



# The Teacher/ Researcher and the Role of Pre-understanding: A Personal Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

*The acknowledgement of pre-understanding is imperative within research and/or teaching. Pre-understanding consists of both explicit and tacit knowledge that can best be understood as two levels or planes; namely, first-hand and second-hand pre-understanding. First-hand pre-understanding, acquired through personal experience, is distinct from second-hand which is collected through the pre-understanding of other people (intermediaries). Pre-understanding includes knowledge within a certain disposition which surfaces while collecting, analyzing and processing information within one's role as teacher and/or researcher. To fully comprehend pre-understanding, three distinct elements including membership (teaching fraternity), experience, and education and training are explored using personal experiences.*

## INTRODUCTION

I can only now as an educator begin to address what I do, and why I do it, in the manner I do. It has taken many years of recursive reflection and a reflexive habit of mind to discover, process, and conclude that as a teacher/researcher my approach to teaching is and has been very much a praxis-oriented mode that evolved during years of teaching in many schools at many levels. I now constantly attempt to connect what I do in my educational role with what is illustrated and theorized in related pedagogical literature. Driven by a need to learn, grow and understand my craft (teaching) I discover within various texts my actions described and labelled using words that are often new to me. For example, the term 'reflection' has recently been modified for me as I read Bolton (2010) this past summer, who concluded:

Reflection is a state of mind, an ongoing constituent of practice, not a technique, or curriculum element. Reflective practice can enable practitioners to learn from experience about themselves, their work, and the way they relate to home and work, significant others and wider society and culture. It gives strategies to bring things out into the open, and frame appropriate and searching questions never asked before. It can provide relatively safe and confidential ways to explore and express experiences otherwise difficult to communicate. (p. 3)

These insights confirm for me why much of this literature was inaccessible in the past as I was a busy educator applying my skills and knowledge to attain certain educational outcomes. I wanted to investigate my practice and label my actions by reading about educational theory and research. However, I did not have enough time in a day to meet my own needs. Many of these books and articles were unknown to me while teaching at the elementary and secondary levels and I never had a chance to read these until I was immersed in a role as a university educator. During my career I had been a successful elementary and secondary teacher. I had supportive administrators, parents and students who believed I was a good teacher yet I was somewhat frustrated that I could not find the time to stay current and informed. I did learn constantly about myself, my praxis and others yet much of the pedagogical literature remained distant and unknown. It reached me only via puzzling and wanting professional development experiences sponsored by well-meaning school Board administrators.

My current post-secondary awareness, wrapped within my present philosophical orientation, is rooted in my past (pre-understanding), first as a student and later as a teacher. For me, this pre-understanding or stance compelled me to teach not just skills or facts but the whole student as I addressed their interests and abilities. I endeavoured to nurture independent thinkers to join our democratic society and my approach to teaching was, and continues to be, 'progressive' as I now know. Progressivism for me meant my classes were activity-based and inclusive as all students were being prepared to live and contribute to our democratic society (Dewey, 1916). I tried to keep my students on task and behaviourally in-line by placing authentic hands-on tasks in front of them that were only part of a menu of tasks supplied each day. Teaching progressively required a great deal of time to prepare yet as I matured I became more efficient and progressivism became my habit of mind and ideal.

My progressivism in the past and in my current teaching role was captured via journaling within day books, planning documents, emails, and notes to others, as well as reminders to myself, marking, scoring and located in transcripts of staff meetings. Evidence suggests I was constantly shifting in an effort to accommodate and include both students and fellow teachers in our classroom. I was learning on the job which makes sense since we learn best by engaging in real-world activities (Dewey, 1916) such as teaching. My approach informed my decisions, pervaded my attitude and marked the trail to planned outcomes. I believe, like Petress (2003), that this philosophy or way of life 'constitutes a moral and social compass, behavioural, attitudinal, and value guide-posts, essential personal and professional prescriptions, and a consistent but alterable assessment means for professional evaluation' (p. 1). In other words, one's philosophical orientation is a critical foundation for educators and should be both known and accessible. Critical because as educators we can anticipate questions from our students concerning our beliefs, as students ask us not only what we believe but also where did these beliefs come from, and what supports them. Currently, the writing and stance of Dewey appeals to me; after all, it was Dewey who suggested that 'meanings and purposes of education must be actively constructed by individual persons' (1916, p. 96). This constructed awareness takes place throughout a career yet from the onset we are guided by our past.

