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## The ‘questionableness’ of things: opening up the conversation

Alison Buckley, Andy Cheng, Sue Dymoke, Jon Nixon, Jane Spiro and Jonathan Vincent

*This chapter developed from a number of conversations that took place at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Value and Virtue in Practice-Based Research the twin themes of which were ‘openness’ and ‘criticality’. These chance and often fleeting conversations focused on ideas explored in the keynote address that Jon delivered at the conference, but spanned out into a wider discussion of the relevance of those ideas within different arenas of professional practice.*

*After the conference we agreed via email that Alison, Andy, Jane, Jonathan and Sue would respond – from their different perspectives and value orientations – to the ideas explored in Jon’s keynote. How might these ideas translate into professional practice? How might embedded practice speak back to the generality of these ideas? How do the ideas relate to our core values as educators involved in practice-based research?*

*These were our starting points. They have resulted in the following edited version of Jon’s original address interlaced with questions and interjections from the co-authors of this chapter. We are not claiming that what follows is dialogical, but it does attempt to open up a conversation on the nature of understanding and what it means to be someone who seeks to understand.*

*Jon began his address with a quotation from the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer: **And what is hermeneutical imagination? It is a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us** (Gadamer, 2004, 41-42).*

I’d like to approach the twin themes of openness and criticality through a consideration of what I call the interpretive tradition: the tradition, that is, of philosophical hermeneutics. Hermes was the son of Zeus and the god of transitions and boundaries. He acted as the messenger and emissary of Zeus, traversing the space between the mortal and divine, the human world and Mount Olympus. It is in this *in-between* space – the transitional space where meaning is made and boundaries transgressed – that philosophical hermeneutics is located.

**Jane:** *In-between* space is what interests me as an educator and communicator. In Dante’s *Purgatorio* there is a limbo land which is a reverse image of the terraces of heaven. For him it was a kind of hell to be in an ‘in between’ place without the capacity to travel to or from; to be caught without movement between two conditions. I interpret this for myself, as an educator, as a metaphor for creative opportunity. If the space between people is seen as the chance to travel between, we have so much to learn from one another; if it is seen as a ‘gap’ we are separated from one another in lonely and threatening limbo-lands. When I arrived as a new teacher in a country where I knew neither the language nor anyone in my new community, I wrote a sequence of poems I called *Exile*:

I am a changeling, plucked

and wrongly placed, my history  
mute, a failure to know  
where I am going, to remember where from.

I empathise here with the experience of physically entering these 'in-between' spaces, as an exile, refugee, traveller, plucked from a first language and culture. The need to cross emotional, linguistic and physical space is urgent. As a teacher of second culture students I have always considered it my responsibility to recognise this 'in-between' space and to ensure it is a journey towards transformation, rather than a place in which to be lost.

To interpret is to seek meaning. We human beings have always searched for meaning. We have looked to the stars to divine our destinies. We have looked at the footprints in the sand to see who passed this way before us. We have noted in the flight of birds the passing of the seasons. But alongside this primary practice of interpretation has evolved the secondary practice of understanding what it is we are doing when we interpret. Rabbis have asked: 'What are we doing when we interpret the Talmud and the Torah?' Philosophers of law have asked: 'What are we doing when we interpret the Law?' Humanist scholars have asked: 'What are we doing when we interpret the Text?'

**Jane:** The image of the footprints in the sand evokes for me a Joshua Indian creation myth. The Creator/First mover in the story creates the earth through rings of smoke, and brings land out of the water. But to his horror, as the sand lifts from the sea, there is a line of footprints clearly imprinted. No matter how many times he washes the sand with sea, each time it re-emerges with the footprints. Even the First mover, believing himself to be the originator of all, has a predecessor. Behind each of our movements, is another; it is simply that we are still unaware. I see hermeneutics as the process of becoming aware, returning to those footsteps again and again to realise they are in fact ours, as well as those of our known and hidden ancestors.

