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Ontology at Work: Constructing the Learner/Worker

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Abstract: *Constructing adult learners' and workers' identities starts with their embodied actions, and to do this we present a philosophical perspective, two fieldwork sites and a model for learning.*

Introduction: Bringing Back the Body

What sorts of adults do we want to be? “Fast capitalism” requires workers who are creative and decisive (Beckett, 1996), yet compliant and mindful of the precarious and contingent nature of their employment (Garrick, 1998; Usher et al, 1997). “Life-long learning” requires self-directed and experientially-sensitive learners, across the age-range, and within and beyond work (UNESCO, 1999; Edwards & Usher, 1998). These expectations and their critique are hotly contested, but we contend that the debates so far are shaped by epistemology (such as the nature of competence) and ethics (such as the formation of character (e.g., Saul, 1997; Sennett, 1998). Powerful and necessary though these debates are, we want to draw attention to ontology, that is, the kind of beings adults are in the light of new expectations of work and of learning. Ontological enquiry is about what there is – the furniture of the world. We start from the common-sense premise that when adults are at work, and also when they are learning at and for work *they are ineluctably embodied, and therefore active.* The detailed philosophical analysis is elsewhere (Beckett & Morris, 2000). Here, we will show, empirically, how self-hood (“identity”) grows out of certain adults’ everyday enactments, through a model of learning which is based in: *practical, performative, material (embodied), actions-in-context.* We will examine two contexts:

(1) *Staff in Aged Care Facilities (ACF)*

Who are the workers in an ACF? The profile is shaped not only by nursing, but also by health care work of widening variety: physio- and other therapies; welfare and other agencies; and a growing number of “patient care attendants” (PCAs), “nursing assistants”, and the like. Various stages of residents’ medical dependency necessitate 24 hour care (especially the high dependency of the “nursing home”), so shift work is a feature, as is the part-time, predominantly female workforce.. Little formal education or training is available for most of this part-time, female workforce. Indeed, most of those who are not nurses or allied health professionals have little formal qualifications, but may have years of experience.

The project we draw from here (Beckett, 2000) was to improve the management of residents with dementia at an ACF – Pleasantville (pseudonym) – by sharing staff experiences in addressing these behaviours, and in that way constructing these experiences as learning. Learning strategies involved staff communication skills (including both initial documentation and verbal discussion between staff), interpersonal skills especially teamwork (such as pairings) in analysing “critical incidents,” and reflective discussion of workplace responses to such incidents. Seven to ten staff in the dementia unit at Pleasantville, comprising nurses and PCAs, all females, met fortnightly over two months, just outside the unit, with my leadership, on alternate Wednesdays. Each staff member met her “pair” to swap experiences in the preceding few days, and what was done to address these at the times they arose.

Each “pair” collected brief notes about such incidents and made a verbal report each fortnight with the unit staff as a team. I transcribed these discussions from notes taken in the meetings. Below is a sample.

After many of these experiences were regularly shared, staff agreed on some main “management” points.

Pleasantville: Meeting #3 Oct 7 1998

Resident B****: Update: Barbara: B**** has been hospitalised with a broken femur. Maree visited her - drinking via syringe, and with family support at mealtimes. Susan: not on intra-venous drips now.

Resident C****: Update: Judith: C**** back from hospital 30 mins ago (Susan: quite dopey too – balance problems) some aggression. Barbara and Susan both astonished to see her returned so soon – medical matters still present.

Resident B***: Update: Judith: goes to bed fully-dressed. Marj: B*** required full change of clothes this morning. Susan: use a lip-plate for lunch, some wandering the unit. Marj: agreed - moves furniture, “dusts”, Barbara: better at night now, and Susan agreed, as B*** heads straight for toilet in the morning, yet today’s incontinence is less typical. Maree and Marjery agree recognition is quite good. S: hairdresser return trip is significant – sees the door! Janice and Marjery agree that patterning B***’s days is difficult.

