situatedness is the background of our existence, it is one of the basic dimensions of human existence.

(Skúlason 2015, 52)

By admitting that we are bodies, always sensing the landscape we are in, always feeling our situatedness, we are slowly moving into a new understanding of what it is to be human, and this understanding is or should influence the ways we think about and within philosophy and art, and it should influence our educational systems in general.

In ECT, this relational understanding is influencing our thinking about thinking. We are asking what it means for philosophical and theoretical practice and the teaching of that practice to really take this understanding of the human being seriously. The methods we are using allow us to closely explore the inner landscape of the body (Jóhannesdóttir 2023) and have a conversation with and about what we find there. We treat words and texts like gardens or artworks, we sense the responses that they create within us and start from there instead of ignoring this initial step in thinking, like we are used to do in our education systems. We are used to pretending that our thinking comes out of nowhere, that we are not persons in situations with experiential backgrounds that feed into our thinking. It is time that we stop this pretending.

### **The body as an intertwined retentive source of new meaning**

What both artists and philosophers do is listen to their bodies and the responses that emerge in the interactional situations they are in. And what they hear is of course inescapably coloured by everything that they have heard before, everything that has been a part of their environment and has settled layer after layer into their bodies, as what Husserl called retentions; past perceptions from past experiences, that in the form of non-thematized memories, linger and affect all following experiences. We always already sense the world through these retentions that have been building up in us layer after layer from when we were still

in the womb (Bornemark 2016). In the creation of meaning, thought, and knowledge, these retentions that are specific to each person play an active role, but at the same time, the world itself is just as active in the process of creating meaning. As Gendlin underlines in these words, our experiential background is always feeding into our thoughts and perceptions:

Your body before language continues to live also beyond language now, as you listen to me. While you hear my words, you are not thinking your own words. Nevertheless your live body retains who you are, your past and all you know. What I say comes into all of that.

(Gendlin 1992, 350)

The artist and the philosopher sense their situations from the experiential background of all their former perceptions that have become retentions, at the same time the world shines and vibrates in this interactional situation and in this interweaving a new meaning is born. This new meaning is born in the form of a new formulation, new words, new concepts, new experiences or sensations, new lines or new colours – whatever form it takes this form allows the world to speak. Or rather it allows this particular side of the world – this intertwining or interweaving of being and world, to speak.

In this pre-discursive, even pre-reflective step of the thinking process, we are in the mode of listening. We are immersed in an environment, a landscape that speaks to us, that thinks itself in us. When I'm in the initial step of thinking that is characterised by aesthetic perception, opening up to receive meaning from the world, there is no separation between me and the landscape. All meaning must emerge from the interaction between me and the world. Interaction or the flesh comes first. I'm not an individual person separated from what I perceive in my environment. I am, in Gendlin's (2017) words, an organism–person–environment, a process that is full of interactions and intertwining.

Listening and being attentive and responsive to this co-construction between me and the philosophical landscape I'm immersed in is what characterises embodied thinking. With this perspective on my thinking process, I can say like Deleuze and Guattari in their text about the rhizome: there is no author.

The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd. . . . a book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations . . . a book itself is a little machine; what is the relation . . . of this literary machine to a war machine, love machine, revolutionary machine . . . when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3–4)

So I am not the author, rather it is the interaction between me and the world, between me and the development of thought, that is at the heart of it. I can also say like Cezanne, who Merleau-Ponty quoted saying: “The landscape thinks itself in me” and “I am its consciousness.” (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 77). Me and the field of thought that I’m working within, the philosophical landscape of environmental philosophy, are in a conversation, I’m immersed in this philosophical landscape, I’m immersed in this development of thought, and its forward-moving character is at work in my thought. My thoughts can never emerge alone in some empty space, they are emerging from the landscape of thought that I’m a part of. This philosophical landscape is then a part of a larger environment, it is a part of the political, natural, and societal landscape, and thus, philosophical thought can never be isolated within an ivory tower. It is always connected.

Gendlin (2004b, 136) says that “language, body and situational interaction are a single system together” – I understand that as the words, the language that move in me, my body, and the philosophical landscape I’m in – the situational interaction I’m participating in are a single system together.

Claire Petitmengin also indicates this interaction in her paper, “Towards the source of thoughts: The gestural and transmodal dimension of lived experience” (2007), where she says: “the emergence of . . . an idea, seems to be characterised by an initial phase where the five senses are not yet differentiated, internal and external space are not yet separated, subject and object are still indistinct” (2007, 75) and then referring to Varela she says: “cognition, far from being the representation of a pre-given world, is a process of co-construction of the inside and the outside, the knower and the known, the mind and the world” (2007, 77). Listening and being attentive and responsive to this co-construction between me and the philosophical landscape I’m immersed in is being attentive to what we can call the forward-moving character of thinking, it is paying attention to the life force within me that wants to engage with the world, connect to it, even throw myself into the arms of the world to carry myself, and the world forward. Why do we have this urge? I think it’s because we are inherently creative beings, as human beings, as organic living beings, we strive towards newness or regeneration, just like plants do. Just like the rhizome that strives towards growth until it spills over and something new comes, the next step.

Embodied thinking is about being attentive to the agency in what is perceived and the interweaving between the agency of the perceiver and the perceived that then comes through in the new formulation, the new text or concept, and the new artwork. And in the same way as artists listen to their material and the situation they are in, we are in this project listening to words and concepts in the interactional situations we are co-creating with these words and concepts. We are using words like things. In the philosophical thinking process what happens is somewhat similar to what often happens in the artist’s process. A painter once described to me how he explained to his students the importance of both allowing yourself to be immersed in the process of

painting, listening to the body's movements and expressions as they unfold in the process of being immersed in the sensing and responding to the material; and allowing yourself to then step back to look at what is there and respond to that, allowing yourself to sense if this was the right step and sensing into what comes next. Gendlin describes this very well in his paper "The primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception," his dots ". . ." stand for the implicit but distinctly felt sense of the next step, next word, next line:

An artist stands before an unfinished picture, pondering it, seeing, feeling, bodily sensing it, having a . . . Suppose the artist's . . . is one of some dissatisfaction. Is that an emotional reaction, simply a feeling-tone? No indeed. Implicit in the . . . is the artist's training, experience with many designs, and much else. But more: the . . . is also the implying of the next line, which has not yet come. The artist ponders "what it needs." It needs some line, some erasure, something moved over, something. . . . The artist tries this and that, and something else, and erases it again each time. The . . . is quite demanding. It recognizes the failure of each attempt. It seems to know precisely what it wants and it knows that those attempts are not it. Rather than accepting those, a good artist prefers to leave a design unfinished, sometimes for years.

(Gendlin 1992, 348)

The same happens in philosophy, you sink yourself into what you are reading or writing about and try to get into a flow of sensing or "making sense" of the meaning of it, and then gradually you get a (felt) sense of what it means to you and you sense into or even formulate your response to it in a flow of sense-making. Then you step back and look at what it is you have said or written . . . take a closer look at it, what is the key sentence or word in this?, what do I want those words to mean in this situation?, was this the right step or is there something more, something else? As you dwell in this stepping back and sensing your response, you are gradually forming a new response, a new opening, and so the process goes back and forth between opening and then stepping back to look closer and analyse what you have, sense the agency of it. This is what Gendlin calls thinking with the implicit, we need the implicit as a starting point to think what is still beyond concepts or words:

How the body is being the situation is more than we can think in concepts or words. So we better think with the . . . think with the way the body has, lives in, is – the situation. So it is not the case that you have only your perceptions of me, that our perceptions of each other are between us. Rather, we affect each other, bodily and situationally, whether we sense or see it or not. My warmth or hostility will affect your ongoing bodily being whether you perceive it or not. You may find it there, if you sense how your body has the situation.

(Gendlin 1992, 351)

Paying attention to how our bodies have the situations we are in is the key element in embodied critical thinking, but that does not mean that we take our felt sense of for example a philosophical text raw as reliable grounding to build on. For example, if I read a book by Merleau-Ponty and my body shouts out loud, “yes yes yes I agree with everything he says,” I’m not going to stop at that. I’m going to ask that sense of agreement what it is in this book that creates the feeling of agreement, and then go on and take a closer and closer look at my interaction with this book. Moreover if I read an article that I feel a strong sense of unease and disagreement with, I will also ask further and sense more into what it is that creates this unease, and step by step my critique will develop from there. Thinking is this back-and-forth movement, it is an interaction, and it is a process, a process that we need to pay closer attention to in our practising and teaching of philosophy.

## Note

- 1 I used qualitative research methods based on phenomenology to study my own and other’s experiences of glacial and geothermal landscapes. I went on trips to glaciers and geothermal areas with groups of people and did participation observations and then qualitative interviews with participants on the trips. See chapters 2 and 3 in my PhD thesis (Jóhannesdóttir 2015).

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## Part II

# Thinking at the Edge, and Focusing

*What if everything you look at looks back at you?*

She means it seriously. She is in the midst of a research project for the Max-Planck-Institute. She is an experienced cognitive scientist.

*What comes as an experience after this sentence?*

The senior researcher, who has allowed us to draw on her material, dwells with intense concentrations on these questions.

*Is art like an airplane . . . ? There is a feeling of despair in this. . . . I can soften this, when I identify art with wind. There is a logical change. A relationship-change.*

Such movements, in which she feels her way forward, are drenched with logical implications and puzzlements. Becoming aware of these movements in the non-judgemental, care-full dyadic settings of Thinking at the Edge (TAE) and Focusing, allows for concepts “to incubate” that have a certain quality. They re-connect her to the ground of her situated knowing, the very ground from which her questions arise.

*Can art create connection . . . . Borders are fuzzy . . . wondering if it is the right term . . .*

The TAE and Focusing moves support and challenge her “to make explicit.” Experimenting with words, she explores her situated, experiential knowing implicitly informing her which question is worth asking, which intuitions worth pursuing, which words work. The decisive concepts that emerge in her process at first seem far off from theoretical sophistication and scholarly texts: “wind,” “mushroom” and “art.” They fill her with excitement, letting her be “onto” something.



*Does wind have something that art has? . . . Yes . . . by creating touch, connection, with a dimension that I normally have lost. . . . In nature there is a presence that can touch you. In art there is a different presence. There are things for which you need an artwork to stand before . . .*

The inner landscape of thinking – at this point – does not yet allow for an overview or clarity. Everything is unclear, yet promising, meaningful in ways you can get lost or stuck in easily.

*Running against the wall, again here. It is not art itself, it is the experience of art . . .*

TAE and Focusing encourage you to not get lost in words, yet let them guide you, like a stick helping you feel the terrain in murky water, darkness, or fog. You learn to move like a jazz player, improvising, resonating, to evolving music. The uncertainty and unclarity of a lifeworld participating in your thinking can be better endured, if you know how to be more receptive to the many registries of your thinking-body inching its way forward.

Her process might end up as a new approach within her field, an original contribution to her research community, or it might not. It is worth her while pursuing this now, anyway. The organic sense-making moves of TAE and Focusing imbue practitioners with a sense of “what it is like to think” more fully, with their embodied-experiential richness, and to understand better the potentials, pitfalls, biases, and blessings of their own grounds of thinking. Whether you gain recognition from other people or not, they enrich the soils of your research, teaching and learning with felt-meaning and purpose. You will know how to clarify the organic-experiential humus from which your thinking can grow.

The following chapters give a taste of the challenges and rewards involved. Krycka shows how TAE and Focusing shape his practice as researcher and teacher, and how they help students find their voice. Heimann and Bach, and Ollagnier-Beldame and Servais, each show how TAE can invigorate research practice, bringing in novelty, new connections, and *joie de vivre*. They point clearly to the fecundity of embodied thinking, to the ways research methods shift when felt understandings, nurtured by generosity and care, play directly into asking questions, exploring findings, and crafting insights.

## 5 Thinking at the Edge and the production of knowledge

*Kevin C. Krycka*

The ever-increasing insistence on having and developing specialised knowledge threatens the kinds of scholarship and educational practices that prioritise remaining open and inviting of the fresh and emergent. A professional's life grounded in and reflective of flexibility, openness, and wonder is generative, not only for the professional but for those who will engage in their works. Gendlin's lifework advanced the creation of new knowledge across many disciplines and practices by consistently and systematically returning to the wonder within us, however nascent.

Over the course of his career, Gendlin was to develop ways that philosophers, psychologists, and other professionals could theorise about and engage with *more-than* the already laid out or given. His goal, at least in part, was to articulate teachable means that could help us intentionally engage that more than in our work and find how (or if) there is more in that work that needs to be said by us. He comments:

Making this method systematic is not only useful in thinking, but reveals a whole new field of rules, a new kind of logic, a new way of understanding what the powers of thinking always were, and strong additions to these powers.

(Gendlin 2017, 206)

Since he laid out his basic phenomenological formulation of embodied knowing with the publication of "Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning" (1962/1997), many other scholars and practitioners have taken up his work either intentionally or by being in intellectual proximity to those who influenced him (i.e. Dewey, McKeon, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Rogers to name a few). Some have developed methods and practices of their own, in a way extending Gendlin's work in ways that fit their interests and leanings through crossing his with the works of others, including religious and spiritual traditions. This chapter centres on the psychological dimensions of Gendlin's philosophy as seen in his two practices, Focusing and Thinking at the Edge. It will demonstrate how Thinking at the Edge (TAE), grounded in the practice of Focusing, enables researchers and students to find fresh, authentic ways

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forward as they form and develop initial ideas into more complete theories and practices.

### **Focusing & TAE as distinct and complimentary processes**

We see in Gendlin's numerous writings, accessible at <https://focusing.org/gendlin/>, a patient encouragement to centre our work, and the processes we use to create or advance it, in our whole body. It is important to keep in mind that Gendlin was a natural collaborator who relished conversations as they often helped refine and develop his thinking, which ultimately resulted in publications and the refinement of his theories, both philosophical and psychological. Focusing and TAE were in fact, collaborations. Focusing grew out of his work with colleagues at the University of Chicago (U of C) and the Chicago Counseling Centers where he studied with Carl Rogers. His years at the U of C and later in Wisconsin were incredibly fertile times (see Focusing.org for more details).

TAE very much grew out of another collaboration that spanned decades; with his wife Mary Gendlin Hendricks and Kye Nelson an early founder of The Focusing Institute (now called The International Focusing Institute). Hendricks and Nelson essentially "workshopped" how embodied thinking and knowledge were the foundation of new thinking and theory. As a phenomenologist, Gendlin created a system of knowledge-making that prioritises interior embodied space that is most clearly articulated in *A Process Model* (1997/2017). For Gendlin, intentionally centring embodied knowledge is the starting point in the creation of new knowledge where what is already known can be exceeded.

In Gendlin's long career, two contributions stand out as essential stepwise instruments advancing the goal of working with our embodied knowing: *Focusing* (1978/1981) and *Thinking at the Edge* (TAE) (2004). Each system utilises an instrument we all have, our felt sense. The felt sense as the foundation of embodied thinking is being explored in many disciplines (Schoeller-Reisch 2008; Stenberg 2002). Gendlin taught that embodied thinking can help us meet challenges we personally face, address impasses we experience in our research, and even assist in how we approach the creation of something as practical as an academic course. What follows here is an exploration of how I use embodied knowledge, referred to throughout as the felt sense, and Gendlin's TAE process in two main areas of my professional life, namely in my research practice and my role as an educator in a psychology department in the USA.

#### *The felt sense*

Carlos Castañeda (n.d.) is reported to have said, "*The difficult thing is to perceive with your whole body, not only with your eyes and the reason.*" This quotation frames perception as more than what you know with your eyes and reason. Perception is a very complex term in philosophy, but for our purposes

we will argue along with Gendlin and other phenomenologists, that perception is something derived from a vast intricacy of here and now, of past and possibility. This vastness can be bodily felt and is what Gendlin terms the felt sense. The felt sense can be found and engaged in the process he named Focusing. First developed out of research on the efficacy of humanistic psychotherapy, summarised by Krycka and Akemi (2016, 251–282). Focusing has been described in the literature thoroughly over the past several decades. Understanding and having practice with Focusing is essential to using TAE. In his book *Focusing* (Gendlin 1978/1981), described Focusing and the felt sense this way:

It is a process in which you make contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness. I call this awareness a *felt sense*.

A felt sense is usually not just there, it must form. You have to know how to let it form by attending inside your body. When it comes, it is at first *unclear*, fuzzy. By certain steps it can come into focus and also change. A felt sense is the body's sense of a particular problem or situation.

(p. 10)

Gendlin (1978/1981) goes on further in *Focusing* and elsewhere to add that the felt sense is not an emotion. For those unfamiliar with the distinction between a sense of something and an emotion or a thought about that sense, this can be a bit confusing to grasp. In order to more fully appreciate Gendlin's statement that the felt sense is not an emotion, the reader would be served by at least a little dip into his philosophy, though it is not required.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, one can come to understand the distinction between a felt sense of something and an emotion about something or a thought about that something, without too much training.

#### *A brief example of finding a felt sense of something*

Imagine you are out in nature, perhaps taking a walk or in a kayak enjoying the sea. You've done all you need to make the trip enjoyable and safe and now you are looking up into the tree canopy noticing the rustle of branches and dappled sunlight. Alternatively, if you're in the kayak, you're noticing the way the water is moving beneath you and how the kayak and your body respond. In either case, you are likely having a very rich and complex experience that may be populated with feelings of gratitude or fear, or thoughts about the sea life or the entire ecological system that is and supports the forest and the waters. If you were to pause, even imaginably now as you read this, you may notice there is a lot going on inside, and if you paused even longer, you may be able to let form a sense of the whole situation that includes the sea, the trees, the sun, the wind, and all your thoughts and feelings about these. That larger sense of the situation is your felt sense of it, which includes feelings or emotions, thoughts,

and conceptual frameworks. Sitting further with this larger, felt sense, a word, image, or odd phrase may come. This is called the “handle,” a solid but temporary articulation of the whole.

Once we learn how to access our felt sense, we don’t need to do much more, if the point is to enjoy the inward scene; in our example, the inward scene or felt understanding encompasses the forest, water, breezes, or anything else. However, if you want to go further or are dealing with a situation that is troubling, interesting, or perplexing in some way, you may want to see how the felt sense, as a referent to the whole, can help you clarify and elaborate it.

This is where the Focusing steps come in.

### *Focusing steps*

By intentionally engaging our felt sense, we can generate more meanings that retain the embodied, whole sense of it but extend it. Gendlin (1962/1997) refers to these newly formed felt meanings as a carrying forward of the symbolisations of the entire experience of which there is an indeterminate number. As Gendlin says, “The given felt meaning, directly referred to, also functions as *arbiter* of the accuracy or inaccuracy of a possible formulation” (123). Though countless, felt meanings are not predetermined or based in the usual logical order of already set-out things, but generate fresh logical schemes. In fact, almost in anticipation of later criticisms of the apparent relativity of felt meaning vis-à-vis their vast possibilities seemingly without any relation to the other, Gendlin cautions that “Knowledge does not become arbitrary as a result of the broad possibilities for creation of meaning” (148). Gendlin is affirming that any newly specified aspect of our directly referred to experience is only one of many distinctions inherently connected. And it is only *after* they are explicated (i.e. formulated into symbols such as words or gestures) that logical analysis can be applied. The application of logic then helps yield the “relations, forms, systems, contained in any creation of meaning” (164).

The six steps or movements of Focusing articulated by Gendlin (1978/1981) give a structured way we can use to engage and let further develop the felt sense and associated meanings. The steps are guideposts, not to be reified into something so rigid they become rules. Rather, in keeping with this chapter’s emphasis on modelling professional life on flexibility, openness, and wonder, engaging our felt sense is more like an adventure where new symbolisations form and carry the originating meaning forward. To be economical, and to avoid repetition within this volume, I will only comment briefly on the Focusing process and how it will relate to this chapter’s objective of articulating how TAE can assist professional life.

Understanding and having some experience with Focusing is necessary for the use of TAE. Focusing, “spending time with an observation or impression which is directly and physically sensed, but unclear” (Gendlin 2004, 1) can be confusing to students and professionals alike. After all we are taught to trust only the clear and already known. Starting from a seemingly inverted place is

Table 5.1 The six steps of focusing as presented by Gendlin

1. Clearing a space	4. Resonating handle and felt sense
2. Felt sense of the problem	5. Asking
3. Finding a handle	6. Receiving

Note: Gendlin, *Focusing*, (1978/1981).

often met by at least mild scepticism. Some professionals and students have argued that the unclear “makes no sense” and they cannot imagine otherwise. But if we persist, with ourselves as scholars and with our students, as their educators, that initial unclarity shifts to an experience of intricacy. And that intricacy creates and implies its own next steps (Krycka 2006).

It is being able to access this internally intricate sense that not only is required for TAE but also allows us to move, open, and develop whatever project on which we are working. We find that any series of statements made before engaging our implicit and internally intricate sense no longer holds true – at least not exactly true in the same way. Likewise, as Gendlin puts it, “An implicitly intricate bodily felt sense is *never* the same thing as a statement” (2004, 1).

#### *Vignette one – focusing: the researcher at an impasse*

This is a real example from a TAE workshop I completed with Gendlin in 2000 and illustrates how TAE and Focusing as interrelated and complimentary processes help clear the space around an important issue and move the situation forward.

An aerospace scientist presented a highly complex problem to the attendees. The scientist was part of a larger team struggling with finding a solution to a rather embarrassing problem recently discovered with one of the team’s already deployed instruments. Until this time, no adequate solutions have been found. Gendlin sat with the scientists, helping them find the felt sense of the problem. At first the problem appeared intractable, after all several other scientists with far more seniority, knowledge, and experience had failed. Gendlin guided the scientists inward, asking them to sit quietly with what initially presented as futility and a sense of being at a dead end. Gendlin asked the scientist to let a sense of the whole thing develop. The scientist took a deep breath, eyes closed, and was still for several moments. We could see in their face something was happening, though they remained silent. Gendlin reflected this observation saying, “You are sitting with this whole problem and there seems to be no solution.” The scientist nodded and remained quiet and silent. After a few moments, the scientist opened their eyes and began trying to say what they were sensing.

Gendlin encouraged the unclear in their voice and gestures. The scientist wrung their hands, moving their fist upward toward the heart area. Gendlin gestured back similarly. The scientists added that “this whole thing is like a

big, layered trouble.” “A big, layered trouble,” Gendlin said. “Yes,” the scientist says, “and more too.” The layered trouble, bound up as it was, had slightly shifted. The scientist’s shoulders relaxed, and they looked up. “It feels like it is not so closed off now, like I can feel *it* relaxing too.” Gendlin reflects, “Ah, there is a new relaxing feeling that it’s feeling now.” “Yes,” the scientist says and adds that they are ready to stop for now and that this gives them a more friendly attitude toward that layered trouble.

In this brief example, it might appear that nothing significant came, at least that’s what it seemed at the time as an observer of Gendlin’s guidance. As is almost always the case, a small shift as the scientist experienced will need time to develop into something more than it arrived as. The scientist would later return to work again with Gendlin on this “layered trouble” and over the course of the workshop was able to explicate the beginnings of a theory about the failure of the deployed instrument.

### *Thinking at the Edge and creating something new*

Developed for those who wanted to progress their own theories from within their field of expertise, TAE was never intended to be only for the privileged highly educated; it was always intended to also be for various professions outside of the academy and for individuals aligned by purpose or experience. TAE is now found thriving around the world in diverse professions, populations, and cultures, including students, parents, children, groups, and teams, and with the advent of web-based video conferencing, cross-cultural TAE-based partnerships and projects are springing up, etc. What is assumed though is personal expertise, be it in some field of study, experiential affiliation, or shared identity and a person skilled in Focusing. For those of us already aligned with a profession, that expertise will be grounded in the associated field of practice. For the student who may have no firm grounding in a field or profession, expertise will look very different and the manner in which we approach finding their internal expertise will be very important.

I have found that everyone, no matter their level of education or experience, has something in them that needs to be said, something meaningful even if at first it appears to be important just to them and their situation. TAE can be a valuable tool for opening up the situation if we know how to. The steps themselves are one way to engage, further *enter into*, and bring into focus that “something” we want to explore. The end product of TAE need not be a fully formed theory and may instead provide just enough clarity to satisfy the initial inquiry. But if this situation, call it an urging or a problem or a curiosity, demands of us that we go further, TAE can be of help.

For professionals and students, the starting point is a meaningful subject that has a sense of room to grow. It could be as simple as a “good idea” in my area of work or a personal matter, such as mourning a loss or life change. As mentioned earlier, the foundation of TAE is the felt sense and to be successful at using TAE one needs at least familiarity with Focusing and its steps. Given

Table 5.2 TAE: Summary of the steps

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**Speaking from the felt sense**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Letting the felt sense form                                      | 4. Write a sentence or fresh phrase to say what you mean |
| 2. Find what is more than logical in your felt sense                | 5. Expand your terms                                     |
| 3. Notice that you don't mean the standard definitions of the words |  |

**Finding patterns**

- |   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| 6. Collect facets   | 8. Cross the facets |
| 7. Allow the facets to contribute a more detailed structure | 9. Write freely     |

**Building theory**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 10. Choose terms and link them                    | 13. Apply your theory outside your field       |
| 11. Ask into the inherent relations between terms | 14. Expand and apply your theory in your field |
| 12. Choose permanent terms and interlock them     |  |
- 

*Note:* Gendlin and Hendricks (2004, 12–24). *Thinking at the Edge Steps.*

are the TAE steps as first given by Gendlin and his wife, Mary Hendricks. The 14 steps consist of three distinct movements: speaking from the felt sense, finding patterns, and building theory.

The following second vignette is offered to illustrate the importance of starting with a felt sense and using TAE to move forward with the entire situation. Later, I will offer practical suggestions on how to bring the richness of Focusing and TAE to the classroom.

*Vignette two – the researcher-educator planning a new course: with steps noted*

The course is on theory construction and would be taught to undergraduate and separately to graduate students in psychology. As a scholar of Gendlin's work, I knew that my prior work would not only support this new endeavour but also feed future projects. It is true that I was designing the course as an experiential one based on Gendlin's philosophy and psychology. The course design project explored further below, is like any other scholarly project I have taken up in this way: I first begin where I am and engage my felt sense at every step of the creation of the project, be it a book chapter like this one, an entire book, or a course. Thus, my reflections in this vignette can be applied to traditional research as much as it is a concrete example of using Focusing and TAE in designing a course. Both are embodied thinking in action.

From the start I had trepidation, wondering if I could pull it off without it becoming an unsatisfying mess for myself and the students. Sitting with this worrisome, somewhat self-deprecating frame of mind, I realised that if I stayed as I was, I would likely get nowhere in designing the course, or worse create even more anxiety for myself.



To help the reader understand the arc of the TAE process, I label each of the main movements (noted as headings in Table 5.2) and within these, the specific steps as they emerged. I should note here that not all the steps and phases were used. In the Discussion section, I will make clearer why this would be.

***Movement One: Speaking From the Felt Sense.*** I pulled out a favourite quote attributed to Carlos Castañeda and wrote it at the top of what I imagined then as the first page of the course syllabus. It read: “The body is an awareness; and it must be treated impeccably.” The quote had an existing felt resonance to me, a felt sense that could return to me as needed without much effort. It would urge me to be impeccable in how I treat my awareness.

By myself in my university office, I took a moment to look inward and sense what it was about this whole situation that had caught me up in an impasse (***Step 1: Let a felt sense form***). It didn’t take long to identify a few things with unpleasant felt meanings. It wasn’t all that surprising that “negativity” would surface first, after all, I’ve encountered many times while focusing a naysayer arise in me, something the proficient Focusing teachers, Ann Wiser Cornell (1996) and her frequent co-author Barbara McGavin (Cornell and McGavin 2008) would call “the critic,” which they frame within the context of a radical acceptance. For myself, critical inner judgements arose almost immediately. They revolved around my own formulations of their root causes such as the well-known “impostor syndrome” and its associated negative feelings of embarrassment and guilt. I recalled that Focusing and TAE ask us to not stay with what comes first but rather to clear a space for more to come. Lightly noticing and setting aside each element of my first reactions, not going into any, I found a sense of ease, something felt from the inside like a wide-open field.

Welcoming the sense of wide-open, I asked myself what was so wide-open about creating this course. I paused here, so as not to fall back into answering my own questions in a typical way. I let another sense form (***Step 2: Find what is more than logical***). This time the formulation had the feeling of learning forward into a bright day with a slight breeze (pausing . . .), “Breezily” I said back to myself and felt a slight easing. Other senses along with words and images passed by, but breezily stuck around. Even now as I write this, I can sense that original freshness in the term itself. Accessing its wider, open territories comes easily, like a summer breeze. Letting *breezily* fill out a bit more, I am aware of the sense of fresh movement without struggle or drama, even a sense of trusting in larger processes as yet unnamed. This nuanced sense of *breezily* is what I hoped my students would also experience in the course.

I engaged this sense, inwardly asking “How does breezily meet the issue of creating a new course?”. A warmth came with that inquiry. Breezily said or implied a connection to my resonance with what the course could be. This surprised me and admittedly made me smile. Was I going to develop an academic course with the goal of being “breezily”? That would hardly pass muster at the curriculum review committee. Breezily was not meant in a typical or standard way. There were nuances in its felt sense that would not fit a usual definition (***Step 3: Notice that you don’t mean the standard definition of the words***).

But breezily must stay for now as it holds more than the regular dictionary definition. I wrote fresh sentences about breezily, expanding what I wanted each word to say precisely (*Step 4: Write a sentence or fresh phrase to say what you wanted each of the words to mean*). In TAE writing fresh, linguistically unusual sentences, energises the process by throwing off convention of grammar and structure. One of my sentences was, “Breezily producing movement unexpected.”

TAE instructions (*Step 5: Expand what you wanted each word to mean*) ask us to write a string of three original phrases with a (. . .) at the end utilising one or more of the words in your sentences. This (. . .) indicates that you are intentionally taking the felt sense along with you but there is more that could be said about it. Here you play with the usual structures of sentences inherited from your native language, such as grammatical and gender rules. You intentionally upend these given rules and end up with some pretty odd and unusual phrases that likely only makes sense to you. And this is perfectly fine at this stage as up until this point your work is for you and you alone.

I spent a good deal of time writing out in odd sentences about what breezily, producing, movement, and unexpected contributed to my academic course through further felt sensing of the . . . after each key word or phrase. Through this process, the crux of each was further developed. You continue this process until you sense a stopping point. When I stopped, I had these four crux sentences:

*Breezily softly draws forward without judgement.*

*Producing is not effortful in the usual way.*

*Movement circles back onto itself, again and again, until released.*

*Unexpected is a constant.*

Very often this is the place where you will stop entirely or pause the process. Having used TAE in several projects, my experience is that one needs a break from the intentionality of the first section of work. This may not necessarily be due to any exhaustion, rather, from the felt awareness that the fresh things that came needed some time to settle in. TAE and Focusing emphasise paying attention to your whole bodily awareness at all times while engaging in the process. If your bodily awareness is saying, “okay, time for a break” or “there’s so much here, I just want to give myself some room for now,” then take the time you need.

*Movement 2: Finding Patterns from Facets.* The second movement is like a game of exploring how these original phrases, which stem from your original felt sense of your project, actually happened in the world (*Step 6: Collect facets*). Using your odd sentences and underlining parts of them that seem full, containing countless other aspects of the project (*Step 7: Allow the facets to contribute detailed structure*) you can create a new sentence. From the four crux sentences in Movement 1, I expanded them by using the key words of each, in essence creating something beyond these four elements. I arrived at this new expression: “Breezily producing movement is unexpected.” It’s worth

noting that no matter how long you have paused your work, you connect again with your felt sense of your project. In my case, the four crux words fed my new course design in concrete ways but would be discovered later.

Over the next several months, I followed breezily, producing, movement, and unexpected into where they opened with further felt meanings. Allowing each fresh sentence to contribute to the others filled out in detail what the form of my project (i.e. an academic course) would eventually become (*Step 8: Cross the facets*). These clusters of meanings were eventually transformed into the course framework built from clusters of meaning units, each with subsequent and interrelated aims. The clusters eventually took the shape of groupings of assigned readings with experiential exercises related to each.

*Movement 3: Building Theory.* The third movement is often not completed simply because through the prior two movements the TAE goal of articulating an implicit knowing and making it communicable, has been achieved. For this writing I will not trace the steps of building theory, mostly because I am building a course not a theory. For my purposes, once I understood at a felt level what the course was about and had an inkling of how I could develop it along more traditional ways, I was finished for the time being.

I knew that a significant amount of work still needed to be done before this would be an academic course on theory construction. I continued to gather examples of each new cluster of sentences, derived from the facets, then searched for other literature to feed them. The crossing of examples, or facets as referred to in the original TAE steps, led on to a period of free writing that further explicated the implicit knowledge of breezily as it related to this course. I would have to gather readings, make up assignments, and plan exercises that resonated with that initial, overall sense of being breezily and the four crux sentences.

### **Finding fresh ways forward: a reflection**

Researchers and students often enough experience that sense of being at a loss, of not knowing where to go with an idea – we get stumped regardless of our level of expertise and education. Instead of seeing these times as personal defeats or indications of some deficit, TAE helps structure our way forward. Galvin and Todres (2007, 31–46) frame this situation as one calling for a more contemplative direction in our scholarly and pedagogical/educational practices that invites us to centre our work from a place of an “unspecialized mode of being” (32).

At the start of this chapter, I suggested that the push for specialisation in our professions is a dangerous turn. We see already where this leads us; often to an impasse and feeling unanchored from things that gave us/give us meaning in our work. From my experience, I can attest to these dynamics being very much alive in my students and my colleagues.

I often have to remind myself in the business of producing papers, courses, or solving administrative woes, that we start only where we are. I remind myself

that “You are never not someplace; you are never without a starting point; you are always an interaction of here and now, there and then, self and cosmos.” (Gendlin 1978/1981, 77). As I have further suggested, Focusing and TAE, practices developed by Gendlin and further extended by many others including the contributors to this book, can form the basis of scholarly practice and teaching. There are still many areas we need to explore in the process of utilising Focusing and TAE, undoubtedly. To help us think further about retaining and feeding the meaning in our work, I offer these brief reflections regarding the two areas explored in this chapter.

### *Creating a new course*

When I first launched the course called “Theory Construction and Embodied Thinking,” there was general excitement amongst the students enrolled in it. They later confessed that they really didn’t have any idea what the course was about or was going on in it, but it was strange enough that they enrolled. The first weeks had us learn how to “Say Hello” and how to “let your body speak.” We read from Gendlin and others who extended his work aligned with the four major areas explicated in the early steps of TAE. We watched videos of Gendlin from *The International Focusing Institutes* website ([www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org)). But this wouldn’t have been as successful if there weren’t structural supports in place. I offer the following three examples of a focusing-oriented, TAE-inspired support system I developed for the course.

#### *First exercise: knowing what you know*

Invitation: Find a small example of a personal best, something of which we are proud or happy. Describe it in as much detail as possible, trying to refrain from explaining. Paint us a picture of it so that someone else with no knowledge of you or your example will understand it. Quickly write for 10 minutes only. Pause. Keep this for later use in class.

#### *Second exercise: finding something meaningful*

Invitation: Find a particularly meaningful piece of music, poetry, art – something that “hits home.” Come prepared to share this with your classmates. Instructions are given to present the exemplar with no context, rationale, or theorising. Classmates are asked to treat the exemplar carefully, as something tender and to note their immediate responses to hearing/seeing it. They will notate their responses in writing, circling the central words or phrases (finding the crux) that stand out for them. Still, keep this private as we need to learn to nurture our own experiences and honour those of others. To “engage” with someone else’s work at this point can lead to shutting it down, even where group norms are clear, agreed upon, and utilised consistently. Gradually, as a class, we become a team but this takes time.

*Third exercise: saying what needs to be said by me*

Invitation: From your field of expertise and with your felt sense, identify at least one part of your work that seems distinctive from the broader field. Admittedly, this is a tricky exercise as it can feed into a solipsistic self-referencing point of view, a view that is disengaged from others to an extent.” I’m speaking my truth” is a common expression that appears to cry for “leave me alone and let me say/have this moment.” It is a profoundly important thing to discover a truth, honour it and not hide it from oneself or even others. Still, we need to continue to not only safeguard these truths but invite them to be in dialogue with other of our truths, which often are not consonant with each other inside – leaving us in obvious contradictions within ourselves and other social spaces. The tricky part in a classroom setting is to lay as good a foundation as possible for care; the ability to perceive another’s world and not move to alter it, challenge it, or destroy it with negation or too much intellectual inquisitiveness.

Protecting the nascent in us is an act of profound caring. In the classroom, we can set the environment but not the interactions. It is through a consistent application of Focusing, even just the initial identification of the something I’m sensing, can turn the tide of internal and external criticisms.

*Filling out the experience of TAE in a classroom*

Throughout the class, students brought in examples from their lives of something meaningful to share with the class. Some would bring in a short clip of a new song they felt resonated in them. Others brought in photographs or pictures. Some read passages from poetry or novels or even textbooks. The rules were that no one could question why these were brought in and no one could offer opinions or explanations. If comments or questions did arise, and they did, they were to write these down for later use. The point was to build a level of awareness of others’ experiences and, probably most importantly, build a level of awareness of their own experiencing. In short, I was structuring the classroom with a “breezily” framework.

Together we learned that not all bodies immediately trust or welcome reflection or stillness. It was critical that we join in cultivating care between each other and an inner partnership within ourselves. Undergraduates, especially if they are young adults, often don’t have the language to express themselves safely. Creating as safe a learning environment as possible was necessary.

I explain to students that just as when I set out to start a research project or write up findings, I have a sense of something interesting that calls me to explore it. If you are a researcher and you’re at the stage of writing up findings or articulating an idea for your profession, we often have a soft goal in mind, as in writing a chapter about some topic in some publication. They seem to understand the connection, but I become explicit about these things so that they have a framework that may be of use later in their lives and careers.

In the case of *Theory Construction*, the goal was for each student to explore a meaningful topic about which they know more than, or differently from, what they assume others know, and then present this exploration in a manner that fits its felt meaning for them. Students could choose the medium for their presentation.

“Producing is not effortful in the usual way,” “Movement circles back onto itself, again and again, until released,” “Unexpected is a constant,” phrases from my TAE work earlier, needed significant translation. As an exercise, I offered to students these phrases and had them self-select into working groups whose goal was to explore these via their felt sense and report back to the class in a single phrase or sentence. Together, first in small groups of three or four, they articulated new meaningful phrases from the seeds of my own. Some of these phrases from the class were as follows:

- Following one’s pace needs support.
- Zig-zagging into and with the larger field of our project excites me.
- Until enough where we decide to leave it or continue.
- Fresh understandings are the explication of implicit embodiment.
- Testing out the freshness of something is critical for its development.
- Pausing can now continue but in a state of readiness or equanimity.

