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# Something extra: the moment of good teaching

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## Abstract

In a series of interviews with teachers recognized by their peers and learners as being adept at their craft I attempted to elicit their intimate experience of the moment of good teaching and found that some of what they described accorded very strongly with the experience of non duality. These experiences are analysed, drawing on Loy's (1988) characterisation of non duality, and its dangers articulated. It is juxtaposed to the current initiative within South Africa to set up minimum standards in teaching and learning and it is suggested that a relationship of parody exists between the two.

From a series of in depth, intimate, conversational interviews conducted with a number of participants on their experiences of good teaching I selected two of the more expressive examples for this analysis. Both teachers were adept in their content knowledge, pedagogic knowledge and pedagogic content knowledge. They knew what they were teaching, why they were teaching it, how to go about it and how to lucidly express themselves.<sup>1</sup> Rather than get the participants to define what 'good teaching' was I attempted to facilitate their concrete description of their own experiences of good teaching using specific fundamental experiential and phenomenological categories: the experience of time, space, self, perception, thought and intentionality. These categories guided my interviews as they pointed towards some of the elementary

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers tend to use four categories when identifying teacher expertise: experience; social recognition and nomination; professional/social group membership; and excellence in performance criteria (Palmer, Stough, Burdenski and Gonzales, 2005). Ben had over 20 years experience, was consistently seen as the best teacher at his school and within his university department, always took on professional responsibilities and excelled in evaluations of his teaching. Darren was substantially younger with only four years teaching experience but was consistently recognized as one of the best student teachers of his year while his learners at school spoke in deeply respectful tones about his work. He was also consistently involved in the structures of what ever organization he worked for, very quickly making an impression with his capacity for high quality work. While still a student at college, for example, he was already on the board of the 'PTA' of his old school. He also excelled in evaluations of his teaching.

structures of experience and enabled a deeper contemplation of what precisely the experience was.<sup>2</sup> What partly emerged from the discussions were descriptions of non dual experiences in these moments of good teaching. Rather than begin with a technical definition of what non duality is, I prefer to allow its meaning to emerge through the teachers' accounts. I also do not want to claim that good teaching and non duality necessarily imply each other, only that in the data of the interviews on good teaching there was a noticeable non dual element.<sup>3</sup> This is what the article characterises by describing the phenomenological logic of non dual teaching and juxtaposing it to current attempts to set up minimum standards of teaching within South African education.

This analysis falls between two kinds of phenomenological research delineated by Van der Mescht (2004) as Husserlian and Empirical-Interpretive. Two of the basic differences between these kinds of phenomenological research lie in the nature of focus and the truth claim made: a Husserlian study attempts to get to the *universal* roots of conscious experience by turning into one's *own self*; interpretive phenomenology attempts to reach a *located* understanding of the world of *an other* by relying on what they say. It is a focussing in on "lived experience, an obsession with the concrete; verbal data are interrogated for how they language participants' physical, emotional and intellectual being in the world" (Van der Mescht, 2004, p.3). The present account starts off as empirical but searches for phenomenological structures that push beyond the local and contingent and attempts to set up a more general analytic of the non dual moment of teaching.

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<sup>2</sup> The categories evolved out of my PhD studies where I was engaged in working out the pedagogic skill of influential Western teachers such as Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare and Descartes. Over the same period I conducted an opportunistic small scale research project that attempted to get local and contemporary accounts of good teaching from which this paper has sprung. I have shorn this article of the somewhat esoteric references of the PhD as I wanted the modern articulation of these experiences in the interviews to come out cleanly. It makes for straightforward reading but hopefully the distillation still captures some of the complexity.

<sup>3</sup> There are a number of good studies of the intersection between non duality and teaching. See Glazer (1999); Greene (2000, 2001); Krishnamurti (1990); Palmer (1997) and Wexler (1997, 2000) for good recent studies and articulations although none of these use the same categories of analysis here employed. Older articulations of similar ideas can be found in the works of Simone Weil, Maria Montessori and Rudolph Steiner. Useful studies of what non duality is in its own terms can be found in Loy (1988) and Forman (1997).