### **The interpretive tradition**

Two insights in particular form the basis of what I am terming the interpretive tradition. The first insight is that *in any attempt at interpretation we are interpreting that which has already been interpreted*. The object of our interpretation is a construct that we inherit from the historical layering of countless prior interpretations and re-interpretations. There is no blank page of history upon which we can inscribe our entirely original understandings. History is a palimpsest of layered inscriptions and layered commentaries. The second insight follows from the first. If all understanding is always already interpretation, then *the interpreter is always already part of what is being interpreted*. The subject that interprets is implicit in the object of interpretation. Notions of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' as the privileged criteria of rationality become increasingly difficult to justify in the light of this second insight.

A third insight follows from the first two and was developed in particular by Hans-Georg Gadamer. If all understanding is always already interpretation and the interpreter always already part of what is being interpreted, then *all understanding necessarily involves*

*an element of self-understanding*. Gadamer elaborated this insight with reference to the notion of ‘application’, which he understood as being implicit in all understanding from the moment of its inception. It is not that understanding is achieved and then applied, but that the application is intrinsic to the process of understanding: ‘in all understanding an application occurs, such that the person who is understanding is himself or herself *right there* in the understood meaning. He or she *belongs to* the subject-matter that he or she is understanding ... Everyone who understands something understands himself or herself in it’ (original emphases) (Gadamer, 2001, 47-48). The hermeneutical task, as Gadamer defines it, is to locate oneself within one’s own field – or, as he would put it, ‘tradition’ – of understanding.

**Jane:** This insight that ‘he or she *belongs to* the subject-matter’ represents for me the very essence of action research. Being given permission to belong to the subject-matter liberates the practitioner-researcher. As a teacher, what has meaning is what we can translate into real change in our professional lives. As an early teacher-researcher I was fascinated by the imagination; I was directed by supervisors to the testimonies of writers, philosophers, poets, biologists, artists, and their accounts of imagination. Yet the more I read, the less satisfying seemed to be my task. I withdrew from the PhD programme after two years instead of three, with a worthy dissertation that included several thousand references to others, but had no further value beyond the MPhil I was awarded. Years later I discovered action research: in other words, I was given the permission to ‘belong to my subject-matter’. I researched what imagination meant to me as a writer and teacher, how it impacted on my students and colleagues, how it could impact even more, in what ways it represented positive change, where there were conflicts and what to do about this. It became my life-work. Belonging to our subject-matter is critical: without this we are indeed lost in the in-between spaces, talking to ourselves; but with it, we are making connections in the world.

The idea of ‘tradition’ is central to hermeneutics as developed by Gadamer: ‘we stand in traditions, whether we know these traditions or not; that is, whether we are conscious of these or are so arrogant as to think we can begin without presuppositions – none of this changes the way traditions are working on us and in our understanding’ (Gadamer, 2001, 45). Traditions pose questions in response to which we define ourselves and our own sense of purpose. The coherence of any tradition, as understood by Gadamer, can only be defined with reference to its intrinsic plurality and potential for innovation. Traditions are constantly evolving as new generations interpret and re-interpret them and, by so doing, modify and elaborate them. Traditions may initially present themselves to us as assertions, but, as Gadamer (1977, 11-13) insists, ‘no assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way ... The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable’.

Central to the argument of Gadamer’s (2004) *Truth and Method* is what he calls ‘the hermeneutic priority of the question’ (pp. 356-371). ‘Understanding begins’, as he puts it, ‘when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics’ (p. 298). In becoming receptive to that which addresses us we are opening ourselves to the question it

asks of us: ‘the essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open’ (p. 298) (original emphasis). Interpretation is the process whereby we receive the object of interpretation as a question. In clarifying and addressing that question the interpreter makes plain its meaning. Gadamer’s major contribution to the interpretive tradition is his insight into the dialogical nature of all interpretive acts. The inherent structure of that tradition, he argues, is that of question and answer.