You can tell that some groups had read the readings! Regardless, they all could enter into something not their own and find the newly original in it. This was necessary. It gave them practice in how to engage the given and carry it forward for themselves as team members. It gave them the experience of original thinking, something several students remarked they had never experienced before. They came to understand that whether the product (aka an assigned reading) “is theirs” or not, they could think with and into it and follow the originator forward into their own fresh understandings. Finally, the foundation of Focusing on the TAE process cannot be understated. Using one’s felt sense as a regular part of learning, or researching or writing for that matter, helps impart a sense of ownership.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I’ve emphasised and given illustrations of how, with a felt sense structured, step-wise, process that guides them, scientists, researchers, and students will find new life in their thinking. This, in turn, is generative of new forms of knowledge that will be meaningful to those who encounter it. We need to have in our quiver an array of caring practices that support the ongoing work of differentiating domains (i.e. specialisations) that retain the use of the intimate sources of creativity and generativity. We are after a different kind of discourse that can relate to the specialised and the caring. Focusing and TAE are two such caring practices that sustain a caring discourse for the

researcher and student. With these two tools, we are given ways to expand the taxonomies of our work, be it in the realm of research or teaching.

I hope it is clear enough that Focusing and TAE are not only about getting in touch with and exploring feelings. Identifying body sensations and/or feeling expression is often a major part of knowledge creation in itself, in fact it might be all that is necessary for understanding a situation. However, it is not enough to go very far in developing a research project or another tangible product like creating a course. The drawback of the emphasis on feeling is that we conflate “a feeling” with the entire situation and often enough come to believe that this feeling or somatic sense is the ONLY thing of importance.

In several places amongst his body of works, Gendlin took great care to explain how a feeling is distinct from a felt sense, though it is an aspect of it. In writing for psychotherapists for instance, Gendlin (1996) makes clear that exploring only the feelings accompanying experiencing limits the further exploration of meaning in any situation, forestalling transformations that can come. Focusing is intentional, while a felt sense can arise at any moment. So, while the felt sense is needed to Focus, Focusing is not necessary to the felt sense.

As a teacher, writer, and researcher, I use TAE intentionally and often at any point in the process of the production of knowledge – be it to design a course or a theoretical or research project. Teaching undergraduate and graduate students TAE is not without its challenges; however, the excitement of discovery, of seeing a student discover they can think in a disciplined way that brings their nascent, often dearly protected, ideas into public light, has striking and delightful impacts on the student and educator. The same can be said of my own journey with TAE. This is the power of Focusing and TAE: The nascent interiorly felt musings around a subject can be engaged, followed, developed, tested, and honed into something for more public use.

## Note

- 1 Two of Gendlin’s key philosophical texts are *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* (1962/1997) and *A Process Model* (1997/2017). For other of Gendlin’s works, philosophical or psychological, visit the Gendlin Online Library, free resource, found at <http://www.focusing.org>

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## 6 In search of relational imagination

### An auto-ethnographic journey through training in embodied critical thinking

*Katrin Heimann and Dorothe Bach*

#### Prologue

Before you enter into this chapter, we would like to invite you to engage in a short experiment<sup>1</sup>:

*Take a stone, any stone at hand and place it in front of you. Call to mind an issue, problem, or project you are currently pondering, professional or personal, big, or small. Then take some time to sense the stone, moving it around in your hands, noticing its shape, color, weight, or any other feature that you can attend to. Now, bring the two, the stone and your project, close. Listen to what happens. Can the stone inform your project in any way? Jot down your thoughts. Don't let yourself be disturbed by feelings of ridiculousness or similar. Just follow the thread that offers itself and take in what you consider of value.*

We will refer back to your and our experience with this prompt later in the chapter.

#### Introduction: how we got to know each other

##### *Kat*

*The bus stops at a distinguished site of geothermic activity, a tourist spot, close to Reykjavík, Iceland. A couple of neat wooden paths lead up to a spot of gurgling hot mud springs surrounded by natural sulfur paintings that seem to comprise all colors of the rainbow. The air is pregnant with smells and sounds that are as intriguing as repulsive. The warmth of the steam plays in mild circles with some cooler breath of wind to surprise your skin. It's a whole symphony for the senses condensed on about 100 square meters of a sheltered hill side, lying warm in the sunshine. An obvious feast for the Iceland tourist.*

*But this is not where we are going.*

*Instead, for about 15 min, we are guided along a small trail leading us up to the right and behind the scene. Bus and street are soon out of sight. Up here the*

*air is fresh, even chilly with the wind breezing fast over a large lake, surrounded by grass and encircled by a little mountain ridge. To the right an even larger, in fact a quite enormous stone plane opens, a mix of desert and moon landscape with rock formations in the background; who knows how vast in actual size. There is no person, no tree, not even a bush in sight that could give us a sense of scale. When I turn my gaze back to the lake, someone from our group is standing in the middle of it, the water reaching only up to her ankles. It's a confusing image, causing a little trembling in my lower stomach. I feel my brows rising slightly, the muscles around my eyes contracting to sharpen my gaze. All of it is quite a spectacle, puzzling and unanticipated, as if we had entered another kingdom through a magic mirror.*

*This is where Doro and I are finding each other; we are asked to form pairs, one accompanying the other in the task to listen to the place, to go where it calls us to – as long as that call keeps us in sight of the group. It's obvious that one might get lost here, although I am unsure that this is prevented by staying in sight.*

This article portrays our, that is Dorothe Bach's and Kat Heimann's, journey that started during the 2021 Training in Embodied Critical Thinking (TECT) summer school in Iceland and continued from then on via different online and offline meetings. A journey that took us from individual considerations to shared projects, from mere acquaintance to treasured friend- and muse-ship bridging our personal and professional lives. The goal of this chapter is to tune the reader's ear – your ear – to the instruments that guided our way and to the possibilities that emerge when we attend to and articulate our embodied, situated experience in the way TECT education invited us to.

To do so, we will be jumping in time and font: The italic text invites you to Iceland via diary-style recollections and later to edited transcripts of our Zoom room sessions in an attempt to let you follow step by step our discoveries. The text in the regular font is representing our evolving reflections on these experiences, before and while writing this article. They focus on our interest in how the methods taught as part of the TECT education, in particular micro-phenomenology, Focusing and Thinking at the Edge, have been shaping our process and mirror the questions that emerged on our journey.<sup>2</sup>

In this vein, it is helpful to state that embodied critical thinking (ECT) for both of us included new and familiar elements: While Kat, who is trained in Philosophy and Neuroscience, has long experience with applying micro-phenomenology, she had no prior exposure to Focusing and Thinking at the Edge. Doro, trained in Literature and working in the field of educational development, on the other hand, was new to micro-phenomenology but had some prior exposure to Focusing and had begun utilising radical listening in her teaching. Most of the

methodological reflections articulated in this text though, occurred to us during our journey together.

We hope you will enjoy the trip to Iceland and onward.

### **Working with landscape**

*Doro (continuing Kat's description):*

*The task was to consider the desert-like landscape stretching in front of us and find a place for a stone we each brought from our home countries. In a prior session inside the classroom, we had “brought this stone close” to a project of ours – just as you might have done following the experiential prompt in our prologue. In effect, the stone now carried traces of this project. Importantly for the new exercise in the Icelandic plain, we were not asked to decide ourselves where to go but to let the stone “guide” us to where it wanted to be – a task that initially seemed as obscure as the setting. The precise ECT instructions stated: When you have found the place where your stone fits, begin articulating what makes it so while substituting the word “stone” with the project you were working on. “My stone/project belongs here/resonates with this place because . . .”*

In our shared understanding, the stone exercise, developed by TECT teacher Ramio Eisenberg (n.b. his chapter in this book), draws on a combination of all ECT methods to help anyone interested to access their embodied understanding of a problem and stimulate creative meaning making. It uses environmental prompts or scores, a “set of gentle instructions” just simple enough to get us going, yet ambiguous enough to not allow for one single interpretation and thus open a space for playful improvisation (see Løppenthin et al. 2022). Such gentle, open invitations activate our senses and make us aware of the creative potential that engagement with our surroundings can bear. Furthermore asking the students to explicate their thoughts in the presence of an attentive listener, it then encourages a facilitated articulation of experience as it is common in micro-phenomenology, Focusing and Thinking of the Edge. Such verbalisation of the felt dimensions of experience can help first stabilize (real-ize) the initial inchoate sense arising and then later lead to a shift away from it, opening up new meanings.

*Doro (continuing her recollection)*

*When it was my turn, I walked towards the lower part of the landscape where I could get a view of the plateau that stretched east towards a mountainous formation. I'd felt a strange sense of danger and attraction when I had first looked in this direction from the placid, pastoral looking lake scene. As for the exact location of where I wanted to sit, I consulted my stone. Where did this black smooth rock from northern Germany that my niece had given me before I left for Iceland*

*belong in the sea of volcanic rock formations? A silly task, I thought. Of course, the rock didn't really belong anywhere in this landscape. Or did it? I followed along with the instructions, rock in hand, and ended up choosing a rather unspectacular spot low down at the bottom of the plane, leaving the interesting rock formations on either side of the dramatic mountainous arrangement unexplored. It felt a bit as if we were now standing in a gutter, a peripheral place where no one would be expected to linger and where one may be swept away during a flash flood. I noticed the tiniest clump of vegetation – a bit of moss, a miniature leafy plant, a grass – at my feet and I was careful not to step on it.*

*Kat and I sat down, and I took a moment to check in with myself. The project I was working on during the summer school revolved around wanting to help others (and myself) deepen their connection to nature, to the more-than-human world. Worried about the growing mental health crisis particularly among young people, I was propelled by my own experience and research showing that being in nature contributes to healing and wellbeing (Bratman, Hamilton, and Daily 2012). I also knew how difficult it was to facilitate meaningful nature encounters. It was often as if something was standing in the way between people and the more-than-human world.*

*At present, I was experiencing this phenomenon myself. I felt nothing but overwhelmed by what I saw in the distance. The landscape appeared strangely unreal, more like a painting than an actual space open to receive a human body. Feeling pushed away, I sat down and began to finger the little plant formation and felt Kat's presence next to me. Here is an excerpt from Kat's notes on what the experience revealed to me about the challenge of relating as I began to verbalize what I sensed:*

*“Who would have thought that here is such a plant, (referring to a grass with strange miniature plums.) This spot feels safe (I point to the tiny plant colony), it allows me to see how everything else is arranged. It feels good to have you here, (my left-hand gestures towards Kat) that there is someone who accompanies this moment. Both this little plant choreography here that sits amid stones, and you over here (my hand gestures again towards Kat) allow me to look at this hostile seeming landscape stretching in front of me. This landscape needs a slow approach, it needs to be mediated. . . . I need this miniature landscape right next to me as well as another person who witnesses my process of approaching the whole to be able to truly take it in. There is a whole lot that is necessary before I can fully arrive, before I am ready to say respectfully, I am here, with fresh eyes. And with somebody who listens. It's like an invitation.”*

In articulating her experience, Doro explicates the usefulness of the environmental prompt as well as the listener. As you might have experienced in the interaction with the stone we prompted in the prologue, engaging with the open-ended instructions without any actual articulation can already lead to new, surprising thoughts. What some of the central ECT tools, such as micro-phenomenology, Focusing, and Thinking

at the Edge (TAE) add to that is precisely such articulation and, specifically, the facilitating listener. Gendlin, who developed the method of Focusing, used to joke that he tested the difference many times: thinking alone in his head vs. having an attentive listener who stays with you in your attempts to put words to experiences, carefully records these articulations and, by repeating them back to you, when necessary, allows you to use them as an environment to think in (Gendlin 1984).

In our experience, it does take practice to listen and hold the space for another person. Social norms make it difficult to abstain from slipping into conversation, brainstorming or advice giving or otherwise engaging with the content of what is said. Following the strict listening instructions of micro-phenomenology and Focusing, as explicated further below, can therefore be as relieving as eye-opening. It seems that only if the speaker is allowed to ponder their own words, linger in the attended silences, the gap between what is sayable and what is experienced, that we can notice what we have overlooked before, that significant insights occur.

And while the listening is thus deeply beneficial for the person it supports, the listener is impacted as well. As we have experienced, resonance stemming from a close listening that fully attunes to the uniqueness of another person's experience for an extended period is categorically different from the type of autobiographical listening we typically engage in, during which we look for what we already know and can respond to. Gendlin maintains that a socially habituated response of how another's experience is like ours "leaves all the living things behind and all you get is the abstract likeness." In contrast, the resonance that emerges between listening partners using ECT methods flows from making "a separate space for the other person so their thing can breathe and then you get a separate space for yours, so your thing can breathe. Then they're both present and then they can cross and then the relationality will be true."  
(Gendlin n.d.b.)

## Working with art

### *Kat*

*It is a beautiful as well as deeply puzzling experience to listen to Doro. I am aware of the uniqueness of her experience, yet there is a feeling of recognition. What I assume to recognize is this feeling of unrealism standing in front of a landscape – a Landscape with a capital L: the impossibility to experience the seen as a living place, the sheer failure of zooming in, switching from looking at the smooth sides of a hill as seen from afar to the millions of stones and edges, sand and dusty details that climbing it would involve. Or no, this is not totally it: I CAN (imagine to) zoom in – but that does not do justice to the experience of the mountain as a whole, the actual Landscape. It is not the same. That Landscape as itself seems to be given to me just like it would (not) be via a painting. There*

*remains a slight sense of the seen as being unreal, an illusion, something far away that I cannot relate to.*<sup>3</sup>

*And maybe there is a real parallel here?! I get excited! In my work, I am also thinking a lot about access – access as the possibility and capacity to relate via your own experience. Though, in my case, it is not the access to landscape, to nature, but the access to art that is obstructed or absent for a large majority of people today. Unfortunately, institutional structures and a common elitist approach to art are often co-responsible for hindering our relationship to it: for placing the works of art in flawless, white, cube-shaped spaces, for charging often exorbitant entrance fees to enter these and for regulating behaviors in them through a litany of rules (Don't touch! Don't run! Don't speak – especially not with somebody you don't know! Don't stand in the way of someone's view! Better let your body disappear altogether!). Within the walls of museums and schools, we have learned to distrust our bodies, senses and instincts and instead become enthralled by the information about the artwork provided by experts via labels and catalogues. And this distrust we carry with us, as a habitual anxiety to fail in front of a work, an anxiety so strong that it prevents us from even trying to engage with what is exhibited. This summarizes the experience that was repeatedly shared with me in interviews I conducted with museum visitors as part of my research about the first five seconds of entering a museum.*

*But I have the small hope that a cure might be on the horizon. I have experimented with different ways of facilitating engagement with art works that work against this mutilation of visitors, and as a tool of empowerment. Up to this point, micro-phenomenology has been the most prominent practice for me.*

Micro-phenomenology, as we see it, is a research method developed to attend to and explore subjective experience (see Petitmengin 2006 and Heimann et al. 2022). It originates in and expands the field of Cognitive Science by admitting a person's remembered stream of consciousness as valid scientific data. A micro-phenomenological interview starts with the interviewer choosing a specific short target experience, an instance in time that they want to explore with the interviewee. They then help the interviewee to evoke the starting moment of this target experience by asking them to recall as many details of the context of the situation as possible: when and where it happened, their precise bodily position, what they visually, auditorily, olfactorily, kinaesthetically perceived at that moment etc. When the interviewee expresses having the moment present, they are asked to give a first experiential report of what they experienced from this moment onwards until a defined endpoint. After this first report, it is the task of the interviewer to help the interviewee to expand this report with further details of content and form, while carefully avoiding any priming that could lead to confabulation or distract the interviewee from the target experience. To do so, the interviewer uses extended notes to repeat verbatim what the interviewee reported, while asking the interviewee to interrupt any time that the repetition

seems inaccurate or incomplete. Importantly, the interviewer can only use the articulations of the interviewee's report to consequently ask for more details about the time sequence or momentary experience. For example, the interviewer might say: You just reported that at a certain moment your brother came to your mind. Could you let this precise moment in time come back to you? If it is present to you: Did something happen right before/after that? Or: Could you describe the way in which you experienced this "coming to mind" of your brother? These questions are purposefully open and avoid priming. They are intended to result in the interviewee attending to the more fine-grained temporal unfolding and to articulating more details about how their experience in every (sub)moment was constituted, for example, whether the "coming to mind" consisting of the appearance of a visual image of his brother, a hearing of his voice, a feeling of his tiny childhood hands in theirs, or a complex combination of all of these and more. The interviewer can then again ask for more details concerning these specific aspects, without rephrasing or introducing new dimensions (e.g. it is not recommended to ask: did you also smell something?). Looping over each mentioned moment and facets in this way, the interview maps out the entire target experience until the memory report is completed or the memory is exhausted.

Being guided and listened to, in this way, often allows interviewees to pay attention to usually unnoticed aspects of their experience and articulate such in fine-grained detail. They might realise that they remember aspects of brother's room they did not think they were able to recall, or that the memory of him is actually centred around a deep feeling of security, a soothing balanced weight in their stomach, they thought they had long lost. The reports become surprising for interviewees. Especially when it comes to experiences of which they thought they could not say a lot about, for example, due to the idea that they were not expert enough. This can create a confidence raising and thus empowering effect, which is what Kat outlines in the following.

*Kat (continuing her recollection):*

*On our way back to the bus I eagerly tell Doro about my work with museum goers, boldly suggesting a connection between my interests and hers. Precisely, I tell her about an intervention earlier this summer in which I conducted micro-phenomenological interviews with visitors of Olafur Eliasson's exhibition "Life." In this site-specific walk-in-installation, the entire glass front of a museum, the venerable Fondation Beyeler, had been taken out and the first floor had been flooded with neon green colored water, extending the adjacent lake into the building. Borders between inside and outside were literally torn down, the distinction between culture and (cultivated) nature blurred, habits and hierarchies of the art system questioned. When I first heard about the exhibit, I wondered how*

*I and other visitors would experience the promise of this artwork? Would the radical potential of the exhibit that I imagined also be felt? How, for whom and under which circumstances? Or what could happen otherwise?*

*As part of my intervention, I asked some students to (re-)visit the installation with the following instructions: "I invite you to direct your attention to your attention to find anything that is interesting to you."<sup>4</sup> Right after their revisit, I conducted a micro-phenomenological interview with them, exploring what they experienced over the course of this task. This resulted in 12 hours of recordings of teenagers who excitedly and meticulously described the rich journey they underwent in the minutes they attended to the work. Even more surprisingly, the students, even those who had in previous visits not enjoyed the work much, voluntarily stayed behind on the museum grounds to share their experiences with each other past the hours of obligatory presence, eager to interact with their own thoughts and sensations, each other, and the work. According to them and their teachers, the experience stayed with them and opened up spaces of teaching, learning and especially art perception that beforehand often seemed out of reach.<sup>5</sup> "MP has the power to break down walls" – I excitedly told Doro.*

## **Working with connection**

### **Doro**

*At first, I have a hard time making sense of the stream of words that flood out of Kat like the steam from the geyser. I was still reflecting on my odd shyness and fearfulness during the encounter with the desert landscape. What does my desire to take people into nature for the purpose of deep transformation have to do with museum visitors' lack of words to describe their experience of an artwork? However, I am immediately intrigued when Kat talks about her work with students at the Fondation Beyeler. I can picture teenagers entering an art exhibit and leaving untouched and bored at best. I was that type of student. I didn't mind going to exhibits from time to time mainly to please my parents and, later, to satisfy my own desire to fit into the middle-class world I was raised in. But I never felt that art "spoke to me;" I didn't even know that it was supposed to. I thought my task was to find whatever was exhibited in a museum important for reasons that experts had established. If I ever wanted to appreciate art, I needed to learn to see it through someone else's eyes. That Kat had found a way to disrupt this pattern piqued my curiosity. Here it was again, the invitation to pay attention to one's own experience combined with the power of listening: the gentle instruction to attend to one's own experience of an environment, combined with her presence as an attentive listener who was uniquely interested in the experience of an individual child, triggered a beholding of their own experience.*

*It began to dawn on me that there was significant overlap in our work and that listening held the key for unlocking people's ability to become aware of, explore, and savour the richness of their experience with the world. Even before I explored the literature on this topic, my theory was that we can find ways to a state in which*



*we experience our non-human surroundings as animate and filled with subjectivities and recover a kinship-based or “kincentric” worldview (Abrams 1996, Martinez 2008). What if micro-phenomenology and similar methods could help me find a path to re-connect with nature? What if I could use them as a tool for helping others do the same?*

In our continuing TECT journey via Zoom, we started exploring this hunch. In one session Doro asked Kat to focus on the sense of a micro-phenomenological interview given her previous long experience with the method. Focusing, in our novice understanding, is a method with distinct similarities and differences when compared with micro-phenomenology. For us, the strongest similarity lies in its dependence on listening and articulation: In a focusing session, the focuser is usually asked to listen or attend to the felt sense of a certain target concept, issue, questions, or conundrum. This is based on the assumption that anything that we encounter or that comes to our mind presents itself initially via intricate bodily sensations, tones, background feelings and more, a mere “felt sense” “at the edge” of what we can grasp and formulate in language. Focusers are invited to attend to this experience by starting to articulate this felt sense to an attentive listener. At points where the focuser gets stuck in the articulation, the listener can offer to repeat all or part of what was said. As in micro-phenomenology, the listeners are asked to stay very close to the exact phrases the speaker used, carefully avoiding mixing themselves into the process. However, listeners in focusing are furthermore trained to help the focuser find a “handle” for their felt sense, a phrase that is good enough to temporarily hold the meaning of something that needs to be further metabolised before it can find a fuller linguistic expression. One way to encourage such a process is for the listeners to point out “glowing” words – articulations that seem to bear a potential of unfolding, of something more that wants to be expressed. This freedom represents a more general principle or aim of focusing that clearly distinguishes it from micro-phenomenology. While micro-phenomenology wants to document an experience, including the felt senses involved in it, focusing aims at unfolding the critical potential of this embodied experience. Shifts and changes occurring to the felt senses as a result of noticing and articulation in the presence of a listener are therefore explicitly supported in and by the process.<sup>6</sup> In the following we share a transcript of our focusing session on the “sense of a micro-phenomenological interview,” edited for length and relevance.

*Kat*

*If I am honest, I sometimes compare a micro-phenomenological interview to a love affair, an intense intimate exchange. As in a real love affair, the session starts with some awkwardness. It feels weird to share the details of your lived experience with somebody else. But soon the listening lures both parties in. The experience,*

possibly the third in a threesome actually, carries in its articulation the feeling of wonder. The tone gets tender. Remembering cannot be forced. You need to soften, and you need to be encouraged and feel safely held in the vulnerable act of sharing your inner experiences. So naturally, there is a kind of mourning that comes when it is time to close the interview. The intimacy is still hanging in the room. It's hard to let go. The other is hard to let go. Sometimes you actually hug each other to say goodbye. When we give our full attention to the other and support them as they begin to articulate their inner experience, a relation can arise that wants to be acknowledged and even celebrated. It is this experience that I treasure most about the method. I really love calling it a love affair, to say it indeed prickles and fizzes. However, coming from the field of Cognitive Sciences, I can also still feel shame saying this aloud – or, best case, a stubborn, defiant kind of pride: To admit to intimacy in the context of research feels daring, transgressive . . . and liberating. I have been partly raised in a research environment that glorifies the neutrality of the researcher and presents knowledge as objective, “found” through disinterested observation. And while designing and running controlled studies informed by this paradigm has driven scientific and technological progress and has taught me a lot, it has also led me to conduct experiments that, to the participant, as well as to me, were boring at best, often strenuous and sometimes uncomfortable. None of us thought of those encounters as particularly rewarding; we mostly came and left as strangers, maybe even doubtful whether this time was spent well, unsure whether anything good would come from the research. ECT work is radically different. It invites us to be fully present, to make use of our human capacity to feel and relate, and to draw on all of our senses as we explore our lived experience or support others in doing so. This work is filled with immediate rewards, surprises, and unexpected turns and resonances. It holds rich potential for changing the way we collaborate with other researchers and for calling into question the boundaries Western science has erected between the researcher and the researched, between a person and their lived experience, between the lived experience and the environments which give rise to them. In a generous space where lived experience can find articulation and resonance, all kind of things begin to matter.

### **Working with care**

In a conversation following the Focusing session, Doro observes that listening to Kat's reflections reminded her of Black feminist Audre Lorde's paper on the “Uses of the Erotic.” Lorde (2017) defines the erotic “as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered . . .” (25) Kat's experience of interviewing resonates with Lorde's insight that allowing the erotic to be present in and expressed through our work is life giving and “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.” (22) And although the transgressive admission of feeling into the research process will provoke shame

and fear of retaliation by those invested in existing power structures, the charge of eros can empower us to (defiantly) reject oppressive systems.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, we also recall that feminists have persistently reminded us that research is never value free but at best guided by “conscious partiality.” To quote Maria Mies, conscious partiality “is the opposite of the so-called ‘Spectator Knowledge’ (Maslow 1966, 50) which is achieved by showing an indifferent, disinterested, alienated attitude towards the “research objects.” . . . Conscious partiality is different from mere subjectivism or simple empathy. On the basis of a limited identification, it creates a critical distance between the researcher and his “objects.” It enables the correction of distortions of perception on both sides and widens the consciousness of both the researcher and the “researched.” (Mies 2014, 38, see also Mies 1983). This, importantly, allows for the possibility of equality. The experience and knowledge of the “researched” are at least as valuable as that of the “researcher,” and both will gain knowledge in the process.

Notably, feminist methodology has also elevated listening as foundational. Deborah Bird Rose suggests that “listening, and more broadly, paying attention, have been underplayed as passive skills but should actually be considered active verbs. . . . To pay attention is to exercise intelligence, to know so is to be able to inter-act.” (2013,102).<sup>8</sup>

Micro-phenomenology, Focusing and Thinking at the Edge all depend on deeply listening to yourself and others. They invite a softness, an openness, a radical honesty. They have the potential to be extremely and immediately rewarding. But they also come with responsibility and should be embedded in a particular ethics of care. This care requires that the researcher and the Thinking at the Edge facilitator create a holding space in which the speaker is able to shape their own process,—caring tenderly for themselves and their emerging thinking, mindfully acknowledging experiences that feel heavy and sensitive—and is supported in assessing in each moment anew, how to continue the journey in a way that feels right for the now.

### **Relational imagination: exploring a new concept through thinking at the edge methodology**

As we continue to inquire into our experience practising and engaging others through ECT methods, we have come to believe that these methods do more than serve as research tools and foster embodied critical thinking. In our experience, they are, in and of themselves, a form of intervention for cultivating what we would like to call “relational imagination.” We are both attracted to the term but need to better understand what we want it to mean. To develop the concept, we decide to schedule a Thinking at the Edge session and use the move of “dipping and dropping.”

Building on his work with Focusing, Eugene Gendlin, together with Mary Hendricks and Kye Nelson, developed Thinking at the Edge (TAE). TAE is designed to support the process of theory construction (Hendricks 2004) and enable a cognition that challenges the very borders of existing concepts and reflective habits by taking into account the felt senses of terms, concepts, frameworks, or other interests (see also Schoeller 2022; for a comparison to micro-phenomenology Høffding, Heimann, and Martiny 2022; Krycka 2006). Just as in Focusing, in TAE it is assumed that generating a novel theory or finding a solution to a new problem depends on harnessing this implicit knowing through the process of unfolding and articulating different strands of meaning. However, TAE additionally supports this process via a series of moves: experiential prompts, designed to help people clarify and develop their thinking and support theory generation through utilising focusing techniques to connect to one's "felt sense" of things and matters (see Schoeller 2022; Gendlin n.d.a.; Hendricks 2004)

One of the prominent moves of TAE is "Dipping and Dropping" (Schoeller 2022). Here the researcher is exploring a particular term or concept through the "felt sense" of it. When this sense has been articulated to a degree that is felt as sufficient by the researcher, they get the task to drop the term carrying it and to feel into the remaining gap until a new term or concept emerges. This process is repeated several times until one has a selection of terms and concepts and an articulation that more fully represents the complexity of the issue or points out remaining gaps or issues. In the following, we share an edited transcript of such a TAE session. This time, the edits did not only comprise shortenings. Rather, in the text below, Kat's and Doro's sessions are merged and include also later reflections from our discussion of the recordings. This feeding of distinct voices into one stream is also symbolic of the ways that our thinking processes have become more and more intertwined and interdependent.

*So, we dip and drop the term "relational imagination"*

*Doro and Kat*

*One thing that comes up is a bodily feeling connected to the question: is this term not actually a tautology? I mean can you imagine without relating to the "other." But actually: yes, it happens all the time that we imagine somebody else's experience on the basis of our own (or worse even: our stereotypes of how "they" are different from "me/us"). For good reasons, there is currently a robust discourse in the academy and also in activist circles around the issue of imagining without reflecting one's social and experiential positionality and intersectionality. We, as white women, indeed CANNOT imagine what it is like to be Black women. However, the categorical statement that we cannot imagine what it is like to be*

*in someone else's shoes does not release us from the responsibility to try, as best as we can, to get closer to understanding someone else's lived reality. And for that we do need imagination. But an imagination that is grounded in the act of radical listening, fully conscious that the imagined is inherently inaccurate, provisional, and incomplete. It's an imagining that is continuously open to revisions and that celebrates the uniqueness and unknowability of another person's experience.*<sup>9</sup>

And here another word comes afloat: We have learned it from artist Jessica Hub introducing a song on Tiny Desk Concerts. It's the word "SOMDER" – pronounced with an association to THUNDER – and signifying the experience of realising that another person has a life just as complex (BUT DIFFERENT) from yours. Which is a THUNDERous experience: It is the experience of listening – and imagining – and listening – and imagining – and suddenly – by further listening – and especially via repeating the word of the other – realising with surprise, shock, wonder, or awe that your imaginings (of the other's experience) were wrong.

Touched by somder we finally see: The concept of relational imagination describes the capacity to imagine with openness, and a strong desire for nuance and depth, aspects of the ultimately irreducible, infinite and unknowable tangled web of relationships that comprise another person's life-world. It can be fostered and deepened through extended periods of radical listening, and it depends on one's vigilant awareness of the limitations of one's own imagination. It can lead to a greater openness to embracing the radical otherness and uniqueness of another person and to experiences of awe and respect for the dignity of life. In the experience of feeling fully alive during a Focusing, TAE or MP session we are again reminded of Lorde who wrote: "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference." (26)

So, where are we now? What are the next steps? In our limited experience, ECT-inspired processes rarely proceed in a logical, straight line nor do they necessarily suggest a concrete next step. They do create urgent affordances though – they lead us to ask new questions, read other books, and let new projects emerge. And, because these questions and projects evolve in spacious listening partnerships and from embodied experience, they have the potential to break the sense of isolation and fragmentation that so often characterise the work of academics. We, for one, find ourselves feeling less disconnected, estranged, or separate from but in relationship with our lived experience and that of others and the questions themselves have become shared questions. If MP and TAE are tools for fostering relational imagination, if working with these methods depends on admitting feelings including the liberating force of eros, and on deeply listening to one's own experience, how can/do/must they change the existing culture in academia? How do we experiment, write, teach, and collaborate from a place where we feel fully alive: in touch

with our embodied experience and in deep relationship and community with others? Does/how does it change our life – the lives of others on a larger scale?

Some of our TECT and MP colleagues have expressed the hope that these methods may hold a key to responding differently to the crises we are facing as a species (TECT website, Petitmengin 2021). We are not clear about the extent of their power yet, but we are keen to explore this possibility on the basis of our experiences so far. Practising deep listening to our and others' experiences has shown us a different way of working and living our lives, one that we vastly prefer over the one that was available to us previously. It feels right. It is more fun. It makes us feel more alive, connected, curious and considerate of adjacent possibilities. It makes us feel responsible. It makes us read, question, learn. It makes us dare to relate, to trust, to doubt, to imagine and to act – differently. This is worth the world to us.

## Notes

- 1 We owe this experiential prompt to landscape architect Ramio Eisenberg, one of the TECT teachers. In his work, Eisenberg has shown that allowing oneself to be informed by the embodied experience of artefacts and landscapes can encourage creative, context-sensitive problem-solving as well as foster critical awareness of the vulnerability of environmental balances (see Eisenberg's chapter in this book).
- 2 The TECT Program introduced us to a variety of different methods all dedicated to harvesting subjective experience in the process of meaning-making such as environmental immersion, and close talking, Focusing, micro-phenomenology, Thinking at the Edge and radical listening, the latter three of which we will pay special attention to in this chapter. While we will sometimes refer to all of these methods as ECT tools, they have existed and do exist independently from the TECT education in their homefields such as qualitative research, philosophy or contemplative praxis ([www.trainingect.com/the-tect-initiative.html](http://www.trainingect.com/the-tect-initiative.html)).
- 3 While working on this article, we learned this is an old idea: Human Geographer Tim Creswell noted that "landscape is an intensely visual idea. In most of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differs from place. Places are very much things to be inside of. Landscape refers to shape – the material topography of a piece of land. . . . We do not live in landscapes – we look at them" (quoted from van Gelder and Westgust 2011, 121) Interestingly, land art, an art form existing exclusively outside of the museum, has been described as an intervention to disrupt habituated ways of relating to landscapes (see Readhead 1989).
- 4 The instruction that guided the participants' revisit of the installation "Life": *direct your attention to your attention to find anything that is interesting to you* was developed within the project group "Experimenting, Experiencing, Reflecting" – a collaboration between the research institution Interacting Minds Center and Artist Studio Olafur Eliasson (see also [www.eer.info/](http://www.eer.info/) as well as <https://experiencing-life.net/>).
- 5 See Heimann 2023, for teacher quotes.
- 6 Micro-phenomenology has the single aim of documenting the intricate nature of one specific past experience – mostly for scientific uses. In general, further reflections on the experience elicited during the interview are considered irrelevant for

- and potentially interfering with the documentation of the target experience and are therefore gently discouraged by the interviewer. See also Petitmengin 2006.
- 7 In Lorde's view, understanding our capacity for joy and fulfilment alerts women to the "disaffection from so much of what we do" (24) and begs us "to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different." (25) Building on Lorde's insight, Adrienne Maree Brown's (2019) more recent work on pleasure activism is inspiring a new generation to claim the erotic as a gateway to social change. Although our struggles as White women are different from those that Black women face, we deeply resonate with and want to elevate the insight that joy and pleasure can become a liberating force, a north star, and a path for activists.
  - 8 In the context of Doro's interest to connect to nature, it is interesting to notice that both Mies and Rose are eco-feminists, concerned about our failure to listen not only to humans but also to the land, the planet we live on with all its different beings.
  - 9 While writing on this article, we became aware of the relevance of Iris Marion Youngs work on Asymmetrical Reciprocity. See Young (1996) Asymmetrical Reciprocity. On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought. Special Issue of Constellations "Feminism and the Public Sphere," 3, 340–363.

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## 7 Refreshing and expanding the meaning of research

### On the use of the TAE process in a micro-phenomenological research project

*Magali Ollagnier-Beldame and  
Véronique Servais*

#### Introduction

In this chapter, we propose an account of the process of applying *Thinking At the Edge* (TAE) in the course of an ongoing micro-phenomenological research project named “Investigating the Experience of Connection to Nature” (ExCoNat). We applied the protocol proposed by Gendlin (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004) while we were in the process of analysing the data of ExCoNat. Overall, the TAE process was deeply involving, and it contributed to our uncovering the values that stand at the heart of research for each of us. It also invited us to a somewhat different analysis of our data. We propose here to give a first account of this process. After providing a short account of our journey and having explained how we applied TAE to our research, we’ll address the issue of what the TAE process did to our research practice: what it did to the ExCoNat research, and also what it did to our research practice in general.

We show that the whole process entails a particular relationship to language and meaning in the making. In particular, a special place is given to “the still unspoken,” *i.e.* that which has not yet been put into words, but which nonetheless constitutes the flesh of the experience – what in micro-phenomenological research is called “pre-reflective meaning” (Petitmengin 2010). This is the case at the level of the micro-phenomenological interviews that were part of ExCoNat, with their focus on the pre-reflexive experience (*i.e.* un-named) of the interviewees, but it is also the case at the level of our experience as researchers using TAE: what this brought to the ExCoNat project, how it nourished and enlivened it, and how it amplified the power of the micro-phenomenological approach that is at the heart of our project. All this leads us to a radical reflection on what research can be, from a critical position of how TAE can transform research practice and researchers themselves.

#### What is the ExCoNat project? A short presentation

ExCoNat is about the perception of the environment as *responsive*, and why it is important to find words to talk about such experiences as the encounter with a forest. According to Bird-David (1999) and Tim Ingold (2017), to

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perceive an environment as responsive is to perceive it as responding to one's feelings, emotions, thoughts, movements, actions, or any internal or bodily change. ExCoNat was created thanks to the collaboration between Véronique Servais, Magali Ollagnier-Beldame, and Pietro Varrasso, Professor of Theater at the Ecole Supérieure d'Acteurs in Liège. The collaboration between the three of us began in 2019, when we decided to bring our expertise together in order to scientifically explore the experience of "connecting" with nature. Our question was: given the severe disconnection – especially within cities but not only – between people and the rest of the living beings in our western cultural tradition (Abram 1996), how do people manage to nonetheless connect with natural beings? On what cognitive, perceptual, sensory, bodily, and imaginary resources do they build their experience? How does this experience unfold? As two of us (Magali and Véronique) are trained in micro-phenomenology, we decided to study these questions with micro-phenomenological interviews about actual encounters with a forest environment.

It is obviously impossible to experimentally provoke an experience of encounter with nature. Indeed, such encounters often occur unexpectedly, surprising even those who experience them (Halloy and Servais 2014). This is why we decided to work with a protocol that would increase the *probability* of connection experiences, without this being presented as an explicit objective to the participants. We devised a protocol based on previous protocols that were developed by Pietro Varrasso as part of his teaching at ESACT. It took the form of a three-hour workshop in the woods, conducted by Pietro and his assistant, Nathaniel Hendrickson. Participants were eight Dramatic Art students and four current or former PhD students in anthropology.

This workshop took place in May 2021 in Belgium. On the morning of 17 May, in the middle of the Belgian countryside, in the pouring rain, the participants were invited to follow Pietro in silence, "together but alone," with the instruction to "take care not to disturb anything." Of course, it is impossible not to disturb anything when walking in the forest, but we wanted to explore the kind of relationship that would be induced by this instruction. Our hypothesis was that the instruction "take care not to disturb anything" would induce a mode of relationship to the environment where attention would be focused on "the effects of my actions on the world around me," which could also be read as "how the environment *responds* to my actions," *i.e.*, a relational and responsive perception. We hypothesised that this would open the potentialities of connection to nature. Furthermore, Pietro also aimed through this type of workshop to help his students move from a language-centred perception of the outside world and to open them up to other logics of perception than discursive ones. The three of us believe that "the ecological crisis is a crisis of perception" (Abram 1996) and that decentring perception from language and refreshing it is critical (see also Hinton 2023). This workshop was thus intended to make more likely experiences of encounter/

connection with nature, which we could then explore in detail through the micro-phenomenology interviews.

The interviews took place between a few hours and two days after the workshop and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. In line with the micro-phenomenological tradition, we invited the participants to go back to “a moment when something happened in relation to Pietro’s instruction not to disturb anything.” The interviews proved to be extremely rich, touching, and interesting. They were transcribed and then processed, and in September 2021, the analysis process started, and the first results began to emerge.