The description sets itself up against the backdrop of the current growing trend to establish various kinds of minimal criteria within the educational field. With the increasing legitimacy of the South African State as both representative of its people and capable of good governance there is a strong drive to ensure minimum standards are upheld within our educational institutions. This entails setting up Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQAs) that define the minimum standards necessary to deliver educational products – the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) being a good current exemplar. The setting up of clear and explicit standards for institutions, teachers and learners to reach towards is a crucial element of the modern reform process in South African Education. It establishes a consistent and coherent guide through the complex terrains of teaching and learning in a country that had a fragmented landscape and ensures that institutions are capable of delivering the minimum standards necessary for good education. The danger with the setting of minimum standards of knowledge, skills and delivery capability, however, is that it becomes an upper limit that slowly starves the creative and dynamic energies of the learner and the teacher. The CHE recognizes the need for paying attention to best practice as well as minimum standards and intelligently refrains from setting up explicit models of good teaching practice for a number of reasons.

If the link between teaching and learning is uncertain and unpredictable, then it follows that any attempt to define good teaching will be limited; good teaching practice cannot be reduced to a formula or set of generalisable laws. . . [I]t was feared that such an endeavour would be misguided; given the particularly context- and discipline-dependent nature of teaching, it would be impossible to relate to the sheer diversity of teaching contexts that exist in South Africa. . . It was feared that a Resource specifically focussing on good teaching practice might be used to develop prescriptive, top-down accountability approaches to the QA of teaching (CHE, HEQC, *Improving teaching and learning resource no.6*, 2003).

Impressive restraint and a recognition of the dangers of attempting to legislate on good teaching is shown. The CHE prefers to see itself in a supporter's role, tirelessly working on conditional factors that enable good teaching and learning to arise:

Good teaching is also dependent on environmental, institutional and structural factors such as resourcing; staffing; workloads; venues; libraries; time-tabling; leadership and management; incentives; and human resource policies and practices. It is suggested that institutional factors such as these – which affect teaching practice and either encourage or discourage the conditions for transformative learning to occur – are appropriate for an external QA agency to scrutinise, because, being beyond the control of the individual

academic, they may militate against creative and innovative teaching practice and also against professional development for teaching (*ibid.*).

Again, this is a carefully crafted and reasonable statement on the role that setting minimum standards should play within our post apartheid world where resistance to an unjust state is being replaced with the rigours of democratic governance. But it misses something about how certain kinds of good teaching speak back to the setting of basic criteria, whether these be descriptive or performative. When writing for the President's Education Initiative, Harley, Barasa, Bertram, Mattson and Pillay (2000) struggled with a similar tension of what it was that effective teachers demonstrated over and above competence in the given roles, initially defining it as 'something extra' with vague and mystical undertones. They recognized that this 'something extra' was a crucial element in the repertoire of roles that constitute effectiveness but that capturing and articulating the concept was beyond their current focus. Harley *et al.* (2000) point to how this 'something extra' to some extent *parodied* the whole process they had been engaged within, always slipping underneath the attempt of policy criteria to capture it. While the CHE wishes to support and encourage the ungraspable, indefinable realm of teaching practice beyond criteria by measuring and defining its conditions of possibility, Harley points to something about it that is more subversive. He recognizes that there is something about good teaching practice that makes the enterprise of criteria setting laughable. It carnivalises criteria, shows that to reach its realms one must forget about criteria, mock them, throw them out the window. Precisely why this is the case is what this article sets out to illustrate in the analysis that follows.

The most obvious juxtaposition between the setting up of criteria and the personal accounts of the experience of good teaching was a general sense of the *absence* of explicit criteria within these special lessons. Ben (name altered), an experienced English teacher, put it as follows when describing his poetry teaching:

I had a really open agenda. It would almost have been impossible to draw up a lesson plan for that, except a very crude one, which would say banal things like 'read the poem' (*laughs*).

Darren (name altered), a young South African geography teacher who had also plied his trade in England concurs:

I know what the topic is, the class, the pupils, the information, all these things you know already, so you know what's going on, but still unprepared.

Both teachers describe a spontaneity within the structures of the lesson that does not come from slack time or going off topic but precisely from within the demands of the lesson itself. It is not anarchy being described but something that emerges from within a functioning lesson where the teachers are already working with a specialized voice (Hoadley, 2005). These are teachers already 'within criteria' (Shalem and Slonimsky, 1999) who emerge beyond it into a stranger and more paradoxical set. These lessons suddenly enter a phenomenologically different space experienced as the quintessence of good teaching. But spontaneity and freedom are very loose characterisations that need fleshing out, and as the interviews progressed I honed in on their fundamental experiences of time-space, self, cause and effect, perception, thought and action.

