



Phenomenology as Embodied Knowing and Sharing: Kindling Audience Participation

by Kathleen Galvin and Les Todres

Abstract

We are particularly interested in how poetry and phenomenological research come together to increase understanding of human phenomena. We are further interested in how these more aesthetic possibilities of understanding can occur within a community context, that is the possibility of a process in which understanding is shared through an ongoing process of participation. In this way phenomenologically-oriented understandings may meaningfully speak of that which is common between us as well as that which may be uniquely lived for each of us in terms of its individual context and nuance. In this paper we reflect on a process by which we engaged with participants to poetically re-present a description of an experiential phenomenon. As part of this process we offered an evocative description of a health care scenario, and facilitated collectively created 'embodied responses' inspired by the interactive form of Japanese Renga. We ask the question: "What kind of phenomenology is this?" Through so doing we attempt to address the theme of this special issue, namely, a focus on a wide embrace of the notion of evidence. We do this by drawing out the epistemological implications of a phenomenological approach that attends to the 'awakening of presences' in embodied and linguistic ways. In this pursuit we are assisted by the writings of Gendlin, Gadamer, Levinas and Shotter.

Introduction

In this paper we offer a consideration of a kind of knowing (embodied or palpable knowing) that we believe is particularly relevant to a phenomenological project. We also offer a reflection on how this kind of knowing could be shared within communities and audiences so that understanding can move among us in meaningful ways. In order to achieve this we draw on a philosophical foundation that includes Gadamer, Gendlin and Levinas. We then explore what we mean by community participation, and share one possible approach to this challenge. We outline what happened when we explored a process of participative and co-operative poetry writing (Renga) in response to a phenomenologically described situation. We then

reflect further on the challenge of 'awakening presences' in phenomenology with reference to the work of John Shotter. Finally, we reflect on some of the epistemological and ethical implications of this process and the expanded view of evidence that this implies.

Renga is defined as a Japanese form of poetry written by two or more collaborators with sequential steps:

Talking to Peter
Warm conviviality
While mourning what's lost

Lost – Re-membering
Strong coffee in Seattle
Permeating us

This Renga portrays something of the spirit of what we want to offer, which has to do with two concerns: Knowing and sharing.

The history of philosophy is full of solitary thinkers, mostly lone men. The muse was in the background, often cast ambivalently as creative and demandingly possessing. In this paper we ask whether it is possible that scholarly life is ready for creative contributions from partnerships in mutual dialogue. We also question the extent to which there is value in the pursuit of dialogical knowing in a community context. This paper offers one meditation and one practice informed by the phenomenon of embodied knowing and shared understanding. Embodied knowing and shared understanding are particularly important in our own disciplinary context of health and social care. In health and social care the capacity to care rests on an empathic imagination full of bodily and relational resonance (Galvin & Todres, 2010). It is these bodily and relational forms of understanding that are crucial in guiding humanly sensitive practice. The term 'presences' may be particularly relevant when considering a wider view of evidence within this context:

Presence: An intangible spirit or mysterious influence felt to be present (Webster's Dictionary, 2008).

One possible direction for phenomenology could be a project that leans towards the awakening of presences. This leads to questions concerning the ways in which this notion of awakening presences is different from that of knowing presences. This paper thus offers a meditation on the nature of understanding in an embodied, shared and participatory context.

Knowing

There is a particular kind of knowing that is central to the task of authentic caring in health and social care. We have characterised this kind of knowing as embodied relational understanding (Todres, 2008). The importance of such a concern is that it emphasises a 'knowing with the heart', in which we can imagine another's world. It is only with such imagining of another's world that caring 'can have legs'.

Sharing

There is another concern that is central to understanding, namely the phenomenon of sharing and how this can come about within the context of community life. To quote Wallulis (1997):

Members of the modern community no longer exhibit the openness of dialogue, but rather adjust to such technical organisation of life as existing beyond their understanding and control. (p. 275)

We have therefore become much more interested in how embodied relational understanding can be shared, and more, carried forward and to some degree lived and owned between us in meaningful ways. We are interested in how others (for example, audiences, readers, group members in learning) can participate in a process of shared understanding through which the link between understandings and presences is awakened, so that understandings of phenomena can be deepened and meaningfully shared between us.

