



**A Human Science Investigation of the Pedagogic Nature of an Exchange Experience** by Don R. Northey,  
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There is a curious division in the school curriculum between those activities which are seen to be necessary for a child's education and those which are considered extracurricular frills. Included in this latter category are not only the activities of clubs, associations, and sporting groups which normally occur outside schooling hours, but also the activities which intrude into the normal school routine and include camps, excursions, and student exchanges. Don Northey's investigation of the student exchange experience makes us especially curious about this division. He shows that, far from being time out from meaningful learning, this particular extracurricular "frill" can be an occasion for students to reflect upon their cultural attachments and to question their taken-for-granted relations with others. Don Northey describes the cultural and personal meanings contained within the exchange experience and in showing their significance for the participants he not only delineates an important pedagogical context but raises questions regarding the pedagogical significance of those activities which comprise the normal school curriculum. His study of the pedagogic nature of the exchange experience enables us to consider again what is necessary for a child's education.

In this study we see how a topic can become a true research question, one which calls upon the researcher's energies and provides a direction for his or her efforts. The topic unfolds as "the revelation of the questionability of what is questioned" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 326) and in so doing makes its significance apparent. That is, in reading the text of the study we gain a strong sense of the pedagogical question that gives life to the researcher's endeavors. Northey starts with the topic of student exchanges, in particular the exchanges he had coordinated between Indian and non-Indian school children in Canada, and indicates his interest in the nature of the cross-cultural understandings which were seen to accrue from these programs. Northey also provides some autobiographical reflections in Chapter One which serve to show how this topic is very much an expression of his pedagogical concerns and interests. The exploration and implementation of exchange programs during his teaching ca-

reer expresses his particular teaching orientation—an orientation which developed in part from his own travelling experiences (p. 8).<sup>1</sup>

The topic chosen for investigation is given weight on two counts. First, there is a dearth of research in the area of student exchange programs, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels (p. 15). In spite of the long-heard calls to open the school doors and to venture beyond the walls of the classroom, few systematic studies of the results of venturing far beyond the classroom to another culture exist. The second support for this study comes by way of the Canadian Government's policy on multiculturalism. This policy and its underlying philosophy of cultural pluralism is the basis for initiatives in multicultural education, ranging from the development of social studies units which deal sympathetically with cultural diversity to partial government funding of cross-cultural student exchanges. The topic of student exchanges is thus of more than passing curriculum interest.

But this topic only becomes a true pedagogical question when we put aside these concerns and take up the narrative which animates the topic. Accordingly, what is especially interesting about this study is that it becomes an occasion for sharing the meaning of the exchange experience. Northey finds this topic of personal interest because of prior experiences with Native people and the various exchange programs he has mounted, but what makes the topic interesting for us is that Northey shows how his interest is more than a detached curiosity. For him, "interest, *interesse*, means to be among and in the midst of things, or to be at the center of a thing and to stay with it" (Heidegger, 1968, p. 5). This interest is conveyed through the manner in which we as readers come to re-live the exchange experience.

We read in chapter four how different questions will be asked of the nature of the exchange experience. In order to "uncover and portray the experiential meanings of participants involved in an exchange program" (p. 30) different perspectives will be taken, namely biographic, ethnographic, social phenomenological, and phenomenological views of the lifeworlds of the exchange participants. Each perspective suggests to the researcher a range of questions. For example, from the social phenomenological viewpoint:

Schutz' concept of the stranger raises a number of questions concerning the experiences in the exchange program such as: What typifications do the groups hold? What stereotypic views are presented? What new typifications arise in the contact situation? Initially, the participants may picture each other as strangers. How does the exchange experience attest this relationship? What makes it possible to move from a relationship between strangers to one between friends? (p. 52)

Then, from the phenomenological perspective

the major question becomes: what is the nature of the exchange experience? That is, what makes the exchange experience different from other educational experiences? (p. 55)

Taken together these questions provide an interpretive framework for coming to understand the nature of the exchange experience. The linking of perspectives through this questioning constitutes a hermeneutic program—a schema for descriptively interrogating the notion of exchange experience.

Unfortunately these questions can be mouthed too easily. It is not until we read in Chapter Five of Northey's frustrating attempts to set up the desired exchange between Indian and non-Indian students that the dissertation topic becomes a strong question which provokes thought. Here the researcher shows us his stake in the topic by his sheer perseverance throughout the setbacks encountered. Here also the question of the meaning of the exchange experience comes to the fore as our interest is drawn to the concerns of those who rejected or abandoned the proposed exchanges, and to the way these "failures" can themselves disclose the pedagogic significance of the exchange experience.

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By stepping back from the situation, I realized the potential these failures had for this study. Through searching to understand both the perceptions of exchange participants and non-participants, a deeper understanding of the meaning of an exchange experience could evolve. (p. 75)

The question of the meaning of the exchange experience now becomes a struggle to recapture a sense of that question, a struggle in which we, the readers, can participate.