Resident M***: Update: Barbara: the medical advice was to “modify” the tender caring, and change the medication. Janice: still weepy, even howling. Barbara wondered if M*** liked being a resident. Maree noted M*** can shower, reluctant to come in the door (can see reflection?). Janice: noted M*** strong on teeth-cleaning. Susan wondered if there was a lot of frustrated communication there, Barbara wondering if a firmer line was called for.

These were that: changes in staffing, and family visits are significant for these residents (they may see these as “interference”); that it is essential to have a wide repertoire of responses to engage “challenging behaviour” (across 24 hrs and several staff, a resident’s behaviour will vary greatly); that hospitalisation turns residents into patients - off-site, they tend to become medical diagnoses, arriving back at Pleasantville, often disoriented; that structures and patterns are essential for residents, but they frequently struggle to re-invent these.

Question from DB: *What do you find yourself doing in such “challenging” situations as the above?* Participating staff agreed they found themselves:

“Trying” (including both now – e.g., “I think she should have a spoon” – and going away and trying later; “I tried to explain to J**** about her son on holidays in Sydney”) is most apt. This is followed by:

“Guessing” (“What on earth is going on?” Inc. looking for other evidence e.g., urine smell; food throwing rep. chookfeeding = “going back to the farm” = mother role). This indicates that:

“Showing” is the least apt (requires the most reflection: staff wouldn’t find themselves “showing” because of the ethical implications e.g. bottom-washing has a dignity aspect).

I invited the group, at a later meeting, to again reflect on their own learning: *How do you “try?”* Discussion produced agreement that staff “talk on their [residents’] level” (Maree), which is hard until you get to know residents, and talk in such a way that humours residents: e.g. “I feel good today/you look good today” to start them off, rather than ask “How are you...?” Staff know they are not likely to get at a resident’s condition directly: recognise there’s a telling and re-telling of stories, so they look for signs of a “new story” emerging (Barbara). The stories are indications of “residents’ realities” – es-

sential for empathetic staff in dementia units to come to understand. Staff-resident interactions centred on validation of “realities”, which directly construct – indeed, *retrieve* – residents’ identities. This is most clearly shown in the questions staff ask residents, which are framed by “who, what, when and where”, but never by “how” or “why.” These latter are often anxiety-producing, and induce identity instability (resident suspects, but can not produce, a “right” answer).

So, a refinement: if time is pressing, “trying” something is the best descriptor. But where observing over time (shaped by certain reflective questions to residents) is possible, staff agreed “guessing” is the best descriptor for how the staff come to understand challenging behaviours. They start with immediate practicalities: “Look, you have to do X...”, and there is first a “*trying*” (striving through persuasion), then, with more time, “*guessing*” and “*showing*.” The striving is embodied, purposeful action. Pleasantville staff are materially present, physically engaging residents’ “challenging behaviours.” What do we mean by this?

Undoubtedly, discourse is significant. But discourse constructs an *epistemology* of practice. Staff are able to share their learnings of what works with individual residents’ “challenging behaviours” (or “hot action”, Beckett 1996) within discourses. Three discourses suggest themselves: *chronological* (times of the day or night, events like visits and meals), *medical* (dosages, clinical matters, hospitals), *psychosociological* (relationships with staff, families, each other) and so on. Staff were able to piece together pattern-making and re-making, “reading” a critical situation or challenging behaviour with their colleagues, such that it can be better understood. A diversity of practical responses and reflective explanations was proffered. This can be regarded as evidence for Dewey’s argument (in Garrison 1999) that the purposes of both practical action and judgement *emerge* as a creative effort to overcome what Dewey in general calls a “disrupted context” – and a dementia unit is quintessentially disruptable. These workers engage in practical reasoning, in attempts to shape stability within the unit. This is fundamentally an Aristotelian epistemology, since it is concerned with the fluidity of purposes with respect to a fluidity of means to achieve those

purposes. Neither ends nor means are fixed in a linear fashion. As history tells us, this confronts much of Western education, with its traditional linear focus on both Platonic (theory>practice) epistemology, and on Cartesian (mind>body) ontology, with theory and the mind given priority. In the workplace, practical logic, aimed at what will work by drawing laterally on embodied experiences, prevails.