## PRE-UNDERSTANDING: LEVELS/ PLANES

Much of what I do (teaching) now can be traced back to my pre-understanding, which 'includes both explicit and tacit knowledge' (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005, p. 61). I now see myself as a teacher/ researcher as I question myself constantly. And much to my delight, this behaviour goes largely unnoticed by others since some days there can be many more questions than answers which weigh heavily upon my brow and spirit. Pre-understanding can influence one's approach and the concept of pre-understanding refers to 'people's insights into a specific problem and social environment before they start' (Gummesson, 2000, p. 57). This is not straightforward since it is practical to make a distinction within pre-understanding. We can easily construct two categories of pre-understanding, first-hand and second-hand. First-hand (level/ plane) pre-understanding is acquired through personal experience (Dewey, 1916) whereas second hand (level/ plane) is collected through intermediaries, such as lectures, literature and various other media (other peoples' pre-understanding). Generally, the notion of pre-understanding includes knowledge, yet it also implies a certain stance while collecting, analyzing and processing information in your role as a teacher or researcher. As a result, each of us must consider pre-understanding as a cognitive factor that can limit vision yet conversely pre-understanding can be a value added feature. For instance, if I were to research how to fly a plane, my pre-understanding could be problematic since I know little about this role. However, if I were to walk into a classroom my pre-understanding would be influential, useful and inform my experience and knowledge of this milieu.

My pre-understanding is a constant yet the degree of influence ebbs and flows in a recursive cycle of experiences, some of which are familiar and some less so. Chehayl (2007) suggests:

... every human experience brings with it previously constructed impressions or pre-understandings, so that no experience is purely devoid of consideration. Pre-understanding is how an individual thinks about these ever present horizons *prior* to experiencing engagement with them ... Through the lens of our pre-understandings, we navigate the unknown events or circumstances that lay before us on the 'horizons' of our life journey. (p. 74)

My work, guided by my philosophy (beliefs) in the classroom as a teacher and researcher, is arguably influenced by my pre-understanding. Toom (2006) adds that a teacher's or 'researcher's common sense, pre-understandings, assumptions, and existing scientific knowledge strongly influence their interpretations, before they have even realised the pure nature of the phenomenon, if they have not explicated them clearly' (p. 8). The need to explore and identify one's pre-understanding appears to be a necessary step to understand and proceed with one's teaching and or research. Previously, I have had the luxury of self-study via action research efforts within both my elementary and secondary classes and within the reflexive tasks of university teaching. Each time I attempted to account for and include my pre-understanding. I am a progressivist, yet what effects does this have on my

teaching and research? To answer, consider Coghlan and Brannick (2005) who outlined pre-understanding by means of three distinct elements, including membership (teaching fraternity), experience, and thirdly, education and training (pp. 62-63).

### **a) Membership**

As a teacher I was immersed in a culture, the educational organization, its language, assumptions and hierarchy. My perspective was that of a fellow member/ insider with a certain pre-understanding. According to Coghlan (2005) I had valuable knowledge about cultures and informal structures of my organization:

Organizations lead two lives. The formal or public life is presented in terms of its formal documentation – mission statement, goals, assets, resources, annual reports, organizational chart, and so on. The informal or private life is experiential, that is, it is the life as experienced by its members – its cultures, norms, traditions, power blocs, and so on. In their informal lives, organizations are centres of love, hate, envy, jealousy, good and ill will, politics, infighting, cliques, political factions and so on, a stark contrast to the formal rational image organizations tend to portray. (p. 5)

Being a member of a school brings with it a great deal of knowledge and insight. For example, you learn about the facility you teach within such as the needs of the building (new roof), limitations (no storage), and strengths (great wide hallways). Every school building I taught within had good and bad features and the age of the building was not always a factor. I must admit, though, teaching in a new school was quite a pleasure as the most current materials were used which were new, clean and fully functional.

My pre-understanding of school dates back to my childhood and is informed by a multitude of experiences. I attended three elementary schools (K-6), one senior public (7-8) and three secondary schools (9-13) before I left with my secondary diploma. Each school was a place of order, safety and social opportunity. I have left out learning as this was really not something I fully became aware of until University where I revisited my past via cognitive exercises assigned by well meaning teachers. When I began to teach in pre-service I could compare a school building to my pre-understanding of schools and construct a sense or feeling towards each facility I entered.

I have found that each school I taught in influenced and changed my pre-understanding of what a school should be. For instance, the office was a place of consequences, law, order, discipline and often chaos yet this was also true of many classrooms. Is it possible to step outside this pre-understanding? Lavery (2003) suggests pre-understanding, whether first or second-hand, is not something an individual can put 'out-of-the-way'. My pre-understanding is not only within my philosophical orientation, it is within my personal history (culture) which is articulated via my spoken language (Gadamer, 1983) and directs my actions (behaviour). These are inseparable elements that fuel my bias, prejudices, perceptions, and assumptions which are required to construct perspective and foster interpretation. I can see this as a useful advantage

(Annells, 1996; Koch 1995) which can be reported and declared as I move forward teaching and researching.