The 'eternal moment' is a well known cliché that expresses the phenomenological feel of non-duality in terms of time-space. Time suspends itself, or as Ben articulates it:

There is a sense in which you are not aware of time. I think I want to say that you are out of time. A lesson starts and you read the poem and then you stick on this last image, confusion about the last image. . . While this happens you look around and see (*laughs*) this sort of thing happening, and really good questions start coming. Then time stops playing a role in that. . . you escape the classroom, actually you are out the school. . . kind of together, travelling. . . discovering things.

There is a peculiar combination of time-space disappearing and being replaced with a heightened awareness of the moment. Each moment stands out in its own particularity allowing openness to what is happening as each moment carries its own weight but does not hold past experience or force future expectation into a straitjacket. The teacher in this state becomes alive to the current context and moves where it moves, taking each moment in its own terms. All past and future expectations are bracketed and left is the moment in its own peculiar nakedness. Darren describes it as follows:

I become very focussed, so focussed that I lose the four walls. Like Johnny is in the back corner, a dark corner, I lose the corner and there is Johnny.

This experience of the moment is phenomenologically similar to the experience of 'eternity'. They are almost exact opposites that catch in their very oppositeness the same phenomenological experience. If a moment is lived purely in its own terms then one is living in a perpetual present. It is not the kind of eternity that stretches infinitely into the past and future but a non-

temporality that exists within the present and a spatiality that bends itself into the moment.<sup>4</sup>

A loss of self or finding of self was another clear feature in the experience. Again we see a paradoxical combining of opposites capturing the same phenomenological experience. Darren describes his sense of self disappearing in the moment:

Your personality is not there. I can't fuck it up in the lesson because I am not there to do any damage.

The 'I' becomes an 'eye' that is open to the moment as it is happening. It is the coming out of the self that allows the looking to happen, rather than the self that does the looking. It is an empty self, a negative self, an open clearing that allows the moment of pedagogy to occur. Ben put it differently:

The experience I had was of huge enrichment, calm, and yes, this is the work for me, this is what I am meant to do. . . The more enriched the class became the more enriched I became.

Here we have an expanding of the self to meet with the class. Put strongly, no self becomes all self, it becomes everything that is there at the moment, expanding to encompass all rather than reducing to nothing in the face of the all. The two accounts work in opposite directions but result in the same effect. The first reduces to an extension-less point, the second expands into the class, but both point to the increased awareness brought about by the boundary of the self changing.

Cause and effect also take on a different rhythm. For a cause to take effect it needs time and space to operate in, and here time and space are working differently. Ben described it as there being:

. . . no predicting. I don't think there was a way of saying that is going to happen today. I think one could engineer almost every lesson to be fruitful in some way, and perhaps exciting, but not that kind of experience. I think there was a happy combination of things there which I don't think is possible to manipulate or control.

Darren captured the loss of working with cause-effect as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> This experience is well described in more political and revolutionary terms by Kaustav's *Power and Resistance: Insurgent spaces, Deleuze and Curriculum* (2005).

You just know the basic formula and then you just do something. I can't tell you what it will be until it starts, and then it just happens as it happens. You can't say at the beginning of the lesson that this is what we are going to do, label the lesson and then do it, by that stage you have already lost them.

Hume ([1739] 2000) pointed to the underlying phenomenological logic of this experience. In the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume showed that the causal connection between events is something of which we have no impression, we cannot actually see the cause, what we see are two separate events, and we project into this with some sort of a connection. The loss of cause and effect would seem to open up a world of enormous freedom as one is free of past chains and future ties, but this freedom is also one of determination, but now it is a determination of the present. Cause and effect merge into the substance of the moment and one path presents itself as clear and distinct because that is all there presently is.

The way one perceives also undergoes a subtle shift. Darren describes the intense nature of the experience:

You are trying to hear everything at the same time and have to be very aware. For example, there is a timid person in front of you who just makes a quiet movement in response to your question and you have to sense this. You pull all the sounds together and hear everything that is happening at once. Like three kids respond to a question all at the same time – a quiet kid, a loud kid and another kid with an off the wall response and you work with all three immediately and the class in general as well. I think that is why you lose your sense of time because you cannot lose that space they are firing in.

Ben spoke more about the effect of these lessons on his learners:

It's becoming more aware, it's awareness. Cummings writes somewhere, something about "the ears of my ears and the eyes of my eyes" and that's what happens, the eyes of your eyes start seeing and the ears of your ears start hearing, so it's the next level of looking beyond the obvious and seeing something that is subtle but profound and you can't actually look at life in an ordinary way again.