It seemed fundamental to us to remain in empathy with our data. Within micro-phenomenology, the study of subjective experience and the unquestionable status accorded to it are accompanied by a total acceptance – during the interview, within the interviewee’s verbatim – of what may seem paradoxical, surprising, or even incompatible with what the interviewee has already said, with other sources of information about the evoked experience described during the interview, or with the literature on the topic. With micro-phenomenological data, the experience is studied from a first-person point of view, that is what may seem paradoxical at first sight rather highlights the person’s point of view, in its pre-reflective dimension (Petitmengin 2006), meaning that finds its way into her/him, below logic and rationality. The sensitive dimension of the experience is palpable, sometimes in its transmodal (Petitmengin 2007) or synesthetic dimension, often intuitive (Petitmengin 2001), and sometimes even poetic and creative.

As systematised by Claire Petitmengin (Petitmengin, Remilieux, and Valenzuela-Moguillansky 2018), the micro-phenomenological analysis of interviews is a rigorous and long process that aims to extract the dimensions of the description of an experience. The experience analysed is the first-person, embodied account of a lived moment, in its various dimensions. But analysis tends towards abstraction, and there is always a risk that contact with the interviewee’s experience is lost. Indeed, the micro-phenomenological analytical protocol invites the researcher to leave out the “content” of the experience (the “what”) to focus on the process (the “how”). For ExCoNat, we developed an alternative method of analysis, inspired by the “resonance salience” approach of Jean Vion-Dury and Gaëlle Mougín (2020, 2021), which is closer to traditional anthropological methods. We were less interested in describing the cognitive processes, which is the main objective of the micro-phenomenological analysis, and wanted to stay in touch with the content of the experiences: the imagination of childhood, hunting, games, etc. All these elements seemed important to us to understand how our participants related to the living or non-living elements of the forest environment; the saliences-resonances approach allowed us to do so.

Despite this, after several months of conducting the interviews, transcribing them, processing them, and doing the analysis, we each felt a sense of distance from the project, a lesser commitment. This was unfortunate, because in our

view, a micro-phenomenological project requires an intimate and embodied contact with the research data in order to make sense of it. In our case, this is all the more important, because we chose to use “resonance salience” (Vion-Dury and Mougín 2020, 2021) as a method of analysis. Indeed, during its second step, this method requires one to let the data and the saliences identified during the first step of the analysis “resonate” with the scientific knowledge and also the personal experiences of the researchers. A high degree of availability and commitment is therefore needed for the researcher to be able to carry out this analysis effectively.

It was at this point that we saw the potential of applying TAE to our research project, in order to reinvest, renew, and nourish our intimacy with it. Veronique had participated in the TECT summer school in Reykjavik in the summer of 2021 and Magali has an advanced training in focusing (which underpins TAE). Answering the invitation of Donata Schoeller, we decided to apply the different steps of TAE to our project, working as a pair and in ongoing dialogue with each other. The result was surprising and beyond our expectations. Before sharing this process and the results obtained, we should acknowledge that, as we are not native English speakers, writing this account wasn’t always easy. Indeed, we carried out the TAE process in French. We thus faced a double challenge: that of putting pre-reflective meaning into words and *then* translating it into a foreign language, English. There is some risk that the translation, in particular, would lead us to lose the semiotic and poetic nuances that make the TAE process so rich. We’re hoping that these nuances nonetheless come through in our text.

### **Protocol: how did we proceed?**

Firstly, we set up a framework for using TAE together, creatively inventing how to proceed, as we were in two different countries: carrying out the TAE steps on our own, and only meeting online. We arrived at some fundamental principles:

1. We work from our bodily felt sense and our lived experience, which means that we speak only for ourselves.
2. We commit ourselves to practise open, attentive, respectful, non-judgemental, and supportive listening to the other and to ourselves, in accordance with the adage: giving ourselves “freedom to make sense” (Schoeller 2023).
3. We are free to share only what we wish to share.
4. We commit ourselves to share congruently what may be painful for us, when it helps the TAE process, the research project, and our relationship.
5. We commit ourselves to dare to trust the process.
6. We commit ourselves to keep confidential the content we will share and express.

Regarding our way of practising TAE in this project, as this was the first experience of this kind for each of us, we decided to follow the whole process

as described by Gendlin. We worked through the 14 specific steps proposed by Gendlin individually (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004), in three blocks. This process was punctuated by the two of us meeting together and presenting to each other the results of our use of the steps – based on notes we had made as we worked through them – and as we met, we each took time to resonate with what had emerged, working from our current bodily felt sense of what we were listening to. We checked the vitality of our process, ongoing, as we worked together. Indeed, the centre of our process was keeping our relationship with the ExCoNat project alive, in order to remain consistent with the ambition of the ExCoNat project: acknowledging creative ways to give voice to the still unspoken. Keeping faith with this, we started the process from our bodily felt sense of the project at the time of our first meeting – and not the memory of our state when the project started several months earlier, in line with Gendlin’s approach of working with one’s experience *hic et nunc*. This was the starting point, our stage 1, of the whole TAE process, which took place over a month.

Below, we summarise how the process unfolded for each of us, based on key moments illustrated by verbatim excerpts. These verbatim extracts illustrate the TAE process in progress, step by step, for each of us. Typically, one of us expresses her relationship to the project, from her bodily felt sense of following Gendlin’s steps. The other lets what is expressed resonate within her and responds, again from her felt sense. Each TAE step is done by each of us. The whole process allows both an intimate and embodied contact with the project, but also a resonance with the partner’s experience. As we move through the TAE steps together, the process informs us about what really matters to us in the project (some “crux”), and in doing research generally: the process brings out sensitive points and points of convergence or tension between us. Working together in this way has created a positive dynamic that increased self-confidence as well as confidence in the ideas and knowledge that emerged during the process. Below, each of us expresses some of these “cruxes.”

### *Magali*

From the very beginning of the process, during the first group session, the idea of “strata” came to my mind. In fact, when I was in contact with my physical senses from the ExCoNat project, I felt a dome above my head and in my diaphragm. Then a succession of domes in between, with a gradation of colour. There was a very clear sensation and at the same time an image of these strata in the form of domes piled on top of each other. I then let the words come out of this physical sensation: “*In which stratum of the ExCoNat project am I most interested and want to be in?*” This question was the initial impulse for the process with Véronique and stayed with me throughout the three weeks of the TAE process. During the third collective session, the work on strata continued and showed me that this was central

to my relationship with the project. What came out of my felt sense was: *“The joints [between adjacent strata] are assembled, connected, sliding AND dislocating, and clinging together. There are multiple strata in the ExCoNat project, with different qualities and unique communications/circulations.”* Véronique brought a resonance from her own bodily felt sense that emphasised “what slides”: *“What hangs and what slides is like a waterfall. Singular circulations. The important word here for me is singular. Paying attention to each one. These cycles are not anodyne.”* At that point I realised that what was important to me was not so much knowing which stratum I wanted to be in – and choosing one – but recognising the plurality of strata that engaged me in this project, and my need to link them, to let them slide, while respecting their singularity. This was a major breakthrough in my relationship with the project: what’s important are the spaces and relationships that hold the strata together. In the end, it’s the unity that counts, not the separation of the strata.

Another moment, later in the process, came in Session 5 with the facets representing the concrete facts. Following Gendlin’s suggestion, working with these facets led me to several models – and associations amongst models – of my relationship to the project, such as these particularly relevant ones: *“Model 3: True openness is achieved in simplicity and trust; Model 4: There are joints to be created and protected between seemingly incompatible aspects; Model 4-Model 3: There are joints to be allowed between seemingly incompatible things while remaining open in trust. Model 3-Model 4: True openness allows joints between seemingly incompatible things.”* In these models I saw that joints made it possible to overcome apparent paradoxes by holding together seemingly incompatible aspects of the project without choosing and remaining in unity. I then saw that these “joints” between different aspects/meanings of the project needed an openness, a (cognitive) space with specific qualities such as simplicity and trust. This was echoed by Véronique from her felt sense: *“True openness allows us to create joints/links between seemingly incompatible things, without dwelling on logical paradoxes. To really create joints between these things, you need true openness. Otherwise, they remain conceptual links. (. . .) We create in-between spaces, dedicated spaces where things can remain temporarily vague.”* These two selected moments demonstrate the power of using the bodily sense to refresh and reinvigorate one’s relationship to a research project, offering fresh insight into the important aspects of the project and how they fit together.

### *Véronique*

When I ask my bodily senses about the ExCoNat project, the felt sense is a swelling in my chest. A thickness, an extension. The words that come to me are “It’s alive. Joy, exuberance. Cheerful.” I then formulate the following question: *“How do we keep it alive? How can we conduct our study/research in such a way as to keep it alive – in ourselves and in our work, particularly*

*in what we are going to pass on?"* The whole process will ultimately revolve around this question. It will lead to a profound understanding of the writing process and of what links me to my fields of investigation (the respondents in the ExCoNat project and, more generally, animals and nature). At first, the bodily felt sense associated with the word "living" is "*the feeling of circulation, of a nourishing cycle*"; then it gives way to "*something rumbling from the depths – like a volcano.*" What catches my attention then is the property of lava that "holds itself." The meaning I give to this is "*to trust the fact that things stand on their own.*" At the end of Step 5 (Dropping and dipping: "expand what you wanted each word to mean by writing fresh, linguistically unusual sentences"), my question becomes: "*How can we conduct our study/research in such a way as to keep the joy, the important thing, the relationships, flowing through the cycle and trusting the fact that things hold together?*" The most interesting moments come during the search for facets and models, at Steps 6 to 9 of Gendlin's TAE scaffold. One of the facets is about living writing, which seems to me like a relationship that you take up again, with someone you meet from time to time along the way. "*Writing in a mosaic, in small leaps, keeps something open.*" "*On the other hand, writing that owes nothing or doesn't respond to someone is meaningless, dead, closed.*" The overall model that emerges is that of the call. "*Staying alive means responding to this call, which is a call to be recognized and treated well.*" Magali resonates with her own bodily felt sense: "*To be in touch with what is alive, in me and around me. It can be an animal, a photo, a relationship that is being established. Staying in this contact by accepting not controlling. To hear its call, the call of the living, to hear this 'call to be considered' in dignity.*" At the end of Step 9 ("Write freely" after having searched for emerging models and patterns), I write the following paragraph: "*Living beings manifest themselves to us and call us to a path of writing that is like a friendship, a relationship that grows out of openness, risk, and the fear of making mistakes. To remain open is to remain vulnerable; intellectualism is a convenient protection, but it breeds frustration. To respond is to engage in a relationship.*" At this point, I understand that the question of "how to respond to the call" is not just a theoretical question. It's a practical question, the answer to which lies partly in how I articulate my thoughts and emotions. "*Staying alive also means staying in debt (with the fieldwork), in a cycle of giving and receiving.*" Finally, "*a responding writing draws a path, and to draw a path is to hold and be held. This is how writing responds. To hold and be held implies accepting deviating from the path, accepting being disturbed (by the actors' power to act) and remaining vulnerable.*"

In what follows, we present what we consider to be the main results of this work of deep listening (to oneself and to the other), knowing that the examples used are a selection and that other extracts could have been chosen. This selection was difficult because the material is very rich. We have selected significant extracts in relation to the questions that guided us.

## **Results. What did we learn?**

What we learned emerged gradually, becoming more refined and deeper as the TAE process unfolded. Over time, some themes have become stronger, and others have disappeared. In order to account for the processual dimension of TAE, we have chosen to divide the presentation into three parts:

1. The effects of the use of TAE on the way we analyse our data.
2. The effects on our relationship to the project and to research in general.
3. The amplification of the properties of the micro-phenomenological interview arising from the use of TAE.

Let's make it clear that these three points were not explicitly mentioned as such during the TAE process. We didn't decide in advance to document these three points. We just wanted to know what TAE would tell us about our research. It was only when we came back to the material, after the process was over, that we discovered that it could be interpreted as telling us something about these three issues. Finally, and before presenting the results, we feel it is important to recall that during our first meeting, from our bodily felt sense, the following questions emerged:

*For Véronique: "How do we conduct our study/research in such a way as to keep it alive – in ourselves and in our work, particularly in what we are going to pass on?"*

*For Magali: "Within the ExCoNat project, which stratum am I most interested in and want to be in?"*

As we said before, these questions were the starting point and gave the impetus to the whole process presented in this chapter.

### *1. TAE and data analysis*

The practice of TAE opened a reflection that proved to be useful in guiding the analysis of the ExCoNat project data. Firstly, the need to analyse our data with a great deal of openness arises from the outset. For example, the notions of strata and porosity/connection between them and furthermore of movement/circulation/joints between these strata testify to this need for openness. This is the case during our meeting 3:

*"There are several strata in the ExCoNat project, with different qualities and singular communications/circulations"* (MOB, TAE step 3);

*"About the word 'living': A volcano that brings very deep things to the surface. Another simple word would be 'circulating' – another possible word is 'lava', a living thing that holds its pieces together"* (VS, step 3);



*“How do we conduct our study in such a way as to keep the joy, what matters, the relationships, circulating in the cycle and trusting in the fact that things hold on by themselves?”* (VS, step 5);

*“In this project I need to keep the relationships, the joy, the circulation. To stay connected with other people. To stay alive and for the collective to stay alive. Stay confident, everything is already there”* (MOB, resonance with VS step 5).

These extracts testify to a need to respect the articulations and connections in our analyses, *i.e.* not to break these links, sometimes between different strata, that we have in our data. They also reflect an understanding that familiar logics are not necessarily the best guide to identifying meaningful connections/articulations within our data. It also commits us to deploying a more intuitive analysis, not focusing on the need for things usually categorised as the same (or of the same kind) to be connected, and perhaps instead directing our attention to see articulations, relations, between things of ordinarily regarded as quite different. Secondly, in these verbatim extracts, the notion of unity manifests itself, inviting us to notice, and then to respect, the coherence that exists in what we study and the relationships between the parts. If we remain confident in the fact that things hold together, we gain freedom in the way we do our analyses, we do not have to put the coherence in ourselves, and we do not have to absolutely look for it. Knowing also that things of a different nature have (partial) interconnections, and that this is solid and alive, we can therefore remain open to inconsistencies and accept not understanding everything. To conduct our analyses in this way, we can seek to “read” our interviews “from the heart,” for a little while putting aside the intellect (Vion-Dury and Mougin 2020, 2021) and attempting to resonate rather than reason with or from the data. Thirdly, the theme of openness became stronger in our meetings, becoming very prominent. One of the main ideas is that the joints between things that are incompatible can only be found in a true openness, in the openness of the heart. Only this openness creates a space where these things can truly co-exist and be interconnected with each other. Living is closely linked to this openness, as is joy. This invites us to widen our attention in the analysis of data, moving from an intention to grasp the data to an intention to be receptive to what the data have to tell us. This posture of openness means being prepared to identify things in our data that are unexpected, even unpleasant, or that challenge our initial ideas.

To give an example of the difference in data processing with and without TAE, we take the case of one of the participants in the ExCoNat study, whom we will call Tihamer. Tihamer’s experience was organised into five moments. In the first moment, Tihamer worries about the harm he is doing to the “baby trees” and feels rejected by them. This gives way to a moment of mutual respect and postural adjustment. Then the guilt returns but is quickly followed by relief and sensory openness:

*“And it was as if my breathing was better, as if a pipe had been unclogged. I started to smell the environment . . . then the sounds, the rain, and then the visual and the feeling of moisture on the skin.”*

This is followed by a moment of acceptance of his fragility:

I really needed to kneel on the ground, it wasn't a decision, it was because, maybe, somehow it was as if my fragility exploded . . . as if there was someone who understood my fragility, and so it was out of fragility that I let myself fall to my knees . . . it was as if nature was telling me: look, I'm offering you this.

A new space-time opens up:

I was completely lost in my memories, I felt protected, I could listen to the noises, feel the brightness, but still feel supported, it was like a shelter.

This interview could be analysed in many ways. A classic micro-phenomenology analysis would attempt to identify the dimensions of the experience (Petitmengin, Remilieux, and Valenzuela-Moguillansky 2018). A socio-anthropological approach may want to identify the main themes addressed by the interviewee or make a list of what themes are common to the 12 interviews. It might also be interesting in grouping parts of the experience into categories ("empathy," "ecological self," "memory," etc.) and consider that a description of the experience of "connection" to nature is there. But what all these approaches have in common is that they impose an external, classificatory logic on experiences that are something quite different. These methods bring together what is apparently similar, assuming that similar realities can be found when the same term is used. The more intuitive and embodied approach we have attempted could be represented by the drawing given below. The drawing (Figure 7.1) does not claim to be a representation of the experience. It is the result of our joint reflections and our attempts to enter the dynamics of Tihamer's experience and to read it "from our heart." It has enabled us to feel and see that the experience is organised like a breath between volition and undergoing, between focused and diffuse attention. The drawing also suggests the role played by sensory openness in the occurrence of a "suspended moment," the opening up of a new space-time, within which memories flow. The two analyses have nothing in common. In one case, the theme of vulnerability and childhood is identified; in the other, we acknowledge the creation of a new space-time, a protected space for memories. The two analyses also induce different causal links. In the first case, assuming that we find the theme of nostalgia and childhood memories in most of the interviews (which is the case), we might tend to think that there is a causal relationship between connexion to nature and childhood, a form of direct induction. But our approach opens up the details of the encounter, with its antagonisms and contradictions, as evoked in particular by the mixture of dark and light grey. The drawing suggests that guilt and trust are not opposites but complementary, that antagonism is necessary

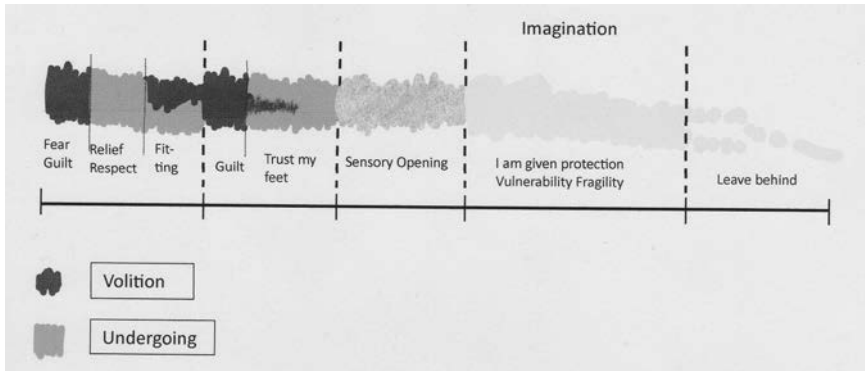


Figure 7.1 A drawing showing the dynamics of Tihamer's experience

for contact, and so on. There is no direct and causal relationship between being in a forest and remembering one's childhood. It is much more complex. Familiar (or Aristotelian) logics and classification are not necessarily our best allies when it comes to analysing these experiences and may lead to false conclusions. Drawing, on the contrary, offers an opportunity to think with the feeling of what happens and to make place for what has not been explicitly told.

## 2. TAE and ExCoNat and, more broadly, research

The use of TAE has had effects on our relationship with the project, beyond renewing and strengthening collaboration, and beyond refreshing our relationship with the data. Firstly, in what is described within the project, things that our minds consider incompatible are nevertheless articulated with each other. This tells us that it may be particularly interesting in our project – but also in research in general – to pay attention to these *a priori* impossible moments and to their articulations. But this can only be done if we manage to maintain this opening of the heart in trust. This is what we contact, from our bodily felt sense, during meeting 7:

*“In ExCoNat, and more broadly in research, my desire is to be at the articulation between strata. These articulations are precious and it is what allows life to be fertile. It is our common fund as living beings.”* (MOB, step 14);

*“In our research, these precious articulations of incompatible things are to be respected; we must take care of them rather than aim to eradicate them. Not only to take care of them but to identify them, to nourish them, to make room for them. Only then can there be trust, that openness in trust which is also in the common fund of life.”*

(VS, resonance with MOB step 12)

Secondly, the theme of response and accountability commits us to considering research as a response to a call (from the field, from the living), which again calls for openness and vulnerability. We are asking ourselves what the conditions are for being available to hear this call and respond to it, that is the *raison d'être* of research: what does research respond to? For whom are we doing research? This is expressed in these verbatim extracts:

*“To maintain a relationship is to hold and be held, which makes writing accountable and responsive”* (VS, step 11);

*“A responsive writing is one that is capable of producing a new sensitivity and of remaining open, of deviating from the path, in order to trace a path that holds on to the living beings who make it salient, a writing which is held by them.”*  
(VS, step 12)

Thirdly, we have the vulnerability and the acceptance of being disturbed, of deviating from one's path – as an investigator in this study – which has manifested itself. One could say, in the end: to become the “fruit” of the investigation oneself. This was evident in meeting 5:

*“How to respond to the call of the field, how to hear it? The question is not theoretical. It's a practical question, the answer to which lies partly in how to articulate one's thoughts and emotions (. . .) You have to work with what you are and not just with what you are as a researcher”* (VS, stage 9);

*“I need to work – in ExCoNat but not only there – with who I am entirely, sincerely, with my emotions and everything that sets me in motion. That's how I can answer the call, by being available, fragile, alive. It is very concrete. In this way, I am part of the great cycle of giving and receiving”*  
(MOB, resonance with VS step 9).

This renews our relationship to the project, and more broadly to research, because there is the idea that in this way we can produce new sensibilities, that is, open up paths for other researchers, but also perhaps contribute to a cultural change in sensibilities in the academic world. This is also illustrated by these excerpts from meeting 7:

*“In the case of ExCoNat, this would mean that our next step is a resonance step with the actors, the people we interviewed, and Pietro. It could be a collective work with them, based on the salient points we have discovered and which we would share with them. Let them have a say in our research and in the developments it will take”* (VS, step 14);

*“Finally, what matters most is to know for whom we are doing all this, the research and the writing. Well, it's to do it in dialogue, in a living relationship.”*

(MOB, resonance with VS step 14)

Our posture as researchers is thus questioned here, as well as the way we look at our data and analyse our results: taking care of incompatible things in ourselves and in the data, which are probably related. At the end of meeting 7, we recognise that this is where the fertility of scientific work lies, as well as the need for us to be researchers with all that makes us who we are (each of us is at the same time a scientist, a teacher, a decision-maker, but also a mother, a friend, etc.), a realisation connected with the notion of strata that we presented earlier in this text.

### 3. TAE and micro-phenomenological interviews

Certain properties of the micro-phenomenological interview have been amplified by the use of TAE. Firstly, the evidence that in lived experience, seemingly incompatible facets of experience, even paradoxes (from conventional logical points of view), can co-occur from a first-person perspective. For example, in meeting 5, “*True openness is about trusting in the life that animates everything. It allows for the creation of articulations between seemingly incompatible things, such as joy and suffering*” (MOB, step 9) and “*Articulating incompatible things is done in openness and trust. It takes this moment of creativity for the ends to hang together. Articulations are not ‘total’ but partial, provisional, they are the paths we create, explorations, possible narratives, and this gives joy*” (VS, resonance with MOB step 9) illustrate this property of lived experience that micro-phenomenology frequently reveals in the interviews: the pre-reflective part of lived experience integrates apparently incompatible aspects, beyond the concept of paradox. Secondly, access to the pre-reflective dimension of lived experience is supported by the passage through bodily sensations that TAE allows. The path through this bodily dimension often provokes surprise in micro-phenomenological interviews, which this extract from meeting 7 points to: “*The precious articulations between apparently incompatible things are the life that animates everything. The impression that this is it, yes, this is exactly it! Life pulsates there, in the articulations between incompatible things. They are only incompatible for our logical mind. It gives me great pleasure to discover this*” (VS, resonance to MOB step 10). More broadly, TAE increases the researchers’ sensitivity to their bodily sensations in this way, via deepening their level of experiencing (Klein et al. 1970). The interviewee being in a micro-phenomenological evocation state is a reliable indicator that he or she is in the process of creating fresh meaning. Finally, we have observed that TAE potentiates the transmodal dimension of experience, that is its quality of manifesting itself in a unified way beyond separate sensory modalities, access to this dimension being one of the strengths of micro-phenomenological interviews. This is shown in the excerpts above evoking unity and coherence as well as the beauty pointed to in this excerpt from meeting 3:

*“There are several strata in the ExCoNat project, with different qualities and movements in the beauty of the living, in the simplicity of openness, a joyful and singular dance”*

(MOB, step 5).

## Discussion

We would now like to broaden the discussion to the following question: what does it mean for the research process to make room for embodied thoughts?

The first element of response concerns the possibility of giving voice to something that has not yet been said, something that is still unspoken. Could a process such as TAE enable us, in the interpretation and analysis of our interviews, not to be content with repeating or reproducing what we have already read, heard, and understood in the scientific literature? In other words, could it help us to frame new questions or think differently? We think that the answer is yes, for several reasons.

In our ExCoNat project, there are three levels of attentional disposition which can give voice to the still unspoken:

1. in the experiences being studied, and explored with the micro-phenomenological interviews, Pietro's instruction to "take care not to disturb" allows for particular attention to what is mostly unnoticed;
2. within the interviews, the guidance consists in accompanying the interviewee to help them be in contact with the pre-reflective dimension of her/his past experience which, without particular guidance, remains unspoken; and
3. within the use of the TAE, we listened to our own "inner unspoken," via the bodily felt sense.

These three registers intertwine, weave together, and constitute the complex fabric (in the etymological sense of *complexus*: which is woven together) of our research. We also believe that there is a relation between this fabric and our observation that it is sometimes difficult to evoke what is sensed and felt in academic research. Indeed, our experience with the TAE shows that these dimensions *can* be evoked in a collective academic work. This strengthens the project, and, we believe, improves its scientific quality – because it allows the researchers to stay closer to the experience itself and to find words to articulate what has not, until now, been articulated. To do so, he/she needs to be connected to his/her own body, as the subjects were connected to their embodied and situated knowledge when they experienced the forest. Language cannot faithfully describe the experience if it is disembodied. As Donata Schoeller has said (personal communication), "TAE is a way to sensitize the researcher for the sensitive material of the Microphenomenology."

Using TAE led us into a radical form of reflexivity that is deeply connected to the ability to say the still unspoken. It is radical because it is not only a social or intellectual, or even emotional, reflexivity (which is practised in sociology and anthropology), it is also the recognition that research is done by real people who are concerned and touched by what they are doing. Doing the TAE process uncovered our deep motivations for research and helped us to better understand why it matters to us (and what matters to us in the ExCoNat

project in particular), why we are doing it and what we expect – or hope from it. We realised and acknowledged that our research responds to a concern about living things in a society that sees them mainly as a resource. The research also responds to a hope, that of revealing the ways by which people still manage to connect with living things, and of bringing these results to life in scientific publications and other research products that are accessible to all. It also brings – underlines – the realisation that science isn't an activity isolated from society and that it has effects on society. Finding words to express still unspoken ways of connecting the self to the outside world is effective outside of academic work itself. The TAE process made it clear that research is not just an academic matter for us.

During the process, the issue of accountability emerged regularly. To whom are we accountable as researchers? We feel that we are accountable to the people we interviewed in the field and to the forest that was the site of our investigation, as well as to the relationships and thinking that the interviewees told us about. Research is not only about taking data and doing what we want with it, relating it to theories or other purely scholarly works. This would equate to being only accountable to ourselves (the researchers). And that would be, precisely, not being accountable. In fact, the TAE process led to a concrete proposal to go back to the actors and establish a dialogue with them around the research. This wish had already been expressed and the possibility of this meeting had already been discussed before the TAE was undertaken. However, the TAE work gave it a new importance and significance. It was no longer just a matter of reporting our results, but of offering the people concerned the opportunity to influence the course of the research and the analysis of the interviews. This meeting took place in September 2022. Overall, it was disappointing. We did not manage to interest the actors in our research; probably we did not anticipate well enough what would have interested them (students in dramatic arts and doctoral students in anthropology) in our research. But the reflection remains open.

In the end, are we going to practise a radically different kind of research from now on, and what would be different? Of course, it is difficult to answer that question, even if Magali told Veronique that she would no longer be able to practise research otherwise. Going back to ExCoNat, we have new guidelines for the analysis of the interviews now, and we are doing it from a different position. It will certainly refashion our results and the final publication. But how different will it be from classical academic research? Well, perhaps not so much, after all. Or perhaps the difference isn't where one would expect it? Isn't it the case that being open, attentive to contradiction, and attentive to encounters between things that seem quite different, and feeling accountable and bound by the field, are the basics of science? Aren't we going back to the root of what research should be? For us, the answer is yes:

*“All this is extremely exciting for me. Part of the exercise was done with a lot of emotion. I have the impression that I am touching the heart of things that have been around me for a very long time. How to respond to the call,*

*how to hear it? The question is not theoretical. It's a practical question whose answer lies partly in how to articulate one's thoughts and emotions"* (Step 9 VS).

*"I had a lot of fun doing this process, I felt like pieces of the puzzle fitting together. A solid matter of course. A game"* (Step 9 MOB).

Finally, one last thing is unknown to us: the style that our writing will take. Does embodied thinking require a different kind of writing, maybe less analytical, more analogical? Should we resort to artistic forms of expression? Gendlin has made it clear that language is not the enemy of embodied thinking. The TAE process is an illustration of it. But it produces a different kind of language. More concrete, vivid, direct. In any case, we'll seek to give the most accurate account possible of what our interviewees have told us, leaving room for the singularity of their voices. But it won't necessarily be artistic or completely different writing. There will be a flavour: something different and recognisable for people who are ready to read from their own body sense.

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## Part III

# Micro-phenomenology and meditation

The room is full. Graduates, PhD students, professors, researchers. Everyone quiet. You would hear a needle fall. Then, for a few seconds only, there is a noise of a rattle. Everyone disperses in pairs with one task: to describe the experience of hearing it. You might think, what is there to talk about? You might wonder, do they not have better things to do? You might hardly believe that 40 minutes is too short for such task. Would you believe that most of them honestly grope for words to do justice to the experience?

In the humanities, social, and natural sciences, we usually learn how to discuss and talk about theories of experience, and about findings gained by observing other people's experience. Scholars usually tread new ground when they explore the intricacy of their own experience, ordinary or extraordinary, and take up different methodological challenges when engaging more precisely with the territory of their experiential cosmos. The kind of challenge such close exploration involves has not even been recognised in the long stretches of disembodied traditions' understandings of the mind and human experience. Turning to *how* one actually experiences something, in detail, even the most unspectacular little thing, like the noise of a rattle, changes many implications in the bigger picture, like how we understand the mind or the body, conduct research, teach, or learn.

In the exercise with the rattle, someone smiles without knowing why. Given time, he realises how memories from early childhood function in the smile, how the smile is inseparable from a slight movement within the body, a touch of relaxation. How to describe the relaxation? A loosening in the stomach? No, rather a soft widening in the chest. How to describe experiencing soft widening? It seems connected with a tingling – he could even feel it in his arms. But now he notices that an expectation played a role in his hearing too. He thought it would be a bell, and the rattling came into that expectation. There was a moment of confusion. How was that? And what was it like to expect a bell-sound? And so on.

So much is involved in every perception, in every single experience, a diachronic story and synchronic happening, unbelievably different from person to person. The pioneers of the second generation of a phenomenological, enactive, meditative, and pragmatist turn that write in this section show how

new challenges and opportunities are posed. They demonstrate what it means to not pretend to subtract oneself from the picture of how research happens. The red thread in this section might be the acknowledgment of the multifaceted importance of an attentive, meditative approach. New opportunities for a more reflective, more engaged, more ethical research, and new opportunities for a more balanced, sustainable, and responsible education, meet in the following section. Petitmengin shows how disciplined, fine-grained exploration of lived experience creates new possibilities for cognitive science and provokes shifts in philosophical intuitions. Strle and Kordeš explore how we creatively contribute to the what and how of our experience and how appreciating this broadens our responsibility towards ourselves and each other. Sandbothe, Albrecht, and Corrinth explore how kinds of mindfulness training can support a transition from an educational culture that focuses just on cognitive skills to one that also trains in emotional skills and skills of committing.

# 8 Micro-phenomenology as coming into contact with experience

Subtilisation, surprises, and liberation

*Claire Petitmengin*

*Claire Petitmengin interviewed by Donata Schoeller and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir in May 2023.*

## What is the main purpose of micro-phenomenology?

The purpose was initially, and still is, to become aware of experience, lived experience, and to describe it. Micro-phenomenology is based on an interview technique intended to become aware of the part of experience that is unrecognised.<sup>1</sup> Indeed as soon as we tried to describe lived experience, it became apparent that a large part of it is not recognised, is pre-reflective, unnoticed. The interview is an adaptation to research of the “Entretien d’explicitation” (explicitation interview), an interview method created by Pierre Vermersch to help experts describe their know-how.<sup>2</sup> A large part of their know-how is implicit, and not only implicit, but unrecognised. Guidance is needed to become aware of it and describe it. When I used the method, I was very surprised by the extent to which lived experience is unrecognised.

How can we become aware of this unrecognised part and describe it?

The principle of the micro-phenomenological interview is to describe a singular, concrete experience. It does not make sense to investigate experience “in general.” The precondition for becoming aware of its unrecognised part is investigating a singular, concrete experience.

Exploring a singular experience makes it possible to become aware of what we do, instead of describing what we *think* we do. In order to abandon pre-conceptions about experience – to achieve an *épochè* – we explore one experience, instead of exploring what we think about experience in general.

Micro-phenomenology is thus a method to become aware of experience through exploring singular experiences. Yet, the focus on singular experience does not mean that the method is limited to investigating only singular instances of experience. Micro-phenomenology also includes a method for analysing interviews that enables us to detect generic structures.<sup>3</sup> This is very important. When we analyse a corpus of experiences gained through many interviews, we inquire if they have structural commonalities. We proceed progressively, analysing one interview, and then another. The other can confirm what we found in the

first one, or challenge it, or enrich it. This is core to micro-phenomenology as a research method. As surprising as the unrecognised feature of experience was the fact that every time we analysed descriptions, some commonalities emerged, some generic structures.

To explain that I will have to say many things at the same time!

These findings are related to the unrecognised part of experience. It seems that the unrecognised part of experience is what we call the “how” of experience: how we experience something. We usually focus on the “what,” the content of an experience. For instance: “Oh, this sound is a bird’s song,” or “This shape is a tree,” these are contents. In the same way, the experience of having an idea is almost always described in terms of the content of the idea. We are not aware of the experience involved in recognising this as a tree, a bird, or an idea. Shifting to the “how,” we inquire for instance: what is my way of paying attention to the bird song, how did I come up with an idea, how do I experience the content I know, how did it emerge? Can I describe *how* am I experiencing this, in addition to describing *what* I am experiencing? How do I experience an idea, beyond its linguistic description, its content described verbally? Where is its meaning, is it in the words?

The structures that we identify in micro-phenomenology are “how-structures.” They are the structures of the unrecognised part. Of course we could identify regularities in the “what,” “what-structures,” yet that is more of interest for qualitative methods of content analysis and not for micro-phenomenology. The structures we find emerge from the analysis of the “how” of experience.

Another thing I would like to add came to me as a third surprise.

By doing micro-phenomenology, and exploring singular experiences, a dimension of experience is highlighted where the structures we consider as fundamental to experience vanish. We come to understand that seemingly fundamental structures, like separations between mind and body, inner and outer spaces, and between the different sensory modalities, are pre-conceptions we have of experience. In the findings of micro-phenomenology, these three structures are challenged. Their status weakens dramatically when we come into contact with experience: we don’t find them if we attend to the “how” dimension.<sup>4</sup>

The phenomenological *Epochè* – understood as a light *epochè*, is a dropping, bracketing of our pre-conceptions about experience. But there is also a radical understanding of the *epochè*, as bracketing our naïve belief in an objective world independent of us. The belief that there is a reality external to us, independent of us, is a very strong preconception. In Husserl’s phenomenology, this radical *epochè* is the first step of phenomenological exploration. In micro-phenomenology, this is not the starting point, this is a result of the findings, so it could rather be considered as the ending point.

For Husserl, as far as I understand, *epochè* is a bracketing, a suspension. In micro-phenomenology it is a realisation, that usually happens progressively, it is a result. So I do not think that *epochè* is still the right word for that process.

Husserl says we have to bracket preconceptions, especially the one of a reality external to and independent of us. Yet, he does not describe how to! As a specialist in Husserl's phenomenology, Natalie Depraz observed many times that she was not able to find in his texts any precise description of how to enact an *epochè*. And she wrote several papers on the question of how we can actually do an *epochè*.<sup>5</sup>

In micro-phenomenology, we try to “bracket” preconceptions during the interview: we help the person to come back from what we call the “satellite dimensions” of an experience to experience itself. A satellite dimension is an explanation or interpretation of the experience. For example, each time the interviewee refers to a generic experience, which does not exist as such, concretely, we help her or him to come back to the singular experience being described, to enact an *epochè* in the light sense of the term.

However, the most fundamental process happens progressively in the course of the interview. While coming more and more in contact with experience, the aforementioned separations we think are there – between body and mind, between inner and outer, and between sensory modalities – reduce, weaken, and vanish. And as I said earlier, the suspension of the most fundamental kind of preconception, that of the existence of an external world, is not done initially, by an act that we do not know how to perform. However, it is lived, it is achieved experientially during the interview process. The interviewee comes to realise that this separation does not exist. It vanishes. It is not suspended, nor is it a conceptual finding. It is done, enacted, and realised.

At the same time, experience “subtilises.” The very structure of the experience is subtle. This should not be misunderstood as a gross experience transforming into a subtle one. The subtleness was there, but it was invisible. Experience subtilises by becoming aware.

### **What is the relevance of micro-phenomenology for a transformed way of thinking?**

This, I think, is the fourth surprise. The very possibility of exploring lived experience through the micro-phenomenological interview and analysis has implications on the epistemological and the ontological levels.<sup>6</sup>

Let me first address the epistemological level: the fact that we can detect experiential structures makes this kind of first-person research, micro-phenomenological research, reproducible. Therefore, findings and conclusions can be falsified or confirmed. This falsifiability is the very criteria of scientific research, if we follow Popper. A scientific result is not validated by its correspondence “to reality”; conclusions need to be *falsifiable* to have standing. If a result can be reproduced, disciplined research is possible. In first-person research, the identification of structures makes it possible to verify or correct them by collecting further interviews, analysing them and verifying if one can find the same structure.<sup>7</sup> For instance, we worked on the auditory

experience with a little team, and we discovered that the auditory experience has a threefold structure according to different types of attentional disposition.<sup>8</sup> This generic structure found in auditory experience could be transposed to visual experience and tactile experience. It seems to be a very strong structure. Another team could now do what we did: elicit fine-grained descriptions of auditory experiences, analyse them, and see whether they in fact find the same structure, testing the genericity of this structure. Experimental sciences, natural scientists, do not proceed differently.

This seems to be one of the main differences from many uses of qualitative research methods. Frequently they focus on the content of experience, not on the “how,” or at much coarser resolution which does not allow the identification of experiential structures. Focusing on the content makes the reproduction of a result difficult.