**Andy:** From my perspective as a researcher/activist seeking to intervene in the executive function of community development through co-production, I recognise that the interpretive tradition has some well-founded benefits and much to say about a hope for living together with difference. However, the operation of inquiry runs counter to the operation of tradition. And faith, the antithesis of enquiry, is the cornerstone of how tradition delivers the compliance to attitude and behaviour that is the advantage bred into it over eons of human/cultural evolution. This is perhaps at odds with Gadamer’s insistence that traditions are mutable. Reflecting on Gadamer’s statement that ‘the real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable’, ought we not to ask: could it be that the real power of tradition is its capacity to blind us to that which is questionable? In considering what the interpretive tradition ‘requires of us’ is there not an onus on us to invite the faithful to enter into the conversation about what is questionable without challenging their faith in the unquestionable and what they see as the benefit that devotion brings?

### **Horizon, prejudice and method**

Tradition as understood and developed by Gadamer is not a bounded and impermeable system. On the contrary, it is a dynamic process that is both open-ended and unpredictable. It is a kind of ongoing conversation. Indeed, conversation was, for Gadamer, not just a metaphor for the interpretive tradition as he understood it, but its very substance: the means by which ideas are sustained and transformed across generations. It is in the *in-between* of conversation that we make meaning, share understanding, and reconcile the strange and the familiar. Gadamer spent his life as a philosopher trying to make sense of this *in-between* space of human interchange. In doing so, he explored three major themes in particular: the fusion of horizons, the power of prejudice and the problem of method.

#### *The fusion of horizons*

Gadamer’s notion of ‘horizon’ relates directly to the importance he places in tradition as the legacy of the past to the future and the corresponding debt owed by the present to the past. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer provides a general explanation of how and why he is using the concept: ‘The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in true proportion’ (Gadamer, 2004, 304). The concept as applied by Gadamer invariably relates to our understanding of the past and of how we interpret the past with reference to the sources available to us. Gadamer’s central point on this

matter is that our horizons of understanding are never static: ‘Every historian and philologist must reckon with the fundamental non-definitiveness of the horizon in which his understanding moves. Historical tradition can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events’ (ibid, 366).

The meaning to be derived from any act of interpretation is always *in-between*: between the interpreted and the interpreter, between the object of interpretation and the interpreter as subject, between different historical positions and perspectives. This means that the object of interpretation does not simply surrender its meaning as a form of divine revelation or authorial intention. Notwithstanding its historical roots in biblical exegesis, hermeneutics is in this respect both secular and humanist in its assumption that neither divine authority nor authorial intention provides the final arbiter in any interpretive act. There can be no appeal to a divine purpose that lies outside the historical course of events or to a human will that is immune to the consequences of those events.

The *in-between* nature of human understanding also means that interpretation is not simply imposed – as imported theory or pre-specified criteria – by the interpreter on the object of interpretation. Although the world is always already interpreted, every act of interpretation is a new beginning occasioning a necessary shift in the interpreter’s self-understanding; or, as Joseph Dunne (1997, 121) puts it, ‘the interpreter’s horizon is already being stretched beyond itself, so that it is no longer the same horizon that it was independently of this encounter’. Because both interpreter and interpreted are located in the process of history – *in medias res* – the horizon of interpretation can never achieve permanent fixity. It changes constantly, just as our visual horizon varies with each step we take: ‘horizons are not rigid but mobile; they are in motion because our prejudgements are constantly put to the test’ (Gadamer, 2001, 48). Consequently, each interpretation is both unique and open to reinterpretation. Plurality is a defining feature of the interpretive field.

