



## Reflecting on the Meaning of Curriculum Through a Hermeneutic Interpretation of Student-Teaching Experiences in Home Economics \*

Reviewed by  
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\*Francine Holm Hultgren.  
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I should like to begin this review by making a rather brief comment on the idea of reviewing doctoral dissertations in a journal. I was pleasantly surprised to be asked to prepare this review, both because I believe that *Phenomenology + Pedagogy* is breaking important new ground in educational inquiry and because the piece of writing that I was asked to review is a dissertation.

Much too frequently, dissertations are read by very few persons. Jokingly, I have discussed with colleagues the fact that many dissertations are read by a total of less than ten persons: the thesis advisor, the student who authored it, the other members of the doctoral committee (probably, if it is not too long), and the parents and spouse of the writer.

In the world of scholarship, then, the joke is a tragic one saturated with irony. A person spends several years of his/her life researching a topic with intense seriousness, submits it to the utmost scrutiny of four or five scholars in the area, and carries out extensive re-writings in view of their criticisms. Not as much can be said for many published books and articles that receive a good deal of attention. At the same time that dissertations sit dustily on library shelves, scholars lament the lack of disciplined inquiry. It should be recognized that good dissertations remain one of the best examples of disciplined inquiry.

Unfortunately, one finds among the archives a great many dissertations that seem to be a mere demonstration of technical skills. The increasing numbers of persons getting doctorates in recent years, particularly in America, may account for the lack of serious scholarship: so, too, may the realization that few will ever read the work anyway.

This sad situation can be mitigated against by the example of dissertation reviews in *Phenomenology + Pedagogy* and by dissertations such as the one by Francine Holm Hultgren. Dr. Hultgren has written a dissertation that is not merely an exhibit of technical virtuosity, but a serious, scholarly inquiry into meaning in educative experience. Her focus on home economics should not dissuade any readers who might regard this work as subject matter specific; it clearly transcends partisan subject matter concerns and moves to the quick of curricular and pedagogical theory.

Hultgren states two goals for her project:

1. To merge an epistemology of knowledge structures regarding curriculum rationalities with an ontological analysis of student-teaching experiences, in order to contribute to a philosophic base in curriculum aimed at understanding educational experiences; and

2. To explore the use of hermeneutic phenomenology in eliciting modes of being and understanding that could be used to enlighten practices (p.iii and p.175).

In describing her progress toward these goals in Chapter I, Hultgren briefly summarizes some criticisms of technocratic rationality which dominate educational inquiry and then builds a rationale for an hermeneutic phenomenological orientation that draws principally upon work of Heidegger, Habermas, Vandenberg, Greene, and van Manen. While the critique of dominant modes of research may be a bit brief (too brief to convert, for example), the characterization of a phenomenological perspective is admirable in that it clearly situates inquiry in being as it is experienced rather than giving primary emphasis to the pondering of being formerly extant.

A question that arises is whether or not such an emphasis is pedagogically sound. While it seems that Hultgren maintains in principle that reflection on being-in-experience is of the essence in phenomenological inquiry, her study seems to focus on being-as-reflection-after-experience. Does Hultgren fall into the too familiar and ironic trap of objectifying phenomenological inquiry by substituting text of lived experience for lived experience itself? Or doesn't she?

The study consists of eleven student-teachers of home economics who return from student teaching to a curriculum course (eighteen 75-minute sessions) taught by Hultgren. The dialogue experienced by the class was tape recorded and used as a text for hermeneutic interpretation. Moreover, phenomenological descriptions of students' experiences were elicited by the researcher to disclose existential themes in the students' experience of being teachers. In addition to revealing themes in students' being as teachers, the descriptions helped to uncover structures of meaning in curriculum.

What is revealed by both the dialogue and the descriptions is that neither dwelled on the objectification of past experience through interpretation of what happened. Rather, the dialogue enriched present experience by teaching students about the alive character of the past in a present that is wide-awake. In calling forth being experienced in their past (student-teaching and before), students came to realize the greater meaning their present encounter could have.

Certainly not of least importance in this regard is the meaning and understanding that accrued for the instructor-researcher who participated *with* the students, not as one who acted *upon* them with pedagogical skills and techniques. In other words, as a teacher, Hultgren was able to be more of a mutual problem-poser than a banker, to draw from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Not only does the author engage in the pedagogical situation for the meaning that might be derived, she acknowledges and exemplifies that the research process itself incorporates her own personal quest for self-realization.

In Chapter II, Hultgren presents a philosophical framework for her inquiry by discussing the value of wide-awakeness and the ability to see through different lenses, and provides further critique of the technical paradigm in curriculum. She then identifies central features of Habermas' categories of knowledge and forms of rationality followed by a rather extensive explanation of selected themes from Heidegger in an effort to provide grounding in curriculum.