Toom (2006) reminds us of Epoché, another concept within pre-understanding which involves setting aside,

... preconceptions and prior knowledge concerning the researched phenomenon. The Epoché enables the researcher to concentrate only on the phenomenon itself both during the data gathering and analysis ... When researchers explicate their preunderstanding, they have to construct clearly their intentions and understandings, as well as define their lifeworld and relation with the world. The interpretations, which are made in the research, have to be read through the researcher's preunderstanding, as well. (p. 8)

What this means for teacher/ researchers is that they need to explore, declare and confirm their background in order to give both themselves and possible readers of their work an understanding of their worldview and/or philosophical orientation, at least as a starting point. Once known, the teacher/ researcher can attempt to provide observations in light of this pre-understanding which may influence data and guide the reader/ consumer of these data.

## **b) Experience**

I taught at the secondary level for several years and then at the elementary level for several more years. At each level, and within each role, there were unique experiences that caused my pre-understanding to grow, change and develop. As a special educator at the secondary level I needed to know about related policy, procedure and practice which gave way to a type of language (culture) used within our department that was informal, often nonverbal and could be traced to formal special education plans, strategies, and documents. Educators, Coghlan (2006) explains, in similar roles may,

... have knowledge of their organization's everyday life. They know the everyday jargon. They know what is legitimate and taboo to talk about. They know what occupies colleagues' minds. They know how the informal organization works and whom to turn to for information and gossip. They know the critical events and what they mean within the organization. They are able to see beyond objectives which are merely window dressing. When they are inquiring they can use the internal jargon and draw on their own experience in asking questions and interviewing, and be able to follow up on replies and so obtain richer data. They are able to participate in discussions or merely observe what is going on without others being necessarily aware of their presence. They can participate freely, without drawing attention to themselves and creating suspicion. (p. 296)

Of course some of our peers outside of our special education department could decode much of this, yet when parents and other community stakeholders visited, it was clear we spoke another language just by the many questions that often followed a conversation or presentation. Clearly the outsiders did not have

the necessary pre-understanding to decipher our language. I recall one such sentence: 'I met the V.P. and we reviewed the I.E.P., after looking at our running records we decide on a S.R.R. placement for .75 daily with support'. The point of this is to illustrate that one quickly loses sight of one's immersion within a culture. Now, as an instructor of special education at the University level for pre-service students, I use this pre-understanding to benefit my students. My current role is aptly described by Toom and colleagues (2008), who note:

A university teacher is both a researcher and a teacher – this applies not only to teacher education but also to university teaching in general. Researching is expected of all university teachers. However, teacher educators are one of the few groups of teachers for whom inquiring into one's own work, as a university teacher is reality: the target of the research is teaching and learning and that is what the educator is doing. (p. 12)

### **c) Education and training**

From the onset of teacher training students are immersed within a culture and one's pre-understanding of this culture is challenged since one knows it as a student from one side of the desk. To step outside this perspective to the other side of the desk causes one to discover the education and the business of teaching driven by accountability, responsibility and duty. It is a step that is gradual in theory classes within a faculty of education and abrupt during practicum within secondary and elementary schools. Pre-understanding is a problematic as one moves from student to teacher/ leader within the classroom. Dual experiences create confusion and uncertainty as one feels like, and technically are a student, yet one is teaching and expected to lead instruction via pre-planned lessons.

As the practice teaching sessions are completed pre-understanding changes. This gives way to an updated pre-understanding that imbues the very perceptions of teaching. Within this teacher development process there is a need to 'begin with what teachers already know and enact in their practices rather than beginning with knowledge that needs to be given to teachers' (Clandinin, 2007, p. 15). Deeply embedded and often tacit (Polanyi, 1967), this core knowledge surfaces during the intense and unpredictable practice teaching sessions via self-discovery (Schön, 1983).

The teaching practicum experiences can direct and inform future actions, reflections and revisions hence varied outcomes emerge and need to be discussed. It is imperative to acknowledge, not ignore, pre-understandings and apprehensions, as well as embark upon critical conversations reflectively and reflexively (Chehayl, 2007).

The stories generated in teacher training are recounted, deconstructed and reconstructed upon return to a Faculty of Education (University) during theory classes and/or anecdotally with peers. This sharing of pre-understanding, perception and experience impacts and changes pre-understanding. Sharing stories fulfils a need to re-examine and discover in order to move forward.

## CONCLUSION

Pre-understanding has caused me to reflect and we know that self-development is enhanced when reflection is involved. Early in this century, John Dewey called upon teachers to engage in reflective action that had the power to transform them into inquiry oriented classroom practitioners (Dana, 2009, p. 6). This reflective action can be augmented when pre-understanding is attended to. However, we need to understand how our philosophy is directed and informed by our current pre-understanding.

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