The main criticism micro-phenomenology has needed to face is that it is introspection<sup>9</sup> and you cannot reproduce its results. It is certainly true that each experience is singular, and you cannot reproduce singular experiences. However, the fact that an experience is singular does not prevent us from identifying generic experiential structures, and these structures can be verified through a process of analysis and comparison. The content is singular, from one experience to another. But the fact that we can identify structures, the fact that we can reproduce research that can lead to identifying structures demonstrates that first-person research is feasible by scientific standards.

*And how is micro-phenomenology transformative for philosophical thinking?*

Then we touch on the ontological implications of micro-phenomenology. I consider them to be the most significant because they have the most important social consequences. I could try to summarise the idea like this: the very process of becoming aware of experience is a process of subtilisation of experience which results in a new ontology.<sup>10</sup>

Usually, the absorption of our attention into the content or object of experience, the “what,” creates a tension which conceals the “how,” how we experience. At the same time, this tension towards the object creates and sustains a separation between the object there and me here. In the course of the micro-phenomenological interview, this tension is released. In order to become aware of the “how,” we have to release this tension. The whole interview consists in doing that. As a result, not only do we become aware of elements of experience that were concealed by the tension towards objects, but at the same time the separation between inner and outer space, subject and object, which was created by this tension, weakens and subtilises. The process of becoming aware and the process of subtilisation are concomitant. The process of becoming aware does not mean to re-direct attention from a layer of solid objects separated from a solid subject toward a more subtle, felt-sensing level. But the very gesture of releasing the tension makes this solid world more

subtle. It is not that we have a solid world of objects and a subtle world of felt senses. Rather the very process of becoming aware is a process of subtilisation which makes felt senses – felt meanings – appear.

We do not have a word to describe this process. I do not reorient my attention from outside to inside; I do not re-orient my attention. I tried to describe this in a paper.<sup>11</sup> In the re-orientation there are two subtle micro-acts: releasing and re-directing. But it is not that I first need to release my grasp of an object outside, and then re-direct to inside. We just release our tension to the object, and this release makes something appear, makes something else appear. You need not re-orient a focused attention. You just release the grasp or tension, for example on the bird song, and if you do that, something else emerges. You do not need to search, to focus on, you just need to release, because the subtle felt sense level is concealed by the tension.

This also implies a new understanding of intentionality, the tension is in the intentionality. These findings challenge phenomenological concepts of intentionality. Intentionality is a kind of grasping. If you stop grasping, the tension between the subject and object releases.

The subtilisation that happens while releasing the tension is most frequently described as liberation. It is experienced as a realisation: we do not have to sustain the world, neither do we have to sustain the world's solidity, nor our own.

I like to quote a description provided by Pauline – it was one of the most striking interviews I did. In this interview she describes the moment when she became aware of what it is to see, by looking at the flowers in her garden:

Suddenly I felt what it is actually to see. To see isn't casting your gaze towards something, projecting it, holding it out, but really it's letting the thing imprint itself in you. You are completely passive, and you let the color, the landscape, come to you. You aren't going to look for it, you welcome it. You're there and you receive it. And you have the impression that the color or the landscape imprints, imprints itself inside you.<sup>12</sup>

It is very moving to remember this interview. Pauline had lost her son in an accident. This gesture of loosening was a shift in her mourning. By letting herself be impregnated by the yellow colour of the flowers of her garden, she stopped fighting the pain. She began to recover at that very moment. She recognised the tension towards objects as a painful gesture that we constantly do. Yet, in some moments when we do not have to defend ourselves – and this happens more easily in nature – we can just relax.

Let me add something about the methodological part. In micro-phenomenology one of the devices to trigger the releasing of attention towards objects, and to trigger awareness, is evocation. Initially I had not realised the power of evocation – I only realised its power recently. In the trainings I see that when coming back from an interview, people smile, even if the experience explored was not so nice. When you are evoking an experience,



you are not tensed toward a goal. When you are *doing* an action, you are tensing towards an object that needs to be recognised or an objective that needs to be accomplished. In exploring in evocation a past experience, the goal has already been reached in the initial experience, the object has already been recognised. So the tension is released in the evocation process, which is liberating by itself. Another quote that I like is by the French philosopher Gurdorf, who studied memory in the middle of the 20th century and was an inspiration for Vermersch. Evocation, he said, “gives experience a whole new value of enchantment and liberation.”<sup>13</sup> The enchantment and liberation were not always there. They were not always there in the initial experience. In evoking, the experience gains some kind of lightness or transparency, because tension is released.

*In that sense, does microphenomenology have a therapeutic effect?*

Completely. This is also a surprise for me. I think that this process of becoming aware is not philosophical in the sense that you manipulate concepts about the relationship to the world. Rather, you realise the very structure of your relationship to the world. It is a lived experience; it is not a conceptual manipulation.<sup>14</sup> You come into contact with your experience. There is a process that we can do, that we can follow to become more aware of our lived experience. It is completely different from manipulating concepts, completely different! You become more and more aware, and by becoming aware, you experience something “therapeutic.” You release the tension, the tension that solidifies the world, that cuts you off from experience. This is the liberation, the vanishing of separation that is otherwise habitually maintained.

This approach is, philosophically, neither materialist nor idealist. It does not imply giving a primacy to subjective experience over objective reality. Because this very distinction just vanishes. Micro-phenomenology is an approach that frees us from this distinction.

So it has an unusual kind of philosophical implication as it is not “yet another position.” You come there not by positioning, or by arguments or conceptualisation. You come there through another approach.

Even though the felt sense dimension plays an important role, in micro-phenomenology one does not focus exclusively on felt sense. Certainly, the felt sense is a main domain. However, through the micro-phenomenological interview we can become aware of many different kinds of experiences, of experiences of ideation, of emotion, of visual and auditory experiences. Yet, the felt sense has huge importance. But we do not use felt sensing for therapeutic purposes as in Focusing-Oriented Therapy, or to foster ideation, as in Thinking at the Edge. We do not use the felt sense for reaching a goal. Accessing the felt sense by evocation is therapeutic, but we do not have a technique to use it or transform it. In that way it is different from and complementary to Focusing.

*You indicate in your paper “Anchoring in lived experience as an act of resistance,”<sup>15</sup> that the disconnection to inner lived experience is related to the environmental crisis we have today. Can you please elaborate a little on that?*

The disconnection from experience makes us not recognise, and not be in contact with the felt dimension, where inner and outer space are not separated anymore, or not so much. This has two consequences. Firstly, outside space, our environment, is perceived as an objective, indifferent, inert space, filled with objects, things intended to be possessed and exploited. The rigid separation we create instant after instant between inner and outer space has the effect of disanimating the world. This seems to be the very origin of consumption: to consider everything as objects, instead of being in that dimension where the separation of inner and outer is much more permeable.

Secondly, and even more importantly – we are cut off from this felt experience, the dimension of meaning, as Focusers can explain. This disconnection is very painful. It is exhausting, to be cut off from this dimension. And the weaker we become, the more we try to fill the absence of meaning by consuming, instead of being in contact with this liberating and satisfying dimension and dwelling in it. We need, we seek, satisfaction through consumption, we need more distraction. In fact, every domain is approached as consumption. Education is approached as a filling in, more and more, with many contents, and learning by heart, instead of as a coming into contact with the felt meaning of all that knowledge. This is very painful. The idea of releasing by coming into contact could be developed in medicine, also in architecture. Yet, this dimension is completely ignored, and there is not even a word for it. An idea I found in ecopsychology<sup>16</sup> is that our political system relies on this loss of contact, because it is when we are not in contact that we consume. The economic system is based on loss of contact. The economy needs us to be disconnected. If we were in contact with experience, we would not need all this consuming to try to be happy – which is a completely desperate process. In this perspective, experiential destitution and ecological ravage are inseparable.

*How do you make a connection from felt experience to meaning?*

The felt dimension seems to be . . . what gives flesh to words. Ideas originate in this dimension. Yet, it is not that there are two levels, a felt and a conceptual level, that are separated. The felt sense does not transform into a concept. If you find a word to name a felt sense, and give it a verbal description, what gives meaning to the word, except the felt dimension? It is the very meaning of words, it is the meaning of everything. Also within artworks, their meaning and their beauty are in that felt dimension. I use “meaning” in a larger sense than just the meaning of words: a meaning of existence, which makes us alive . . .

Yet, there is another important consequence here. It connects to the finding that releasing the tensions towards objects leads us to let go of the

presumption of a separation of inner and outer space, which is liberation. This comes from the contact with experience. It is an example of the process of getting out of the conceptual ruts in which we are stuck.

Coming into contact with experience is something new. It has not been something that has been very much cultivated. This very act changes our concepts and our representations, inducing huge changes – changes in fundamental conceptions we think we live by, such as the conceptual distinction between inner and outer space. That is why I think that this contact with experience fosters critical thinking, to get beyond the conceptual ruts which we are in. The very contact with experience, at first glance seems to be far from critical thinking, from concepts, from the ability to distinguish, discriminate. Yet, it can function as a process that enables us to question and overcome fundamental patterns. In this way the practice of coming into contact with experience results in a new vision and new thinking, and it even dissolves some taken-for-granted conceptual views. It does not mean that we leave concepts and language behind; rather, it gives the possibility of getting out of preconceptions and creating completely novel ways of thinking.

*This touches a major motivation of Embodied Critical Thinking. It adds something radically new to the ways in which critical thinking is conceived and enacted. ECT is not re-iterating established critiques of some concepts, positions or approaches of thinking. We open up the philosophical understanding of methods of thinking to include enacting close contact to experience as a means of overcoming conceptual ruts we are caught up in. This close contact certainly is implied in innovative thinking. It is so little acknowledged that in public discourse we conceive of artificial intelligence as intelligent, but not methods of enacting contact with lived experience!*

*This brings us to our last question. How do you see the relation between micro-phenomenology and artificial intelligence?*

Firstly, micro-phenomenology allows us to understand better the process of ideation, of understanding.<sup>17</sup> We still know very little about how digital technologies change this. For example, how does electronic writing change our thinking process? What does it change? I know people who still have to write on paper to think, to express ideas clearly. We can do micro-phenomenology interviews to explore what changes. It is very unnoticed, yet it might introduce huge differences in the thinking and understanding processes. The difference between reading a book and reading huge amounts of electronic contents, for example, could be an object of very concrete research.

Furthermore, I was a computer scientist, and I know how the machine works on the micro level. It is unable to experience anything, that is obvious for a computer scientist. A machine cannot think and experience. Machines can manipulate huge amounts of content, which may give the impression that they can think. But ideation, getting a new idea, is anchored in the felt dimension. Therefore machines cannot think. Artificial “intelligence” is thus in a

way a nonsense-name. So, what we can hope is that machines take charge of manipulating contents, processing information, and delivering information. That is what they can do. That way, they can leave us more time to come and stay in contact with the living source of meaning, where new ideas originate. We can use machines for algorithmic manipulating, and devote more time to embodied thinking, from which novel solutions to the thorny and urgent problems our society is facing can emerge.

*You have given us decisive reasons for the importance of micro-phenomenology to the diverse areas we have discussed: the status of first person science, and micro-phenomenology's epistemological, ontological, philosophical and therapeutic implications. To conclude, do you also want to touch upon any difficulties with this method and practice?*

I am a micro-phenomenology researcher and also a meditation practitioner. For me it is difficult to separate both. Both are very similar. Meditation, the way I practise, is exploring experience concretely, instant after instant. I have done that for years.

I think the main difficulty, as I experience it, is that a practice approach may contribute to a gap between people. There is a gap between those who never cultivated contact to experience, neither through micro-phenomenology nor through meditation or other methods, and the ones who do. The difference created by the practice dimension makes me sometimes think we are in another world! On the other hand, I see so much enthusiasm generated by the micro-phenomenological approach. This difficulty is not just a side issue. It is a real problem. Because you cannot just explain this approach. You have to enact it, people have to live it, or at least be open for an experiential glimpse. Obviously, I cannot transfer my many years of meditation practice to others through words. To understand the liberating dimension of coming into contact with experience, one needs to have an experiential taste of it. This is difficult to give. It creates a gulf between people. We cannot just fill it with words. This is why one of the current lines of research in micro-phenomenology is to develop training to make the method more easily accessible, and to imagine ways to quickly give a taste of the felt dimension to people who are not familiar with it, by helping them recognise it in their experience.

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# 9 Experiencing as an ethically sensitive gesture

*Toma Strle and Urban Kordeš*

## Introduction

We are experiencing beings, and our experience is the one thing we cannot doubt. We can, naturally, doubt the content of the experience (as René Descartes nicely did in his *Meditations*; Descartes 1680). However, although it might seem to us that every experience is the experience of *something*, this intuition is not necessarily accurate. Is our experience a “report” of *something* (of what the “world out there” is like, of who and what I am etc.) or, conversely, is our experience solely our own *ad hoc* creation? Or, perhaps, is our experience a mixture of both: our own creation as well as information of something “outside” of consciousness? Is what we experience simply a reflection of an observer-independent reality, or rather, a reflection of the way we approach, attend to our experience when trying to observe it? The answer to this question is of great importance for empirical phenomenology – a newly emerging research field which aims at researching and understanding the conscious mind through systematic gathering of first-person data (cf. Kordeš 2016). However, here we will not focus on the methodological and epistemological challenges and “moves” of the empirical phenomenological research (we do briefly touch upon some implications that the ideas developed in the chapter have for first-person methodology as well as interdisciplinary collaboration)<sup>1</sup> but will mostly investigate some of the possible consequences the answer to the above questions might have for our everyday life and experience.

The way we answer the question of what role we play in the formation of our experience, and how significant our role is, determines to what degree we can (and perhaps should) see ourselves as responsible for our experience, for what is it like to be us, and, ultimately for the world that surrounds us. Although taking up responsibility for our experience is not a simple endeavour, being co-creators of our experiential worlds enables us, at least partly, to actively participate in deciding and determining what we experience within our everyday interactions.

In the chapter, we will see that the answer to the posed question strongly relates to the classical dilemma found within the sciences of the mind. Are we essentially a kind of copy-paste machines dependent and determined by

external events or, alternatively, are we the co-creators of that what we experience, understand, know, and are? And, consequently, have some choice over and the capacity to co-determine the significance and meaning of what “comes to us” from the outside of our conscious minds. Considering some of the contemporary views on the human mind (e.g. enactivism; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1993; Thompson 2007), we will try to make visible that we inescapably contribute to the what and how of our experience. We will argue that the way we, as active and embodied agents, turn towards our experience – we will call this the *horizon of observing* experience – co-determines and thus actively co-creates our experiencing (the chapter could thus also be titled “Enacting experience as an ethically sensitive gesture” to emphasise the embodied, creative nature of experiencing).

Firstly, we will lead the reader through a practical first-person observation to get a glimpse into what it means to observe, to attend to experience. Then we will briefly explore the enactivist view of the human mind and its claim that the cognitive system (the knower) and the world (the known) mutually co-specify and co-determine each other. Further on, we will introduce the notion of the horizon to reflect upon a strange characteristic of observing experience: that what we see as experience depends significantly on the perspective of looking at it – that is on our horizon of observing it (e.g. how we turn our attention towards our experiential field). We will conclude the chapter by reflecting upon our responsibility towards our experience as well as the world within which we encounter ourselves and others.

### **What does it mean to attend to experience?**

Empirical phenomenology is a relatively new research field dedicated to understanding lived experience through in-depth first-person research. Drawing from the philosophical school of phenomenology founded by Edmund Husserl, it takes a more mature stance towards understanding the conscious mind compared to classic natural and cognitive sciences, which try to make sense of subjectivity by transforming it into an object mostly empty of subjective life (cf. Kordeš 2016; Roy et al. 1999; Strle 2013). Inspired by philosophical phenomenology, empirical phenomenology aims at examining, “beyond the spook of subjectivity, the concrete possibilities of a disciplined examination of experience that is at the very core of the phenomenological inspiration.” (Varela 1996, 335). In that, empirical phenomenology follows some of the key methodological insights of philosophical phenomenology.

Two must be noted for the purposes of this chapter. The first is the primacy of experience, or, as Francisco Varela (1996) succinctly puts it: “it is the re-discovery of the primacy of human experience and its direct, lived quality that is phenomenology’s foundational project.” (Varela 1996, 335). Phenomenology considers consciousness as the essential constitutive source, the *sine qua non*, of how knowing and knowledge emerges (be it first or third person). As such, it must be taken as primary and investigated with all possible care.

The second insight that is essential for our purposes here is that empirical phenomenology (following Husserl's ideas) aims at taking a different attitude towards experience compared to most sciences of the mind, which fundamentally presuppose that experiential phenomena are something to be found "out there," a kind of objects independent of subjectivity, taking presupposed theories and beliefs about the nature of experience as the main source of their knowledge (this being an important part that constitutes the so-called natural attitude that most sciences of mind implicitly or explicitly assume). In adopting the phenomenological attitude towards experience, however, first-person inquiry within empirical phenomenology tries to bracket this natural (or naive) attitude:

Natural or naive attitude assumes a number of received claims about both the nature of the experiencer and its intended objects. The Archimedean point of phenomenology is to suspend such habitual claims and to catalyse a fresh examination. Whence Husserl's famous dictum: 'Back to the things themselves', which for him meant – the opposite of a third-person objectification – a return to the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy.

(Varela 1996, 336)

However, empirical phenomenology differs from most lines of philosophical phenomenology as well as sciences of the mind in its epistemic stance towards consciousness research. Whereas philosophical phenomenology mostly uses philosophical analysis and armchair reflection of the phenomenologist as the core source of insight into consciousness, and sciences of the mind generally aim at objectifying conscious phenomena to be able to study them through established third-person methods, empirical phenomenology takes in-depth empirical examination of lived experience and the resulting data as the primary source of insight into the conscious mind (cf. Kordeš 2016; Kordeš and Demšar 2018).

In this empirical spirit, instead of thinking or theorising about the nature of experience, we propose a set of practical first-person observations.<sup>2</sup> We would like to understand what it means to *observe experience*. What happens when one directs one's attention towards an aspect of their experiential field to observe it?

***Observation: find your belly within your experiential landscape***

Consider a scenario where I am messaging with a friend on my mobile phone about first-person research approaches when she unexpectedly asks me: *What does your belly feel like? How did you experience your belly just before I posed the question to you?* What is it like to satisfy my interest in the experience of my belly?

My attention naturally turns towards the part of the experiential field (i.e. the totality of what I experience at this given moment) where I expect



to find this specific element of experience. Observing this particular area, I might sense an indistinct impression of that part of my bodily experience, or an intense, very distinct sensation. Perhaps I become aware of a specific feeling of pain, a sense of warmth or coldness, or feel my clothes touching my body. Or I might experience something else entirely, for instance, the noise of chattering coming from around me. Perhaps I notice no experience at all. Regardless of what I observe, the feeling of my belly likely does not feel created anew – it probably feels like I noticed an aspect of the experience that had been there before I was prompted by my friend to observe it. However, how can I know what I experience when no one is looking? I might not even remember having experienced a feeling, not even a vague one, of my belly prior to being prompted to turn my attention towards it. Furthermore, it might even be that the very act or gesture of observing, the act of turning my attention towards a particular area of my experiential field has (co-)constructed my experience. What was this like in your experience? Did you feel your experience was there before you attended to it or that you created this experience anew, that the very act of observation brought forth a new experience?

The puzzle of whether we (co-)create experience through acts of observation (the gestures of attending to experience) or, conversely, that these acts simply bring to our attention something that had already been there before, is called the *refrigerator light fallacy*<sup>3</sup> by some (Jaynes 1976; Schear 2009). This puzzle poses the following question: is the light inside the refrigerator always on? Assuming the refrigerator is in working order, every time we peek inside it, the light is on. Although it is possible to imagine the light being off when the door is shut, we have never observed this ourselves. One could argue that we could have known that the light is off when the door is shut by, for instance, placing a hidden camera inside the refrigerator; moreover, one could say that, since we understand the mechanics of the refrigerator, we *know* that the light is off when the door is closed. However, we cannot say this in the context of observing experience. For we cannot place a hidden camera inside our conscious minds, nor can we know the “mechanics of experience” without first-person observation. To answer the question of what is it like to be us, we have no other choice but to observe experience from within.

An important question arises: do we create, construct our experience through acts of observation, or do these acts merely bring forth to our attention something that had already been there before? Resolving this question is crucial for empirical phenomenology and for understanding its results. However, for our inquiry here we are not so much interested in dilemmas of empirical research on experience (cf. Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch 2003; Kordeš and Demšar 2019, 2021, 2023) but in how any experience comes about – be it attended to for research purposes or within everyday life.

Let us investigate further.

*Observation: continuously attending to a part of our experiential field*

We may have a strong intuition that our experience had already been present before we observed it and that the gesture of attending to our experience simply brought into our conscious awareness the information about this experience. However, this intuition is most likely mistaken. Let us see what happens if we observe our belly for a while longer, attending to a part of our experiential field – our bodily experience.

You will likely notice that experience changes through the process of observation. After persistently observing experience, I might feel certain tensions gradually release or strengthen; I might, after some time, start to experience a pleasant (or unpleasant) tingling sensation; perhaps I become more and more observant of the delicate nuances within different parts of my bodily experience; or I may experience struggle with keeping my attention on the bodily part of my experiential field, mind-wandering until I know what I want for lunch and only then again becoming aware of experiencing my body. Most attempts of attending to one's experience, however, reveal one thing: the way we turn towards our experience contributes significantly to what and how we experience. Observing experience is thus not an innocent transmission (extraction) of information but an active process that (co-)constructs what is being observed.

Let us investigate a little further to see what happens when we attend to our experience in different ways, from within different horizons of observation.

*Observation: different ways of attending to experience*

What happens if I attend to how my belly feels with soft, open, mindful attention? What if I attend to my experience with focused, “sharp” attention instead? What if I attend to my experience by searching for a particular sensation (say, the unpleasant pinching that has been bothering me) or with an intention to transform it (say, to dissolve the pain I just felt in my belly)? What if I attempt to just patiently let the felt sense of my belly manifest itself in any way it is going to manifest (without judgement or purpose)?

With such experiential investigations, we try to make visible that attending to experience is a creative process; and that the way we turn towards our experience matters greatly for what we, in fact, experience.

**Not acquiring but enacting experience**

After getting some sense in observing experience from within different attentional attitudes, a further question can be asked: Is it that the same experience can be observed, attended to in different ways, or does every observational gesture create a new experience? We believe that introducing an adequate epistemology can resolve such questions. Hence, we will briefly look into theory since we believe that a new epistemological framework (different to those most

often employed in the sciences of the mind and consciousness) can offer a more natural and sensible understanding of the unusual insight explored in the previous part of the chapter. Moreover, we are convinced that the framework we propose is not just theory or helpful to first-person methodology but may be, if considered carefully, useful for and perhaps beneficial to our everyday lives.

However, first we need to break free from the realist instinct whispering to us that everything occurring within our conscious mind is simply information about the world independent of our observation. We have seen that a simple examination of experience reveals that such an instinct cannot be applied to understanding experience, since observing experience is unavoidably a creative act and not some sort of excavation of the already existing. The enactivist view of the mind (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1993; Thompson 2007) offers a good starting point for a better understanding of the nature of mind and experience.<sup>4</sup>

In their seminal book, *The Embodied Mind* Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1993) introduce the notion of enaction (i.e. cognition as embodied action) to emphasise that within cognitive processing action and perception are inseparably meshed and that the cognitive system (the knower) and the world (the known) mutually co-specify, co-determine each other, as in a dance, where neither of the two partners is the sole originator of moving. Within the domain of perception, they ask a seemingly simple but crucial question: “Which came first, the world or the image?” (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1993, 172). Mostly, two general answers have been given to this conundrum in their view. The *chicken position*, as they call it, states that the world has pre-given properties (independent of the knower) and the task of the cognitive system is to extract, recover that what is “out there.” The alternative is the *egg position* where “[t]he cognitive system projects its own world, and the apparent reality of this world is merely a reflection of internal laws of the system.” (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1993, 172).

To overcome this age-old dilemma, Varela et al. (1993) propose a middle path between these two extremes: enaction, where the cognitive system, actively interacting with its environment (which includes other beings), brings forth, enacts, what it knows, and experiences. For enactivism, perception and knowledge are neither processes of extracting a pre-given world, nor an arbitrary projection of a reality-independent mind:

It is precisely this emphasis on mutual specification that enables us to negotiate a middle path between the Scylla of cognition as the recovery of a pre-given outer world (realism) and the Charybdis of cognition as the projection of a pre-given inner world (idealism). . . . Our intention is to bypass entirely this logical geography of inner versus outer by studying cognition not as recovery or projection but as embodied action.

(Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1993, 172)

According to the enactive view, knowledge and experience emerge from the active interaction, and histories of interactions between cognitive systems and their surroundings, “dancing in a mutual, circular specification and negotiation of meaning that does not allow for any such strict separations” (Strle 2016, 88) between the knower and the known, the object and the subject.<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty beautifully conveys the gist of this realisation towards the end of his *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 430).

### **Horizons of observing: acknowledging responsibility for our experience**

Whereas Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1993) primarily introduce the notion of enaction to explain perception and cognition, we extend their idea to the realm of experience (see also Kordeš and Demšar 2023).<sup>6</sup> We argue that the act of observing experience neither recovers a pregiven, independently existing experience, nor does it unconstrainedly project a pregiven inner world of experience – rather, experience is enacted, brought forth as an interplay between the act of observation and the observed.<sup>7</sup> The result of a particular act of observation is thus neither a replica of the “original” experience nor an unconstrained construction. Rather, every observational act is creative, carried out from within a certain perspective or horizon of observation – that is the totality of characteristics inherent to the way we turn towards our experience (e.g. the way we attend to our experience) which “colours,” and co-determines our experience. Experiencing is thus a creative process.

What is meant by the notion of the horizon of observing experience can be illustrated with some examples from the study by Kordeš et al. (2019, 213–215) in which a group of meditators were randomly sampled during meditation and reported on different ways in which they turned towards their experience (in the case of the quoted examples, the experience of pain) – revealing a diversity of horizons of observing experience and how they contributed to meditator’s experience:

*Cyclical reinforcement of pain through thinking:* ““Oh, not again!’ I’m dealing with the pain in my knees. Actually, I don’t want to deal with it. I avoid it – there is restlessness and the desire to move.”

*Trying to “solve” pain by meditating:* “I was trying to accept the feeling of the meditative posture. I tried to let myself loose into the pain – ease into the feeling of unease. There is a feeling that relaxing into my body will lead to me embracing the entire experiential field.”

*Escaping from pain into “important” or entertaining thoughts:* “For a while, I was observing pain in my thigh and while I was observing it as pain, it hurt. . . . I had to forget about it. I had to change my focus to make it disappear. It started with me listening to birds singing. . . .”

*Meditative transformation of pain into “just” another feeling:* “My focus was on the bodily feelings. My leg started to hurt again, so I began to observe this pain. At first, I felt the need to move my leg, and then I consciously focused my attention on this need, and pain suddenly became just another feeling. The painful part disappeared.”

We invite you to recall how you were observing how your belly felt and consider whether and how *your way of observing*, of turning towards your experience, related to and co-determined what you experienced. Attending to how one’s belly felt with focused attention likely brought forth a different experience compared to when one attended to it with mindful attention. Moreover, different ways of attending to one’s experience might have led to a range of different experiential landscapes over and beyond one’s bodily experience. It could be that attempting to observe how one’s belly felt at first brought forth a kind of experienced resistance towards carrying out “this silly exercise.” But in time, perhaps one’s mind got curious, tired of experiencing resistance, and began exploring different corners of the emerging experiential field. Maybe one actively tried to overcome this initial resistance by changing one’s attitude or expectations or, perhaps, from the very start attempted to play with shaping one’s experience.

What we experience is, in this regard, crucially a “mirror” of us and not a “mirror” of things in themselves – the idea that resonates well with the enactive view of the mind. Horizons of observing experience thus play a crucial role in what we, ultimately, observe and become aware of as our experience – be it how we experience our belly, a sensation,<sup>8</sup> or an idea we encounter.

Understanding that what we experience is not something that exists independently of our gestures of observation but is instead the “reaction” of this something to our way of looking leads to an important consideration: if we are to understand how our experience emerges, we must understand how we turn towards our experience – our horizon of observation. Although the horizon of observing experience can have many characteristics that colour our experience and is determined by many factors, it is itself an experience and can be, as such, observed and described (what the three observations tried to make visible and what the illustrative examples from the cited meditation study by Kordeš et al. (2019) reveal). Interestingly, we do not need to know all the characteristics and factors that lead to a particular horizon of observation. Careful (phenomenological) observation of our experience reveals that we can access the experience of the horizon of observation in a more direct way – we can become aware of our horizon of observing experience as a felt sense (cf. Schoeller 2023 for further elaboration on the notion of felt sense) and become aware of the way in which we creatively contribute to our experience. We can, for instance, notice our attentional disposition towards our experience, attitudes we may have towards it, the background atmosphere that colours our experiential landscape, anticipatory background feelings subtly shaping our experience, etc.

The idea that horizons of observing experience play a crucial role in what we observe and become aware of as our experience has also important implications for the methodology of empirical phenomenology. Let us briefly mention a few. Firstly, co-researchers' horizons of observation through which they approach observing experience must be investigated. This, for instance, allows the researcher to better understand the gathered first-person data, how they emerged, etc. Moreover, understanding the horizons of observation is quite informative, perhaps essential, for making sense of the great diversity of particular experiences we normally tend to report on. To take into account such characteristics of empirical phenomenological research, Kordeš and Demšar (2021; see also Kordeš et al. 2019) developed the sampling reflectively observed experience (SROE) method which represents a possible approach to the phenomenological examination of horizons of observation. Secondly, to better understand the "meaning" of the gathered data, and how they emerge, one needs to investigate the horizon of the method itself – the way a particular research methodology approaches its inquiry (cf. Kordeš and Demšar 2023).

While the insight that horizons of observation colour and co-create our experience may seem rather straightforward, perhaps almost obvious to some, a careful reflection upon the idea reveals that it is quite consequential, perhaps existentially so, to our everyday lives. Being active agents in the formation of our experiential landscapes is, on the one hand, good news, as it suggests we can, at least to a degree, decide and determine what we experience. On the other hand, it means that we are partly responsible for our experience and everyday lives in which we enact it – responsible for how we experience ourselves, the world, and our interactions with others.

Experiencing interactions with others (e.g. within relationships) is a telling example. When somebody utters something to us or acts in a certain way, we might feel that the "objective" utterance, action, or the person itself *made us* feel this or that way (for instance, feeling elated, offended, self-conscious, or playful). However, taking the idea of horizons seriously, we might realise that feeling elated, offended, self-conscious or playful always emerges from within a particular horizon. Our horizon. Thus, how we experience an encounter or interaction is, to a degree, if not for the larger part, co-created by how we lean, turn towards it; surely it is not solely a matter of this or that "objective" utterance, action, or person alone. This, however, means that we bear at least some responsibility for our experience. Moreover, being partly responsible for our experience implies bearing at least some responsibility also for the world around us – for, the way we experience ourselves, the world, and others significantly affects our actions and consequently other's experiences.

If experience emerges within the dance between us (importantly, through our horizon of observation) and the world (which naturally includes others), this perhaps hints at the possibility of shifting our perspective towards ourselves and that which surrounds us. Naturally, different research approaches and practices within the domain of psychotherapy (cf. Wedding and Corsini 2018) represent a rich source of knowledge about the possible ways of

transforming one's experience, and about challenges that emerge on the path. Although a discussion on a variety of approaches aimed at transforming one's experience surpasses the scope of this chapter, Eugene T. Gendlin's Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy should be mentioned as a rich source on embodied, focusing-based practices of transforming one's experience (Gendlin 1973, 1996). There, for instance, Gendlin lucidly argues that noticing the felt sense of experience is a delicate process that requires careful observation,<sup>10</sup> which is quite in line with how empirical phenomenology understands observing experience. Moreover, many non-Western traditions, such as Buddhism, also have to say much on this topic (see, for instance, Thera 1973).

Transforming one's experience is not a simple matter. Nevertheless, we believe that the idea that we are not passive and helpless receivers of events that shape our experience, opens essential space, even if initially slight, for the possibility of transformation of experiencing, thinking, and living.<sup>11</sup> And, perhaps, enable us to become more caring, open, or curious towards others and their experienced horizon(s) of observation.<sup>12</sup>

Becoming more open and curious towards one's own and other's experience and horizons of observation is, moreover, also quite important for interdisciplinary research, where exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas between sometimes very diverse disciplines and approaches is essential (e.g. in cognitive science). For, being open, curious, non-judgemental, yet critical towards one's own and other's presuppositions, implicit intuitive and theoretical convictions, and established practices is fundamental to a better understanding of complex phenomena (such as the mind), which cannot be reduced to one aspect or "truth." Opening up to one's own and other's (perhaps very different to ours) horizons from within which we approach observing experience, research, and living as scholars, can, perhaps, also lead to a more caring and open academic environment where respect, sharing, and co-development of ideas would become more present. Perhaps thus, the process of acquiring knowledge can become more ethical (see the concluding part of the chapter for Varela's (1984) idea of ethics as the foundation of knowledge; see also the observation that follows, through which we try to encourage observing and understanding one's own and other's horizons).

### **In conclusion: actions are clearer than words**

Hopefully, it is clearer now how one might co-create one's experience through the way one turns towards it. Let us try another exercise to delve into the notion of the horizon of observation a little further.

#### *Observation: exploring the experience of encountering an idea*

Let us explore how we experience encountering an idea (or concept, belief, opinion, etc.), and how our specific way of turning towards it colours the experience of such an encounter. One can try to choose either an uplifting or an upsetting encounter with an idea when, for instance, talking to someone,

while watching a video, reading an article, or while the train of thought paves the way to a realisation, insight, etc. We are not looking for descriptions of solely factual data; however, factual data can be a *part* of the idea.

Take some time to recall one such encounter from your recent past and try to relive it as vividly as possible. Consider the entire episode: your experience before the encounter, during the encounter itself, and the immediate experiential aftermath. Instead of focusing on the content of the encounter or the idea itself, try to observe your experienced “reaction” to this idea and the way you attended to or turned towards this encounter – your horizon of observation. What was it like to encounter this idea (consider, if relevant, your thoughts, emotions, socially related experiences, background feelings, or the atmosphere of the encounter)? How did you turn towards encountering this idea: what was, for instance, your attitude towards the encounter; were expectations or anticipatory feelings a part of your experiential landscape; from within what attitude did you approach encountering the idea?

Imagine, for instance, you are about to listen to a podcast titled “The unified science of emotion.” Being a classically trained psychologist, you feel pleasant anticipation and curiosity towards learning about this new theory (thinking about possible new behavioural and neural accounts of the phenomenon). The podcast, however, starts by criticising the predominant use of quantitative methods in emotion research and poses the idea that emotion science should equally, if not predominantly, focus on experience research to even have a chance at coming up with a unified theory of emotion. Your pleasant anticipation and curiosity quickly turn to suspicion, and your mind works hard to find contra-arguments to what the podcast is saying; your whole body resists the idea. You start feeling disdain for this “preposterous idea,” even a little contempt towards it. You notice your attitude towards encountering the idea, and half-interestedly observe it for a short while, but quickly dismiss it, since you cannot believe such “nonsense.” Your attention slowly wanders away from the podcast to more important matters. (Naturally, this imagined example paints just one of the many possible “reactions” one could have towards the described encounter and just one of the many possible ways in which one could approach observing one’s attitude towards the encounter.)

Now for the difficult part: try to put yourself in the shoes of somebody with a very different horizon: that is somebody with a different background, set of beliefs, attitudes, etc., towards the very idea you tried to relive in the first part of the observation. As vividly as possible, try to imagine how she experiences such an encounter, and how her perspectives, attitude, or way of turning towards the idea might differ from yours. Can you step into the shoes of someone you deem very different from yourself?<sup>13</sup> What did you feel, think, sense? What do you think how is it possible to “react” so differently to the same stimulus? What does this experiment tell us? What would happen if everybody, before reacting (say commenting on Twitter, replying to a message or email, or responding to a statement made by a person one feels close to), would attempt this exercise?



Different horizons towards the encountered idea very plausibly lead to a very different experience, although the “objective” stimulus that both persons were presented with and had access to, was the same (in this example, a written or spoken idea). This shows that the horizons from within which the encountered idea was approached matter greatly for the way in which we and others experience such encounters. This observation (and others presented before) makes visible that we are active participants in the ever-ongoing emergence of our and other’s experience. And although the experience of encountering an opposing idea to the one we hold might not be easy, and is perhaps even unsettling, we can try to observe the horizons from within which we and others approach observing experience. Moreover, agreeing with the idea of horizons, one must realise that our viewpoints and experience can be different. Yet, if we think carefully, we are, in many ways, also quite similar – in our experienced reactions to opposing ideas, for instance. And in our capacity to observe and explore horizons of observation.

If we suppose that we crucially enact our experience from within the horizons of observing it, then our experiencing, and the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding, can be seen as an *ethically sensitive gesture*: what we learn about the world, and others, is perhaps not so much a reflection, a responsibility of the world or others. It might be our responsibility. As is beautifully put forth by Varela (1984; see also Varela 1999) in one of his early essays, “The Creative Circle: Sketches on the Natural History of Circularity”:

“That the world should have this plastic texture, neither subjective nor objective, not one and separable, neither two are inseparable, is fascinating. . . . It shows that reality is not just constructed at our whim, for that would be to assume that there is a starting point we can choose from inside first. It also shows that reality cannot be understood as given and that we are to perceive it and pick it up, as a recipient, for that would also be to assume a starting point: outside first. It shows, indeed, the fundamental groundlessness of our experience, where we are given regularities and interpretations born out of our common history as biological beings and social entities. . . . It reveals to us a world where “no-ground,” “no-foundation” can become the basis for understanding that the age-old idea of objectivity . . . is, by its own scientific standards, a chimera. . . . We should do better to fully accept the notoriously different and more difficult situation of existing in a world where no one in particular can have a claim to better understanding in a universal sense. This is indeed interesting: that the empirical world of the living and the logic of self-reference, that the whole of the natural history of circularity should tell us that ethics – tolerance and pluralism, detachment from our own perceptions and values to allow for those of others – is the very foundation of knowledge, and also its final point.”

(Varela 1984, 322–323)

It is perhaps difficult to convey in an “abstract” way what we tried to express; however, Varela said it succinctly (as a continuation of the above quote): “At this point, actions are clearer than words.” (Varela 1984, 323). To practise noticing the felt sense of thinking, experiencing, and being, to practise observing horizons from within which we enact our experience (and actions), is essential to our knowledge about and understanding of ourselves, the world and others (this edited volume is rich with reflections, approaches, and techniques that hopefully enable the cultivation of *being differently*).