### *The power of ‘prejudice’*

What the interpreter brings to the process of interpretation is vitally important. We understand the world in relation to what we bring to it by way of prior assumptions, preconceptions, and prejudices. We understand the world in and through our experience of the world. This perspective, as Gadamer (2004, 271) puts it, ‘involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices’. If we are an integral part of the world that we are seeking to understand, then we can ‘formulate the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics as follows: what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?’ (p. 278) Prejudice – our historicity – is where interpretation begins: ‘the concept of “prejudice” is where we can start’ (p. 273). We bring with us to any attempt at interpretation prior values and assumptions that shape what and how we interpret.

Gadamer insists that this importing of ourselves into the process of understanding is a necessary component of that understanding. However, he also insists that we must be aware of what we are importing. Some of our prejudices may assist understanding, while others may distort or deny understanding. A large part of the hermeneutical task involves self-

examination through the sifting of prejudices. To have trust in an interpretation is to trust that the interpreter has undergone this process of self-examination in respect of the values and assumptions that have shaped that interpretation. Similarly, to trust in one's own interpretive capacity is not to have blind faith in one's own convictions, but to trust in one's own commitment to questioning those convictions. Trust is a necessary condition of understanding and understanding is a necessary condition of our being in the world. If we trusted nothing in this world of ours, then it would be a world beyond our understanding – and a world beyond our understanding is no longer *our* world.

Gadamer is not arguing on behalf of relativism: an ethics of 'anything goes'. Rather, he is arguing for an ethics of deliberation. He is arguing on behalf of mutuality and reciprocity as the conditions necessary for whatever shared understanding is necessary for being together. Understanding implies – and requires as a necessary condition – recognition of both selfhood and difference and of the necessary relation between the two. To seek to understand is to adopt an ethical stance – not a moralistic or moralising stance, but a stance which affirms the central importance of personhood (of the other and of the self). If our world is shaped by our understanding of it, and if that understanding is conditional upon our meeting of minds, then understanding is nothing if not ethical. The originality of *Truth and Method* lies in its injunction to overcome what Gadamer sees as the alienation implicit in the ideal of 'prejudiceless' objectivity: acknowledge the presence of yourself in your own understanding; recognise the other person's understanding as central to your own understanding; develop your understanding as you would a dialogue. Above all, Gadamer insists, do not assume that human understanding can be reduced to method. That is not how human understanding works.

### *Beyond method*

At the time when Gadamer was writing, 'method' was in the ascendancy. The idea of 'method' was particularly associated with scientific enquiry, but the idea of there being a pre-ordained methodology of enquiry across disciplines and fields of study held sway. For enquiry to be taken seriously – whether within the natural, human, or social sciences – it had to be conducted systematically and in accordance with pre-specified methodological procedures. In its most extreme form this scientific positivism – buttressed by the philosophical presuppositions of logical positivism or logical empiricism as it is sometimes termed – claimed that observational evidence is indispensable for knowledge of the world and that only when supported by such evidence could a belief that such and such is the case actually be the case (i.e. be 'true'). A methodical approach to the selection, gathering and analysis of empirical 'data' – and to the inferential process whereby 'findings' were derived from this approach – was and to a large extent still is the means by which scientific enquiry gained legitimacy and public recognition. 'Method' would enable one to gather and analyse 'data' which would then provide knowledge in the form of 'findings'. This became the dominant paradigm of scientific enquiry and exerted a strong influence on the social sciences generally and on social psychology in particular where it was supported by the presuppositions of behaviourism.

Gadamer's starting point in *Truth and Method* is the 'problem of method' as he terms it. (Gadamer, 2004, 3-8). Understanding, he maintains, cannot be reduced to a method,

although interpretive methods may contribute to our understanding. Gadamer does not deny that there are methods, but denies that such methods are constitutive of human understanding: ‘as tools, methods are always good to have’. But, he insists, we must understand where they can be fruitfully used if we are to avoid what he terms ‘methodical sterility’: [I]t is not their mastery of methods but their hermeneutical imagination that distinguishes truly productive researchers. And what is hermeneutical imagination? It is a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us.’ (Gadamer, 2001, 41-42)

**Jonathan:** Gadamer’s hermeneutical imagination resonates strongly with the philosophy that underpins the Stratus Writers Project, a participatory action research project working with university students on the autistic spectrum. Our project used autoethnographic narratives as a means of identifying unique insider knowledge about autism and experiences of higher education. Our research process aimed to be fully participatory, where data were collected, analysed and disseminated by the students themselves.