Philosophical foundation

Philosophically we have drawn on the work of Gadamer (1975), Gendlin (1992) and Levinas (1961) to characterise two very important dimensions of embodied relational understanding. From Gendlin's (1992) work we have drawn on the importance of one's embodied self, which gives a meaningful reference to 'owning' understanding, so that the understanding becomes full of personal, historical, and tactile references. In line with this emphasis it is only the 'epistemic body' that is adequate for gathering together the whole sense of something in a felt way. This 'whole sense of something' is never a 'frozen' or finished whole, but is open, an alive presence that is always on the way. From the work of Levinas (1961) we have taken the importance of being open to the other, and all the meanings there, including what it takes to be deeply informed by 'the that' of the other's alterity or difference that is always more than we can know, thus stretching us to horizons beyond ourselves. Gadamer (1975) helps us to see what understanding is: A play between embodied self and other. In such a play or open dialogue there is a care for the presencing of the phenomenon, such as, 'the loss', 'the comfort', 'the shimmer', that will always be more than just you and me; it is always 'that'. 'That' is always more specific and more complex than any generalisation.

Together Gendlin (1992), Levinas (1961) and Gadamer (1975) have challenged us to engage in the kinds of understandings and communications that can respect the full spectrum of self, other and world without fully reducing one to the other. Therefore, in 'embodied relational understanding' we find a tension between our shared vulnerable heritage (our embodiment), the infinity of otherness (alterity) and the alive 'more' of the phenomenon that wants to announce itself.

This challenges us with the question of what kinds of discourse are adequate in keeping this 'alive' tension, contained in embodied relational understanding. We see poetry and poetic discourse as a medium that can swim in this space between sharedness, otherness and the quality of 'just this thing' (the loss, the comfort, the shimmer).

In the context of seeking the spirit of the participative creative process we also wish to consider the task of what Gendlin (2004) has called 'Carrying Forward', in his philosophy of implicit entry. Within this perspective, 'carrying forward' is a crucial part of what happens qualitatively in the space where shared meaning is transmitted and evolves between us. This communicative space is more than just me and you in an embodied way, it also includes our cultural, historical contexts as well as factors beyond this, our domains of possible meanings and horizons that transcend all the patterns we have made of them.

In relation to our concern to kindle audience participation, we offer a particular type of carrying forward; a carrying forward of embodied meanings in a way that can 'move' or 'touch' another. From there, these embodied meanings can be offered again to 'touch' another and so on continuously. In this way of carrying forward, we are not simply duplicating the meanings that are transmitted to us. Instead, we are participating in meaning making, through receiving something 'old' but also bringing something 'new'. In this 'carrying forward' we wish to care for the other and what he or she is telling us about 'that'. However, we are also, as participants, taking part in how these meanings relate to us personally and how they carry a certain aliveness 'of that' as they move into the future.

This aliveness of the phenomenon, 'the that', occurs in the sense that it guides the embodied interaction, and the whole process has qualities similar to what Gadamer (1975) called 'a conversation'. Wallulis (1975), a scholar of Gadamer, has written about the notion of a 'language community' and how meaningful conversations are 'grabbed' by the matter at hand, in a community context, far beyond the individual partners' construction of the:

This event of conversation is not led by any of the partners but rather by the subject matter (sache) of the conversation that 'seizes' the conversation partners into the process of coming to an understanding. (Wallulis, 1997, p. 274)

Thus in the process of carrying forward, phenomena or 'that', have the characteristics of a kind of presence that is alive. It is this presence that also changes in

some way as we embody it both personally and as a community.