Perception heightens, not in the sense that caffeine sharpens vision, but that the teacher perceives what is happening in the pedagogic moment without past perceptions or future thoughts interfering. This does not mean she still cannot be wrong in her perceptions, only that mistaken perceptions will be humbly dropped for the correction. It also does not mean that the teacher will be like a blind person seeing anew. Past perceptions are not obliterated, only held lightly so as not to obscure current developments that open out into new areas beyond expectations and stated outcomes.

The way one thinks also shifts. There is an opening of thought, a freeing of thought that allows originality to spontaneously come, for every moment is spontaneous and original if taken on its own. Darren describes how this happens in a particular moment where a learner interrupted him with a strange question – “How many times have you had sex?”

They try to spin you off but you just respond to the question as any other, you respond to its point and then carry on to the next. It feels like it has come out the blue and it hits you, but it is just a kid looking for attention and you respond. You don't say: “That is ridiculous”, you respond on that level. It is funny and off the wall, so you say something funny. Everyone laughs and responds and then you are on to the next question.

Krishnamurti, one of the great expositors of non dual pedagogy, provides a similar example:

You deal with the fact. To take one example: someone asked, “Can I put the tent up?” And I said, “Don't do it near the road.” She said “Why not? I am a free person.” In other words “you needn't tell me”. So I told the person why. You go into it so that she understands the situation, which is factual. The point is to be open to the facts without attachment, so that what ever the current situation is, you respond to it as is, without pushing a past agenda or future end. The thought that is needed by that moment can arise because you are open to the moment without attachment (Krishnamurti, 1990, p.209).

Ben describes how he attempts to encourage a mode of thinking in his learners where they do not rely on his own interpretation but enter into the poem themselves:

There is this intense, really loud silence happening, pregnant with meaning and thinking, you can hear the thinking going on and then it's just a nudge, into the next step, another nudge, into the next step, that's how it goes.

Ben points to how it is that structure still remains crucial to the lesson, but how the teacher is able to hold the structure gently so that the learner can enter into it from their own position. It is not that the teacher is in a kind of no thinking blank state that accepts whatever happens. The teacher fully knows what the complexities and constraints of her subject are but is adept in holding this loosely and lightly and varying it as the situation demands. As T.S. Eliot puts it in the Four Quartets “the pattern is new in every moment”.

All of the above translates into a way of doing that accepts the current situation for what it is with all its structural constraints and future implications but allows the new to arise from within it. There is no denial of content or pedagogic domains, only a working with them in a way that is suited to each



new moment of the lesson. Ben calls it a kind of spontaneousness. Darren puts it like this:

[I]t all spins together into one and you deal with it as one even though there are many things happening to make it that.

The moment demands an exact action, it is that action, and that action is not someone doing something, it is what happens in that moment and the more the teacher is in the moment the more that moment will just demand actions that the teacher will do, and so there will just be action in its fullness.<sup>5</sup> But this action only becomes possible if one is still, for only in the stillness of the self will the action become apparent, otherwise it will be obscured by past desires and future expectations.<sup>6</sup>

If we go back over the six aspects of a non dual teaching moment discussed above we notice that each of these aspects can be described in opposite ways that are phenomenologically similar. Momentariness and eternity; loss of self and expansion of self; a loss of cause and effect separating off into distinct moments and a new determination found within the moment; perception heightening to the moment but losing itself in the intensity; thinking becoming free but finding only one path to follow and action becoming spontaneous and determined at the same time. Now this reduction to either side of the polarities should not surprise us when working with the intensities of non dual teaching.

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<sup>5</sup> This full action descends on one complete, as Nietzsche well understood and expressed in *Ecce Homo* – “If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one’s system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces. The concept of revelation – in a sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes visible, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down – that merely describes the facts. One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightening, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form – I never had any choice ...

Everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree but as in a gale of a feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divinity. The involuntariness of image and metaphor is strangest of all; one no longer has any notion of what is an image or a metaphor: everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression.” (Nietzsche, 1966, pp.300-301).

<sup>6</sup> In the incomparable words of T.S. Eliot. “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance’ (Eliot, 1974, p.191).

It is a taking of a polarity and pushing it to its extreme, to the point where the polarity collapses and becomes its opposite. The opposites, when extended, link up behind and in front of each other.

So what are we left with when working with a non dual moment in the classroom? We have a timeless, spaceless, selfless, free from cause and effect, perceptionless, thoughtless, actionless moment that is saturated with present time and space, drenched with self, absolutely determined, full with one thought and demanding one action. This is the non dual teaching moment that sparkles with parody when placed next to the setting of minimum standards with all its specific criteria and outcomes. In paradoxical terms, it is a kind of criteria that is criterion-less, a pattern that is pattern-less, that spins and plays and dances around its sibling still counting out its objectives.