Gadamer’s invitation to meaningful conversation with traditions, phenomena and others has much import for participatory action research *with* students on the autistic spectrum whose ‘conditions’ and ‘disorders’ have often resulted in their being silenced. Jim Sinclair (1989) puts this well in his personal narrative ‘Bridging the Gaps’: ‘My credibility is suspect. My understanding of myself is not considered to be valid, and my perceptions of events are not considered to be based in reality. My rationality is questioned because, regardless of intellect, I still appear odd.’

Sinclair’s critique reflects the historical reality, where discussing autism was the exclusive prerogative of clinicians and researchers and where autistic people were the *objects* of medical examination, rather than *active participants* in the creation of knowledge relating to their own experiences (Milton and Bracher, 2013). However, building on Gadamer’s challenge to ‘see what is questionable’ – in this case about autism – the Stratus Writers Project asserted that the autistic students themselves are authoritative and carry revealing wisdom about their own lives. By emphasising the participatory nature of the research process, ‘in-between’ spaces were identified and indeed celebrated; the lines between researcher and researched were blurred and the students’ collective experiences were explored as ‘first person plural accounts’ (Couser, 2000, 306).

The analysis of the qualitative data by the students themselves might, in research terms, be considered the transgression of a boundary for some, yet for us it represented an opportunity to construct new and valid meanings in a humanising way. Megan, one of the participants, summed it up in her evaluation when she said, ‘The greatest success from my point of view was having a voice. We weren’t treated like research subjects but research partners in the process...right from the beginning through to presenting at conferences.’

Implicit in Gadamer’s critique of method is the idea that understanding involves self-formation and human flourishing that is open-ended in the extent and scope of its proliferation. The application of method, on the other hand, assumes a notion of rationality

that seeks closure and predictability. Human understanding, argues Gadamer, must be true to the nature of humanity: a humanity that is necessarily fragile and vulnerable by virtue of its complex interconnectivities and its uncertain relation to the future. Gadamer saw this as a struggle between the human and natural sciences, with the latter imposing an inappropriate methodology on the latter. But his analysis was such as to reframe the terms of the debate in ideological rather than methodological terms: the scientific method when inappropriately applied to the human world insists upon a particular version of humanity. Moreover, since the natural world is always already an interpreted world, the methodology derived from the natural sciences may be severely limited even when applied within its own traditional domain.

**Alison:** Using narrative inquiry, I am interested in understanding the lived experience of delirium following a neurological event, from both the patient's and carer's perspective. My position both as a nurse and a researcher with a clinical background and an empirical 'view' of the research subject poses a methodological challenge. Whilst this priori experience was formative in shaping my initial research interests, I am conscious as to how I 'situate' myself in the research trajectory such that my personal constructs and assumptions as a nurse do not unduly influence both the researcher – participant relationship and the emerging dialogue. I need to remain respectful of the primacy and immediacy of the participant's narrative and whilst acknowledging that participant – researcher dynamics will exist, the utterances, descriptions and dialogue of the participants need to remain dominant and authentic. This methodological challenge between the relative merits of research methodologies and the pursuit of rigour and objectivity has been debated at length. However, Michael Crotty (1998, 17) rightly acknowledges that throughout the research journey, there is an inevitability that the assumption and 'situatedness' of the researcher will shape 'for us the meaning of research questions and the purposiveness of research methodologies'. Indeed, as discussed by Christine Stephens (2011, 67) the interviewer is 'not a neutral bystander and their direct contributions to shaping the narrative, as well as their representation of a broader social world in which the narrative is orientated, cannot be minimised or ignored'.