The attempt to link the epistemological and ontological is problematic (especially with such strong emphasis on Heidegger); it tends toward a mutual repelling (as when like poles of two magnets meet). I could not be certain from the arguments advanced why this linkage was deemed necessary. Despite this, however, it must be acknowledged that Hultgren's attempt to derive a basis for an ontological inquiry into curricular phenomena is indeed a monumental undertaking and should be regarded as a worthwhile contribution in its own right. My central point here is that the researcher's treatment of the second of her purposes quoted early in this review ("to explore the use of hermeneutic phenomenology . . .") is better developed and substantiated than the first purpose ("to merge an epistemology of knowledge structures . . .with an ontological analysis"). As a matter of fact, I believe that the second purpose is more than enough, and fortunately the dissertation can be read as an important contribution with this purpose alone in mind.

In Chapter III, Hultgren orients the reader to the methodology used in interpreting the pedagogic encounters that she led. In so doing, she is able to characterize a form of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry in a pedagogically sound manner; in fact, those who want to learn more about the method of inquiry should find the dissertation quite helpful. At the same time, she carefully steers away from the temptation to offer recipes. In doing so she draws well from work by Ricoeur, Kockelmans, Barritt, et al.

In Chapter IV, it is evident that Hultgren draws pedagogically upon her students. Meaning derived from her dialogic encounter with them informs both her research and her teaching. The descriptions are rendered in multiple forms for the reader and organized through the following topics: "My Worst Day in Student-Teaching," "A Place in Space," "My Experience in Student-Teaching," and "Doing Curriculum." Central themes are identified, categorized, and discussed. There is a real sense in which the dialogues and interpretations should not be summarized in the review; the writing should be savored holistically to be appreciated. Much is preserved by Hultgren's good judgment to adhere frequently to verbatim excerpts rather than summarizations.

The identification of themes pointed powerfully to the vast vulnerability of meaning-seeking and becoming to the psychological, social, and political character of schooling. This was manifest in the supervisory relationship in student-teaching, but the pervasive force of control was illuminated time and again. Of central importance here is the discovery that the technical paradigm in curriculum is so powerfully

ingrained that even these student-teachers who were engaged in more than twenty hours of dialogue and reflection remained largely unable to see curriculum as more than a plan on paper. Through continuation of the dialogue, however, Hultgren as pedagogue was able to let the students see more of the "being" of curriculum. She adds that this quality of education or grasping one's potential for being, occurs more readily "when there is a simultaneous drawing out of being of the three elements together: student, subject matter, and teacher" (pp.173-174). It was at such a point that pedagogic direction was mutual, not controlling. In this encounter, it seems that Hultgren was able to provide insight covertly, if not overtly, into the intimate relation between curriculum and the lived qualities of teaching experiences (an intent of her inquiry that she noted on p.71) and to thereby "increase . . . awareness of the meaning an experience has for those who are undergoing it or have lived through it" (p.75). Could more be asked in a mere twenty-two hours of dialogue and reflection?

It almost goes without saying that I believe that this dissertation is a valuable contribution. It is an admirable demonstration of the value of hermeneutic reflection by teachers who seek to reveal pedagogic being amid the forces of technocracy and authoritarian control that saturate the surface of the lives of teachers and students. As such, the dissertation exemplifies a worthwhile alternative to the domination of technocratic rationality in curricular inquiry and discourse.

The major question flowing from this, however, is a political one. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation and is offered not as a criticism, but as one of the most critical questions that must be faced: Can the example provided be recognized by those who do not share a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation to inquiry? Can the vast numbers of those who adhere solely to a technocratic rationality relate to the language and form of inquiry used here? How do educators of behavioristic persuasion read phrases such as "to call forth into being," "seeking the things themselves," "seeing what speaks or stands behind words," and "to clear the way to let being be"? Can such researchers or practitioners respond other than by saying that this means nothing or by rejecting it as a kind of mystical double-talk?

Here we seem confronted by Plato's paradox of *The Meno*. It appears impossible to teach something to someone who does not almost already know it. Perhaps it is only by recognizing pedagogic content as that which one almost knows because it is deep within, there to be recovered, that we can move beyond the paradox that prompts the following line of reasoning: A proponent of one paradigm cannot genuinely communicate a position to an advocate of a contradictory paradigm. If the first enters the paradigm of the second and uses its discourse, he/she has already denied the value of his/her own assumptions, and if that step remains untaken, genuine communication seems doomed.

If, however, goodness is there to be uncovered, then to make dialogue a dwelling place for being may be a center through which genuine

communication can be recognized. In this case, recognition and communication comes more through reflection in the being than about the being. I suggest that Hultgren's experience points toward the precedence of human interaction in the search for meaning over pondering the latter through the written word. There is always a paradoxical sense in which recovery of being through writing objectifies it; yet, writing can be an especially meaningful way to disclose it. Surely, the two can have a correlative effect. I for one attest to the fact that reading Francine Hultgren's dissertation enriched my own quest to recover being and provided inspiration for me to help others pursue that ontological journey (curriculum) as well.