But as hinted above, the experience of this kind of non dual teaching brings its own dangers. Ben articulates these hazards well. After briefly touching on the dangers of erotic transference he talks about an interaction he had with a colleague:

This guy was head of science, but also a play producer, an extraordinary mix of person, wonderful guy, sort of renaissance man, and we had a long talk in my office one day and he said “how did I do it, what do you do, why are they suddenly, you have been here a year or so, and they are much more keen on their English, and they write”. And I said “It’s very simple, they work for me.” And he did not like that at all, he switched off and said “God, no, that is very dangerous, you can’t go with that, surely the subject is more important?” “Ja it is about the subject actually, but it’s through me, I’m the medium.” And I guess when I start saying something like that it’s a bit narcissistic.

The irony in this honest appraisal is that the effects of experiencing non dual teaching moments precisely mitigate its happening again. By becoming narcissistic one loses the ability to immerse oneself in the world of another. When I enquired how he managed to overcome these negative effects he had this to say:

I think for me, I say this in humility that I worked too hard my whole life, I worked so hard at being good at what I was doing, and my concerns were broader, I wasn’t just impressing a bunch of kids, I had an English Department to run, four or five of us who had to function together as a team and that was my mission in life, to get the team really firing. . . So there were outside concerns, and the subject was always the thing for me, that quite apart from any classroom experience, apart from any group of kids learning the subject, English, I could pick up Hopkins and just read it for myself, and struggle with it and marvel at it.

Hard work, broader concerns and a loving respect for the subject in its own terms are very powerful correctives to the flatteries of good teaching. Darren, however, did not survive the vagaries of teaching, especially after a stint in the more dysfunctional schools of inner London:

Look, there are always going to be kids you cannot reach or who are not interested, but in London the amount of those kinds of kids is high. They are already stoned when they walk into your classroom, wired and drugged and interested only in getting sex after the lesson in the toilets, or dreaming of being great sports stars and dismissing everything else as a waste of time, and teaching in a situation where these kids predominate destroys teaching and it has destroyed my love for teaching. You are a symbol of everything they detest and this symbol is all you are, nothing else and you cannot break through, and if there are too many of them then it kills the passion and your love of teaching dies. You might break through and have one good lesson with them, but you need so much more to counteract all the crap that has happened. This is the saddest thing that has happened to me, I have lost the desire to teach.

A clear statement that the non dual teaching moment does not carry all before it and that there are underlying sets of basic standards needed to facilitate and enable working teaching and learning.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, these special moments often result in raised expectations that are not fulfilled, dangerous transferences that are taken advantage of, narcissism that obscures the next moment, jealousy of others who garner more praise, excuses about why minimum standards are not adhered to, insistence on process without delivering any product, sloppy preparation. . . the list could continue into all our teaching failings.<sup>8</sup>

The intention of this paper is certainly not to claim that this non dual teaching moment sits as the end point of all teaching or that it offers a devastating critique of outcomes based education – rather it is to briefly analyse its phenomenological structure, point to its paradoxes, warn of the dangers of its delights and laugh a little at the necessary madness and clumsiness of the current projects of governance within our world before plunging back into them. Nor is it a denial of the value of criteria and the project of making the

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<sup>7</sup> A useful survey of South African research on how we go about producing competent teachers can be found in Parker and Deacon (2005).

<sup>8</sup> It points to what I ironically call the seven deadly sins of good teaching, a realm we have tended to forget about in the struggle to define and create minimum standards of effective pedagogy. These ‘sins’ only emerge once good teaching is consistently performed. It is the work of those in criteria to get beyond criteria. Dante’s *Purgatorio* provides the best account of this realm.

tacit explicit. In a peculiar manner this article makes explicit what is happening in the most intuitive realms of teaching experience and expertise, only it recognizes how criteria themselves shift in their nature as these areas of teaching are explored, becoming paradoxical and fluid to meet with the nature of the experience.

But I do not want to leave off this articulation of non dual teaching with a set of disclaimers. The teachers interviewed felt these moments sat at the heart of their finest experiences as teachers. To dismiss these experiences as the orgasms of teaching does not capture the radical nature of this realm, of how it is structured in such a manner to mock the necessary project of establishing standards within our teaching profession, not from the realms of anarchy or mediocre practice that we are currently so intent on combatting, but from the best our profession has to offer.

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