But discourse (and the practical epistemology which it generates) requires a *materiality*, an enactment, with functional bodies – both their own and their residents. Staff grapple with embodied “disruptions.” There is a viscerality about the caring which grounds discourse with residents and with other staff – and generates activity-based learning at its most immediate. What to do “here and now” is a vexing issue for these staff; they need to “go with the flow”, but also direct it - these are “enactments” of their work. They need creative and rich repertoires of actions so that reaction is not the only enactment available. They must try to anticipate residents’ needs and wants. In what some prominent postmodern adult educators have called the “local, personal and the particular” (Bryant and Usher, 1997). Staff are learning from within a *community of practice*. Like all professionals, they are confronting diversity, power and a variety of discourses but in ways that are dynamic – they enact these dimensions in the daily flow of their work – and they do so by thinking and doing (and by learning, when all this is shared) in a context. A dementia setting is a “local personal and particular” workplace, illustrative of key features, or “realisations”, of postmodernism (Burbules, 1996). It is also a site of powerful adult learning, for the staff.

(2) *Students in Adult ESL Literacy*

At two metropolitan Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes, we explored how learner identities are enacted in the context of an adult ESL Literacy classroom and the implications for the teaching/learning of literacy (Morris, 2000). Extensive data was generated through a series of interviews with classroom teachers and a series of interviews with a small cohort of learners (Somali and Ethiopian women with little to no formal schooling and literacy in their first language) drawn from each class, and year long classroom observa-

tion at both sites. The findings suggest that the teachers' understanding of ESL *ness* and Literacy/il-literacy and of their learners appear grounded in an understanding of language and culture fundamentally as "representation" as opposed to "being-in-the-world" (cf., Csordas, 1994). By engaging with the world, and here specifically the world of classrooms and of language, at the level of signification, the material bodies themselves, *the adult learners*, are at risk of disappearing. But, as the following extract illustrates, by placing the body at the centre of an analysis of subjectivity, identity and literacy, different kinds of questions emerge about the self, the individual in relation to others and literacy as social/cultural practice. Here, a teacher reflects on the challenge of working with a diversity of learners in her daily practice:

So this Muslim women, she would wear the hijab, she didn't wear anything across her face, her face was exposed and we went, as I said, used public transport and everything was fine. Several months later, she has become more and more strict, and now she wears a full veil, right over the top of her face, you can't even see her eyes, it's just a black gauze right over the top, she wears gloves as well. She wears glasses so that becomes a real problem if you go anywhere because you can't even, I don't know whether she wears the glasses underneath, but we'll go up to the self-access centre, when she's in here (women's only class) she's fine, she'll take off the veil. When she goes to the self-access centre where there might be men, here she is trying to have the veil from here to here and glasses across the top and of course it's just about impossible to keep it all together and, and she's got the gloves so she's struggling on the keyboard. One day when we were walking down the stairs and I was just next to her, and I thought I could ask her, and I said, "Look, how come only six months ago you came with me on public transport and you showed your face and that was no problem and now, you've got it totally covered?" and she said, "Well, I'm closer now to my religion, I'm more...I'm a better person now because I do this." Now for someone like you and I, that is just... how on earth can we possibly understand what stage each of these

people are at and how do you know you're offending people. I said to her, "Aren't you worried about what people think of you?" I said, I mean I could, because she knows me very well so I could push the limits a little bit. I said to her, "Look. To look at you, you are very frightening, if someone on the street looks at you they would be very frightened and if there's anybody that doesn't like Muslims you're the person they're going to attack." I said, "Aren't you worried about that?" She said, "Oh no." I said, "You could have something underneath your dress, you could have a weapon and people would be frightened of that." And she was totally, she just thought there was no need for her to worry...(Interview, 7.12.99)