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 See Kordeš and Demšar (2019, 2021, 2023) for an in-depth discussion on methodological and epistemic challenges, and positions of empirical phenomenology, as well as first-person research more generally.
- 2 The observations are partly adapted from Kordeš and Demšar (2023).
- 3 An analogous problem – the *excavation fallacy* – has been described by Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear (1999; see also Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch 2003). There, the metaphor comes from the field of archaeology, where the archaeologist cannot avoid contaminating the artefact during excavation.
- 4 The more embodied versions of contemporary predictive processing accounts of cognition (e.g., Seth 2021) align well with the core ideas of enactivism in this regard.
- 5 Many empirical examples can be found in Seth (2021), Thompson (2007) and Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1993).
- 6 It must be noted that Varela et al. (1993) do not conceive of perception and cognition as separate from experience.
- 7 More precisely, it is the interplay between the act of reflection and that which is reflected upon (see Kordeš and Demšar 2023).
- 8 See Petitmengin et al. (2009) for a study on how adopting different attentional dispositions relates to different ways in which we experience listening to a sound.
- 9 Within empirical phenomenology, the “participant” is understood as the expert on her experience and thus as a co-researcher. The “lead researcher’s” role is thus to guide and scaffold co-researcher’s explorations (for different approaches of achieving this see the second-person in-depth phenomenological inquiry (SIPI) technique developed by Kordeš and Klauser 2016; see also Hurlburt and Heavey 2006; Kordeš and Demšar 2021; Petitmengin 2006).
- 10 See also Klein et al.’s (1969) work on experiencing scales.
- 11 See Petitmengin (2021) and Strle (2021) for a discussion on the possibilities of radical transformation of our experiences and the potential consequences thereof for how we act towards our environment.
- 12 This idea aligns well with the spirit (and experience) of the *Training in Embodied Critical Thinking* (TECT) project and its continuation, *Training in Embodied Critical Understanding* (TECU) (see Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019 for a further explication of the goals and practices of ECT).
- 13 This idea is similar to the Thinking at the Edge step of Crossing (although there, the steps towards taking up other’s perspectives are more elaborate). For more details, see, for instance, Gendlin (2004) and Schoeller (2023).

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# 10 Multidimensional mindfulness trainings and methods of embodied thinking at universities of the 21st century

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The cultural-political basis of this chapter is provided by MIT transformation researcher Claus Otto Scharmer's reflections on the university of the 21st century. At its centre is the cultural transformation competence known as *vertical literacy*, which differs from the horizontal transfer of knowledge common in schools and universities in that it trains emotional and volunative skills on an equal footing with cognitive skills. Cultivating the interplay of all three forms of human intelligence (*open mind, open heart, open will*) is urgently needed in times of polycrisis in order to close the gap between knowledge and action.

The basic definitions of vertical literacy described by Scharmer are outlined **in the introduction** and related to Aldous Huxley's concept of non-verbal humanities. On this basis, we address the following question in four steps: *How can multidimensional mindfulness trainings and methods of embodied thinking contribute to promoting vertical literacy in the 21st century university?*

In the **first step**, we provide two notes on the use of the word "mindfulness." From a pragmatist perspective, they show that the current use of the word "mindfulness" in both everyday and scientific language follows a "one-sided diet" (Wittgenstein 2009, §593, 164e). The **second step** explains how one-dimensional and multidimensional course programmes differ from each other in the field of secular mindfulness trainings. In the **third step**, selected methods of embodied thinking are presented and concretised through the personal experiences of one of us. Against this background, in the **fourth step**, we outline how one-dimensional and multidimensional mindfulness trainings and embodied thinking approaches can be used as bridging programmes for the transition from horizontal to vertical higher education.

## Introduction

In his article "Vertical Literacy. Reimagining the 21st Century University," Claus Otto Scharmer outlines the task of the university in the 21st century as follows: "I believe that the current historical moment . . . invites us to reconceive the 21st-century university as a *unity of research, teaching, and the praxis of transforming society and self*" (Scharmer 2019).

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Scharmer exposes what he calls vertical literacy as a transversal meta-competence that combines the three aforementioned areas of responsibility of the 21st century university: “In short, vertical literacy is about leading transformation by shifting consciousness from ego-system awareness to eco-system awareness” (Scharmer 2019). He mentions the following as examples of vertical literacy capabilities:

- “seeing yourself – that is self-awareness – both individually and collectively
- accessing your curiosity, compassion, and courage
- deepening the space for listening and conversation
- reshaping the type of organising from centralised to ecosystem
- cultivating governance mechanisms that operate by seeing the whole
- holding the space for profound transformation: letting go and letting come” (Scharmer 2019)

As a systemic transformation researcher, it is important to Scharmer that the vertical deepening of academic teaching and learning culture takes place “across all levels” (Scharmer 2019): “at the level of individuals (holding the space for self-awareness), groups (deep listening and dialogue), organisations (from centralised to ecosystems), and the evolution of larger systems (coordinating through seeing the whole)” (Scharmer 2019).

More than 70 years before Scharmer wrote his essay, another pioneering text on the transformation of the modern education system was published. This was the essay “The Education of an Amphibian,” by Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) (Huxley 1956). The multidimensionality that Scharmer’s “across all levels” list alludes to is characterised in Huxley’s more literary text as the “amphibiousness” (Huxley 1956, 9) of human existence; as “the multiple double life of creatures indigenous to half a dozen incompatible worlds” (Huxley 1956, 9–10). For Huxley, we are “amphibians, living simultaneously in the world of experience and the world of notions, in the world of direct apprehension of Nature, God and ourselves, and the world of abstract, verbalized knowledge about these primary facts” (Huxley 1956, 15).

Against this background, Huxley describes the vertical depth dimension of human existence as “a self associated with a group of not-selves” (Huxley 1956, 19). In Huxley’s view, below the conscious ego lie: (a) the not-self of habits and conditioned reflexes, (b) the not-self responsible for the body, (c) the world from which we draw our insights and inspirations, (d) the world of archetypes, (e) the world of visionary experience, and (f) the world of the Holy Spirit, the Atman-Brahman, the clear light and suchness (Huxley 1956, 17–18).

Huxley’s diagnosis of the education system of his time reads: “Organized education is predominantly verbal education” (Huxley 1956, 15). From this he concludes: “We must do more for the non-verbal part of our amphibious nature” (Huxley 1956, 16). In order to provide an initial impetus, Huxley outlines “the curriculum of our hypothetical course in what may be called the

non-verbal humanities” (Huxley 1956, 19). This plan is as follows: “Training of the kinaesthetic sense. Training of the special senses. Training of memory. Training in control of the autonomic nervous system. Training for spiritual insight” (Huxley 1956, 19).

Of central importance here is the fact that this curriculum is not about the verbal transfer of knowledge, but about forms of practical, experience-based training of the non-verbal dimensions of the human amphibian. Broadly speaking, what Huxley outlines here as a curriculum of non-verbal humanities is not far removed from what Jon Kabat-Zinn developed in 1979 and has popularised worldwide in recent decades as the secular mindfulness training Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn 2013).

For the following steps, it is helpful to relate Huxley’s curriculum of non-verbal humanities to Scharmer’s concept of vertical literacy. The special achievement of Scharmer and his colleague Arawana Hayashi is that they have developed – using Huxley’s terminology – a *second* curriculum of non-verbal humanities. This curriculum opens the possibility of connecting non-verbally with the not-self levels of groups, organisations, and larger systems. The name of this training, which consists of a set of social, systemic, and ecological mindfulness exercises, is Social Presencing Theater (SPT) (Hayashi 2021).

This art-based form of collective mindfulness training forms a pedagogical basis for vertical literacy. It complements the first non-verbal humanities curriculum outlined by Aldous Huxley and developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat Zinn’s eight-week individual mindfulness training Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) enables students to connect (in a non-verbal way) with the different not-self levels of their individual existence. Social Presencing Theater (SPT) helps participants to open up (in a non-verbal way) to a comparable connection to the different not-self levels of our collective and planetary existence.

In both cases, “non-verbal” does not mean the complete exclusion of language from the respective mindfulness practice. It only means that the focus of the exercises is on the perception of what can be experienced and that it is part of the exercises to take interpretations and judgements that manifest themselves in thoughts and words as epiphenomena and, if possible, to let go of them or minimise their influence on the process of perception.

### **Two notes on the use of the word “mindfulness”**

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), the founder of the modern philosophy of language, would have called the way in which the word “mindfulness” is used today a “one-sided diet” (Wittgenstein 2009, §593, 164e) – and he was right. He would surely see the detailed examination of the “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein 2009, §67, 36e) between the different uses of the word “mindfulness” and the associated “language-games” (Wittgenstein 2009, §7, 8e) as a cultural-political task. This cannot be done here. We will limit ourselves to two points helpful for the distinction between one-dimensional and multidimensional mindfulness trainings to be made in the following pages.

The **first** point relates to the differentiation established in mindfulness research between mindfulness as a practice, state, skill, and trait (Krägeloh et al. 2019, 10–20). In many uses of “mindfulness,” the states, skills, and traits denoted by the word are understood both as fundamental characteristics of people and as dimensions of the effects of underlying exercises and practices.

In contemporary philosophy of science, it is the perspective of philosophical pragmatism, which suggests that the complex and difficult-to-investigate phenomena of the interior (states, skills, traits, and attitudes) should be viewed from the visible, concrete, and relatively easy-to-name practices associated with the production or cultivation of the aforementioned phenomena (Brandom 2011). In contrast to the pragmatist approach, the phenomenological approach in the philosophy of mindfulness is already much more developed and at the same time more presuppositional, complex and vulnerable (Ferrarello and Hadjioannou 2023). If you want to give “mindfulness” a pragmatic and easy-to-use meaning, it is helpful to name the mindfulness exercises and training programmes to which the word directly or indirectly refers. This is rarely done in the inflationary and diffuse use of the word that currently prevails.

The **second** point relates to what becomes apparent when the use of “mindfulness” is viewed in terms of the underlying mindfulness practices. If this is done, it becomes clear that the meaning of “mindfulness” refers in most cases to *individual* mindfulness exercises. These are practices that everyone can do for themselves on a yoga mat or meditation cushion, such as a body scan, sitting and walking meditation or mindful yoga.

In view of the widespread focus on individual practices that do not require training partners, it can be stated that the current use of “mindfulness” can be characterised as a “one-sided diet” (Wittgenstein 2009, §593, 164e). Few people know that, in addition to individual mindfulness exercises, there are also scientifically researched and highly effective dyadic, social, systemic, and ecological mindfulness exercises.

A comparison with the use of the word “sport” can be helpful here. In terms of the underlying training programmes, the current use of “mindfulness” can be likened to understanding “sport” to only mean individual strength training or jogging, for example. In fact, however, we naturally also understand “sport” to include games for two, four (table tennis, tennis, badminton, etc.), or more people (soccer, handball, volleyball, field hockey, etc.).

Comparable games or practices for two, four, or more people and group constellations also exist in the field of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn, the Max Planck researcher Tania Singer, Scharmer and Hayashi have developed, tested, and evaluated different types of secular mindfulness exercises in recent decades. While Kabat-Zinn and Singer primarily address the individual and social impact dimensions (Kabat-Zinn 2018; Singer 2024), Scharmer and Hayashi aim their mindfulness-based group training directly and explicitly at systemic and ecological effects for cultural transformation, for example of UN organisations, governments, NGOs, educational institutions, and companies (Scharmer 2016; Hayashi 2021).



Advocates of individual mindfulness argue that individual meditation practice also strengthens social and ecosystemic awareness (Kabat-Zinn 2019). The space of consciousness is indeed expanded through individual mindfulness exercises. However, this takes time and regular practice. In the influential and foundational work of contemporary meditation effects research *Altered Traits*, Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson distinguish between beginners, long-term practitioners and professional meditation experts for this reason (Goleman and Richardson 2017, 249–274). The time requirement associated with profound effects – regular practice over many years or decades – makes it questionable whether and to what extent the path of individual mindfulness practice alone is a sufficient basis for acute transformation processes in times of polycrisis (Harari 2018, Chapter 21; Metzinger 2023, Chapter 4). This also applies if the scientifically investigated spreading effects are taken into account (Engert et al. 2023).

Social and ecosystemic mindfulness practices are interactive forms of exercise. They are structurally different from the canon of individual mindfulness practices. They cannot be practised without a partner, or only to a very limited extent. If one wants to improve his or her social and ecosystemic mindfulness, not only individual mindfulness should be practised but also the canon of social and ecosystemic training programmes should be integrated into one's life. This is particularly important because interactive mindfulness practices lead to perceptible changes in the social and ecosystemic spheres more quickly than individual ones.

### **Secular mindfulness training for universities: one-dimensional and multidimensional training formats**

Collaboration with more than 50 universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland has shown us that mindfulness trainings at universities is most successfully implemented if the training programmes meet the following conditions:

1. The vocabulary of the training programme is secular; that is, it makes no use of spiritual or religious terminology.
2. The training programme was developed, tested and researched by internationally recognised scientists.
3. The programme has established itself as a national or international standard or is on its way to doing so.

Mindfulness courses of this kind form the benchmark against which it is worth orienting oneself when it comes to implementing mindfulness training at universities. If you look at the training programmes that meet this benchmark, you will see that they are generally programmes that have a clear focus within the spectrum of the aforementioned mindfulness dimensions (individual, social or ecosystemic).

The focus of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 is on the individual mindfulness exercises of

sitting and walking meditation, body scan and mindful yoga. The focus of the social mindfulness training developed by Tania Singer is on contemplative dyads in which two people meditate together and report their states of consciousness and bodily sensations to each other in a regular time sequence without commentary or judgement. The focus of the Social Presencing Theater developed by Scharmer and Hayashi is on social, systemic, and ecological mindfulness exercises that relate to four or five people (Stuck Exercise, Dance of Five), large groups (Village, Field Dance) or to the overall ecological system through symbolic constellations (4D Mapping).

We refer to training programmes with such a clear and unambiguous focus as *one-dimensional* mindfulness trainings. This is not meant to be derogatory. On the contrary, in order to achieve professional competence or even mastery in one of the different dimensions of mindfulness, this type of one-dimensional focus is useful and helpful. In contrast, we refer to a training programme in which individual, social, and ecosystemic mindfulness practices are specifically and systematically combined as *multidimensional* mindfulness training.

With regard to the question addressed here, there is another point to consider regarding the aforementioned programmes. The one-dimensional mindfulness training programmes developed by Kabat-Zinn, Singer, and Scharmer/Hayashi are not tailored to the university context. They were each designed for different target groups outside of academia and are now used worldwide in specific settings.

Due to their specific contexts of origin, these one-dimensional programmes are based on motivations, purposes, and target perspectives that cannot be assumed in universities. MBSR originated in a clinical context and is aimed at treating chronically ill people (Kabat-Zinn 2013). This means that a corresponding intensity and a high level of motivation and commitment on the part of the participants are essential and can be expected. Singer's Dyads programme was developed from the neuroscientific and cognitive scientific research contexts of the ReSource project (The ReSource Project 2020). It aims to provide psychologically oriented attention in paired social interactions and requires a secure and protected communication space to enable personal openness and avoid psychological injury (Singer, Koop, and Godara 2021; Singer 2024). Scharmer and Hayashi's programme was designed for managers in global companies who are under high systemic pressure to transform and deliver (Scharmer 2016).

In contrast, the first, and so far only, multidimensional mindfulness training courses were designed specifically for university members. Their genesis goes back to Mike Sandbothe and Reyk Albrecht's research and development projects (2015–2019) to develop target group-specific mindfulness trainings for universities. These resulted in Mindfulness-Based Student Training (MBST) for students, Mindfulness-Based Teacher Training (MBTT) for teachers, Mindfulness-Based Employee Training (MBET) for employees, and Mindfulness-Based Leadership Training (MBLT) for leaders at universities (Sandbothe and Albrecht 2024).

An important goal of these 12-week training courses (12× 60 or 90 minutes plus four hours of digital detox retreat) is to help participants integrate at least 15 minutes of mindfulness exercises into their daily routine. A fundamental learning outcome of the two research and development projects funded with two million euros was that placing practice at the heart of the courses and minimising the amount of theoretical input is conducive to achieving this goal. Amishi Jha and her team came to a similar conclusion when developing and testing individual mindfulness training for the US military (Jha et al. 2017).

Another result of the project work is the supra-regional cooperation platform *Mindful Universities*. It now connects more than 800 university members from more than 50 universities and colleges in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland who are working together to promote mindfulness in higher education across countries by, among other things, integrating independent mindfulness courses with ECTS points into the subject curricula and/or short mindfulness exercises into their respective subject courses (Voss et al. 2020, 2022; Konrad et al. 2023).

The prototypes of the developed target group-specific mindfulness trainings for universities were one-dimensional training programmes (2015–2019) that Sandbothe and Albrecht, together with their Jena colleague Hubert Ostermaier, replaced in 2021, during the pandemic, with multidimensional 12-week courses (Sandbothe, Albrecht, and Ostermaier 2024). These were designed as online courses and were then adapted to be offered face-to-face after the end of the pandemic. The multidimensional structure of these courses' core curriculum can be described as a movement that leads from individual and dyadic exercises (weeks 1–7) through social and ecosystemic exercises (weeks 8–11) and then back to individual practice (week 12).

For example, empathic openness towards other people is trained not only through individual exercises such as the Body Scan (week 3) and the Moving Body Scan (week 8) but also through social mindfulness exercises such as the Social Body Scan (week 9) with small group feedback sessions that allow participants to experience the social body of a group on intellectual, emotional, and bodily levels. In addition, ecosystemic mindfulness exercises such as the Eco Body Scan (week 10) and the Eco Sense Lab (week 11) are used. With the help of social arts-based human sculptures, the Eco Body Scan trains conscious awareness of the systems of which we are a part and which shape us, including our environment and life on planet Earth. The new wording of “Body Scan,” “Moving Body Scan,” “Social Body Scan,” and “Eco Body Scan” makes the inner connection between individual, social, and ecosystemic exercises clear from a terminology perspective.

Today, multidimensional courses are offered at universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland in online, face-to-face and hybrid formats. The broad programme implementation of multidimensional mindfulness trainings for university members has the function of a literacy measure that is needed at

universities, as mindfulness practice is not (yet) a natural part of state school curricula.

In academic practice, it has been shown that based on this literacy training, in a second step the one-dimensional mindfulness training courses by Kabat-Zinn (MBSR), Singer (dyad training), and Scharmer/Hayashi (SPT) are met with interest, positively accepted, and used. Without appropriate preparation through multidimensional bridging programmes, on the other hand, the one-dimensional formats are often perceived as too demanding or even rejected by university members.

Kabat-Zinn has described the approach of multidimensional mindfulness trainings developed at and for universities as the principle of “many doors, one room” (Kabat-Zinn 2024). He refers to “various doors that are currently opening all over the world.” In his view, these include not only “MBSR and the entire family of ‘mindfulness-based interventions’ (MPIs)” or “mindfulness-based programmes” (MBPs), but also, “from a facing wall perhaps but opening into the same room, the door of the ReSource framework and its supporting evidence base, stemming from the very creative work of Tania Singer and her colleagues; and on yet another wall, the doorways of Otto Scharmer’s Theory U, along with the pioneering work of Peter Senge, the Presencing Institute, the expressive group theatre work of Arawana Hayashi, and their colleagues and collaborators in the world of business and organizations” (Kabat-Zinn 2024).

As bridging programmes, multidimensional mindfulness training opens access to a vertical educational landscape emerging in universities of the 21st century. Kabat-Zinn has described the pluralisation of mindfulness – “many doors, one room” – as “an essential element in building a livable future for humanity” and emphasised “educating the next generations of students who will carry it out as well as be the beneficiaries of their own transformative engagements, inner and outer, alone and together” (Kabat-Zinn 2024).

### **Embodied critical thinking methods for the 21st century university**

In addition to target group-specific mindfulness trainings, some other methods and techniques can support universities in making the transition from the horizontal to the vertical paradigm. These include body-based verbalisation methods that aim to make the multidimensional space of human consciousness more accessible for critical thinking. Since 2021, a selection of these methods has been tested as part of the interdisciplinary European Erasmus+ programme Training in Embodied Critical Thinking (TECT). From the canon of this programme, we focus later on the Thinking at the Edge (TAE) method and the micro-phenomenological interview (MPI).

TECT was developed with the aim of providing students, teachers, and researchers with innovative methods to methodically deepen critical thinking in times of multiple crises (Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019; Training

Embodied Critical Thinking Website 2023). A focus on embodiment in the cognitive sciences plays an important role here (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). The biologist and neuroscientist Francisco J. Varela (1946–2001), who also inspired Otto Scharmer in the development of the change management method Theory U, the philosopher, psychological theoretician, and psychotherapist Eugene T. Gendlin (1926–2017) and the phenomenological philosopher Claire Petitmengin are central sources of inspiration for the pluralistic methodology of TECT.

The three-year TECT programme starts each year with a 12-part, weekly webinar with theoretical input and practical exercises. This is followed by a one-week summer school programme to consolidate selected methods in person. In 2021, for example, this week focused on the Thinking at the Edge (TAE) method, developed by Eugene T. Gendlin. To be able to classify this method and its potential as an innovative form of education, it is helpful to take a look at its genesis.

In his psychotherapeutic practice, Gendlin observed that clients who not only talk about their problems but also include their current ongoing lived experience while they talk can be treated more successfully. What Gendlin calls the “felt sense” plays an important role in situation-related embodied experience: “A felt sense differs from an emotion. It is wider, and at first unclear, murky – the sort of feeling which we might describe by saying: “This is nothing” or “Just confusion.” At first it can be very slight, just a whiff of some bodily quality; for instance, a slight unease, a tightness, or a jumpy feeling. Quite soon it may then turn out that very strong emotions were implicit in it, along with much else” (Gendlin 1992, 204).

Gendlin attributes an implicit knowledge to the body when he writes:

The body feels every situation, and also what we might do in it and what would happen. The body employs this physical knowing all day quite automatically, but if you enter this bodily level directly, you can find many things and arrive at new steps that do not come automatically.

(Gendlin 2000, 258)

Gendlin developed the multi-step Focusing method (Gendlin 1978) in order to make direct attention to body knowledge and the felt sense accessible to as many people as possible. It is practised by focusing on partnerships. As a transformative, awareness-enhancing method, it can be used outside the psychotherapeutic setting. Today, groups around the world offer a protected framework for practising this method.

In the 1990s, Gendlin and Mary N. Hendricks developed Thinking at the Edge (TAE), a method to generate ideas, specially designed for academic purposes. The aim was to provide students with a tool to help them develop their own research approaches and logically consistent theories – a tool that guides them from a vague new idea to scientific formulation.

Gendlin describes the TAE process as follows:

In TAE we provide the needed interaction without any imposition, by taking turns in what we call a ‘Focusing partnership.’ In half the time I respond only to you. I follow you silently with my bodily understanding, and I tell you when I cannot follow. I speak from this understanding now and then, but only to check if I follow. In TAE I write down your exact words as they emerge (because otherwise they might be gone a moment later), and I read anything back to you when you want it. Then, in the other half of the time, you do this for me.

(Gendlin 2004, 6).

At the beginning of the process, the topic to be explored is formulated in a key sentence. This key sentence is then continuously linguistically developed through dialogue work, for example by exploring the resonance elicited by individual words in an alternation of embodied sensing and speaking, in order to find fresh words that express what wants to be expressed even more appropriately. What is said is documented by the dialogue partner. This documentation can later support the participants in developing their own ideas.

The following process phase was roughly in the middle of the first TECT Summer School, which took place in Reykjavik (Iceland) in 2021. The participants went on a group excursion to observe an active volcano from a nearby hillside. Notes from the diary of Thomas Corrinth, who took part in this summer school, serve to illustrate the TAE process: *It was not only visually breathtaking, I was also fascinated by the sounds: a kind of ocean roar, interspersed with cracking, clacking, popping and crackling. Sounds that I had never heard before in my life. Depending on which way the wind was blowing, I perceived smells – sulphur, of course, but also elements that I didn’t know and for which I don’t have the right words. In the evening, after the excursion, I realized this event had triggered something for me. But I couldn’t verbalize it yet.*

In the following TAE steps, one of the aims is to use current personal experiences or events, such as those just described, as a lense for your own research topic. In this way, new aspects of your topic may emerge. Thomas Corrinth noted what happened when his dialogue partner listened to him during this step of the process: *It just bubbled out of me for minutes – like the lava from the volcano the day before. It was as if the words and sentences first had to form and relate to each other over the last 12 hours, even to make sense in my body. Now they came out of my mouth relatively clearly formulated and organized. I had the feeling that this was so easy for me because I associated so many sensory experiences with the volcano observation – sensory experiences that my body was having in this group, in this environment, at this moment – now something linguistic was produced from them.*

Gendlin described this event as follows: “I have a bodily sense of what I am about to say. If I lose hold of that, I can’t say it. If I have a sense of what I want to say, then all I do is open my mouth and rely on the words that come. Language is deeply rooted in the way we physically exist in our interactive

situations” (Gendlin 2004, 3). In the final TAE steps of the 14-step TAE methodology, which were also carried out as part of the Summer School, the aim was to select three terms or combinations of terms that best reflect the core of one’s own TAE process from the many notes that were taken. One of the author’s terms was “fluidity” – a combination of “fluid” and “connectivity” that he invented spontaneously.

How can TAE be placed in the context of a vertical educational landscape? With the Focusing method, Gendlin emphasised therapeutic processes independent of the therapist, that is he democratised them and thus indirectly promoted social transformation. In contrast, TAE is a verbalisation and idea-finding technique that, in the context of its origin, primarily served the academic goal of experiential, embodied and embedded knowledge production. With both methods, Gendlin gives unconscious, non-verbal intelligence a space so that it may be useful for self-confident, verbalised intelligence. The emphasis on the verbalised (in spoken and written form) is different to that of the mindfulness programmes described earlier. While in the latter, spoken and written words are perceived as epiphenomena, in the TAE process words and sentences are defined as targets and are therefore continuously debated, refined, and written down.

The micro-phenomenological interview (MPI) pursues a similar objective. Petitmengin has adapted and further developed the psychologist Pierre Vermersch’s “explication interview” (Vermersch 1994; see also Mark 2019, 134), building on Varela (Varela and Shear 1999), to adapt it to a research context. With the help of the MPI, the development process of experiences is to be made more comprehensible and accessible for verbalisation (Mark 2019, 133). According to Petitmengin, it is about how an experience unfolds phenomenologically:

Becoming aware of the pre-reflective part of our experience involves a break with our customary attitude, which tends . . . to act without being conscious of the way we are going about it, without even being conscious of this lack of consciousness. We need to divert our attention from ‘what’, which usually absorbs it entirely, towards ‘how’. This redirection of attention is sometimes triggered by an obstacle, or a failure, but may also be the result of training and learning.

(Petitmengin 2006, 240)

As an elaborate micro-phenomenological transcript would go beyond the scope of this chapter, we quote again from the diary of Thomas Corrinth, who was also present at the second TECT Summer School in Ljubljana (Slovenia). The following note describes the phenomenological starting point of the subsequent MPI: *In the middle of Slovenian nature, I am lying on my back in a lush flower meadow, surrounded by breathtaking, fairly untouched nature. It’s around 25 degrees Celsius and my training partner is lying just a few centimeters*

*away from me. We have our eyes closed, remain silent and take in this wonderful environment with our senses. Most impressive are the insects, whose sounds gradually cast a spell over me. Sounds in a variety and a volume spectrum that I have never heard before in my life.*

This background noise was the focus of the micro-phenomenological interview that Corinth's training partner conducted with him. After the interviewer had led him through certain questions about the experience just described, he dissected the quality of this soundscape piece by piece. This gave rise to the word "insect orchestra." The interviewee described his experience as a huge, harmonious orchestra that revealed to him the power, coordination and intelligence of nature. When asked whether there was perhaps something else and how it manifested itself, he noted a subtle sadness. This impressive orchestra of insects was beautiful to him, but it also made him suddenly realise that this experience was not normal for him: *I can't remember the last time I experienced such an intact natural environment presented to me in such an impressive acoustic way. All of a sudden, climate change and the extinction of species was also present in this micro-experience.*

As the personal accounts show, the MPI allows for extraordinary precision and depth of focus. Similar to the TAE, remembered sensory perceptions and bodily sensations are reconstructed in detail in order to verbalise experience in a phenomenologically differentiated way. Here, too, the target perspective is the spoken and written word. Unlike Gendlin in TAE, Petitmengin in MPI is not concerned with the development of new, logically consistent theories and concepts, but with uncovering and letting go of the usual structures of our relationship to the world (Petitmengin 2021).

This uncovering takes place in extensive transcriptions, in which a specific micro-experience is described in its developmental and relational structure with phenomenological precision. In contrast to this, the TAE process condenses the thinking related to a concrete experience, step by step, into fewer and fewer terms that are as accurate as possible so that theories can be developed. The focus of the two methods is on the verbalisation of non-verbal experiential processes. TAE and MPI have their own power as forms of education in that they make body knowledge accessible, sharpen sensory perceptions, offer other forms of articulation and include the social dimension – for example through the presence of a focusing or interview partner. Both TAE and MPI are epistemic techniques that require a lot of practice, time and space.

Similar to one-dimensional mindfulness programmes, these methods of embodied thinking could also benefit from prior mindfulness literacy training in the university context. This is especially true if TAE and MPI are understood as more than discipline-specific techniques for creative writing in the humanities. In conclusion, we outline a proposal that places TECT methods, together with target group-specific mindfulness trainings, within the transformation framework outlined in the introduction with reference to Scharmer and Huxley.



## Conclusion

How can multidimensional mindfulness courses and TECT methods support the transition from the horizontal to the vertical university culture of the 21st century? In what ways do these methods contribute to fulfilling “our business as educators” (Huxley 1956, 26), which is “to discover how human beings can make the best of both worlds – the world of self-conscious, verbalized intelligence and the world of the unconscious intelligences immanent in the mind-body” (Huxley 1956, 26)? How can a force be cultivated that goes beyond the humanities and promotes vertical higher education in the sense described by Scharmer as a “unity of research, teaching, and the praxis of transforming society and self” (Scharmer 2019)?

If multidimensional mindfulness courses and TECT methods are placed on a scale of verbal and non-verbal educational practices, it becomes clear that the TECT methods and the multidimensional mindfulness trainings come from different directions but move towards each other. While TECT methods move from the verbal to the non-verbal and back again, the curriculum of multidimensional mindfulness trainings move in and towards the non-verbal while using verbalisation as a medium to explore the non-verbal spaces of individual, social, and ecosystemic awareness.

Both programmes combine different methods and forms of training, have a pluralistic methodology, and make vertical dimensions of human education accessible in universities. They connect the human mind with emotional and somatic spaces of experience but set different emphases. TECT explores the non-verbal spaces of experience in order to generate epistemically precise descriptions of phenomena (MPI) or theory-enabled forms of knowledge (TAE). Multidimensional mindfulness trainings do not follow a theoretical agenda. In a pragmatic way, they contribute to the promotion of attention and emotion regulation as well as the alignment of movement impulses and willpower toward prosocial and public welfare-oriented behaviour.

The multidimensional mindfulness trainings and TECT are at different stages in their development process. Multidimensional mindfulness courses are the result of a scientific development, evaluation and scaling process that began in Jena in 2015 and has spread from Thuringia to universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. These programmes were developed in a rapid prototyping process, tested with several thousand participants, and evaluated from a social science and medical perspective (Sandbothe and Albrecht 2024). The TECT approach has been designed in a Europe-wide network since 2021. If an independent TECT curriculum results, a scaling and evaluation process can follow.

An evidence-based TECT curriculum could be designed as preparatory literacy for higher-level continuing education programmes (such as TAE and MPI) and then be used within established horizontal higher education to optimise knowledge production, particularly in the humanities. Furthermore, it is also conceivable as a bridging programme that facilitates the transition from horizontal higher education to vertical. In both cases, the TECT curriculum

could prepare, support, and/or extend the use of multidimensional mindfulness trainings at universities. If we cross the bridge formed by multidimensional mindfulness trainings and the TECT curriculum, the potential space of a vertical educational landscape opens up, a space composed of already existing practices and training programmes that have been tested worldwide.

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## Part IV

# Emancipations

If research is understood in terms of disciplinary progress, of personally getting on with one's career, producing output and raising one's citation index, and if teaching and learning are understood as delivering and absorbing content according to set curricula, one might wonder why we use such a philosophically, historically, and socially loaded term as emancipation as the title for this last section of our book.

Emancipation, historically, implies an act of freeing a person, more often a group of people, from legal, economic, social, or political restraints that reduce and hamper their possibilities, their development as individuals or as a group, their right to expression, and, of course, the opportunities for their lived experience to be heard and play a role in a society's understanding of itself. In this way, emancipatory motivations are obviously at the heart of democratic education. Putting an embodied-experiential approach into practice in research, teaching, and learning touches this motivational core, and at the same time exposes a difficult, decisive crux in mainstream scientific practice. One of science's major sources of insight has been philosophically well described and analysed as the skill of approaching anything as if "from nowhere." Natural scientists, in particular, are trained in how to place themselves "out of the picture," as detached observers. The neutrality of their personal presence – the putative ability to substitute one researcher for another and get the same result – has been central to the effort to build a shared, accumulating body of knowledge. Through it, enormous progress has been made, including liberation from the randomness of prejudice-loaded thinking, and from powerful authorities claiming privileged access to truth. Technological and medical progress, based on scientific research, has saved and eased lives while furthering possibilities of human unfolding.

What does an embodied experiential approach add to this? It adds an intricately emancipatory effect that opens up a crux, a nexus, a pivot point, in this success-story. Being neutral – stepping out of the picture – is an advanced first-person skill. The possibilities of the *personal* character of our presence within practices of "being objective" are masked, placed in the shadows, by the usual ways in which (particularly in natural science) we think about being objective. Putting an embodied-experiential approach into practice within the

context of academic practices strives to add to, and not to undo, this cultural skill we call objectivity. It strives to open up further reflective spaces in which the rigorous standards of science are complemented by the competence of engaging one's own ground of thinking more skilfully, bringing oneself into the picture more reflectively, and finding one's own voice in the thickness of scientific contexts. Schoeller's chapter showed that in various research groups and communities this has been recognised as an important source of insight; but the *rhetoric* of science pushes it into the background.

Students, researchers and teachers often say that encountering methods of embodied critical thinking and understanding, like TAE, Focusing, Micro-phenomenology, and meditative approaches, enabled not just original thoughts, but a kind of understanding of themselves, others, and of subject matters, that has been discovery-like. This element of discovery is rather fundamental in character. Participants, whether students, or experienced teachers and researchers, describe it as finding one's voice, finding how to be more fully oneself and present in an academic context, finding what it is like to think-for-themselves, finding a new kind of respect for the potentials of what is closest to hand: the surprising richness of lived experience, if attended to with proper means and skills; the gratifying spaces of listening, when this is mutual; the subtlety and expansiveness of languaging, if one slows down and learns to attend to how words are landing and how words are emerging. Only after practising and experiencing embodied-experiential approaches, have many of us realised how much we yearned for such dimensions of being and thinking within academic practices. Furthering unfolding of human experience, furthering encouragement to think for oneself, furthering multi-level understanding of self, others, and topics, in the context of academia, is fully in line with John Dewey's vision of an emancipatory democratic education. The philosopher Philip Kitcher (2001, 301), continuing on from Dewey, writes:

if democracy is to be a way of life, shot through and through with occasions of joint deliberation, future citizens must learn how to be adept discussants. They must be good listeners, able to enter and understand others' perspectives, skilled at mutual engagement.

We agree. However, putting an embodied-experiential approach into practice implies bringing a more-than-human story into this understanding of democratic education. Attending to embodiment has us attending to being in – being a flux in – our environments, down to the cellular level. Attending to an embodied dimension of thinking implies opening up to vulnerability and to joy, to the complexity and interdependence of our embedding, which always exceeds our theories, categories, and agendas. In this way, the emancipatory dimension of embodied thinking practices does not just concern humans, but humans opening up to the more-than-human world they are and are in. The next sections touches on these effects and the challenges that come with them, written by teachers and researchers reflecting on their experience of teaching and thinking in more experiential-embodied ways.

Each of Sandberg's, Eisenberg's, and Walkerden's chapters show students experiencing the emancipatory potential of embodied thinking skills. Sandberg shows how working proactively with their emotional responses to climate change was a pathway for students into taking their feelings seriously as sources of knowledge and that this often led to emancipatory shifts emerging from felt understandings. Eisenberg shows ways Gendlin's focusing practice can be brought into architectural education, evoking a flowering of new teaching methods. He shows how weaving focusing processes into design work empowered students to find their voices as designers. Walkerden shows students designing and carrying out felt sense centred reflective practice experiments, using settings from their everyday lives to practice stakeholder analysis, negotiation, creative thinking, etc. – developing their skills in working intrapreneurially to catalyse socio-ecological change. Sauke explores the use of embodied thinking in teaching and research in environmental philosophy, touching ways of reconnecting humans with their lived environments and freeing research practices from tacit disconnections.

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# 11 Focusing on emotions in climate education

## A felt sense of the climate

*Ole Martin Sandberg*

As a teacher who primarily works in environmental education, I use this chapter to describe some of my experiences with using the methodologies of embodied thinking in education, and the results as seen from my perspective and those of the students. I have participated in the *Embodied Critical Thinking* (ECT) research project at the University of Iceland and the international project *Training Embodied Critical Thinking* which draws upon, among others, the theories and methodologies of the philosopher-psychologist Eugene Gendlin as well as cognitive scientists like Antonio Damasio and Francisco Varela (see Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019). These projects have influenced my teaching in different courses related to environmental ethics. In these, critical embodied thinking was used in various ways with remarkable impacts on student engagement and outcomes. To limit the scope of this text, I focus on a course called *Coping with Climate Change*, taught in the summer of 2021, which had a concise topic and a specific experimental approach. Although it was a philosophy course, we read and discussed texts from a wide range in humanities and social science on aspects of the climate crisis and the students were asked to take note of their emotional states during the course to track and reflect upon how the texts affected them, their well-being, and their outlook on the future.

In all the courses, though, an emphasis has been on going beyond the texts in the curriculum. We are not here merely to learn and discuss the arguments put forth in a given text; rather we are using the texts as catalysts to learn more about ourselves and the way we relate to the world and the topics. Different texts allow us to examine topics from different perspectives. By focusing on how they *affect* us, the readers, we can also discover a process of personal development that can have lasting effects beyond the next exam period: each change in perspective is not merely a different argument but also a potential change of the self who is reading it. By encouraging students to pay attention to their embodied and affective reactions to a text and to relate it to personal experiences we bridge the gaps between abstract and concrete, objective and subjective, universal and personal, intellectual and intuitional, academia, and everyday life. In short, we make education *relevant*. Furthermore, it liberates the students from the constraints of rigid academic style and requirements of

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prior background familiarity with academic concepts and encourages them to *think for themselves*. Starting with your personal and embodied situation and analysing your feelings is not an act of individualist narcissism; it is rather a starting point that encourages critical reflections on your connection to global issues (see also Gendlin 1987) in a way that makes abstract issues *concrete*.