To remove the very essence of my practice experiences in an attempt to strengthen rigour and objectivity and lose a perspective of self appears not only naïve but unattainable. As Gadamer posits we already 'belong to the tradition', we already have a relationship with the case. My 'situatedness' and relationship not only with patients but with the 'life-world' of nursing, the culture and tradition to which I belong should be viewed as an important contribution to the research and a valuable guide to enquiry, not a distraction or encumbrance.

For Gadamer, the position of the researcher is paramount, he is always located in a *situation*, and because we are inevitably influenced by a historical position, then the interpreter must adopt as Jon examines, a 'historical horizon' whereby there is a conscious intention and acknowledgement of bias which may influence the interpretation. Gadamer refers to this as 'consciousness of being affected by history'. An acknowledgement of these prejudices is necessary so that as Kitt

Austgard (2012, 830) posits ‘ the text, as another’s meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own’. Jon suggests that the very essence of the researcher is a powerful tool for interpretation – indeed, that we ‘understand the world in and through our experience of the world .... ‘

The iterative process within the hermeneutic process, defined by Douglas Ezzy (2002, 24) as ‘the art & science of interpretation’ actively engages the researcher in the interpretive process and recognises that an awareness of the researcher’s ‘starting position’ as a sense-maker inevitably contributes to the research ends. It is not that the a priori position which influences the interpretation but rather that a new meaning arising from the data analysis which may shift the overall understanding.

Reflexivity involves the realisation of an honest examination of the values and interests of the researcher that may impinge upon research work (Primeau, 2003). Constance T. Fischer’s (2009, 584) position is possibly more enviable in that in challenging the notion of objectivity recognises that ‘it is not possible to view without viewing from somewhere’. Indeed it could be argued that the prejudices of the researcher are in themselves a ‘view’ which inevitably bestows meaning and is the very source of our repertoire of knowledge. I believe the negative attribution of researcher ‘prejudice’ should be redefined and seen rather as a positive influence on the explication of meaning derived in the interpretive paradigm. As a nurse I will inevitably bring knowledge and my own reality to this interpretive work, which I propose will undoubtedly shape the research questions and the very purpose of my work.

### **‘... what this requires of us’**

If we are to follow Gadamer’s metaphorical lead, we need to see humanistic enquiry as an ongoing conversation: a continuous process of question and answer. Among our interlocutors are both the living and the dead: the dead who still speak to us through the record of their words and deeds; the living who share our object of interest and enquiry. It is a conversation that may be conducted in company, but that is equally valid and worthwhile when conducted in solitude – what Hannah Arendt (1978), in her last great work on thinking, called ‘the two-in-one’ of thought (pp.179-193). All thought, she argued, is dialogical in nature, which is why the experience of solitude is radically different from the experience of loneliness. ‘Thinking’, she maintained, ‘is a solitary but not a lonely business; solitude is the human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two in one, without being able to keep myself company’ (p.185).

**Andy:** From a background of two decades of community development and activism, I find Gadamer’s metaphorical lead, ‘to see humanistic enquiry as an ongoing conversation’ inspirational. And, indeed, my own work – seeking co-production between the users of social care and community services and the practitioners who design, manage and deliver them – has been committed to facilitating a ‘...living together with difference’. Crucial in this is, of course, what we (all) mean by

'living'? And in the field I work in there is a clear difference between the motivations, operations and aspirations for outcome as enacted – even if not fully articulated – by different participants. In my world these are groups of participants we designate as service users and practitioners, who in turn are both tacitly and explicitly negotiating with managers, funders, regulators and, truth be known, me. What strikes me most about the challenge of forging '...the firm commitment to live together with difference' is my perception of a gap between what it is to *inquire* and what it is to apply the inquiry in our *living*. Perhaps this is an insurmountable gap – the tackling of which presents us with a Sisyphean challenge.