Of importance here is the tension that the body evokes. The teacher's re-telling provides us with a sense that certain constructions of a "Muslim" (and hence learner) are being privileged over others, and at least in this instance, are not based in the everyday experiences of the learner. In this construction, the learner's identity is treated as though stable, continuing and unitary. There is little space for "other" dynamic versions of what it means to be a Muslim woman studying at TAFE. Yet even in this short extract we begin to see how the learner is caught up with her many roles, hence "other" identities and through her response to the teacher's questioning, disrupts the strong impulse of the teacher to normalise. One might argue that underpinning the teacher's construction of the learner is a view of culture as representation, as something inscribed on the body. The learner presents a very different version of culture, one that is lived, where knowledge, beliefs and experiences are located in the body. The discourse that the teacher employs makes it difficult to understand the learner's individual body practices. The body is treated obliquely as a symbol for something else, which acts to distance us from the individual's everyday embodied experiences. Yet, as Davis (1997, p.14) argues, understanding embodiment really requires from us an ability to work out "how differences intersect and give meaning to their interactions with their bodies and through their bodies with the world around them."

What arises from this story and resurfaces throughout the fieldwork are “active bodies” constructing and reconstructing their sense of self and occasionally resisting “others” construction of them. We begin to see how different components of individuality can be understood as dimensions of existence expressed by the active body, in bodily activities. In the extract above the adult learner’s embodied knowledge and experience challenges the universalising impulses of particular classroom practice that privileges a representational epistemology. By attending to the kinds of learners’ identities that are constructed through pedagogical interaction in the classroom, we may better be able to understand how the meaning of literacy for adults is influenced by their agency. This is where the opportunity for doing pedagogy differently lies.

Conclusion: Ontological Significance and Epistemological Implications

In the aged care fieldwork, we observe the construction and re-construction of staff members’ senses of self – they are recognised as authoritative in their work, both amongst each other, and in the broader context of the ACF. They are knowledgeable in their work: they are “knowing workers”, but more fundamental than an epistemology is an ontological claim. The staff in an aged care facility confront the material reality they find at work every day, including their own material reality – they find themselves doing messy, frustrating, repetitive work with residents. More profoundly, their attempts to engage the stories (“realities”) of residents with dementia assume a contiguous, extended world within which such stories can be made sensible, and in which a community of practice is possible. These “enactment” practices shape identities, both for the residents in such facilities, and for the staff themselves. Such a world is populated by material bodies, and paying attention to bodies (O’Loughlin, 1998; Michelson 1998) materialises those identities ineluctably and irreducibly.

In the adult ESL Literacy fieldwork, we observe the multiple ways that identities are constructed and how these constructions provide the resources through which individuals’ subjectivities and experiences are shaped. These learners are active bodies that are not simply subject to external agency, but

are simultaneously agents in their own social-construction of the world. The narratives present adult learners in a much more complex vein, as social/cultural beings and challenges the kind of generic a-historical “stick figure”¹ prevalent in much of the literature on second language learners. We begin to construct learners’ experiences not as distractions or deviations from “real” language learning but rather as regarded as constituting the very fabric of learners’ lives – their lives are marked by the experience of difference. If embodied selves shape and are shaped along the way, it becomes important to attend to the performative aspects of teaching one way or another. An awareness of how our teaching practices elicit or construct identities may well lead us to perform differently, one in which the scripts for teaching and learning are never complete. The challenge lies in being attentive to difference (mainly embodied differences) in ways which don’t simply “re-other” those bodies and voices that are marginalised by a reliance on discourses as markers of difference.

Taken together, these two fieldwork projects support a model of adults’ learning which is primarily ontological, before it is epistemological. This seems to us redolent of a Wittgensteinian research perspective (Winch, 1998), in which human learning flows from “attention” to the task at hand, giving full regard for the cognitive as well as for feelings and emotions in social settings. For us, “attention” starts with embodied consciousness. This ontological approach has epistemological implications. Adults’ experiences of the kind examined above suggest a model of adults’ learning like this:

- *a community of practice (that is authentic, embodied work)*
- *a dynamic (Aristotelian means-ends) engagement with diversity, power and a variety of discourses*
- *a context which is well integrated with the wider environment.*

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¹This phrase was first used by McKay & Wong to capture the homogenised view of ESL learners that is often perpetuated in much second language literature.