### **Coping with climate change**

The climate crisis affects everything on this planet and is therefore part of every topic we teach, implicitly or explicitly. And conversely, every academic topic has a role to play in climate mitigation and adaptation because all human activities are in one way or another part of this complex process. As the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) makes clear, mitigating the worst consequences of climate change requires "unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" (IPCC 2019, v). It is, in other words, not a simple problem that can be solved by natural science or technological quick-fixes but one that requires a system-wide transformation of "the social fabric of society" including a "shift in world views and values" (UNEP 2021, 28). Stating it this way has the unfortunate side effect of making it feel overwhelming and incomprehensible. The magnitude of the potential disasters that can follow from catastrophic climate change, as well as the magnitude of the societal transformations that must happen to prevent them, is a source of anxiety, frustration, and depression among many in our time, especially in the younger generations.

These emotions are among the issues we must deal with in order to deal with climate change. As Susanne Moser says: "Neglecting the emotional reception of climate-related news makes communication and outreach efforts more likely to fail" (Moser 2007, 65). Moser also notes that there is a tradition in Western culture of seeing emotions as the opposite of "rational thought," and thus not as something scientists or educators should engage with, but that scientists have come to see emotions in a "more positive light" (Moser 2007, 67). One of the pioneers in this research is the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio whose research shows that, rather than being in opposition to or separate from each other, "certain aspects of the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality" (Damasio 1995, xiii). Many of our real-life decisions depend on information that is not available to conscious cognition but is still absorbed in the body through its interaction with the environment and informs our actions through feelings or emotions. Thus, a "reduction in emotion may constitute an equally important source of irrational behaviour" (Damasio 1995, 53).

Emotion and feeling,<sup>1</sup> Damasio says, "assist us with the daunting task of predicting an uncertain future and planning our actions accordingly" (Damasio 1995, xiii) and what could be more important than that when dealing with the uncertain future caused by climate change? Furthermore, feelings "provide the urge and the incentive to behave according to the information they carry

and do what is most appropriate for the current situation” (Damasio 2021, 83) and since climate action is urgently needed, whether that is in the form of mitigation or adaptation, feelings are an important factor to consider when we teach about climate change. This is also for the sake of the students themselves, many of whom are processing their own difficult climate-related feelings such as ecoanxiety, ecoparalysis, and solastalgia (Albrecht 2011). As Moser says: “unhampered, or unattended to, feelings can also paralyze or mislead us. This just further underscores why we ignore or dismiss them at our peril” (Moser 2007, 67). The bioethicists David Schenck and Larry Churchill go a step further and argue that we “must move from a cognitive, observer understanding of our situation to a felt embodiment of our predicament, from intellectual knowledge to bodily acknowledgment” (Schenck and Churchill 2021).

Therefore, when I designed the course *Coping With Climate Change*, one of the assignments for the students was to keep a journal where they kept track of their emotional reactions to the texts and their development over the course. Especially relevant was whether any of the readings and discussions made them feel differently and whether those feelings seemed more constructive in terms of their well-being or their motivation to take meaningful actions. We read a wide range of texts covering various aspects of climate change such as economics and politics (Mann and Wainwright 2018; Brand and Wissen 2021), history and colonialism (Davis and Todd 2017; Whyte 2018; Malm and Hornborg 2014), media and discourse analysis (Bettini 2013; Foust and Murphy 2009), philosophy (Gardiner 2013; Tuana 2020), ethics and sociology. Some of the texts were gloomy while others were more optimistic – this is important because we don’t know what the future will look like so it is relevant to prepare for and contemplate different possible scenarios. Equally important, though, is the fact that “our visions of the future affect our ability to act in the present” which affects the possible futures (Sandberg 2020). The question is thus not which text is more “realistic” but rather what it does to you and what you can do with it. While the students were encouraged to write openly and honestly about their affective processes, they were also told that they were welcome to edit this writing before handing it in case they did not wish to share every personal detail with the teacher. They were though, surprisingly honest. In the following, I present some of the students’ reflections in paraphrased form to preserve anonymity.

### **“Climate change is personal”**

On the one hand, the course helped some of the students deal with their anxiety and find a sense of hope amid despair. After the course, one student wrote:

Reflecting on my feelings since the course started, I’ve observed that I do feel anxious about the effects of climate change, but this course has helped me realize that giving up and filling myself with anxiety, stress and depression doesn’t help.

Another student described a similar process: *“This take on climate change and how we can kind of change the future helped a lot with the anxiety I have been feeling.”* Several others describe their experiences of climate anxiety and how it changed during the course: either as an underlying background feeling they became more conscious of during the course or as the reason they took the course, but all describe a shift in their anxiety. This is not because the course consisted of reading material that downplayed the severity of the problem – on the contrary, we read some of the most gloomy worst-case scenarios discussing the possibilities of civilisational collapse and human extinction (Kemp et al. 2022; Steel, DesRoches, and Mintz-Woo 2022; Bendell 2018). But we also read more optimistic texts about what can be done and what people are actually doing to prevent those possible futures (Beck 2014; Papazu 2016), keeping a focus on the message that the trajectory of the future depends on the actions taken in the present.

On the other hand, some students felt some of the material unnecessarily increased their sense of hopelessness. One student wrote that they didn’t find the depressing reading materials helpful: *“It’s not helpful to hear ‘you’re doomed’ all the time, whatever the problem is.”* But, as the same student comment continued: *“But then the solutions became more prominent and I began to think ‘yes, this is what I have been looking for in my journey.’”* Others appreciated the more pessimistic reading material as part of the process of working through their climate emotions; a process they compared to the process of denial, depression, and anger one might feel after being diagnosed with a severe illness: by going through the emotions and accepting them you might come to terms with the situation and be better equipped do something constructive about it. This student concluded *“We don’t know the future yet, and there are many possible futures available to us. But before opening up, it is important to grieve our past reality.”*

As mentioned, the concept of the many possible futures was a key theme and one of the reasons we read a wide range of literature with speculations about future scenarios. Whether or not the students agreed with a specific text they generally appreciated the variety. They were told it was okay to be irritated with a text but also encouraged to interrogate themselves about where that irritation might come from and reflect upon it. This, in itself, can lead to fruitful insights, as one student wrote: *“It has been interesting to observe my own reactions to the different texts and ponder why some of them resonate and others less, or not at all.”* The same student also said: *“The variation has given me a better understanding of the complexity of the situation and the different outlooks on it, which in turn has made me concerned in a calm way rather than panicky.”* That comment summarises my aspiration for the course: To convey the severity and complexity of the situation in a way that acknowledges the students’ concerns and anxieties without inducing in them either paralysing despair or equally pacifying naïve optimism. I too struggle with finding the affective balance and being concerned “in a calm way rather than panicky” seems like a good and constructive outcome.

A further outcome is expressed in the following comment:

I feel like I have come such a long way. It has only been a few weeks but my biggest accomplishment is that I actually care. I want to help. I did not think that my mind would change so easily or so fast.

That students come out of a course as changed people is an aspiration for many teachers but rarely achieved. The topics we teach rarely connect to urgent matters in the “real world” nor to the students’ own experiences. Climate change is an urgent and real issue, but it is often taught abstractly, as something that doesn’t concern us here and now, something that is out of our hands, or only a matter of science or policy. Despite us being cognitively aware that it is a very real and serious global process, it often feels abstract, especially when it is presented in the form Timothy Morton calls an “information dump” (Morton 2019, xviii). I think this might be what the student means by discovering they “actually care.” Of course, students who take an elective course on climate change must already care about the issue, but there is a difference between knowing about a topic and feeling it. Psychologists call this “psychological distancing”: when a topic is presented in a “big picture” way, it can seem abstract and impersonal (McDonald, Chai, and Newell 2015; Maiella et al. 2020). Connecting education about the complex process of climate change to the personal and affective processes experienced by each student allows the students to each go through their own individualised education: we are all reading the same texts but each is encouraged to process it in their own way. Everything we care about will be affected by climate change so there is no wrong place to start the process of coming to care at a personal level because the personal is intimately entangled with the global. One student described their experience in these words:

I experienced a profound personal growth regarding my thoughts and emotions about climate change which I didn’t expect. Climate change is personal, and I knew I needed to start thinking about it in that way. This was a big shift in mindset for me and as the course went on, I felt like my understanding and way of thinking about climate change developed into something deeper and more profound.

Words like these: shift in mindset, personal growth, being on a journey, going through a process of change, are not par for the course in a philosophy course. They signify the importance of taking the students seriously as knowledge-seekers by encouraging them to take their feelings seriously as sources of knowledge. We can provide students with facts, most of which they already have access to via the Internet, but helping them process these facts is a different matter. I also think the students’ phrases reveal the relevance of Eugene Gendlin’s insights from psychological therapy: focusing on a problem is not solely a cognitive process and often the problem cannot be expressed

or solved by concepts alone; the trouble must be felt in the body (Gendlin 1981, 146). This is not to dismiss traditional philosophy based on conceptual analysis but, as Gendlin says, “we cannot even know what a concept ‘means’ or use it meaningfully without the ‘feel’ of its meaning” (Gendlin 1962, 5). Sheila Jasanoff makes a similar observation, that climate facts are not the same as meaning: the former arise from impersonal observations while the latter emerge from personal experience (Jasanoff 2010). Words and concepts can help though: By going through different possible articulations – or by reading and discussing different texts – we might find that they adequately articulate our felt meaning (Walkerden 2005) and thereby enable us to unfold it further: “You get to where the trouble is and it shifts” (Gendlin 1981, 173). Or maybe they don’t feel right but exploring that not-rightness is also fruitful because it can be a sign that “more is needed” (Schoeller 2023). This sense-making is a process in which both we and our understanding of the problem develop together: working through a problem in a way that takes the embodied aspect of it seriously will therefore be a form of personal change and growth. We realise that we are part of the problem and the problem is part of us. As Gendlin says: “The bodily concrete version of the problem (not just our thoughts, but our being the problem) has shifted in a bodily physical way. That is a step of experiential change” (Gendlin 1978, 328).

### **Felt shifts: from “despair” to “joy”**

In their book, *Being Ecological*, Morton remarks that at almost every environmental conference, someone will eventually voice their frustration and say something like: “but what are we supposed to be *doing*?” (Morton 2019, xxiv). Morton considers this a symptom of going through a traumatic experience and desperately seeking a way to prevent it in an attempt to avoid realising that it is already here. The fact we must come to terms with is that we don’t know what to do. Or rather, from a technical and scientific perspective, we know exactly what to do: we need to – stop (or drastically reduce) all carbon emissions – but since we, as a civilisation, are *not* doing it, a more interesting and pressing question is “why are we not?” and perhaps “given this fact, what can and should we then do?” This is not a simple scientific issue, and there are no straightforward answers. This frustrates some students who want solutions. I can only assure them that I am as frustrated as they are. If I, or anyone else who cares about the existing and coming generations, had a simple solution to the climate crisis, we would not be wasting our time in academic conferences or teaching courses. We would be out doing it.

Still, though, I hope that the students find some individualised answers to the question: “what are we supposed to be doing?” Not through me giving them any answers to that question but through them working through and feeling in their bodies questions like: “What do I care about? What am I most concerned about? How can I act on that? What motivates me to act and what is preventing me from acting?” Here it is important to emphasise,

as Gendlin does, that “only your body knows your problems and where their cruxes lie” (Gendlin 1981, 12). As we discuss the different texts, a student might feel “a physical change in the body, a felt shift” (Gendlin 1981, 12). It is important to pay attention to this because “without tapping the deeper bodily level, which is at first always unclear, one would stay stuck with the thoughts and feelings of what the problem appears to be at the beginning” (Gendlin 1981, 12). Focusing on the felt sense is not about accepting it at face value though, because with the felt shift in the body comes a change that makes the problem seem different. Students, and all of us, need to go through the different shifts that change the nature of the problem of climate change. This includes reading texts that are frustrating and cause irritation. Do you think Bendell (2018) is exaggerating the threat or maybe that his dystopian vision is too fatalistic and causes resignation? Good! That is not a reason to reject the text but to see it as an opportunity for reflection. Moments of irritation or excitement at a text can be “read” as carefully as one reads the text itself (Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019). Pay attention to the irritation and ask what we can do to prevent his vision from becoming a reality. What other texts and visions are giving you a bodily reaction? Can you use them to find out what motivates you and let them lead you out of disembodied indifference or despair? Spinoza defined emotions as “affections of the body by which the body’s power of action is augmented or diminished” (Spinoza 2018, 95). The key, then, is to pay attention to the emotions caused by different ideas and analyses and ask whether they diminish or increase your power to act.

My personal process led me through the apocalyptic texts about how climate change might cause the collapse of civilisation to the notion that, given current and recent sociopolitical developments, they are more likely to reinforce and intensify many of the worst features of our civilisation, which is frankly a prospect I find more frightening (Sandberg 2020). Having gone through this shift, I resonate with Gendlin’s claim that “the problem now posed in new terms may still not be solved; it may look worse (but it feels enormously better)” (Gendlin 1978, 328). Why would changing the problem into one that seems more frightening feel better? Because it allowed me to articulate the problem and find an answer to the question: “What am I supposed to be doing?” If climate change is a threat multiplier that will exacerbate the worst social problems, such as exploitation, inequality, xenophobia, and military domination, then we know what we can do here and now: any fight for social justice in the present is also a fight to mitigate some of the worst consequences of catastrophic climate change in the future. Posing the problem as one of civilisational collapse does not provide me with a feeling of what to do. It is a problem to be stuck in. But the problem now posed in new terms does feel better, although it looks worse, because I know that to change the trajectory of the future I need to act in the present to change the structural features of this civilisation. That is still a daunting task but at least it gives me purpose and motivation.



Despair is a common feeling regarding climate change. Spinoza defines despair as the effect caused by a frightening image of something in the future combined with a sense of certainty (2018, 110). Removing that certainty is a cause of hope. It brings the realisation that the future is not yet determined and that it is shaped by our actions, which is a felt shift that in Spinoza's terms increases our power to act. The effect related to the bodily passage of a state of despair to one of increased action is what Spinoza calls "joy" (see Deleuze 1988, 50). Joy in this sense is thus not a state of being happy about the situation, but rather about the bodily shift that comes from stating the problem in new terms in a way that can help you act with greater clarity and intention. This, I think, is what Gendlin means by stating that even though the problem now seems worse, going through the process of rearticulating it will feel better. Gendlin's process of focusing on the felt sense and the implicit meanings in the body is a way out of being stuck in a problem, a way out of despair and perhaps a way towards joy. The relevance of this approach, not just in philosophy but in all education that aims at empowering students to wrestle with problems by looking at them from different angles and seeing how they themselves are also part of the problem, is illustrated by this comment from a student in the course:

I signed up for this course because it was time for me to face climate change and my anxieties about it but it did not occur to me that it might give me an answer to the question of the importance of philosophy in the modern age.

## Note

- 1 Damasio distinguishes between feelings and emotions. Feelings are an organism's experience of bodily processes while emotions are more specific reactions to those experiences. Emotions can accompany feelings and can cause feelings (Damasio 2021, 78). Eugene Gendlin makes a similar distinction between emotions and what he calls the "felt meaning": the latter is the bodily sense of the whole situation while the former are specific patterns that can accompany this sense (Gendlin 1973, 370).

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# 12 Embodied critical thinking and environmental embeddedness

The sensed knots of knowledge

*Anne Sauka*

## Recognising the embodied ground of thinking

The dominating consumerist and capitalist genealogies have inflated the thing-orientation<sup>1</sup> to *cancerous* proportions (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 163; Marder 2021, 63; Sauka 2020a), and have been identified by environmental philosophers and other humanities scholars as evidence of a human–environment disconnection (Petitmengin 2021) that has seeped into our values, attitudes, and practices from the way we speak to our lived materialities and experiences.

Claire Petitmengin expresses it thusly:

The drama that we live as a human born in our Western civilization is that we are most of the time cut off from the felt dimension, the living heart of our experience. It would be more accurate to say that we cut ourselves off from it, by a process of rigidification that it is possible to recognize and describe. From moment to moment, we spend considerable energy trying to identify fixed forms in the fluidity of the world, objects of which we can say “this,” because it is only upon this condition that we can think of ourselves as individuals and say “I.”

(Petitmengin 2021, 175–176)

In this quote, Petitmengin acknowledges the interconnected problems of self-identification via the dichotomisation of subject/object, human/nature, etc., and the materialities that *become* from the ways in which we self-identify and, thus, also the ways in which we experience ourselves and our lifeworlds.

While it might seem like a trivial truth, how we approach, experience, and live our lifeworlds undeniably impacts our lived materialities. For example, in my home country Latvia the official public communication by the “Latvian State Forest” and “Riga Forests LLC” sometimes likens the forest to a bed of carrots. For example, a representative from Ltd “Riga Forest” has stated: “Forest management can be compared to agriculture, but there nobody cries about a carrot that is pulled out of its bed, yet we have to justify the cutting of the trees” (Kondrāts 2017). It presumes that the forest needs to be

harvested, replanted, and managed for it to thrive, in the same way that we approach a carrot bed in a garden. While one can argue that this approach is faulty (which it is), it is also a self-fulfilling prophecy that *turns* the forest into such a bed of carrots. Examples like that run across all domains of biopolitics to environmental policies, from the overuse of antibiotics to pollution of production, waste policies, and sustainability goals. All of these interrelated problems are characterised by depoliticisation (Neimanis et al. 2015), atomisation of the largely entangled issues, and an overall underrepresentation of more-than-human and environmental impact on human problems. In a more global sense, the dichotomy of wilderness/civilisation,<sup>2</sup> for example, endeavours a factual alienation between these domains, where the city becomes the only imaginable natural environment for a human being.

As a result, if intuitively one might feel wrong about describing a forest as a bed of carrots, or distinguishing wilderness from civilisation, what are we really left with, if not a plantation of carrot-like trees and an “untouchable” wilderness on the borders of a polluted city? The answer seems to lie within this fragile acknowledgement of this picture as counterintuitive to many. While everything, from pollution to the sixth extinction, and everyone from sociologists to biologists points toward Western societies as unrelenting consumers, colonisers, and killers of the environment, yet so many of us find that characterisation hard to digest, have an innate sense of nature as our home, and think of nature as something crucially connected to what and how we are. Precisely, this embodied intuition of there being something “more” to ourselves and our relations with nature than the predominant narrative tells us seems to point toward alternative stories, through which we are told and have lived, without even sometimes realising it. It seems that this “intuition” or *gut feeling* of connectedness and more variations of different relationalities to nature might be the crux that provides answers that might inform thinking and research practices.

Hence, in environmental philosophy, when seeking ethical knowing for the future, it is crucial to seek out that which is “already there” (Sauka 2023, 2024) – that is the alternative ways of relating to each other and the more-than-human earth that are already within our potentialities and quite possibly – also within our everyday experience, if perhaps concealed by the dominating lifeworlds of today’s urban societies in which many of us live. The stories or myths that we have told about ourselves in the past are one such potent source of knowing, when addressed in the modality of “how” rather than “what” (Petitmengin 2021; Yunkaporta 2020; Rasmussen 2021), that is – in the context of how they potentially engage us with the world around us, rather than in the context of “what” these stories convey (in the modern sense of facts).

In my work, when I address mythologies as potential sources for environmental knowing, I adhere to the methodology of critical genealogy (Foucault 1977; Koopman 2013). Rather than seeking the “objective” history, genealogical thinking turns to the “history of the present” (Sauka 2020b) and

acknowledges the manifoldness and open-ended character of the stories from which we come and through which we are told.

When doing environmental philosophy this way, however, it is important to acknowledge that such a change in focus from “what” to “how” entails a reconnection of philosophy and research practices in a broader sense to the realm of first-person embodied and embedded experience. This is also supported by the recent upsurge of first-person approaches, such as Embodied Critical Thinking, microphenomenology (Petitmengin 2017, 2021), and ecophenomenology (Abram 1997, 2011). These further illuminate the significance of recognising and revitalising human–environment relations on an experiential level of the “felt sense” (Gendlin 1966) for endeavouring a renewed proximity with nature.<sup>3</sup> That also includes the nature within oneself based on that, which is “already there,” within the grasp of our embodied experience.

Thus, I am faced with two interconnected ways of knowing – a genealogical approach that relies on altering the stories that have been told “about us” by reaching to the ones we are told by, and a phenomenological approach that adheres to the experiential knowing, revitalisation, and recognition of human–nature relationality in the here and now. I continue struggling to grapple with both of these aspects separately, and in connection, with my other work (Sauka 2022a, 2022b). Yet, faced with the experiential, embodied aspect of thought as such a significant part of doing environmental philosophy, especially in the works of philosophers such as David Abram, Arne Naess, I could not help but wonder about the presence of a phenomenological facet in all aspects of research, in as far as research is always also connected to the scientist and their lifeworld (Petitmengin 2021). How do we make this presence seen?

To actualise the leap in thinking, it seems significant to make my connection with the lifeworld and felt sense explicit to both myself and the world, to emancipate research practice and language from “abouting” to “thinking from within” in a way that is also communicable between disciplines and scholars. Thus, in this chapter, I approach the role of Embodied Critical Thinking (ECT) in environmental humanities research. ECT as an experimental experiential approach<sup>4</sup> that taps into the body via felt senses (Schoeller 2020) for doing research is a viable approach to draw to the fore the aspects of our experience that reflect embodied embeddedness and exist in a modality that goes beyond dichotomic thinking. Even more, via the felt sensing of the body as processual (Gendlin 2017), environmental embeddedness, and embodiment are at the core of ECT and Thinking at the Edge (TAE) research (Gendlin 2004).

In this context, ECT scholars highlight the link between experiencing embodiment and environment and the role of embodied experiences in the way we constitute and conceptualise nature (Schroeder 2008; Jóhannesdóttir and Thorgeirsdóttir 2016; Petitmengin 2021) and argue for the transformative potential of ECT (Schoeller and Thorgeirsdóttir 2019; Krycka 2006) that could allow us to reach into ourselves to find alternative, already present, experienced environmental embeddedness to more profoundly sense and

understand ontologies we live by as a precondition for transformative action (Gendlin 1997, 2017; Petitmengin 2021).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, this chapter makes the tentative claim that, while a lot, if not most of environmental humanities research already rests on a kind of “felt sense”<sup>6</sup> that comes from the very fibres of being or, so to say, “from the guts” of the researcher,<sup>7</sup> the application of ECT practices could be emancipating to make this kind of embodied, enactive, and embedded thinking more explicit. Enhancing the visibility of the embodied phenomenological facet of research would come with several benefits, including the possibility to decide to consciously include “felt sense” in the framework of research as well as the opportunity to self-reflect on the embodied and experiential aspects of thinking.

Moreover, it is also important to take into account that, if the dominating narratives are intrusive and stifling for the way we experience and constitute ourselves as individuals in a world that is seen as disconnected from us, they also stifle our knowledge communication with each other. This means that we might lack words to express the embodied intuitions, and we might thus find it challenging to go beyond a dualist thinking about subject–object division that phenomenologists of the body as well as feminist philosophers have criticised and elaborated upon by demonstrating how the subject and object are intertwined.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to show how ECT can serve as a vital tool for recognising, revitalising, and reflecting embodied, enactive, and embedded thinking that comes from a felt sense, including, in research practices beyond ecophenomenology. In particular, the chapter traces the application of Eugene Gendlin’s move of *instancing* from his methodology of TAE to showcase the use of embodied knowing and felt sense in the context of environmental philosophy as well as its teaching, learning, and research. Thus, in a move from a “what” this theory is about to a “how” to enact it on a methodological level, this chapter takes me on an open-ended journey – a thinking process that in itself might prove useful for gaining some insight into environmental reconnection.

### **Reaching *beyond* with Embodied Critical Thinking**

What does *doing* Embodied Critical Thinking in research look like, and what types of insights can it provide? Eugene Gendlin states:

Every topic and situation is more intricate than the existing concepts. Every living organism is a bodily interaction with an intricate situation and with the universe. When a human being who is experienced in some field senses something, there is always something. It could turn out to be quite different than it seemed at first, but it cannot be nothing.

(Gendlin 2004, 2)

Going out from the assumption of a deeper intricacy *within* the conventionally formulated concepts, TAE steps (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004) that are

adopted by the ECT approach (Schoeller 2023), thus, provide one possible method of reaching *beyond* the concepts that are usually adopted by researchers and binding one's research question or project to the felt sense *within* it. Taking these steps means taking into account the felt sense, as well as developing one's thought from and *with* these intuitions – a way of “carrying forward” (as per Gendlin 2017, see also Walkerden 2023). This way, one can express the intricate meaning that is often included within the concepts, yet, are inexplicable within the usual abstractions.

In the following, I will demonstrate the approach of ECT via TAE steps, to facilitate the use of embodied knowing and felt sensing in teaching and research in environmental philosophy and to showcase the application of these methods for bringing forth the implied experiential processuality and entanglement of materialities.

TAE steps can be taken alone, but more often than not it is helpful to have a partner, who follows closely one's progress in thinking, sometimes offering clarifying questions, and taking notes on what is said and felt. In this case, I met with a TAE partner/listener, who invited me to attend to my felt sense of doing research in environmental philosophy. In this exercise, we followed some of the TAE steps (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004) that included (1) forming a crux sentence that “comes up” from the problem/project at hand, (2) exploring the felt sense of the sentence, (3) rewriting the sentence based on the felt sense, (4) choosing the key concept of this sentence, (5) finding other ways to express the felt sense of this key concept, (6) defining all three key concepts. These adhere to Steps 1–5, “Speaking from the felt sense” (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004, 12–14). After this, we moved on to Steps 6–8, “Finding patterns from facets (instances)” (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004, 15–16). These steps include (1) *instancing* – anchoring the felt sense and crux sentences in experienced events – and (2) *crossing* – seeing what aspects stand out of the instances if they are looked upon together (Schoeller 2023, 304–306). As expressed in the TAE steps document, these steps help to “articulate an implicit knowing and make it communicable” (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004, 17).

### **TAE example – how to “carry forward”?**

#### *Key sentence, replacing words (steps 1–5)*

My problem in research has often been connected to the complexity of expressing the intricacy, processuality, materiality, and embeddedness of nature cultures in the context of a dualist and often *thing*-oriented use of language that seems to permeate the dominating genealogies, that is calculative and objectifying thinking patterns, attitudes, and language use. These often complicate the explanations of new materialist and posthumanist thinking, which then, in turn, seem lacking in the sense of pointing toward a different kind of thinking that does not offer a methodology for its achievement.



Although alternatives and instances of feeling and experiencing the world processually and in an embedded and embodied way are present both in the alternative genealogies that co-constitute us, as well as in everyday experience, these often get drowned out by the dominating strains and are harder to grasp, especially, in a coherent research context.

With this in mind, I formulated my first crux sentence:

*Surpassing contradictions to expose the obvious that is concealed.*

My partner asked: How is your felt sense of this? I then went on exploring the felt sense of the sentence. What does it entail for my research? How does it make me feel?

*There is a sense of urgency. Heaviness of hard work. Agitation. Need to do this whatever this is. Being worn down by this need. It would be easier to live without this need. If I could unsee the necessity to reveal the obviousness it would be easier not to have to write. Agitation until the work is done. It is a lot to put in every time.*

*Sadness. It is not obvious although it is. We could live but we cannot. We have to write.*

My partner then asked: *Is this the predicament of environmental philosophy?*

*The basic thought is so simple. Confusion that I need so many words to explain something so simple. There is a contradiction between the simplicity of thought and the many words.*

It became obvious that the felt sense behind the key sentence referred to research in environmental philosophy in a general sense – as a calling, as well as a burden at times, and touched upon the feeling of sadness that simple, and – at least to me – seemingly obvious thoughts often need endless theory writing, convincing and neologisms to express them. Moreover, and what is even more alarming, these struggles to express seemingly simple thoughts and the “felt sense” of human embeddedness in the world coherently often also lead to theoretical conflicts even between like-minded scholars.

My partner then inquired: *What is the thought?*

*Yes, what is the simple thought within everything?*

Me: The most simple thought: *We are the world. No difference between spirit and body. Meaning is inherent in the world.*

In this context, I dipped into the felt sense (Gendlin 1995), to see whether I could reformulate the key sentence: “Expressing inherent sensefulness coherently.” From here, I chose the word “sensefulness” as the main concept and thought of possible replacements for this word. Seeking replacements for your

favourite concepts can be significant since one is often “led” by the concepts that one uses most often, and these concepts conveniently function as placeholders that misleadingly seem to be self-explanatory. This can lead to disconnected theories that blindly accept that certain concepts mean something, while, upon their use, each researcher might have a richer meaning behind the use of these placeholder concepts, which would also deserve to be “felt within” more closely, as they could add to the theory more than the use of convenient abstractions.

When looking for a replacement, one does not need to think of a synonym in the dictionary sense of “replacement,” but rather to allow a felt sense to emerge. This way, it is possible to open up a concept and ask oneself – what do I mean when I use this concept? To delve into that, there is a TAE step of finding replacements for the word last used, that is the term sensefulness. The replacements that came out of further exploring of the felt sense were:

1. *Vibrancy of life*
2. *Relatedness.*

After finding the “replacements,” I went on to find definitions that would suit them, to gain further insight into what I mean when I use these words which I have grown so accustomed to that I often forget to question them.

Definitions of three terms:

*Sensefulness: Things and processes have meaning within them.*

*Vibrancy of life: The animacy of everything that is.*

*Relatedness: Direct relation and inbetweenness of actors.*

This initial framework of TAE Steps 1–5 then allowed us to move further with the move of *instancing*, to see whether any relevant instances come from the felt sense of the theme, from which the key sentence and the accompanying keywords emerged. The first instance that came to my mind was connected to the way thinking and language influence our practices and materialities:

*Production of trash via production of consumer things. I am constantly aware of buying cheap, unsustainable toys and clothing for my children. There is a double contradiction, I feel. First, the things themselves are an ontological contradiction – I need them but do not need them, and will soon discard them, since they are trash – a “should not have been” to begin with. Second, the children are so very nature-loving, embodied, and embedded beings of wonder who then need and use so much “stuff” from the production line of trash. An impossible conundrum. Sadness and heaviness when I think of this illogical situation of being a consumer. Cannot relate to the environment. To stay within society I have to buy things. We could make them more environmentally friendly with better quality. People cannot think of the sensefulness of the world; they would need to think differently.*

*This puts us in an impossible situation of no choice or a potential choice that is not made, like making quality products. Sustainable products.*

Here, being “caught by language” transferred also to being “caught by the system” that, similarly to my initial problem, points toward a systemic problem, a necessity for a change on a larger scale. Firstly, similarly to how a researcher is compelled to explain anything that is beyond the conventional abstractions in a lengthy way, a person wishing to live sustainably might struggle due to the systemic hindrances at play. Secondly, this instance also refers to the concept of “sensefulness” as a potential turning point, as a marker of a necessary change in ontological assumptions.

I then moved on to the next instance that came to mind with regard to the key sentence:

*Often philosophy students are so eager to run away from embodiment and embeddedness. It is so hard to demonstrate the need to embed our thinking and think environmentally. On the contrary, they tend to revel in the justifications of human ingenuity. Their heads are in the clouds of words. I remember this one instance in an exam. The student answered a question about “essence” and a quote on the difference between “self-moving” things and things that are moved from the outside – and the student chose grass and humans as the apparent opposites here. So many questions in me – why would you choose grass as a thing that is moved from the outside? Why was it so important to juxtapose yourself to another living being rather than a phone or a house, for example? In other words, why did nature fall victim to self-identification? Why does nature fall victim in so many cases of similar human exceptionalism that was reflected in the student’s answer? How is grass moved from the outside, you might ask. Well – it’s easy, they answered – the grass has a metabolism. Well, don’t we all. . . . The student did not have my questions, of course. Just living through the exam might be a feat comparable to how grass grows through the driest periods in the summer and still manages to somehow save some green. Yet it made me think of countless other times when I encountered a position – any position as always standing for or against something else. A is not not-A, always, and we identify ourselves as not being anything else – is it not curious? How to relate to the earth, if relation is dangerous to identification? How to accommodate that topic in teaching environmental philosophy or philosophy?*

Here I saw two interrelated problems coming up. Firstly, this instance is tied to the first one, in the context of the complexity of changing mindsets on a larger scale and changing the discourses that rule over society not only in a language-related context but as materially embedded systems of living. Secondly, alienated and argumentative thinking often bypass similarities, as it values differentiating, branching, and distinguishing. Synthesising theories and

approaches becomes possible when concepts are stripped of their seeming conflictuality and juxtaposition that is often only present because of a disconnection brought by the use of words that do not align with the felt sense. We are even pressured to define in the introductory parts of essays or dissertations, the precise ways in which this exact piece of philosophical research is distinct from others and represents a certain niche (the “what”), though, we are never asked to inquire *how* these particular concepts relate me to the world? And that could be important, since asking – what are the contents beyond the concept that I use, and how the concept relates me to the world, might often bring about surprising connections with other concepts that are used for the same reasons, while being of different or even opposite meanings. Some researchers might use “transcendence” for the same reasons as others use the concept “immanence,” while for others “materiality” relates to meanings in the same way as “spirituality” for others. Probing and inquiring this “how,” whilst not simple, might inspire you to engage with this complexity of expressions and relationalities.

Both instances also brought to light the problem of hopelessness in the face of large, systemic hurdles for both research and experiencing environmental embeddedness. Thus, I formed a new key sentence:

*Teaching and learning mindful embeddedness without losing hope.*

This sentence served as an initial crossing of the sentences – that exposed one of the biggest challenges in environmental philosophy – the necessity to seek affirmative approaches and to both acknowledge but also not subject oneself to hopelessness. As expressed earlier, I use the TAE term *crossing* for a process of noticing the points of connection (or disconnection) that happen when both instances enter my thinking at once. This is not a comparison or contrast in the conventional sense, but rather a tentative probing around the felt sense – what comes up, if we think of these sentences together?

I then went on to cross these instances once more and added another thought to the mix. Namely, the keywords “without losing hope.”

*When they understand. Sometimes eager not to know.*

*Example: Lose hope means apathy. How to inspire without extinguishing hope?*

Then, a crossing instance came up for not losing hope:

*Mushroom event. People growing mushrooms. Artist coloring fabrics with plants.*

*Small hands-on practices that give hope. Something you can do with your hands. Something small people can do so we sense relatedness with earth.*

*Partner: Is there something more?*

*This is related to creative expression.*

In this instance, I focused on a recent event, when I gave a speech before the screening of the film “Fantastic Fungi” in a small town cinema in Latvia. This event was organised by a couple who have started a mushroom business, providing people with the possibility to grow oyster mushrooms and lion’s manes at home in specially prepared boxes. This instance not only logically leads me to affirmative environmental ethics as something that starts from small, creative practices and actions but also reminds us of the potential of the use of creative expression and hands-on exercises in teaching environmental philosophy. These exercises might be directed at direct experience of life’s processuality and connection to nature, etc. These could then help in arriving at alternative genealogies of processuality within our bodies, beyond an either/or – or even transforming contradictions into a synthesis of meaning, allowing us to think outside of the restraints of pre-given abstractions by looking within what is “already there.”

Finally, thus, I arrived at the idea of activism and hands-on practices as vehicles for shifting ontologies in an environmental context. The steps of TAE, hence, brought to the fore a previously unthought-of aspect of environmental education. While I knew and had engaged in hands-on practices and exercises, I often regarded them as too minor to be of any “real” impact, yet, the process of instancing and crossing allowed me to arrive not only at their significance but also to a reevaluation of their potential. Finding hope in the “minor” has long been mirrored by the systemic injustice and unsustainability of the “major,” yet, within these instances, I finally saw their mirror-connectedness as a potentially productive and hopeful combination, rather than a desperate cry for help.

On a meta-level, the TAE steps are themselves such a hands-on exercise, which I embarked upon when exploring my own embodied embeddedness within the thought processes that led me to continue the challenging journey of environmental philosophy again and again.

### **Conclusory remarks: embarking on a journey within**

While there is a certain awkwardness, a sort of discomfort about including the “felt sensing” of a researcher into their research as a meta-approach or a useful facet of doing research – whether it be qualitative or quantitative methods that one uses – this awkwardness seems to come from the straightforwardness that the application of this methodology requires. In a sense, it asks the researcher to “get naked”<sup>9</sup> in front of their own research, or to “look into the eyes” of their own fascination or research interest – why do I do what I do, and how does my felt sense inform me on my way?<sup>10</sup>

When writing this chapter, I went through the feeling of this awkwardness too. Why do I recite this process of thinking, if I could just say that “hands-on practices inform and add to experiential changes in environmental thinking” or something of the sort, rather than going through the motions of how I came to that thought? What does the process add to the discourse, if anything?

The emphasis on the “what” in research accounts for part of this awkwardness. More often than not, research is geared toward the product rather than the process of inquiry. While methodology, of course, is very important in most sciences, and new “technologies for *hunting* knowledge” are appreciated, science does not accommodate processes of *gathering* bits of insights as insightful in themselves, so long as they do not open a door to a potential new insight to gain or a new, more effective process for gaining that insight. This “product of knowledge” might be elusive or nonexistent, but still, it remains the main goal of the process. The process exists for the sake of the product. Thinking for the sake of itself “seems” to not affect the world, if only on students whose brains we might “train.” Thus, the felt sense that drives the research is most often left aside. This situation cannot but remind one of how capitalism is based on (mostly women’s) unpaid labour in the house, which has been made invisible by not acknowledging it, which brings about a certain awkwardness when addressed. Yet precisely this unnoticed process and the conscious reflection upon it might allow (1) recognising intuitions and felt senses as a necessary part of every research process and (2) thus adding the dimension of the “felt sense” critically and consciously to research practice.

Moreover, the awkwardness that is first felt by asking oneself the question, “Why am I adding this *intuition* to my research and what does it add to it?” itself deserves recognition and asks for an active researcher’s participation. Precisely, this awkwardness that makes us ask the question “Why exactly this?” can mark a difference between feeling and embodied knowing. How to take *gut feeling* to *gut knowing*, that is how to approach and connect to a place of felt sensing, without mistaking this for some other kind of passing feeling? That is precisely the work in which ECT and the TAE methodology can be of assistance since they include both carefully, and critically assessing one’s intuitions as well as creatively employing them for building ethically minded, livable, and even enjoyable futurities. A similar role to how research ethics also function as a meta-monitoring tool for research.

Personal and research-oriented felt sensing can often be interconnected, and, if “carried forward” (Walkerden 2023) can lead to a coherent and often innovative theory. Moreover, felt sensing can help (re) connect several seemingly unconnected aspects of research or other types of exploratory practices. For example, in the above example, I managed to *cross* the idea of explicating thought with hands-on exercises and activist practices that had not occurred to me as linked in a strong sense before. Reconnection to the felt sense, and thus also to embedded embodiment, is a useful approach in any endeavour, yet, it can be crucial, especially in environmentally-oriented research.

While ECT stresses the significance of first-person experience and the possibility of finding answers within oneself, it does not presume each personal instance as a universal truth but rather invites one to employ one’s felt sense for further inquiry. Moreover, ECT not only stresses the embeddedness and embodiment but works through it.

ECT in research, thus:

- 1) allows “reclaiming of nature” (Jóhannesdóttir and Thorgeirsdóttir 2016) as a significantly nature cultured space, from (rather than “about”) which to speak, being an essential tool for environmental inquiry in phenomenology,
- 2) but, can also be seen as a valuable meta-tool for any researcher for *feeling*, *sensing*, but also *reflecting* on their biases and *gut intuitions*, from which further research is often born.