So, what *is* required of us on first entering the conversation? First, we require the ***courage*** and ***patience*** to listen to the other. Listening requires courage because so often it involves hearing what we don't want to hear or what is difficult to wrap our heads round. It requires patience because listening – and reading with a listening mind – can be a long and hard slog. Reading, in particular, is crucial: being attentive to the words on the page and/or screen; persevering with what on first and even subsequent readings may appear difficult and unfamiliar; reading in such a way as to understand the text from its own historical perspective; reading inter-textually so as to understand the text in context; and, finally, interpreting the text with reference to our own contemporary concerns.

The crucial requirement in entering the conversation is to be attentive to what is being and has been uttered in both the written and spoken word. It is only by listening in on the ongoing conversation – the conversation 'out there' in the collective experience of thinking together *and* in the 'two-in-one' of solitary thought – that we can begin to understand what questions we want to pose, what questions we are being asked to address, and the terms and conventions within which those questions need to be framed. We can't simply blunder into the conversation. We have to take stock of it – understand its parameters and emergent themes – and, crucially, identify our own interests within it: identify, that is, the particular question that the conversation asks of us and that we might want to ask of it. That question is our point of entry.

Let us suppose, then, that we have identified that question; that we have a sense of our starting point; that we have identified the origins of our enquiry. What now is required of us? I suggest that we require the ***determination*** and ***imagination*** to stay with the question, to refine and focus it, to sharpen it and apply it. Refining the question requires determination because it is a process rather than a single act or event. It requires imagination because it precedes though inference, guesswork and intuition. It is an ongoing process of question and answer. Only by refining the question can we understand the nature of the problem that is the object of our enquiry – an object that is only gradually revealed through this process of progressive focussing. The endpoint of this process of question and answer is not a definitive answer, but a defining question: a question so refined as to imply the parameters if not the substance of any response to it.

**Sue:** What strikes me is the extent to which questions are at the root of experience and how much of my life as educator, researcher and poet is bound up with

questioning. Education is all about developing curiosity and, with that, the means to learn through discovery. If we give our students endless answers, we diminish their power to take an active role in their own learning - both in school and in their adult lives. Through my work in education, first as a Secondary school English teacher and latterly as a teacher educator and researcher, I have constantly encouraged young people and those at the beginning of their teaching careers to question, listen and reflect on their developing classroom practices as learners and teachers. I want them to take time and make space for these processes. They should be enabled to frame new questions through creative risk taking, through asking themselves, their peers and/or their students: how would it be I tried out this activity or if I wrote this line this way or if I read the text from that point of view?

I think they must learn to seize and twist the question kaleidoscope for themselves, to see new and endlessly reflecting patterns, to interrogate why a person has arrived at such an interpretation, whether it is better than theirs or just different and if it could help them to arrive at a new understanding. This breaking down of questions into smaller fragments is a fine art that many doctoral students are challenged by. On beginning their research they often appear adamant they know what they want to investigate and refuse to be distracted by other ideas. Nevertheless, only by redefining, refocusing, sharpening their questions will they productively engage in original research.

As Jon says, the interpreter is within the world in which they are questioning. However, the nature of an individual's questions (and thus their horizon) changes as the student, beginning teacher or researcher becomes further embedded within a particular world. As they grow in confidence they can begin to look beyond the obvious colour-pattern variations in order to explore the intricate tracteries of light and shade in the far distance.

In writing poetry and researching the act of poetry writing, I am constantly questioning the nature of things around me in order to reinterpret what others have interpreted in a way that, I hope, will shed new light. For example, currently I am seeking to explore: why poets feel constrained by the demands of academic writing; how other passengers might react when someone invades their personal space; why a Blackbird sings in a particular way at twilight in Winter. In some of my poems, such as the poem 'Mass Observation', I have experimented with a form that solely consists of questions. In doing so, I am not trying to be cantankerous: I am simply trying to get closer to an understanding of how others might experience, and question, the world.