A further implication of this kind of carrying forward is that it is never a linear or abstract process because it is grounded in the rich multiple textures of the embodied world. It is these rich multiple textures that are far more alive than any thought that represents them. Thus,

... there is, for Gendlin a 'carrying forward' of the body that has been 'dogmatically hidden' by conceptual thought. (Wallulis, 1997, p. 275)

This presence, although it is carried by words is always more than the words. In any 'alive' language 'the more' stays alive as a reference for this presence and continues to act as a source of further words between individuals. In this respect Gendlin (1992) highlights the crucial role that the body plays in nourishing the kind of language that is 'up to the task' and 'alive enough' for embodied relational understanding. Gendlin (1992) says of carrying forward, "It is not only the *words* but also *what we want to say* to carry *the situation* forward ... in a *bodily sensed way*" (pp. 102-103, emphasis in the original).

In this process there is a creative tension between self, other and the 'alive' phenomenon. The tension means that no words can ever be the final words. However, words can open a space and move us toward a new understanding. We engage in this tension in a bodily felt way, we are carrying forward by engaging in the tension between what is shared and what is other. As such, the essence of language is not in its summative power, but instead in its opening power. Our participative quest is to use language that is able to move within this 'open'. Foti (1997) argues that for Gendlin language is always tactile and full of sedimentated meaning:

Gendlin points out that *every* use of a word has, in fact, a certain metaphoric force because, whenever a word is brought to speak, its sedimentated meaning and connotation intercross with the speakers' sense of the context or situation (p. 310, emphasis in original).

Within such a tactile sense of bringing something to words it is possible to notice that this sense involves more than any particular phrases or words that one uses. Instead, the tactile sense is a living thing (presence or phenomenon) that feeds and sustains the meanings. We see poetry as one potential way that such presencing can be awakened and sustained. As an interactive form of poetry Renga writing offers a

way to engage audience participation. In concrete terms, this kind of carrying forward then requires a play between an attentiveness to the phenomenon, which is given by the other and the community of others, and our own sense of being touched bodily, and further, making something of the presences that have been gifted to us. These understandings resulted in our interest in Renga as a possible participative process that could address the following practical question: How can we kindle embodied and linguistic participation in a way that holds sharedness, otherness and 'the that', and does so in a way that can move within the 'open'?

A participative poetry writing process: Kindling audience participation

We are intrigued by the Japanese form of Renga and wish to share an audience's participative response to a phenomenon. At a symposium in Canada, Kate (the first author) engaged the audience in a process of writing Renga. The audience consisted of qualitative researchers from the discipline of education and literary poets. Renga is a Japanese form of shared poetry that generated the later form of Haiku (Reichhold, 2008). We were interested in exploring Renga with this audience but in a modified form. That is, we dropped the formal Renga rules (5, 7, 5, syllables, seasons, moon and flower) but retained the principle of co-operative poetic conversation. The rationale for dropping the formal structural rules for this exercise was that we wanted to emphasise the primacy of embodiment, presencing and relationality and what emerged in this process, rather than the form itself.

We were particularly interested in relationality and 'the more' of the phenomenon and there were thus some principles that we wanted to retain in the Renga. One of these was that each written line was either written in relation to the line before or written in response to everything that had come before, in other words to the phenomenon as a whole experience. A further emphasis was on the creative tension or play between 'the that' of what was offered, and participants' bodily felt resonance and unique variations in response.

Kate invited symposium participants to respond to an initial description of a situation that she as a nurse had often experienced, helping someone with faecal incontinence. She asked participants to respond to this description with

- words about their own bodily felt sense; and
- words about the phenomenon that they wished to offer.

Participants were invited to contribute to a Renga writing process. Once the first line had been written participants were invited to write the next line of the Renga, after which the group would pause for everybody to incorporate that line into their own experience and understanding and then move forward. At each line we waited for someone to volunteer to write the next line and to read it out aloud. Each line was free form (with no formal Renga rules).

The following scenario was used as the initial prompt for 'kindling' the Renga participative writing process.