In these ways, I see ECT as a promising emancipating approach both in scientific inquiry processes in the context of environmental humanities and beyond and in co-constituting lived materialities for the future. Thus, the approach of ECT is emancipating for doing environmental research or getting a closer glimpse of personal biases, inspirations, and intuitions on an experiential level. Yet, it can also be emancipating for communities in a broader sense if adopted as a thinking practice for getting in touch with nature, ourselves, and each other, and envisioning new practices that facilitate human-nature closeness in design, experience, and ways of life.

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### Notes

- 1 Erich Fromm describes this as the having orientation and discerns it as different from an existential having. Fromm (1976, 85). Further – Sauka (2020b).
- 2 Criticized by Guha (2013); further discussion Sauka (2023, 89–90).
- 3 While the term “nature” here could be contested (Thorgeirsdóttir 2024), the ethical call adheres to realizing the sensefulness of the earth/materiality itself and urges reiterating immanent cosmologies.
- 4 As well as Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy with Thinking at the Edge (Gendlin 2004) focusing-based practices that form the conceptual and practical backbone of ECT (Schoeller 2023)
- 5 This approach is also in line with a broader spectrum of research from a first-person and/or phenomenological standpoint that brings to the fore experiential embeddedness and implies a phenomenological approach as a necessary aspect for doing research with other methods of inquiry. Some of these reflect on different aspects of embodiment, such as the growing interest in breathing (Škof and Berndtson 2018), listening (Bjelica 2022; Lipari 2014) and eating (Mol 2021; Pelluchon 2019) as possible starting points for phenomenological inquiry, included might also be feminist philosophical accounts (Ettinger 2005; Oksala 2016, 2021; Cixous 1976; Irigaray 1985, etc.).
- 6 A great example of research that is driven by a felt sense, are the ethnographic movies by Heland and Ernston (2016, 2018) that portray the conflicting understandings of “nature preservation” through conservation practices involving “local plants” and

the efforts to clear the areas of “alien” plants in Postapartheid South Africa and are also great examples of research that comes from a “felt sense” of the researcher. In these movies, the act of clearing and purifying “nature” is demonstrated as a decolonizing action. However, decolonization here employs both ideological and practical tools associated with colonization, thereby revealing a reversal of discourse that seeks to address what is broken by using the same tools (Lorde 1984), rooted in the perceptual imaginary of the human being as separate from nature. The authors use visceral video language to convey the nuanced problematics of the matter, while also delivering the results of detailed research. This example allows a fresh, felt sensibility from an experiential grounding that allows problematizing seeming juxtapositions in a more nuanced way, not as a clash of societies or a debate between local and global, but through the attuned, embodied sensibility to power, violence, entanglement, and processuality that crosses borders without erasing distinctions.

- 7 Thus, Montaigne, Spinoza, Nietzsche, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Gilles Deleuze, etc., etc., and many others – notably, most environmental philosophers form different ways of opposition to the so-called Global Northern outlook that seemingly dominates public discourse and societal ideas. Moreover, new trends in philosophy, both in phenomenological (Waldenfels 2000, 2003; Böhme 2019), new materialist and posthumanist contexts (Radomska 2016; Neimanis 2017, 2018; Alaimo 2010; Braidotti 2013; Radomska 2016) as well as in cognitive science (Varela and Thomson 1991; Noë 2009) and philosophy of biology (Meincke 2018; Nicholson and Dupré 2018) have furthermore highlighted processuality, porousness and transcorporeality of the body.
- 8 Which I, in the last instance usually describe as a “human exceptionalist substance ontology, where thingness dominates processuality”, characterized, among others, by a strict A is not notA logic that stands in the way of a more inclusive approach of conjunction.
- 9 Gendlin refers to the concept of “naked saying” and to the discomfort felt by “uncovering” the meaning of the felt sense in research: “Therefore when someone asks us: “what does this poem mean?” we answer: “The poem itself says what it means.” In this answer about poetry, we know what we are saying although we cannot substitute patterns for it. But, in philosophy and theory, we think we must be prepared to do so. If someone asks “What do you mean?” we feel a need to answer with clear categories and known meanings. We defend what we said by claiming that we “really” meant those clear categories. If we cannot say we meant them, if they don’t cover what we said, then we are uncovered – naked in what we said. Naked saying makes us uncomfortable. This philosophical discomfort is bodily, a physical sensation, isn’t it? Yes, our bodies are capable of philosophical discomfort. But the word “bodily” changes in saying this.” (Gendlin 1991)
- 10 “Reading insights through one another diffractively is about experimenting with different patterns of relationality, opening things up, turning them over and over again, to see how the patterns shift. This is not about solving paradoxes or synthesizing different points of view from the outside, as it were, but rather about the material intra-implication of putting “oneself” at risk, troubling “oneself,” one’s ideas, one’s dreams, all the different ways of touching and being in touch, and sensing the differences and entanglements from within” (Barad 2012, 77).

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# 13 Focusing in the school of architecture

*Ramio Eisenberg*

This chapter explores resonances between architectural practice and architectural education, and the philosophy and practices of embodied thinking, particularly Focusing (Gendlin 1981) and Thinking at the Edge (TAE) (Gendlin 2004; Schoeller 2023). It speaks from my experience of weaving embodied thinking practices into my teaching of architecture and in particular, landscape architecture, at the Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology, during 2014–2022.

The narrative follows my own learning journey as a teacher, helping students with self-care in design, using an evolving suite of concepts and exercises.

Focusing’s main contributions to architectural education are introducing novel ways to think with the body, formulate non-verbal concepts, and sustain a welcoming attitude to an opaque, unclear state of thinking which is key to the design process. It validates student experiences, helping them appreciate the value of their *own* experiencing, and promotes appreciation of somatically oriented processes, while fostering a collaborative learning environment.

A saying attributed to Eugene Gendlin (Allan Rohlf’s, personal communication) points vividly towards the possibilities:

“We think more than we can say.  
We feel more than we can think.  
We live more than we can feel.  
And there is much more still.”

Gendlin coined the term “felt sense” to refer to the sensation of meaning as it is experienced in the body (Gendlin 1981). The practice of Focusing, which Gendlin developed, teaches people to discern their felt sense and express non-verbal feelings in words. In Focusing, which is rooted in client-centred therapy, the emphasis is on personal meaning and personal reorientation. It is usually done in pairs, with one person focusing and the other serving as a listener. The focuser directs their attention to their felt-understanding and follows and facilitates its development; while the listener provides empathic listening and unconditional acceptance, focusing their attention not on the content but on the form, supporting the identification of patterns and anchors. Thinking at

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the Edge is a method that Gendlin (2004) developed, that builds on Focusing, designed for developing new concepts and ideas from felt meaning. The steps in a TAE process oscillate between the personal experience of receiving, identifying, and explicating the felt sense, to the creation of a shared understanding. The heart of both focusing and TAE is in the shaping of symbols that express felt understanding. Both these practices coincide very well with the process of learning design, as they provide practical and conceptual underpinnings to a process that is largely mysterious, and sometimes even excruciating.

In the following account, I will describe my accumulating experience with introducing these practices to the design studio at the Technion School of Architecture over the years 2014–2022. I will draw on some student feedback from reflections on the “heart of the course” for them, as well as some other feedback I have received. To maintain privacy, students’ names and identifying details have been withheld.

## The courses

### *2014: finding sanctuary*

During the 2013–14 academic year, I was given the opportunity to teach a research-focused mandatory course accompanying the landscape architecture capstone project. Traditionally, students selected their topics, with the course enhancing their understanding and personal perspectives on these subjects. Drawing on my Focusing-oriented research, I thought that integrating Focusing practices and concepts into the curriculum would enrich their creative journey.

Unexpectedly, studio instructors mandated all projects be designed for a specific site, which was met with resistance and frustration from students, who had expected far more independence. Consequently, much of the semester saw me serving as a pillar of support, transforming the course from a purely creative aid into a sanctuary where students could express and navigate their challenges.

On the first day, the studio instructors tasked the students with presenting an “architectural question” for their final projects. To accommodate this, I drew on Gendlin’s (2004) practices for “Thinking at the Edge” (TAE), and introduced the weekly reflective journals, in which the students collected “living edge” phrases that resonated with them each week. These phrases set the stage for radical listening sessions in class, rooted in the principle that mindful, non-intrusive listening can ignite personal knowledge construction (Kleist 2004/1878; cf. Gendlin 1981, 1997).

The curriculum also delved into academic texts, introducing students to concepts from complexity theory and phenomenology, and diverse communication and learning styles. Most students deeply valued the course, calling it a “tranquil oasis” within a challenging semester. A notable example was a student attending with her week-old baby, emphasising its significance to

her. Yet, a handful found the introspective exercises intensified their struggles. Thus, an important understanding emerged, that to align with students' readiness to participate, such a course had to be an elective, not mandatory.

*2015: the trauma of being an architecture student*

Following the success of this initial course, I collaborated with Dana Ganihar, my focusing mentor and partner, to offer an elective titled "Focusing within the Creative Process in the Design Studio." This course was open to students from all faculty departments and attracted a majority enrolment of architecture students.

In our inaugural session, Dana, unfamiliar with the architectural world, prompted students to share their personal narratives of "what is it like to be an architecture student?". They shared their anxiety and fatigue with the constant pressure and lamented their difficulty in finding their own voice. I was familiar with students' perceptions and complaints, so I wasn't surprised by the frustration, pain and difficulty that emerged, yet after class, when we left, Dana said to me: "Ram, what are you doing to these students here at the faculty?! They *all* seem to me to be post-traumatic!" and something came home to me at that moment: what if she was right? What if they really are traumatised by us?

I've seen this happen repeatedly: students begin their studies with passion and deep commitment. Yet over time, this passion gives way to a certain "hardness," an overhanging sadness, fatigue, and loss of self-trust, all replaced by a sense of just-wanting-to-do-it-right-and-be-done-with-it. One student commented, for instance:

[During my studies] I was sensitive to negative criticism. Maybe because I often received criticisms that weren't particularly constructive. Even insulting ones, unjustly so. Over time, I developed a thick skin. One where criticism doesn't penetrate. Along with that, my curiosity disappeared. My feelings disappeared too.

(Student 4)

I had also been a student, and it never occurred to me that I was traumatised. Not like this. The learning experience in my view, though arduous and challenging, was also deeply satisfying. So, how could it be that it can be so distressing, such an ongoing torment for so many people?

Architectural education is notoriously rigorous, expecting students to grow a thick hide against criticism and to develop a resilient ego. While architecture is in fact collaborative by nature, little emphasis is placed on nurturing the soft skills essential for self-care and team excellence. Students are thrown into the deep end with project-based learning, expected to develop their ideas with little or no guidance on ideation's nascent stages.

A relatable instance of such an obstacle is when "nothing comes." Despite the knowledge, the resources, and the motivation, students often find

themselves staring into an abyss of blankness, where ideas refuse to manifest. Here, Eugene Gendlin's philosophy provided valuable insight. He writes (Gendlin 2009, 339, 341):

But what if nothing comes? What if our bodily knowledge is enough so no stupid moves come, but nothing else comes either? Then we need direct reference to the IU [implicit understanding]. . . . Our implicit understanding is the reason why the many stupid thoughts don't come. So our implicit understanding functions in the 'nothing comes'. The fact that nothing comes is an achievement. But if nothing comes, we need direct reference to implicit understanding to get a palpable sense of the problem. Once we have that sense, then small steps of carrying forward come from it, and eventually a large step.

Nothing comes is not nothing. It's a very active process. Its ongoing refusing carries an implicit knowing about what is needed. Appreciating this, invites relaxing into the inarticulate felt knowing. Embracing this inner gesture, one student reported, for example:

For me the 'Nothing-comes', was like removing a boulder from the path. [A blockage] that constantly stood in my way all [throughout] my studies, and I didn't know how to deal with it. And here in this course, it happened so fast, that was amazing. . . . Its effect, and the knowledge that it's going to stay with me! It's very, very, like. . . . This course has achieved its purpose big-time . . . so really, thank you!

(Student 23)

Design education is a classic form of project-based learning, revolving around the design studio. Each semester, students are faced with a complex problem, and they are tasked with developing a conceptual solution for it, mimicking the real-world design process. The development of an idea in the design studio corresponds very well with focusing principles, as it is a gradual and iterative process that involves sketching, talking, presenting, and explicating to carry forward one's understanding of the situation. Yet, there's a hidden assumption that a concept, such as an "architectural question," is both necessary and readily available, which is not always the case. There's a hidden and implied expectation in academia, that people simply "know how to think" and will "come up with an idea." The catch is in the word "simply." We teachers see our role as helping students develop their ideas, but seldom if at all, do we engage methodically with students on the level of pre-nascent ideas. So how does one get there? Namely, how does one arrive at one's concept? And how does one nurture one's pre-nascent concept?

Most of the time, the studio interaction involves receiving both affirming and challenging guidance from the teachers. However, there are times when the authoritative guidance of an experienced teacher unintentionally obstructs the student's personal engagement with their own experience. We teachers sometimes get stuck "helping" students deliver an immature concept. I have

inadvertently fallen into this trap myself, many times, attempting to help by outlining the “right course of action” for their project. To my disappointment, I have repeatedly found that such well-intended guidance sometimes fails to be beneficial and oftentimes even confuses the student further.

It’s essential to mention here that it’s not black and white. Architecture teachers have many tools that create spaces for students to have personal, non-verbal experiences of design insights – asking them to look in different ways, to imagine, to construct physical models, etc. But we lack the language to speak of how meaning is formed and tools that engage directly with interiority in ways that can support this process.

This issue of concept development is at the heart of the matter. In *A Process Model*, Gendlin (2018) puts forth a theory of “meaning making” that illuminates how our sense of what is forward – our orienting to situations – involves a crossing of vast amounts of experiencing, functioning implicitly. Living as humans, we have – we are – a sense of meaning propelling ourselves forward, expressing ourselves in symbols and language. In this understanding, being human is being embedded in patterns *and* making fresh meaning, on and on. This is the very essence of being alive. These insights and concepts appear pertinent to the core practice of architectural education. Teaching Focusing as a basic skill promotes a stronger sense of self-reliance; TAE practices include various techniques for working with concepts as raw material; and, most importantly, they affirm that which is both unique and competent about the students: the sheer fact that they are alive.

Dana and I placed a great emphasis on experiencing this aliveness and developed exercises that highlight it, aiming to secure students’ acquaintance and trust in their own felt-sense as a way to “carry forward.” Two examples are the “My resources” exercise, in which students identify things that give them strength, which they can “lean on” when needed, and “The feelings by my side”, an exercise in which students learn to differentiate between “themselves” and their “arising feelings.” The “Shy animal” exercise – one of the initial exercises in the course, a guided imagery of an encounter with a shy animal in the wild, that develops skills in a kind of interior gentleness, is another. These sometimes had profound effects. One student commented on the latter,

“The experience I underwent in the ‘shy animal’ exercise was a total shock to me. The excitement from the inner world I discovered within me . . .” (Student 4).

Another commented regarding “the feelings by my side” exercise,

The essence [of the course] for me was related to the encounter with feelings. The meeting of ‘I-and-the-feelings-beside-me. This encounter allowed me to interact and not just [be totally] immersed in the feelings, trying to do something with it. Being beside [the feeling] allowed me to bring myself compassion, to give space, and to touch resources like “I am here” and “there’s room, everything’s okay.” “I am here” often



manifests as a feeling of internal expansion and clearing, body shifts, which brought out a delicate curiosity and calm presence. “There’s room, everything’s okay” manifested as a sense of vast space around my body and chest, giving a feeling that everything can be contained.

(Student 13)

TAE-inspired exercises built on the foundations Focusing provides. For example, the technique of dropping and dipping (Schoeller 2023; Gendlin 2004) involves taking an idea and then stripping away what is most important from it . . . and then waiting . . . and sensing what comes up in its place. The same can be done in design, by erasing a line from the plan. Removing it and feeling: what happens there in its absence? This technique is very effective, but it’s entirely foreign to linear, conventional thinking methods.

The course reshaped many students’ learning approaches, and the feedback was immensely positive. Three examples from students’ reflections on the “heart of the course” for them were as follows:

The ability to listen to the body, which holds so much floating information, and to navigate it was an interesting and fascinating process. It required training, patience, and I would even say gave a special “hope” for our work in the studio. . . . I am usually very analytical in my work and always found it difficult to break the “I don’t know” barrier of the planning stage. It required so much willpower, physical and emotional effort, as well as consistency to confront all the thoughts running in my head and try to find a thread that ties them together in a creative and accurate way. Being *with* the feelings allowed me to shorten this stage in the planning process and gave me the opportunity to progress in a more flowing manner.

(Student 7)

Sometimes, a sketch that arose in focusing was an expression of a thought that hadn’t naturally found an external expression, and it continued to develop and [eventually] found its place in the project. The focusing sessions were a liberating and pressure-free tool, during which I managed to reach parts of the project that I hadn’t reached in daily planning. Detaching from the generic terms of a plan, section, and visualization to my own private concepts created a space of freedom and mental liberation that moved me forward in the planning process.

(Student 6)

I am very proud of the process I went through. My self-confidence has become a clearer feeling within me. It’s as if now I am confident from deep within my soul, and not because my mind tells me to be. Sketching preliminary and more developed drafts while focusing was one of the most important tools for me. Sometimes, seeking assistance from

my listener and explaining the sketches, like the qualitative/quantitative exercise, really helped me visualize and add more meaning and layers to the design. I'm thrilled at the opportunity to discover that the architectural personality within me, as I call it, is different from anything and any thought I knew before and that I was unaware of its existence earlier. And I know there is still so much hidden, and perhaps many things will change, which is very intriguing.

(Student 11)

Reflecting on this feedback, I saw our methods' potential to reshape architectural educational paradigms. Through Focusing, students can reignite their passion, embracing uncertainty while placing trust in their inner compass.

### *2016: structuring*

In our third year, I was appointed to teach the capstone project in landscape architecture which gave us an opportunity to teach both the focusing course and the Studio in coordination. I recommended the course to my students, half of whom took it, and those who didn't still learned from their peers via osmosis.

In this year, Dana and I refined the exercises we created together and built a procedural framework that corresponded to the pace of the studio which became the basis for all ensuing focusing courses. This framework had three phases:

- I. Foundations (4–5 weeks) – corresponding to the research and idea generation phase of the studio, in which we focused on developing the skills of radical listening and felt sensing, with an emphasis on identifying each student's personal resources, nurturing the self-confidence that “what I have to bring” is of value.
- II. Skill development (5–6 weeks) – in parallel with the project development, in which we dwelled on encountering ambiguity and not-knowing, and introduced them to more advanced focusing skills such as offering suggestions.
- III. Project implementation (3–4 weeks) – towards the final, public, studio presentation, we introduced some TAE steps that help articulate the felt knowing in a way that is more communicative.

Throughout the course, we encouraged students to use focusing to work on their projects, yet often they were focusing on various personal issues in their lives, taking advantage of the focusing sessions to address aspects of their lives which ordinarily do not receive enough attention in the academic space.

One of the key principles of focusing is developing the skill of listening, which in its elementary form we call Radical Listening (Eisenberg and Bach 2014). Focusing in partnerships (Gendlin 1981), where one person is focusing

on their own emerging understandings, and the other is listening to support this process, includes two principles that ensure mutual care:

1. A privacy contract maintains the confidentiality of the focusing space.
2. The session is led by the focuser adhering to their felt-sense. This removes the risk of accidentally crossing into unhelpful territory, as focusing will not carry forward to a place one is not ready to be in.

Listeners are just providing support, reflecting what the focuser says gently, and providing suggestions tentatively. The process is designed so that the focuser has autonomy in guiding the session. Students learn to attune to each other, based on the understanding that we think better when we receive empathic listening (Kleist 2004/1878). Listeners offer resonance: reflecting the focal person's words, according to their request, without interpretation. Thus, while many students experienced strong emotions in their focusing sessions, they felt safe and that a deepening self-awareness brought relief.

This emphasis on partnerships, where one student listened to another – tracking their companion's process closely and keeping their own process differentiated from the focuser's – had a substantial impact on many students' listening skills. Two commented, for instance:

Before the course, I was impatient, not letting my partner [in planning] even finish his sentence. Many times, I didn't understand what he meant in his explanations. So, when I learned about the topic of listening and resonating, I applied it in my work with my partner, and now I was able to resonate and understand what he meant without spending most of the time arguing.

(Student 2)

I noticed, just about two weeks after the course ended, that the way I explain myself has changed, both in my studies and in my private life. . . . I also feel that I listen better, much less interrupting others. I genuinely feel that my listening is much more qualitative now, I manage to understand things to the end instead of jumping in, and if I don't understand, I'm not afraid to pause the conversation and resonate the things to clarify them.

(Student 3)

After establishing foundational focusing skills, we began to integrate exercises geared more towards the design process. We introduced more advanced focusing skills, teaching the focuser how to delve into their project using various ECT techniques derived from focusing, TAE, and constellations. This phase included exercises such as "Focusing on place," directing attention outward towards a specific location, and exercises aimed at cultivating curiosity and empathy towards the unknown, such as the "Blank sheet" as a placeholder for the not-yet-born.

We also incorporated playful exercises inspired by domain focusing and constellation methods such as “letting the sketch speak” by physically sitting or standing *on* their project sketches, and speaking *their* insights, and “Sketch-focusing,” whose origins were a demonstration I gave where I felt the direction a sketch “wanted” through hovering my hand over it. Sketch-focusing, as we taught it, combines a number of tools learned in the course, including editing a planning sketch with empathic listening, where the planner shares their ideas verbally while executing the sketches. This dual registering of insights, with drawing and verbal expression resonating with each other, serves as an “amplifier” for thinking, increasing clarity and depth of insight.

The last part of the course pivoted on project execution and creating a shared language. This process hinged on the TAE principle of “zigzagging,” a method that oscillates between speaking one’s implying for oneself and explicating for others, which had become fundamental to the course. Students’ weekly journals demonstrated this zigzagging. In these, the students collected fragments and phrases of “private language” (speaking to themselves in personal ways that might well be opaque to others) from their focusing sessions, deepening their connection to their unfolding meaning, which laid the ground for translating it into actionable steps in their studio work.

We emphasised that the creative process includes both personal language, where the focus is very much on staying faithful to one’s own felt sensing using words and images in ways that may be idiosyncratic and cryptic, and public language, where the emphasis shifts to making insights accessible to others (cf. Gendlin 2004). This differentiation, which is fundamental to Thinking at the Edge, creates a well-marked space for staying faithful to one’s own insights in the design process. Taking in this separation gave students a sense of security, boosting their confidence and aiding their creativity.

An example of the interplay of personal and public languages was in formulating a project programme – a compilation of specifications and requirements a design project has to meet. While traditional programming emphasises separating analysis (understanding the client’s needs) from synthesis (creating design solutions) (Peña and Parshall 2012, 15), our method of private and public speaking blurs these lines. Instead of focusing solely on a systematic, one-way analysis of the client’s needs, we proposed a process that allows for both personal and collective perspectives to mutually arise. In this dynamic process, students translate their own private experiences and perceptions (personal language) into publicly understandable expressions (public language), and vice versa, to create more connected, holistic, and meaningful design outcomes.

### *2017: focusing in the design studio*

Up to this point, Focusing had been contributing in the background to various studios. However, none of these involved direct interaction with the studio teachers and as such, it wasn’t intricately woven into the studio process. As I prepared to teach a third-year studio on repurposing an abandoned quarry,

we integrated the Focusing course as a studio complementary; an elective enhancement course that ran parallel and in sync with the studio's subject. This time, the course aligned with major studio milestones, benefiting both courses. Students enrolled in the Focusing course began sharing the technique with peers. For example, they would offer their peers "a focusing moment" to tackle studio challenges, promoting better listening. As a result, the essence of Focusing was palpable throughout the studio.

I often tell my students that a successful architectural project hinges on three things: understanding the issues, knowing the context, and the designer's personal expression. Each of these facets involves knowledge emerging from felt implying, especially felt during the initial site encounter, where project relationships form. As the adage suggests, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." When there's only little or no knowledge about the location and the design challenge, individual impressions shine brightest: meaning being created (Gendlin 1997) in interaction with the place is foregrounded. Both the theory and practice of focusing proved invaluable in this first phase of the studio. In *Thinking At the Edge* (Gendlin 2004), *Instancing*, that is addressing a particular memory, association, or experience that emerges upon encountering an issue, reveals vast richness; and *Relevanting* is the deliberate act of selecting such a moment and explicating helpful meaning from it, with it. In line with these concepts, the students were asked to create a "tribute to the place and the experience" using on-site materials in the semester's initial week. This tribute served as an instance encapsulating the project's creative trajectory, eventually unveiling its layered significance.

Another incorporation of focusing was the *Depth Walk* – a method I crafted for a research project on walkability using focusing-while-walking. It involves a walker verbalising their emerging thinking while another, the listener, records the insights and ensures the walker's safety. Students learned radical listening and, on presentation day, paired up for depth walks to exchange feedback on each other's work. These insights were later compiled and given back for project enhancement.

Merging the Studio course and the Focusing elective was a fulfilling venture for all, including my co-teachers. Though I didn't dive into "felt sensing" theory, I embedded focusing principles like tying the project's inception phase to a "first impression," and introducing techniques like radical listening, instancing, and depth walking, which became staples in my future teaching. I initiate my studios with a focusing exercise, guiding students towards their internal preferences and feelings, a "something-in-them" that implies, that prefers, that likes or dislikes – which is an expression of who they are, as they encounter a situation. That's our starting point.

### *2018: landscape architecture as a therapeutic profession*

In 2018, the Mazor Psychiatric Hospital in Acre became the backdrop for my design studio project, while Dana continued to teach the Focusing Elective course, in parallel, on her own.

I see landscape architecture as a healing profession, yet unlike psychotherapy, our healing addresses non-specific individuals. I also believe that the most personal is also the most universal. In order to create something that will touch others, we must touch something personal, that deeply matters to us. In this project we had a chance to put that hypothesis to the test. While Dana initiated radical listening in the focusing course, we explored our roles as landscape healers in the studio. While the psychiatric context was initially daunting for some students, at the end of the semester it was highlighted as a most profound experience for all of them; this studio was one of my most gratifying teaching experiences.

In the initial three weeks of the studio, the students engaged with patients, families, staff, and expert fellows, practising radical listening. They were welcomed warmly and granted access badges, akin to medical students, allowing them an insider's perspective in a psychiatric institution.

Their primary task was to create a “nurturing place” within the hospital using on-site resources. Supported by the hospital's maintenance team, the students showcased a festival of installations aimed at promoting well-being. On the day of the event, all the hospital wards were opened, and around 180 patients – some of whom were from secure wards, who had not been outdoors for months – were guided out into the courtyard to experience the installations. This event left a profound impression on all who participated. One student reported with tears in his eyes that a patient had asked him: “Who are you? Are you angels?”

The course garnered praise and was a turning point for many students. Prof. Peretz Lavie, then-president of the Technion, who was present at the studio finale, even suggested my nomination to the Yanai Prize, the Technion's top teaching honour. The event was also captured in a short film available on YouTube, titled “Mazor Landscape Project” (Tal 2018).

A studio graduate, reflecting on the course five years later, wrote:

The Focusing course accompanied me throughout my third-year design studio at the Technion, on the Landscape Architecture track. In the course, we received exercises that were paired with the planning and design tasks in the studio, designed to support and enrich our individual and collective creative processes. The various exercises encouraged us to allocate time and space for the formation of new ideas, without which we would remain at a more superficial conceptual level. Among other things, we learned to listen to the natural curiosity that arises from within us and practiced how to express it – in conversation, writing, and manual sketches. We learned about a crucial stage in the creative process in any field – the stage of not knowing, the point where we move from the ‘unknown’ to the ‘known’, and we practiced how to dwell in this ‘foggy’ space. We explored the intricate underpinnings of the dramatic encounter between our ideas and reality, and practiced how to work with the critical voices – both internal and external – that arise from this meeting. The various exercises in the course were revolutionary for me.

They enriched my creative process in an extraordinary way and continue to accompany me today in my work as a creator, designer, and landscape architect. Learning focusing proved to be an even bigger gift in my personal life when during a mental crisis amid the Corona pandemic I turned to a focusing oriented therapist.

(Student 22)

The course represented a paradigm shift both in the student's approach to learning and in their personal attitudes. According to end-of-semester feedback, the course "literally saved" some students, reshaping their fundamental perspective towards their studies.

I gradually came to understand that we were involved in a movement to transform the core of academic discourse. It invites a return to the true essence of academia: a place where students learn out of a deep love for knowledge, a willingness to expose themselves to new ideas, and a readiness to grapple with the uncertainty and ambiguity that often accompanies the pursuit of knowledge.

### *2019–2022 – Further developments*

In line with Technion's regulations, special elective courses are capped at a three-year tenure. To continue offering our course beyond this limit, we proposed it to the faculty committee and it underwent a Senate review, resulting in its incorporation into the architecture faculty's catalogue, a pioneering move in global architectural education. Of course recognition is a foundation; the course's long-term success hinges on the availability of skilled and committed instructors, and that raises another set of issues.

During these years, and until my retirement from the Technion in 2022, we also developed an advanced TAE course, a philosophy reading group for faculty and PhD students, and hosted guest lectures and workshops on Gendlin's philosophy and practices. Also, my development of focusing as a research methodology bore fruit in both my own research-in-design (Eisenberg 2018; Teff-Seker and Eisenberg 2023) as well as in research students' work such as Teff-Seker and Orenstein (2019), Rosenberg and Behar (2020), Teff-Seker et al. (2022). And more forthcoming.

### **Discussion**

In the mid-19th century, the concept of "a healthy soul in a healthy body" led to a shift in the perception of academic education worldwide, and universities began incorporating mandatory courses on physical culture, sports, and more. Today, students in every university, particularly in the Technion, have a wide range of sports and fitness courses available to choose from. What was true then remains true today, but in reverse: "a healthy body in a healthy soul." I believe that, similar to the revolution of "a healthy body," we are at the

beginning of a “healthy soul revolution” that will contribute the added value of consciousness skills to the academia of the future.

In our knowledge-centric culture, we often emphasise rationality at the expense of the tangible aspects of thought, and, particularly in their teaching, academic institutions prioritise existing knowledge as a foundation for effective action. But during creative endeavours, we invariably come to a point where familiar knowledge falls short, and new understanding beckons. This leads to questions: How do we approach the unknown? Where does the novel emerge from? How do we pivot our attention from established concepts to budding meanings?

Those who innovate know there’s a route to the new, but it’s elusive in description. We possess skills that, although second nature to us, are challenging to articulate. Embodied knowledge arises from deep, non-discursive experiences, which we “felt-sense” in the body. Given the right conceptual frameworks and practice, we can fine-tune this intuition to usher in fresh insights.

Architecture, like Focusing, centres on iterative evolution, emphasising iterative refinement and “generative lines” over final products. Gendlin’s (1997, 2018) “philosophy of the implicit” aligns with this design ethos, enriching architectural vocabulary with felt-sensing terminology. Key concepts from Focusing and TAE, like “crux” which corresponds to “generative lines,” and “instancing,” mirror architectural principles. In Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy, “the more” is pivotal: beneath initial formulations is a vast richness (Gendlin 1997, 2018). For designers, this resonates powerfully. Design isn’t about finality but the continuous exploration of possibilities. By embracing “the more,” designers probe deeper, constantly seeking new insights and transcending boundaries.

Focusing’s primary contribution to architectural education lies in the way it helps students find themselves as designers. Each student carries a distinct, personal experience, and with it a unique grasp of reality, which, if unexpressed, remains undeveloped. Focusing underscores process over product, centring on continuous unfolding. It delves into a dynamic exchange between expression and experience, fostering an understanding of “implying” – how creative processes dwell in ambiguity, where emergent ideas surprise and deviate non-linearly. This understanding instils a calming assurance, counteracting pressures from academia’s product-centricity and the success-focused narratives of social networks.

Architectural practice’s contributions to focusing stem from the fact that architecture spans both the material and the social: place, construction and use. It operates at the nexus of discursive and non-discursive language, moulding complex spatial and cultural systems symbolically. Doing architecture means diving non-verbally into these systems to produce non-verbal meanings. Using Focusing in architectural practice vividly reveals the potential of felt sensing to support practices that are not language-centric.

Because architectural practice is always situated within sites, clients and users, it invites an inversion of traditional focusing practice. Traditional



focusing emphasises an “inside out” approach, focusing on internal sensations and thoughts – working from how situations are already being held interiorly towards effective action within them. Using focusing in architectural practice this movement can be reversed: one immerses oneself in situations, circumstances, then heeds interiority as a way of deepening understanding and supporting creativity. This “outside in” approach – letting a situation evoke a felt sense and then carrying forward from there – gives an alternative shape to focusing which is applicable in many circumstances. We allow our world to resonate within us. Embracing this “outside in” movement expands the scope of Focusing practice, supporting its embedding in many professional milieus.

The play of focusing in architectural practice shows how focusing makes profound contributions beyond the verbal and the personal. The social and material are remade through deeply responsive interiority.

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# 14 Learning to catalyse socio-ecological change

## Reflective practice experiments

*Greg Walkerden*

### Platform skills for socio-ecological intrapreneurs

#### *Embodied thinking skills and catalysing socio-ecological change*

In *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, Eugene Gendlin (1997) lays out a wide range of everyday practice situations in which, without ordinarily taking much account of it, we rely on felt understanding to orient and reorient ourselves, to find words to say, to guide action, and so on. It is no surprise, therefore, that we find embodied thinking skills making important contributions to processes of catalysing change in socio-ecological dynamics (e.g. Walkerden 2004, 2005, 2019).

One strand of this is political practice. There is a political aspect, in an informal sense, to all environmental work whenever influencing others' actions is part of what one is doing, for example the work of crafting policies and plans, and shaping changes to practices. Political practice – both formal and informal – has a complexity that far exceeds the descriptive powers of the theories, models, procedures, heuristics, and the like that we have to guide our practice. Toulmin (1977, 401–402) illustrates this:

By speaking here, when and how he does, [a politician] may – at one and the same time – honour an engagement to his constituents, give unintended offence to some hearers, make an implicit promise to others, draw public attention to his skill as an orator, stake a claim to future office, enhance or damage his party's electoral chances, accelerate a thrombosis, precipitate a personal crisis of confidence and/or break an assignation with his mistress.

*Skilful* political practice involves coming up with ways of acting that make sense in many of these contexts at once, and, as Schön (1987) underlines, *feeling* how to move is integral to managing this complexity. Toulmin singles out political practice as especially complex. Gendlin (2018) shows, however, that *every* situation has analogous complexity. His concept of “implying” elucidates this; it points to the very many considerations that we can feel are in play at

once, and *can* have as an integrated, integrating, felt sense (Gendlin 1997) of what is needed. We only manage to navigate the lived complexity of our situations *by* feeling what actions may fit, and, as Gendlin's work on felt sensing shows, we can vary greatly in how skilled we are in this (Hendricks 2001; Klein et al. 1970; Gendlin 1997, 2018). Developing embodied thinking skills is therefore an important – but often wholly or largely unremarked – part of becoming a skilled environmental professional (Walkerden 2005).

When we bring together – as we often do in environmental management – a sensitivity to socio-ecological systems' dynamics, political dynamics (within organisations, as well as within communities), and managerial capacity (in networks, as well as within organisations), we have no explicit methods that lead us methodically to a conclusion. Making decisions is making judgements. If we are centred (not driven by anxiety or a sense of obligation, for instance) we do what “feels right,” in the sense of “feels like it fits the situation.” (Looking at how you settle on changes to a text you are editing is one everyday place where you can notice these skills at work.)

Uncertainty, and the need for ongoing adaptation that it entails, is a second source of the importance of embodied thinking skills. Attempts to model the socio-ecological dynamics of larger systems, over longer timeframes, reveal, again and again, that, from a quantitative perspective, we understand the physics of many socio-ecological systems quite well, the chemistry fairly well, the biology roughly, and the socio-economic dynamics crudely. The IPCC's (2023) syntheses of global climate models illustrate this. But it is obvious in regional scale modelling as well (Gilmour et al. 1999; cf. Walkerden 2019). The adaptive environmental management tradition (Holling 1978; Walters 2001) models a proactive, pragmatic response to this:

- Expect to be surprised, because there are large uncertainties, unknown feedback loops, and human activities operating at unprecedented scale and rates.
- When making plans, focus on flexibility, adaptive capacity, and resilience: choosing courses of action that make sense in many of the possible futures. Carefully consider whether intentional transformation is appropriate, and what risks are implicit in a “business as usual” approach.
- When managing, design in learning. Treat management actions as probes and look for ways to create feedback loops that deepen understanding of risks and what might be helpful. Support ongoing dialogue amongst stakeholders, to strengthen alignment and so that learnings can be shared.

Toulmin (1977, vii) comments aptly:

[People] demonstrate their rationality, not by ordering their concepts and beliefs in tidy formal structures, but by their preparedness to respond to novel situations with open minds – acknowledging the shortcomings of their former procedures and moving beyond them.

Evan Karel, a senior environmental manager, whose practice Frances Westley (2002, 354) explored, concluded: “the experience of managing in complex adaptive systems is more similar to catching waves or looking for emergent corridors of action than pulling strings or working levers.” This fluid, improvisational quality calls for embodied thinking skills. A *felt* understanding is a sense of the whole of something. It holds many considerations in an integrated way and can be worked with directly to facilitate shifts in insight and find new paths forward. Gendlin and colleagues have demonstrated that at length in psychotherapy and self-help (Gendlin 1981; Hendricks 2001), but it is equally true in professional practice (Walkerden 2004, 2005).

Creativity – and thence skills in thinking with, from, and in one’s *felt* appreciation of situations – is also very important for more fundamental reasons: we need to transform our socio-ecological presence. When one looks at our societies’ integrated environmental impact over large spatial scales and longer timeframes, it is painfully obvious that our collective *de facto* commitment is to major unplanned, harmful transformation (Richardson et al. 2023). Consequently, a great deal of innovation and change at finer resolutions in space and time lies ahead, if we are to shift to less distressing trajectories. The energy transition we are currently undergoing, for example, involves many people working on new technologies, many more in policy networks contributing to policy innovation, and many more again innovating within energy industry businesses – exploring business models, finding ways to cut costs, and working out how to bring in new technologies at scale. Many of our socio-ecological problems are much harder than this. The reason why the energy transition is accelerating exponentially is that in many contexts transitioning to renewable energy saves money. It provides good returns on investment. Biodiversity conservation, for example, because for most stakeholders it increases costs, involves many political challenges. Just for that reason, however, it is a site for a great deal of innovation in policy and practice, for example finding ways to align the interests of vulnerable communities and wildlife, increasing the ecological permeability of urban and agricultural landscapes, improving regulatory frameworks and management systems (both policies and especially on-ground implementation).

Overlaid on issue complexities are the specificities of each practitioner’s particular situation – for example stakeholders who do not welcome environmental initiatives, funding constraints that need innovative workarounds, gaps in socio-ecological understanding of *local* conditions, and limitations in their own skills. Finding a path through the *integrated* impact of these difficulties is often challenging. In sum, reshaping our socio-ecological presence to do a better job of caring for people, and to share our landscapes and waters more considerately with non-human beings, involves creative work by a very large number of people. A skilled practitioner – a practitioner whose skills are appropriate to the times – must therefore be good at improvisation, innovation and catalysing change. Embodied thinking skills are fundamental for this.