What's in your head?  
What dreams are you dreaming?  
What does night rain on the window feel like  
while your boy's away at war?  
(Dymoke, 2012, 1)

The process of question and answer is endless – 'in reality', as (Gadamer, 2001, 60) puts it, 'the last word does not exist'. But there does, of course, come a point when we decide

to give an account of ourselves – when, that is, we contribute publically to the debate through some form of publication or public address. What is required of us in giving such an account? The prime requirements are, to my mind, *openness* and *magnanimity*: openness in acknowledging that no-one – least of all one’s self – ever has the last word; magnanimity in recognising the value of alternative and possibly critical viewpoints and counter-arguments. These qualities suggest a style of reporting that focuses on provisional insights rather than proofs, dilemmas and concerns rather than resolutions, and frameworks for further thinking rather than definitive statements. The point of a conversation is not to win with a view to achieving closure, but to forestall closure with a view to achieving increased understanding. We must always – *always* – argue beyond the point of seemingly irreconcilable difference.

**Jonathan:** Although challenging historical hegemony can be subversive and creative, it should be acknowledged that the essential ‘questionableness’ of things also urges us to act with humility. We participants of the Stratus Writers Project must recognise that our voices are only some among many and so we must also relinquish our claims to certainty in accepting the essential openness of our findings. Thus, it is through honest and reciprocal dialogue such as this that our knowledge about autism and what can make university better for autistic students can be reimagined and more ethical understandings made possible.

That is not to say that difference can be transcended or overcome in the interests of some over-arching unity – whether defined in spiritual, essentialist or absolutist terms. Difference is real and must be recognised. It is only through the recognition of difference that we can live together. We live together in difference or not at all. That is why we must seek to understand that which we choose to criticise. We can only criticise with honesty what we have fully received; the quality of our criticism depends upon the quality of our receptivity. To criticise without first opening ourselves to that which we are criticising is a particularly pernicious – and increasingly prevalent – form of philistinism. When we ‘go public’ we very often position ourselves critically in relation to others and, in turn, receive criticism from those against whom we have positioned ourselves. That is how the conversation works. But it only works well insofar as we genuinely seek to understand prior to engaging in critique.

Hermes – the go-between in our world of *in-between* – is having a particularly hard time at the moment. Dashing between Hebron and Jerusalem, Damascus and Homs, the Ukraine and Crimea, etc., our god of transitions and boundaries is undoubtedly under considerable strain. He is witnessing us mortals kill and maim ourselves with wilful abandon. Hermes also has to contend with the superpowers and their internal wrangling – for example, the ‘tea party’ squabbling in the US and the coalition tiffs in the UK. Ours is an incontrovertibly agonistic world. *Nothing now is more important than the understanding of difference and the firm commitment to living together with difference.* The interpretive tradition – as I have tried to elaborate it – is much more than a scholarly outpost of Western philosophy. It is our only hope of living together. It is the only space left. The interpretive tradition has much to teach us.

**Jane:** I am in warm agreement with Jon that *Nothing now is more important than the understanding of difference and the firm commitment to living together with difference.* The Old Testament has a notion that human beings themselves create the conditions for a Golden Age: it is not a place, but a state, and not freely ‘given’ but earned by each of us. To navigate in-between spaces with an open heart is our challenge. In 1973 the reform rabbi Jonathan Magonet opened a symposium that brought Jews, Christians and Moslems together into open dialogue. This symposium, intended as a one-snapshot event, at the time of writing now enters its 42<sup>nd</sup> year. He writes: ‘The complexity of modern civilization is a daily lesson in the necessity of not pressing any claim too far, of understanding opposing points of view, of seeking to reconcile them, of conducting matters so that there is some kind of harmony in a plural society’ (Magonet, 2003, 16). Why this paper of Jon’s is so deeply resonant for me, is that it has dared to connect what we do as writers, researchers, and thinkers, with what we do in the wider world, and with the belief and hope that this connection can make a positive difference.

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