The scenario is faecal incontinence. A man of 45 is laid on his back in a hospital bed on an open ward with seven other patients. It is the middle of the day and meals are about to be served. He is lying in his faeces and he is in pain. He cannot move and is aware of the stench of his faeces and the presence of other patients. He has been like this for five minutes but he knows the nurse is on his way; he has gone to get a bowl, cloths and water. The man feels a degree of self-disgust, even self-loathing; an overpowering anxiety, a deep worry that everyone around is also extremely averse to this situation and is bearing this smell resentfully. He wants to be invisible, not noticed. (Galvin & Todres, 2009, p. 3)

After reading out this evocative descriptive, there was long pause. A woman then got up, went to the board and wrote:

It is human, this shitting thing

From that moment a series of participants contributed lines, each pausing after focusing on the previous audience member's contribution. The Renga that emerged through participation was as follows:

It is human, this shitting thing
 Discomfort can cause joking: release anxiety
 leaving my body, his body, our body
 Where are you?
 To embrace is (un)certain
 contamination
 heart beat in my ear drums
 I can't stand my body being the last man
 standing
 How have I become (un)dignified?
 This is no fucking good
 Why? Fuck!
 To lose control is to k(no)w shame
 Why are others bodily limits acceptable and
 ours are not?

There was time at the end of the symposium for discussion of the whole process and the meaning that

it had for the participants. In addition to further sharing and descriptions of individual variations of the experience there was also acknowledgement of the power of the experience in its palpability and the way in which the presence of the phenomenon was bigger than any words could say. In this way the meanings were not as much in the words as in the palpable presence of something almost in the room. This process was with a group that were not nurses. However, the participants expressed appreciation of how important this kind of sharing of meaning could be in educating nurses to understand and engage in more empathic and humanised ways. One participant commented that he felt a 'noema' was in the room. Thus we return to the issue at hand: Knowing and sharing.

The 'that' that moves

A paper by Shotter (2003) entitled 'Real Presences: Meaning as living movement in a participatory world' has inspired us to think even further about the ontological depth of 'sharing'. Shotter (2003) speaks of the emergence of "dynamically unfolding structures of activity that we all participate in 'shaping', but to which we all must also be responsive in giving shape to our own actions" (p. 435). In his articulation of the nature of 'real presences' as an alternative to 'mental representations', Shotter (2003) indicates to us how what is shared in sharing meanings is potentially much more palpable and complex than an interpersonal process in which one person simply conveys meaning to another. Instead, in shared meanings there is a third thing, and in a sense this thing has its own body. More than this it also has life in that it moves and changes beyond the participants. Its reality is neither dependent on construction by the actors present, nor is it completely independent of the actors present. Thus, 'that' and we move together, interdependently. For Shotter (2003) real presences are "incarnate in the unfolding activity in which we ourselves are participants" (p. 461). At the same time these real presences "can like another person issuing instructions and commands, exert a communicative influence on us and thus (at least partially) structure our actions" (p. 462).

We believe that our process of kindling audience participation through Renga is one way in which meanings as moving presences (the 'that' that moves) can potentially inform the possibility of shared and palpable embodied relational understanding. It is this embodied relational understanding that may be particularly important to caring practices in our case, and beyond this to the epistemological and methodological movements that are trying to heal any theory/practice gap. Phenomenology, in its quest to access lived meanings in a meaningful way, may benefit from more consideration of how presences

become more alive as we attend to them, not only with linguistic hospitality, but with bodily hospitality as well.

Evocative Kindling or Provocation?

Further to this, we have been reflecting upon the process that we have used in our attempt to 'kindle' audience participation as one way in which to offer a possibility of shared and palpable embodied understanding. After the symposium event described above, Kate returned to the UK and we reviewed together the value of the process and its potential to 'awaken presences' in the ways that we have been exploring. We wondered whether the process was successful simply because of the nature of this audience; that is, the audience members had a shared and common interest in literary and poetic expression. We wondered whether this contributed to a tacit openness and agreement to receptively engage in this process. This participatory audience took the whole process 'in its stride' and simply experienced the Renga writing and its outcomes as productively challenging and evocative.

With these thoughts in mind we wondered what the response would be if we were to present their Renga at a conference of human science researchers (IHSRC, 2010). In this instance we did not engage this new audience in a participative process but rather explored with them whether and in what sense the presentation of the Renga could awaken a presence of the phenomenon in an evocatively productive way within this context.