### **Focal skills for intrapreneurs**

One place where these capacity-building challenges come into focus is designing university courses to train environmental professionals. Most environmental professionals working proactively for helpful change are working as intrapreneurs: inside government agencies, corporations, and the specialist consultancies who support them (whose recommendations must make sense to their clients). Helping these students contribute appropriately means helping them to develop as intrapreneurs.

Innumerable lenses are relevant to any given environmental decision (Walkerden 2005, 2019), and many skills are associated with them. Designing a course requires selecting a few to focus on. Also, because many students are novices, they need procedures that they can follow to scaffold them, as they build up a feel for how to practise more fluidly (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2005; Kolb 2015). So developing learning objectives hinges on selecting a small number of practices, and identifying heuristics that are entrées into them – and, given their importance, working out how to teach embodied thinking skills to underpin their use.

In the Environmental Decision Making course, which I am reflecting on in this chapter, I focused on teaching six practices. The six practices I taught fall into two groups. Three offer a simplified way of orienting towards policy and management situations in ways that resonate with three key constituencies for environmental intrapreneurs: technical experts, politicians (or senior leadership attuned to political realities), and managers. The heuristic is: Environmental policy, planning and management decisions that make sense,

- (i) make sense technically (if enacted as designed the results are likely to be welcome, given the networks of cause and effect in play),
- (ii) make sense politically (that is, enough support can be gathered for them to be enacted), and
- (iii) make sense managerially (if an approach is adopted, we have reasonable grounds for expecting to be able to carry it through: resourcing is feasible, plan/do/review loops should be able to reveal problems, etc.).

This triangulation has its roots in adaptive management, which gives prominence to all three lenses (Holling 1978; Walters 2001). The emphasis on political sensitivity and engagement here is larger than in classical adaptive management because my experience revealed that adaptive management planning needed to be strengthened in that direction (Walkerden 2006). I taught systems analysis as an approach to developing technically strong proposals, stakeholder analysis (in a form designed to support Principled Negotiation (Fisher and Ury 1981)) as a way of exploring political tensions and possible alignments, and management system analysis and design as a way of thinking into managerial rationality. In each case the analytical method was a proxy for a wider sensitivity: a way to enter into the making sense process.

The second group of three are oriented more specifically towards catalysing change. I taught Principled Negotiation, as a good starting point for developing skills in helping people to align: a platform from which to develop *social* change skills. A central move in its heuristic is shifting from a focus on positions to interests, a movement that felt sensing plays an unacknowledged pivotal role in. I taught reflective practice, with deliberate, sustained felt sensing at its heart, as a platform skill for *personal* change – shaping one’s own professional development. Thirdly, to strengthen capacity to innovate, I taught creative thinking skills, including De Bono’s (2009) “Six Thinking Hats” which is oriented towards group process, and focusing, adapted slightly from its self-help focus to creative purposes (notably starting from the creative interest rather than discomforts) as a platform for personal creativity.

The version of focusing I taught did not use a listening partner. I taught skills for companionship oneself, while focusing, so that students had a version of focusing they could use professionally without a sympathetic focusing partner. Central to this was a felt sense-centred adaptation of Rico’s (1983) clustering process, which she developed as a support for creative writing. Again, felt sensing is an unacknowledged pivot in her process. Its contributions become obvious after one has put on paper, in a cluster, the ideas that are ready to hand, and one is sitting, looking them over, asking what else might be relevant, helpful, and gladdening. In my adaptation, the felt-sensing skills are foregrounded. The words one writes down emerge from felt sensing, the arrows between nodes trace how the felt-sensing process unfolded (what came from what, reflecting felt shifts, small and large), and then sitting with the developing diagram, rereading the most recent node or savouring it as a whole, is like having a focusing partner repeat something you have just said or reminding you of your overall process. This helps you go on in your evolving understanding, allowing further felt shifts to take shape as new nodes (Gendlin 1981).

### **Teaching embodied thinking as a platform for practice experiments**

The assessment in this course was two major projects: a policy research project using the technical-political-managerial triangulation, and a practice research project using reflective practice experiments. It is the latter that I am reporting from here.

The model for reflective practice experiments used was based on Walkerden (2009), which centres on a crossing of Schön’s (1987) model that provides a frame, and Gendlin’s (1981, 1997) felt sensing which provides depth. Reflective practice, as Donald Schön (1987) describes it, is curious: shaped by looking for opportunities for learning. He differentiates three kinds of the experiment: (i) we can approach practising guided by an exploratory curiosity but no particular expectations, and/or (ii) try out promising moves, that is do something we think might be helpful and see whether we like what

happens, and/or (iii) test hypotheses, that is see whether what we expect to happen actually does happen. Schön's approach derives from Dewey's (1938), which was also a central inspiration for Kolb in the development of his experiential learning cycle, which has "active experimentation" at its core (Kolb 2015).

Schön differentiates reflection-*on*-action – reflecting in pauses – and reflection-*in*-action – the ongoing sensuous, reflective awareness of how the action is going as one is doing it. Both can be sustained by felt-sensing processes. Focusing is a paradigmatic example of reflecting in pauses. Reflection-*in*-action has obvious resonances with mindfulness. But when it is practised as a sustained heeding of an evolving felt sense of one's ongoing practice, it provides more poised support for ongoing adaptation and improvisation. Both felt sensing in the flow and in reflective pauses were important for the students' reflective practice experiments.

Schön's model of reflective practice experiments provided an accessible scaffold that students could work within, whatever their facility with felt sensing. Within that frame students could work on their interiority skills, working from their current edge. Both Schön and Kolb acknowledge the importance of felt understanding, but neither develops it as a focus. In Schön's case, as I show elsewhere (Walkerden 2005), this is likely because he lacked the processes and concepts for explicating it. In Kolb's case, this is more a difference in emphasis; he cites Gendlin but is using a very wide lens. In my teaching, and that of my co-authors in this book, we are focusing closely on embodied thinking methods because of their striking potential for emancipation and empowerment, when taken up intensively (Gendlin 1981; Walkerden 2004, 2005; Schoeller 2023). Jordi (2010) sees resonant benefits.

In their reflective practice experiment projects, students had to:

1. Decide what practice(s) they would experiment with: one or more systems analysis, stakeholder analysis, management system analysis and design, Principled Negotiation, creative thinking, and reflective practice.
2. Decide what settings they would experiment with them in. This could be any setting of their choice other than in our environmental decision-making class, for example in their work for another course, their household, or their employment.
3. Work out, or discover, how they are, and how they can, use their "feel" for their practice to guide them as they experiment. (This was often done, in part, while they were experimenting, of course.)
4. Work out what passages of practising they would explore, and/or, what moves they would try out, and/or what hypotheses they would test. (These decisions were also often made, in part, while they were experimenting.)
5. Heed, and record, their findings: "when I tried X, guided by Y 'feel' re my practice, Z occurred, which was, and was not, welcome in j respects for k reasons."
6. Reflect on their findings.



I taught sustained felt sensing in a variety ways, including:

- demonstrating it myself, pointing out how I was relying on focusing micro-processes as I was teaching, and as I was demonstrating thinking through policy problems, live, in class;
- helping students notice it in familiar practices, for example reflecting on playing netball and football helped a number of students grasp what, in their own living, the term “felt understanding” was pointing to;
- helping students notice their and their colleagues’ use of felt understanding live, in class, with Socratic questioning accompanied by pointing out process shifts and microprocess skills (*as per* Hendricks 2001);
- exercises to do in class, for example working on a policy design question using felt sense-centred clustering, a way of focusing without a partner;
- homework exercises that scaffolded the integration of felt sensing and each of the systems analysis and stakeholder analysis; and
- directing students to diverse online resources (e.g. video clips of Gendlin teaching focusing).

An example of a checking question used in class, to help students reflect on their own skill level, and to cue seeking support from their peers or me, was as follows:

Do you know how to check with your ‘feel’ for how your practice is going, to learn from it?

How skilled are you at ‘listening to yourself’?

. . . is slowing down and letting an idea emerge slowly something you are familiar with?

. . . is being curious, when something you’ve written or said no longer seems to fit, a stance that comes effortlessly and easily?

. . . is checking back and forth . . . in a relaxed, gentle fashion . . . , between your feel for what is needed and your ideas or plans, familiar territory?, . . . letting your ideas adjust to fit what you feel is needed (and vice versa when that feels appropriate).

This way of teaching skills that have wide relevance has a number of attractions from a practical perspective. Students experiment in settings in which they are already embedded, and that they are comfortable exploring in. Many chose workplaces, many chose households, and some focused on activities they did alone. Students take responsibility for developing their own skills. They focus on skills they would like to strengthen or think may be particularly helpful. For example, one student used her procrastination in essay writing, taking an assignment for another class as her case study, as a medium for developing creative thinking and reflective practice skills. Another student used his work as an environmental officer, in which he was responsible for compliance with pollution control regulations by small businesses, to focus on developing stakeholder

analysis and negotiation skills – obviously directly benefitting his environmental work at the same time. All the work that students did was fine-grained – their focus was on learning, not on being influential; learning gently, sensitively, and safely. Indeed, they were asked to step back to low key exploratory practice (curiosity without effort) whenever they felt unsafe or unsure.

Because the learning is in actual settings, the learning is more palpable than, for example, in role plays or class exercises. Its standing is different. The transition from developing ideas for action to taking action is marked (Kolb 2015). It involves a shift from standing outside a situation to being inside it and taking responsibility for enacting change. This brings with it a basic shift in embodied knowing: one builds know-how in *making* a difference. The students each developed their “feel” for how to do one or more of the course’s focal practices. Moreover, at a meta-level, they *also* learned how to contribute to research and development of practice traditions (Walkerden 2009), *albeit* working from their own learning edges, rather than from a community of practice’s edges.

### **Research methods**

This chapter, itself, is a report from a practice research experiment, run over five years. In *my* reflective experiment – exploring ways of teaching students to be helpful, influential environmental and sustainability practitioners – I was obviously learning a great deal from my students. *They* experimented, and *they* reported back. I learned through helping, supporting, assessing, and later analysing, their work.

My learning from them this way is, on the one hand, a commonplace of reflective teaching. However, to minimise risks to the students, they only learned about my research project after all assessments for the course had been finalised, when I asked them, by email, if they would be willing to let their assignments be used in my research. I emphasised that students should only let me use their assignments if they felt comfortable having their stories shared anonymously. Students had to choose to opt in. Over those five years, I taught 205 students, and of those, 122 students provided their assignments for use in my research. The reports quoted here are presented anonymously, with a few identifying details altered where this seemed prudent, and with some light editing of English expression for clarity (English was a second language for about half my students). In some of the quotations, keywords related to felt understanding are italicised for emphasis.

I begin with stories of the research process for two students, to give a sense of the shape of a student’s research project. They provide contrasts in two areas. One makes a useful start with felt-sensing skills, and the other becomes quite accomplished; most students fell within these bounds. They also contrast learning through a professional workplace and through a personal project. Both examples underline the transferability of the skills being developed. After these I widen out the discussion, drawing in additional students’ experiences.

Working with a relatively small number of examples has a logic to it related to the kind of generalisation I want to offer: showing what *may* be helpful and what *may* be empowering (Schön 1995; Walkerden 2009). This form of generalisation invites readers to explore what *may* be helpful in their own situations. Our circumstances are so varied, we each need to shape action for our *specific* situations, so knowing what *usually* works in some families of cases is not sufficient (Brunner 2006; Walkerden 2009). The goal of this kind of research is to support readers' "reflective transfer": "carrying [approaches] over into new situations where they may be put to work and tested and found to be valid and interesting, but where they may also be reinvented" (Schön 1995, 31). Identifying what *may* be relevant and *may* be helpful is a form of generalisation from cases that fits when the research goal is supporting colleagues in shaping their own practice (Walkerden 2009).

### **Self-directed learning: two case studies**

#### *Sustainable retailing: developing negotiation skills*

I want to begin with an example of a student who was a senior manager in a retail company who "intend[ed] to make the business as sustainable as possible." He had raised this policy agenda with the Managing Director prior to the course and had been told "such actions are only to be taken if they are cost neutral." He hoped to be more influential, and set out to develop his skills as a negotiator, and, to support this, to develop his skills in stakeholder analysis.

A central challenge for him was, as he put, it,

[that] I have difficulties in practicing reflection-in-action. I noticed this quite often in the past and it *feels* like a real disadvantage in some situations to me. When for example negotiation partners are able to react better to the development of the conversation and dictate it. In extreme cases it is this *feeling* of not being present and having trouble following the conversation, not being able to actively influence the direction of it.

He describes his experience with stakeholder analysis as follows:

I begin working on the stakeholder analysis and my first reaction is that this might be not a good use of my time. I *feel* like I know most of the things and have them in my head anyway. But after taking some time to think about the issue at hand, I *feel* very happy that I started this. Having everything written down and in a clear manner somehow *puts my mind at ease*. I amended and added a couple of things in the following days which is easier once the table is drafted. It seems like the stakeholder analysis helps to organise my thoughts. I *feel* like I am more *comfortable* going into the negotiation now with this in the back of my mind. It gives me kind of a clear direction. However, I still *feel* a bit nervous about

whether I am able to incorporate some of my ideas into the discussion appropriately. The actual negotiation might go a totally different way.

Describing the negotiation he writes:

Again, I *feel* happy to have done the [stakeholder] analysis, it allows me to be on the ‘front foot’ in the conversation. Our managing director now agrees on putting [sustainability] on the table and discussing this further internally. But he [still] does not think that we should have a “green budget” for additional spending on sustainable practices. I now listen carefully and *pause* a bit longer, I *notice* a bit of anger *coming up inside me*. I think I realised that the conversation is not going to bring out a better outcome than that and that we are at a dead end right now. He does not seem to be very interested in this issue and I decide to not take it any further today because I *felt* that I would have not been able to argue in a rational and creative way that would have led to a better outcome today. I tell him that I will start discussing the issue with our department heads and that we will take it from there.

Reflecting afterwards on this conversation he comments, “The intended outcome was not reached completely, but another step was taken in the process towards achieving the outcome. I *felt* more comfortable during the negotiation.” But more fundamentally, he notices changes in his ongoing conversational practice: “I now pause more often during conversations and ask more questions about the other person’s thoughts and feelings about the particular issue.” He goes on and describes an example of doing this in another professional conversation unrelated to his sustainability work.

What do we have here? He is not describing the sophisticated use of felt-sensing skills – sustained processes that develop novel insights, which focusing (Gendlin 1981) instances. He *is*, however, describing a process of reflection-in-action in which his registering of shifts in feeling tone – back and forth between comfort and discomfort, and noticing and standing back from the arising (and implicitly the falling away) of nervousness and anger – is shaping his practice, helping him be more effective. Most importantly, he has had the experience of (i) preparing for a negotiation with stakeholder analysis and experiencing the easing that this brings, (ii) shifting to a more centred, aware presence in the conversation, that enables him to take stoppages in his stride, and (iii) shifting his conversational rhythms to give himself more time to discover and reorient, as the conversation proceeds. He describes, in other words, using the play of felt understanding in ordinary ways that would be familiar to most readers, yet also taking small but useful steps to enhance his skills in this area. His experience is a demonstration that students who do not find embodied thinking skills easy to access in sophisticated ways can nonetheless benefit materially by being helped to pay more heed to their embodied presence, and the understandings implicit in it.

*Weightlifting: developing reflective practice skills*

The second student shows the possibilities of just working with yourself: noticing your process (here weightlifting) and, with the combination of Schönian moves and Gendlinian sensitivity to felt understanding, developing a much more reflective, sensitive form of the same practice. And, in the process, greatly enhancing his skills as a reflective practitioner.

What motivated his experiments was that

Recently, I have undertaken a more rigorous workout routine with the inclusion of an additional compound movement for each workout to shift past my natural plateau. I am visiting the gym on average three times a week and have noticed significant strength improvements in deadlift, squat and flat bench exercises.

However, “the increase in intensity has caused me to experience muscle burn-out”; this was interfering with his work as a landscaper. Most notably, he injured his right hand. “This situation has put me at somewhat of a crossroads for my personal well-being where I am required to take action to change my habits without knowing what that action is.”

He set out to use a crossing of Schön’s and Gendlin’s methods with Feldenkrais’s “Awareness through Movement.” On his first attempt, his efforts to pay more attention to his practice only worked modestly: “The loud external environment of the gym and chaotic internal environment of my body (i.e. dizziness, numbness and adrenaline) made it extremely difficult to focus and reflect upon my feeling and micro-processes.” He shifted to “visiting the gym during later hours [when] I was able to provide an environment for myself which I had more control of, and [was] be able to reflect easier.”

In his second week,

I focused on implementing ‘felt knowing’ method of reflection which I was more comfortable with. Every time I felt at unease, I made sure to be pay attention to my felt feeling in those moments and give myself time to holistically understand the situation. . . . I decided to base the next workout sessions totally on the way I felt on the day. This meant that I would go into the gym without a set workout or a timeframe, instead the choice of exercises would be unrestricted and purely determined by ‘What my body wanted to do’. Instead of trying to eliminate these awkward sensations through reactive processing and my logical way of doing things, I chose to implement exploratory practice in my workouts, letting these sensations move, grow and voice themselves. By letting the sensation manifest and grounding my reflection in felt knowing rather than a logical explanation, I was able to finally understand where my experience of muscle burnout originated (failure to listen to my body with a misunderstanding of ‘no pain-no gain’ attitude).

This led to marked shifts in his weightlifting that greatly reduced strain and “mental exhaustion.” In his third week he found

reflection became easier and more natural. . . . I noticed that being more gentle and sensitive with myself made it easier to reflect. Additionally, I felt like the process of self-reflection and awareness using felt knowing was at times intimate.

Reflecting on the whole process he commented:

[Working with t]he concepts of ‘felt knowing’ and ‘reflection in practice’ allowed me to notice how and why I do things, eventually opening up a rich number of possibilities. Instead of processing awkward sensations logically as they arise, I let them grow, move and voice themselves until I understood the situation holistically.

And:

Perhaps the greatest personal breakthrough of this exploratory experiment was the development of my understanding of body signals. . . . I realised that my misunderstanding of the workout mentality ‘no pain-no gain’ caused me to misinterpret my body senses (fatigue, pain, dizziness) and make disadvantageous decisions leading to muscle burnout. [. . . M]aking decisions based upon felt knowing and intuitions proved beneficial in reducing muscle burnout. More importantly, listening to my own senses allowed me to tune in to my interests and understand myself more than my standard logical way of doing things without considering emotions and feelings. Hence, I found this method to be useful in both decision making and everyday life.

There are many features of his practice that are commonplaces of sustained felt sensing (Gendlin 1981):

- He gave himself more time.
- He practised close, sustained listening to his unease, and to the feel of his practice generally.
- His grasp of his situation became more holistic.
- Letting felt understandings explicate led to fresh insights.
- Heeding felt understanding expanded the field of possibilities he was aware of.
- He finds himself being more “sensitive” to himself, “gentler,” even “intimate.” It is striking to observe this arising in weightlifting practice, where straining is the norm, however.
- He received very concrete positive feedback from this practising, in the form of improved well-being.
- The shift in mode of thinking became “easier and more natural” over time.

## Innovative learning leveraging innovative teaching

### *The development of embodied thinking skills*

In the two cases outlined earlier, we have one student who worked with felt understanding in a way that is likely to be familiar to most readers: noticing shifts in comfort and discomfort as situations evolve, with a level of discernment that differentiates between emotional reactions and a felt sense of what is likely to be helpful (e.g. “I notice a bit of anger coming up inside me . . . and I decide to not take it any further today because I *felt* that . . .”). The second student is making explicit use of focusing processes and demonstrating sophisticated use of felt sensing in reflection-in-action (e.g. “implement[ing] exploratory practice in my workouts, letting [awkward] sensations move, grow and voice themselves”). Letting felt senses ‘speak for themselves’ is a signature move of higher level skills in ‘thinking with the implicit’ (Hendricks 2001; Gendlin 2018), because it cuts across our usual relation to ideas as contents that we work with – *usually* we think about thinking as if all the agency sat with the thinker, and none with the thought (e.g. Flew 1989). As I noted earlier, most students’ use of felt-sensing skills fell within this range.

A third student, who was using tensions around cleaning in her shared household as a medium through which to develop negotiation skills, describes how

I tried to identify senses or feelings, and then experiment with them by *letting them move, grow and speak for themselves*. As an example, in the first weeks after I moved in, [I noticed I was . . .] feeling more uncomfortable because of the division of the household tasks. I experimented by letting that feeling grow *instead of trying to eliminate that awkward sensation by giving it a rational explanation, as I usually do*, until I finally understood where it was coming from (my desire of being a cool nice flat mate) and what was at stake (my interests in feeling comfortable in a place that is temporarily mine as well).

Her comments about shifting from “giving a rational explanation” to “letting the feeling grow” echo the second student’s comments about making a shift from his usual ways of thinking – which he characterises as trying to “eliminate” unwelcome sensations and be “logical” – to a decentred mode of thinking, in which agency is distributed: “letting these sensations move, grow and voice themselves.” His “standard logical way of doing things” involves “[not] considering emotions and feelings.” These students have learned to differentiate two modes of thought: (i) “following my felt-knowledge” and “letting these sensations move, grow and voice themselves,” and (ii) following “facts and rational thinking,” and “my standard logical way of doing things.” It is very helpful to notice and orient from this process contrast, (i) a mode of thinking in which we sit with the felt “more” that sits below anything we say (without which we would not know what point we are

making), and (ii) a mode of thinking in which we leverage the potentials of calculative rationalities and deductive logic. What their comments underline is that they *are* building skills in noticing and orienting from this process difference, that they are giving embodied thinking skills greater prominence in their thinking, and that this is emancipating: it is increasing flexibility, increasing insight, and increasing creativity. A striking detail is how helpful both students found it to discover; ‘where they were coming from.’ When we tacitly assume that we are transparent to ourselves, the possibility that one could ‘discover’ ‘where one is coming from,’ and that this could be revelatory, is obscured. We assume, unreflectively, that we already know what is at stake for us, so we do not explore. Embodied thinking approaches bring these hidden practice possibilities into view. Heeding felt understanding in a sustained, gentle way, supporting its explication, is one demonstration that we are not transparent to ourselves. Appreciating this is very important for shifting from positional bargaining to interest-based negotiation, for example.

Another group of students showed that they were functioning at quite a high level of social awareness, leveraging their skills in forming and using felt understanding, but without there being much evidence of the *development* of these skills occurring, during their reflective practice experiments. For example, a conservation practitioner working on threatened species issues commented as follows:

[Lobbying] is an area I’ve been interested in since arriving four months ago but haven’t yet actively or consciously pursued this with management, as I’ve still been finding my feet in the role and learning the lay of the land. . . . I just observed conversation and behaviours around the management of the [. . . current, prominent] issue to help me understand *and get a feel for* where perceptions lay and what our preferred position was for lobbying in a ‘live’ situation.

And:

*Felt* like my colleagues were wearing an awful lot of the ‘black’ hat [taking a critical stance, a reference to De Bono’s (2009) Six Thinking Hats practice], *so tried to be conscious of* my comments and the angle they might come from, but wanting to drive the conversation forward. It was brought up again in a smaller group, which included the most vocal of our staff members on the topic, but took a different tone, which was interesting. It *felt* like walking through the situation in the last discussion and getting a lot of things off the chest opened the way to more discussion now. Concerns were still there but attitudes *felt* like they had shifted to start thinking about the ‘how’ which I thought was a great step forward.



These casual references to how the shifts in conversation felt underline how reading social situations is a feeling process. Having an evolving feel for what is happening in conversations, and orienting from there, is something that socially skilled people do all the time, without, usually, taking much time to explicate it. She is not focusing in a sustained way in pauses in the ways that the second and third students illustrate, but she is very accomplished at using felt sensing as an aspect of ongoing practice. She concluded her reflections on her experimentation with:

Conscious consideration and application of these methods was a useful systematic, educational exercise, as it created a space that was useful for deliberate decision making, actions and reflection. . . . I appreciate there is a lot of weight and importance in harnessing felt-knowing, embracing learning-by-doing and reflection-in-action in assessing a situation and using that to determine what tools and methods might best be applied to achieve a desired outcome. The intended outcome, to encourage open discussion about approaches to lobbying without strong resistance was achieved, demonstrating the ability to use these tools in a practical, real life setting to assist the flow and ideas for environmental decision making.

A relatively small number of students – leveraging their previous experience – preferred a more meditative approach as an alternative to felt sensing. (On some occasions they failed to differentiate this from sustained felt sensing – the difference is centrally about whether one is observing what is arising and practising being relaxed, or engaging gently and kindly with what is arising and fostering deepening understanding.) They consistently found themselves calmer and more centred in their practice but did not experience the creative shifts in insight (Gendlin (1981) calls them “felt shifts”) characteristic of sustained felt-sensing processes.

In sum, the development of felt-sensing skills in pauses before and after action (reflection-for-action and reflection-on-action), and in reflection-in-action, were widely demonstrated, and where this was not occurring (or at least not reported by the students) there was still skilful use of either felt sensing or a related process being demonstrated, in most cases.

### *Pedagogical innovation within the reflective practice tradition*

Crossing the Gendlinian and Schönian traditions brings substantial innovation to each tradition. Schön (1987) was well aware of the play of felt understanding in skilful practice but lacked an explication of what these skills are. Instead, he focused on the social processes – coaching, practicums (e.g. design studios), etc. – that facilitate developing knowing how in the classroom (Walkerden 2005). There are at least two main ways in which embedding Gendlin’s practices within Schön’s practices for reflection strengthens them greatly.

- When embodied thinking skills are not an explicit focus in teaching, students are left relying largely on the microprocess skills that they have developed previously. Since these skills are rarely taught explicitly, this usually means that students are left relying on what they learned through modelling and their own experimentation during childhood and adolescence. This is hazardous. The contrasts between the students whose processes were described earlier show that there are skills that may well be missing. The transition from simply taking in felt understandings to actively fostering their explication, dialogically, is a profound one, in particular (Hendricks 2001). Not teaching felt-sensing skills explicitly leaves some students at a considerable disadvantage.
- The second major limitation concerns the impacts that shifts in emotional charge – for example into anxiety or frustration – have on learning. Skills in stepping back from an emotional reaction, letting a felt sense of it form, and exploring its logic (i.e. its view of what it is appropriate to do), are very helpful when one finds oneself emotionally off-balance while navigating an evolving situation. Anxiety and frustration are quite common when students are in unfamiliar, challenging circumstances, and they can impede learning markedly. Embodied thinking skills can be emancipating here.

The experiences of the students demonstrate that bringing in Gendlin's approach to felt sensing supports a major expansion and deepening of Schön's approach to teaching professional practice.<sup>1</sup>

From a Gendlinian perspective, bringing in Schön's 'reflective practice experiments' heuristic – exploratory practice, move testing, and/or hypothesis testing – brokers the emergence of a substantial, distinctive, felt sense-centred practice with a wide range of applications. The main line of the trajectory of Gendlin's thinking runs from exploring how we experience meaning (Gendlin 1997), to developing modes of therapeutic practice that leverage that (Gendlin 1996), to developing the focusing practice as a means of "giving therapy away" (Gendlin 1981), and to developing *Thinking at the Edge* (Gendlin 2004) which builds on focusing (one practices focusing while doing TAE) but which returns to the discoveries of the profound intellectual flexibilities that thinking with and from felt understanding brings (Gendlin 1997). *Thinking at the Edge* was developed initially for theory-building – it is an explication of, and, as a formal method, a proceduralising of Gendlin's own process of theory building (traces of TAE methods can be seen in the text of *A Process Model*, for instance). The felt sense-centred reflective practice experiments approach that the students are using here is at least as general an application of focusing as TAE; arguably its application is wider, because a reflective practice experiments approach can be brought into any area of practising. I am hopeful that laying out this approach here will lead to it being used more widely. There is a great deal of room to expand and discipline the carrying forward of practice traditions through reflective practice experiments (Walkerden 2009, 2019), and to support practitioners at all levels of expertise on their learning journeys, as the stories told here illustrate.

*Mind and body, reason and feelings*

I want to return, lastly, to the second and third students' contrasts between two modes of thinking, which they framed as a contrast between being logical and considering emotions and feelings, being rational and letting feelings grow. Their contrasts of the logical and the felt need some slow consideration. Our rationality is always felt, at least tacitly (Gendlin 1997), and our felt understandings can always be explicated into rational schemas (Gendlin 2004, 2018). It would be better to understand these two modes of thinking as interpenetrating, rather than separate – each pointing to potentials in the other. This confusion is common among people learning embodied thinking skills for the first time, and unhelpful, as Gendlin (1981) underlines. Thinking at the Edge is a profound illustration of how helpful deep integration of these modes of thinking is (see the chapters by Schoeller, Krycka, and Heimann and Bach, in this book, for example). What is in play here is a kind of cultural naivety about body and mind, emotion (“the felt”) and reason, that others in this volume have taken up (see the chapters by Schoeller, Thorgeirsdóttir and Haraldsdóttir, and Sauke, in particular). The central issue is closely related to what Whitehead (1953) named “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” Whitehead, appreciating the singularity of everything actual and the fluidity of everything, was pointing to how mistaking conceptual stabilities for what is – “the accidental error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete” (Whitehead 1953, 50–51) – necessarily wrong-foots us. Thompson, explicating Whitehead (the words in single quotation marks are direct quotations from Whitehead), writes:

Concreteness [for Whitehead . . .] refers to what is most important and basic in our lives. This is our *immediate experience*, the dimension of the aesthetic, of *bodily feeling* – notice the contrast with the notion of an *anaesthetic*. The aesthetic is the ‘ground’ for every ‘figure’ we have. This is what Whitehead called ‘that stream, compounded of sense perceptions, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities, adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life’. Our concrete bodily experience *connects us to the world*, and is thus the *base* for all inquiry. So concreteness also refers to what really occurs, whatever is exactly as it is, not possibilities or hypothetical entities, nor abstractions or partial selections of features. It is the immediacy and *fullness* of what is uniquely individual, of what is an ‘actual situation’.

(Thompson 1997, 221–222)

It is commonplace to take the mind/body and rational/emotional-felt dualisms as fundamental features of reality. This misuses these concepts. *Experiencing* the relativity of words to felt meaning – the way words have to fit our felt understanding to be making our point, not the other way round – revives an appreciation that words are tools best used pragmatically: used

where they are helpful, and put aside when they are not, perhaps then taking up other words, or perhaps, for a time, sitting inarticulately, savouring the *felt* understanding, without words.

When we lose track of testing how well the words we are using are fitting the experiences we are articulating, we treat the worded schemas as if what the terms portray *is* the real. We may function as if bodies *and* minds exist, alongside, but separate from, each other, for example. It is versions of that unnoticed clumsiness – mistaking the schema for ‘the is’, the abstract for the concrete – that make a term like “felt sense” seem paradoxical. The term “felt sense” must involve an observational or conceptual mistake, it seems. What one has lost track of, here, is that body/mind contrasts are helpful in some contexts, but poor fits to other aspects of our experiencing. Appreciating that reality radically exceeds any schematising, and embracing the pragmatic openness that this inspires, both honours what embodied thinking reveals and empowers us to use embodied thinking practices flexibly to pursue helpful innovations. This is a very important skill for people working to catalyse socio-ecological change.

## Note

- 1 For traditions of reflective practice that mistakenly reify useful ways of contrasting mind and body – mistaking their abstract patterning for the fluxing, the holistic ground of lived experience they speak from, as Whitehead puts it (Thompson 1997) – and as a result treat reflection as an entirely cognitive process, the benefits of this crossing are even more profound, as Jordi (2010) demonstrates.

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# 15 Disciplined thinking, sensuous wisdom

*Donata Schoeller, Greg Walkerden,  
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We have told many stories of excitement, challenge and delight in these pages . . . our own, our colleagues', and our students'. In these stories, you may have noticed: Embodied thinking is deeply empirically disciplined. Our experiencing is its bedrock. One way this so is that instances, specific concrete experiences, are supported in making their often uncomfortable demands on our theories. Another is that whatever disciplined investigations (e.g. using quantitative and qualitative methods) we have undertaken play into our felt understanding. Experience, in all its forms and textures, shapes what can be said – via the medium of being taken in by us, *understood*. If we stay faithful to what, somatically, makes sense (not confusing this with other considerations like serving our interests or sating our appetites), in principle all our formal and informal experimentation and learning is available, via our felt understanding. . . . In practice it is not this encyclopaedic: we are not self-transparent, and our taking in and understanding is organic, so this should not be thought of on the model of a library or information retrieval system. But nonetheless there is a richness in the experiencing that plays into embodied thinking that brings a kind of faithfulness to empirical realities . . . and the processes of explicating that we engage in are able to draw in more and more of what we have learned, at the same time as they bring us fresh insights. In this way, embodied thinking works against the grain of disconnection that familiar ways of thinking and acting may bring with them, when they do not fit the situations in which we live and use them. The transformative dimension of embodied thinking happens in a very organic way, taking along with it the interconnected experiential tissue with which we are woven into the fabric of the world.

The crucial general point is that thinking that expresses embodied understanding is neither conventional nor arbitrary. It *is* faithful to our embedding in our situations – social, ecological, intellectual, intrapersonal, . . . our living in *all* our environments plays into our experience of presence, so empirical discipline and theoretical discipline play directly into embodied thinking practice.

Our academic culture, with its emphasis on funding and outputs, ignores the organic time it needs to understand subject matters in-depth, to clarify confusions, to incubate ideas, to care for oneself and others in facing up to intellectual challenges. Stepping into the practice of embodied thinking, in the

context of research and learning, runs into a management of time and people that has grown from a tradition of forgetting the thinking body. Calling this work knowledge *production*, a term which – since the industrial revolution – has had strong mechanistic connotations, evokes this insensitivity.

We tried to walk our talk also in the coming about of this book. We began with regular meetings in which each author laid out their specific core ideas. The point was not to pitch these ideas to each other but to enable each other to develop, as boldly as possible, what is meaningful to us, within a mutually interested listening climate. We continued with meetings in which authors of each section met to listen to each other, and to continue to give each other space to develop ideas “at the edge.” We provided each other company in places where we felt stuck or blocked. We knew we could reach out to each other when we needed support to unfold an idea that we felt unsure, yet excited or discouraged, about.

In academia, practising embodied thinking methods may seem like yet another task to take on – one that may sound like a luxury, making it quite impractical to prioritise. But at this point we touch on what we might call a benevolent paradox. Practising an embodied approach within research, no matter how little time one has, is not experienced as losing time. On the contrary. Slowing down to dip into the felt motivation for your work, for instance, can re-fuel your energy and let you know what is relevant and worth your time. Slowing down to listen to each other, clarifying, or perhaps just acknowledging, some deep confusion at the bottom of your work, or of some learning or teaching challenge, can provide surprising insights that save a lot of time.

Even allowing for workshop participation and training, practising a more embodied way of thinking saves time in a quite fundamental way: passages of time become well used, not wasted and not rushed past. Something is empowering in the leap we practise in a rather radical way. We hope to excite you, to entice you, to join us in this practice, to become adventurous yourself, and to dare to become a beginner and stutter and stammer while attending to what is important and alive for you within your work – touching what needs more attention, and learning to listen more curiously and generously to yourself and others in academic work. These practices invite us to take ourselves and others seriously as embodied thinkers, allowing thinking with and from the rich affordances of lived experience and its inspirations, that are not just worth your time, but that give your time the value it deserves.

This touches upon a natural ethical side effect of overcoming the body–mind split in practices of research and learning. The side effect has been described in this book as learning to develop a presence that can account for interdependence, as becoming aware of the horizons of our approach, and as acknowledging that what one researches co-arises with the way we approach something. How we approach subjects matters, and how we approach ourselves and each other matters greatly, when it comes to having an understanding of research that does not cut the embodied researchers away from the flesh of the world. Including ourselves in our research and

teaching implies including our vulnerability, a vulnerability we share with all living beings. Including our vulnerability implies developing modes of work that allow for more flourishing. Thus, there is a certain kind of built-in ethics in an approach to research that takes account of its processes in more embodied ways.

Conditions of flourishing are uncovered thereby that are simple, and yet surprisingly difficult to implement within academic cultures. It does not seem to take much work to flourish together in academic research and learning settings: attending to the feeling body, opening spaces to unfold fuzzy ideas and not pinning each other down prematurely, taking time to pause, to bear uncertainty, to share silence, to be interested and informed by the specifics of simple experiential events, all of this allows for a transformative freedom of thinking. But even though all of these possibilities are close at hand, they can feel impossible, like a revolutionising of the system. That is why researchers, faculty members, and students are sometimes speechless after having experienced a summer school, in which these embodied thinking practices are our daily routine. How to take this kind of experience of learning and research along, when returning to the system-as-usual? This is why we speak of a leap into practice. Courage is implied. Even though changes on the systemic level are obviously needed, changes in individual practice can inspire others, and fuel and promote changes on a larger scale.

The story of the researchers of this book is a good example of the benevolent paradox of gaining time, energy, inspiration and momentum by “going more embodied” in research. The authors took the challenge of delving individually, and then increasingly also jointly, into the experience of embodied thinking, applying methods, and testing them in their work, with collaborators, students, and trainees. Scholars from diverse fields joined hands in putting their fingers into the entangled ground of our specific situated cognition. We encouraged one another, taught, trained students and researchers using the methods, and disseminated them further. A community of scholars using these methods is emerging, as this book demonstrates. Their research understanding hopes to be anti-reductive, not just a critique: an attraction, an invitation, and a joint and more joyful venture.

The benevolent paradox we touched on above is connected to another paradox. You might also have sensed it between the lines of the chapters. It has to do with the fact that the more personal a felt sense for an issue is, the more understandable and generalisable it can be. This paradox has been described by different thinkers, ranging from Søren Kierkegaard to Luce Irigaray, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Luisa Muraro, from Alfred North Whitehead to Eugene Gendlin. Much of our intellectual culture orients in the other direction: prizing the emergence of categories and capacities for repeated use of well-defined processes, for the efficiencies this brings.

Embodied thinking is almost a reversal of that – a flowering out of every unique instance. This might be the most challenging philosophical implication of the kind of shift we need to understand in our future research: the



vastness and intricacy of ourselves. To actually name the movement of meaning and understanding happening in embodied thinking, we need new basic metaphors. We might need to conceive of such thinking movements more like a growing cosmos, like a universe that is expanding. Or like a plant that is emerging and unfolding from many roots, needing time to develop its shape and to contribute to the “ecosystem” whatever it can. Universality, and here we carry forward a classical pragmatist intuition, might be better grasped as a precise development that grows from shared grounds of lifeworlds and scientific contexts, and that – in this unique form – allows for other thinking to flourish, for other voices to find themselves, and for an expanding and diverse universe of meaning, where we jointly understand, and do a better job of coming to terms with, living and caring for a planet.

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