The next chapter explores in detail the dispositions of those who opted out of the proposed exchange program and is, for me, the most interesting part of the study. Northey interprets questionnaire and interview data using the concepts of "tourist," "traveller," and "stranger." He shows that an exchange requires students to avoid the demeanor of the tourist and not only to be a traveller but to embark upon a journey into strangeness—to become a stranger and to accept the uncertainties that go with this predicament. For the non-participants, however, "an exchange was a journey in which they were unwilling to engage" (p. 116). Their refusal to be anything more than a tourist reveals the possibilities which the exchange experience holds open for them. The investigation of this refusal discloses the pedagogical significance of the exchange and creates an appreciation of the education which is denied those who deny themselves.

The exchange which finally took place was between French-speaking students from Quebec and English-speaking students

from British Columbia. This exchange occurred over a two-week period and entailed equal time spent in both home locations. Northey was a participant observer in these exchanges and through a series of interviews with Tom and Ann, two of the student participants, he sought to portray the lived meaning of the exchange. By means of lengthy descriptions we relive the days of the exchange as Tom and his billet Guy come to know each other. The questions of biography and ethnography posed within these descriptions suggest certain themes as making sense of the exchange experience—themes that are developed via the social phenomenological and phenomenological perspectives introduced in the subsequent chapters. For instance, the works of Buber, Schutz, Levinas, and Sadler are used to make sense of the interview and observational data and to develop thematic descriptors of the exchange experience. These themes and their variations are explored by narrating also the exchanges that occurred between Ann and her new friend Jacqueline. The inclusion of photographs throughout this description is worth mentioning for in certain instances they increase our sensitivity to the text.

The task in Chapter Nine then becomes one of gathering the themes that have addressed the nature of the exchange experience.

These themes are the following: a willingness to enter a journey as a stranger; a growth of the I-You relationship; a dwelling in and mutual sharing of the life-world of the other; an expansion of horizons in the process of self-understanding; a coming to know the other in his/her sameness and difference; a development of a sense of we-ness and community; and a deepening of the we-relation into friendship. (p. 270)

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A nice development here is the presentation of these themes in the form of a reconstructed letter written as one of the participants to her billet sometime after the actual exchange.

Throughout Northey's study we see that the question of the nature of the exchange experience is not only a question of what *is* but also what *ought to be*. In showing us what the exchange experience means to those who have participated in it we come to see its curricular possibilities. A pedagogical way of seeing results whereby "we are forced to consider what the actual experience as lived by students ought to be and to search for approaches which will enhance the attainment of its essential nature" (p. 59). The question that we have followed so far becomes: "How do we promote the meaningfulness of the exchange experience so that the experience itself contributes to the good of those involved?" (p. 292).

Here a caution must be sounded for fear of departing too far from the hermeneutic which has gone before. To be sure Northey makes clear his concluding intention in Chapter Ten is not to provide curricular prescriptions but rather to continue the dialogical tone of the

prior text; yet still the need for this point of application is worth considering. We may recall the words of Gadamer who said "application is neither a subsequent nor a merely occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 289). The discussion of the pedagogical implications arising from this study of an exchange experience suggests a certain cleavage between understanding and application, hermeneutic, and pedagogy. Perhaps I am quibbling over the unfortunate use of the term "pedagogical implications" for what it seems to me that Northey is actually doing here is broadening the horizons of the question. The problem is that the narrative style of addressing the question is lost and consequently there is the danger that the curriculum we have experienced will be reduced to curriculum prescriptions. Northey does well to avoid this reduction but still we wonder how much more powerful this conclusion might have been were we still to feel the presence of Tom, Ann, Guy, and Jacqueline and the other participants in the exchange.

My final comment has to do with research methodology. I have difficulty with the idea that pedagogical research is simply a matter of choosing methods that appear suitable for exploring a topic that is of interest. In order to ask the pedagogical question which would make a topic worthwhile pursuing, an orientation has to be established. Although this orientation is expressed as a research methodology, it is at a more profound level an expression of significance within the researcher's life. Can we therefore say that "methodologies need to be chosen on the basis of their potential contribution to a deeper understanding of the situation?" (p. 319); or do we really mean that our dwelling in the "situation" is to be deeply understood, and as researchers, the task is to convey the sense of this situation? This is what Northey has achieved in his dissertation.

I wonder, therefore, about aspects of the "reconstructed logic" (Soltis, 1984, p. 6) of this dissertation, in particular the outline in Chapter Four of differing approaches to the study of the life-worlds of the exchange participants, as if the methods that are identified with these approaches have some independent status. It seems to me that the question of the meaning of the exchange experience becomes pedagogically significant as a concern for biographic, ethnographic, social phenomenological, and phenomenological methods is placed in abeyance. From this point Northey's study exemplifies the subordination of method to substance. It shows methodology to be the mode of behavior of the researcher which takes him or her closer to that which is of interest.

To the extent that Northey has shown how a pedagogical question might be asked, his study stands not only as a very good analysis of

the exchange experience but also as a good example for others embarking upon a pedagogical study. I applaud his efforts.

### Note

1. All page citations are from the text of the dissertation unless otherwise indicated.

### References

- Gadamer, H-G.** (1975). *Truth and method*. New York: The Seabury Press.
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