The participative process

We engaged in this process because we were interested in the question: Can the thing that 'grabs' or touches one audience be shared with another audience? Our purpose was to reflect on the nature of this sharing and what we may learn about 'a feeling of understanding' (Halling, 2008; Todres, 1998; Willis, 2004). The feedback that we received from this next presentation was mixed. Some participants expressed that they had been 'part of an experience', in other words, a palpable presence was offered and welcomed. For others, the presentation was unsettling and even overwhelming. It is in relation to this latter response that we became thoughtful and wondered about the differences between evocation and provocation.

It was not our primary intention to provoke, upset or disgust people, but rather to share something that had enough 'felt' or sensual intensity so that it might 'grab' participants and offer the possibility of an embodied response that could perhaps be palpably present in the room. In other words, our intention was to try out a process with potential to offer embodied

shared participation and to see what happened. Embodied shared participation has a 'felt' intensity that was, in our view, more likely to be made possible by bringing 'right up close' our human connectedness through the body's levelling power. This was our rationale for choosing the particular humiliation scenario as a stimulus for the Renga. However, while 'kindling' refers to awakening a spark, it is also 'a playing with fire'. The process is necessarily unpredictable and the potentially powerful nature of what may emerge can underwhelm, overwhelm, or even provoke our audience. There may also be an unpredictable emotional response to what is shared. Our intention is to evoke a feeling of understanding, but we tread a fine line because we are drawing on material about deeply personal and private vulnerabilities, which are usually hidden in practice (Lawler, 1997) and may be experienced as a horror. There is a reason why we took this risk with our audience and now with our readers, and it has to do with our project, which concerns the 'humanisation of care', suffering and well-being. We aim to call practitioners' attentions back to human vulnerabilities and existential issues in healthcare (Galvin & Todres 2010; Todres & Galvin 2010; Todres, Galvin, & Holloway, 2009). We believe that this task requires some way of confronting our health professional audiences with language that does not deny the body and its repelling hidden aspects. By doing this we are willing to risk the natural reaction of people 'turning away' (Kristeva, 1991, 1997) precisely because the context of ever increasing technology in caring practice moves practitioners further and further away from the intensity of vulnerability and suffering that people 'on the receiving end of care' often experience. Such human vulnerabilities, where patients may be 'existentially exiled', are part of everyday practice. It is possible that experienced practitioners may 'take for granted' or even be 'hardened to' their patients' 'exile'.

Such 'hardening', which is unfortunately visible in health and social contexts, may thus require a pedagogical approach in which 'conventional evidence' is not enough to underpin humanly sensitive care. It is in this context that our pedagogical approach may benefit from evocation and sometimes even provocation (Willis & Borbasi, 2010). It is our aim to bring embodied experience into the foreground as a pedagogic project in order to help our students remain awake to that which brought them into caring in the first place; that is, a care for humans. These students may also be faced by the challenge of how to develop their capacities to know when to be open and when to be more distant in caring practice. In other words, they are called upon to develop capacities that can mediate the horror experienced by themselves and their patients, but to do this in such a way that does not add to the

suffering of the patient (Galvin & Todres, 2009). We argue that bearing witness (Churchill, 2005; Glassman, 1998) to the experience of the other is a fundamental part of caring work, and this is also the source for a particular kind of knowledge that can guide practice.

Our responsibility to 'keep it safe'

The most that we can do is to make what we are going to do explicit to audiences and participants, to indicate in advance the nature of the experiences we draw on and then to grant the freedom and respect that is needed for our audience to allow whatever is going to happen to happen. Informed consent is not a fluid enough notion to be able to embrace the complexities of a possible shared embodied understanding or the unpredictability of the spectrum of possibilities between evocation and provocation in our process. If we are to be faithful to a phenomenological endeavour then we might need to take risks with uncertain processes so that fresh insights and felt understandings may come from immediate experiences in the world. However, it may be useful in 'classroom' situations to offer debriefings and support, although this is not possible for our readerships and some other audiences.

Conclusion

The central question that our paper may raise for phenomenology's projects is this: Is one possible direction for phenomenology a move towards the awakening and sharing of presences? We would like to argue that the central spirit of phenomenology involves proceeding on the basis of an epistemology where understanding is never simply cognitive, but is always intertwined with senses, moods, qualities and multiple inter-subjective and cultural contexts that are given to consciousness in the ways they are holistically presented. Being present in this phenomenological way is thus never only 'cognitive presence' or 'aesthetic presence' or 'emotional presence'. We derive these specialised presences, we do not originally live in these presences. The importance of this for the theme of this special edition, namely a wide embrace of the notion of evidence, is that phenomenology in the way we have been pursuing it in this paper as the 'awakening and sharing' of presences, calls for a definition of evidence that is not merely in the third person but is also intimate with the first and second person.

It is in this spirit that phenomenology, in giving holistic epistemological power, keeps open an aesthetic sensibility that precedes the specialisation that splits science from art. In Willis's (2004) words, we should make "living texts ... and other artistic forms to create a portrayal which carries the immediacy and impact of an experience" (p. 8). In

addition, a phenomenologically oriented exploration of ‘what is in the space’ between reader and text might also allow future projects that explore how literature and poetry work (Howard, 2010) in facilitating embodied experience and understandings. To return to the beginning of our paper, in all of this is the lived body, you and I, and even the muse beyond our control. It is within this endeavour that we see Leggo (2009) referring to his writing as “seeking always a living ecology in the vast mystery of the earth” (p. 151). From a phenomenological point of view this living ecology is a living community. A phenomenological project that wishes to address the deeply participative nature of this living community involves a phenomenology that is faithful to the ongoing play between individuality and what is shared. This play can never be summarised as ‘evidence’ because it is always ongoing and always exceeding its last generalisation. Thus, the presence

moves. We can ask ourselves what kind of phenomenology this is. The direction taken in this paper is one example of a phenomenological project that wishes to:

- 1) open up authorship in participative ways; and
- 2) engage in more aesthetic ways of knowing
- 3) while still honouring the relational realities of presences.

While postmodern relativism engages in the first two projects in interesting ways, the phenomenological project that we have been exploring also crucially retains the third characteristic; that is, an honouring of the relational realities of presences.

Referencing Format

Galvin, K., & Todres, L. (2012). Phenomenology as embodied knowing and sharing: Kindling audience participation. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 12 (Special Edition, July: *Evidence-Based Approaches and Practises in Phenomenology*), 9 pp. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2012.12.1.9.1122

About the Authors



While nursing, Kate undertook a doctoral study concerning the evaluation of nurse-led practice using conventional research methods. Ironically, this drew her towards qualitative approaches and reminded her of her formative literary-rich education in Ireland and what had been lost in her specialized nurse education: a ‘nourished’ scholarship that incorporated the literary traditions, story, poetry and reflections on experiential meaning.

Observations in clinical practice at that time sensitised her to the reductionist nature of practice in contrast to the depth and detail of what people go through in suffering and in illness. Kate came to realise that knowing what to do in practice as a nurse didn’t always come directly from a technical perspective; rather it came from somewhere deeper and she became fascinated with this ‘deeper’ could mean. This led to conversations with colleagues about existential issues and phenomenology, and to the work of the human science community.

The world of phenomenology opened a path to the fullness of her earlier experiences, and how poetry and written language are able to convey something richer than science and which is palpably present. This journey culminated in the development, with Swedish colleagues, of a lifeworld led approach to education which, later, was used by Kate when leading two innovative curricula developments at Bournemouth University: a professional doctorate and a set of lifeworld-led undergraduate education materials.

Kate has been pursuing interests in phenomenological research, existential philosophy, and poetry in a number of concerns in Health and Social Care, particularly regarding the meaning of ‘what it means to care’. With Les Todres, she has written papers on the humanisation of care, a more contemplative approach to education for caring practices, and a developing theory of well-being. This work is to be published (2012) in a book called ‘Caring and Well-being: A Lifeworld-led Approach’.

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His current research interests include older person care, mental health and quality of life. Professor Todres was responsible for co-ordinating the submission of articles dealing with the one of the *IPJP*'s specialist themes, Method in Phenomenology (see the 'Scheduled Themes' section).

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