

Intersubjectivity Revisited

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In her essay, Mary Jo Hinsdale addresses a most serious problem in our academic world: under administrative pressure to “diversify” the student population, we see an increasing number of students who, in Sara Ahmed’s words, have been “made into strangers.”¹ Drawing on Frank Margonis’s “political intersubjectivity,” María Lugones’s “world travelling,” and Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s legacy of “academic colonization,” Hinsdale shows how the notion of play runs throughout, be it Margonis’s “intersubjective play,” Lugones’s “playful attitude,” or Smith’s “rules of the game.” She discusses how those students are not just excluded or marginalized, but they are “wounded,” “too hurt to remain open.”² They are weary and can no longer trust. In this response, I would like to revisit the concept of intersubjectivity, and address a couple of caveats.

Intersubjectivity is not a new concept, but is currently a major topic in both the analytic and the Continental traditions. One of the main themes of transcendental phenomenology, we find it in the fifth *Cartesian Meditations* and in Edmund Husserl’s manuscripts published in *Husserliana*, vol. 13–15.³ Christian Beyer writes, “According to Husserl, intersubjective experience plays a fundamental role in our constitution of ... ourselves as objectively existing subjects, other experiencing subjects, and the objective spatio-temporal world,” all three being important components of education.⁴ Intersubjectivity also comes into play on three different levels, all relevant to education: (1) among people who agree on a given set of meanings; (2) among people who share meanings constructed through their interaction with one another; and (3) among people who share divergences of meaning (that is, referring to different subjective definitions of reality as in humor, irony, or self-representation).⁵

Furthermore, and an important point in the context of education, intersubjectivity is linked to the experience of empathy. Already in 1917, Edith Stein, a student of Husserl’s, wrote in her doctoral dissertation how empathy is at the root of intersubjectivity.⁶ For Beyer, “Intersubjective experience is empathy experience.”⁷ Empathy enables us to ascribe intentions and feelings to others based on our own belief system, whereby we assume that an individual who looks and behaves more or less like we do will perceive and experience people, situations, and the world the way we do. Conversely, or so it goes, were we “to put ourselves in his or her shoes,” we would perceive and experience people, situations, and the world the way he or she does. This constitutes the background Husserl calls “lifeworld.”⁸

In a similar vein, Lugones writes about “worlds” in which “‘world’-travellers have the distinct experience of being different in different worlds and of having the capacity to remember other ‘worlds’ and ourselves in them.”⁹ If we return to Husserl’s meaning of “lifeworld,” we can see how it applies to education. According to Beyer, it can be understood on two levels, both highly relevant to the academic world: in

terms of individual beliefs which help make sense of oneself, others, and the world; and in terms of communities. Either a single community whose common beliefs, and as it were, language, are the basis for making meaning of their “homeworld,” or different communities wherein their common “lifeworld” provides the general framework which will “allow for the mutual translation of their respective languages (with their different ‘homeworlds’) into one another.”¹⁰ The terms “lifeworld” for Husserl, “world” for Lugones, and “text world” for Smith, signify the way members of one or more social groups (for example, diverse students in a course coming from a variety of cultural or linguistic communities) understand and structure their own individual worlds.¹¹ Smith explains how it involves not only a different conception and perception of space, but also of time, subjectivity, and theories of knowledge, language, and power structures.¹² Is the “outsider” simply “out of place,” or does the difference go beyond a matter of space, involving more profound “otherness?”

Turning to Emmanuel Levinas, we see that the relationship to the Other enters a new dimension: “The relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual.” Within this relation with the Other, “alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship.”¹³ In other terms, what Levinas calls the space of intersubjectivity is not symmetrical.¹⁴ The Other is experienced as other not only as *alter ego*, but it is other because “the Other is what I myself am not.”¹⁵ One of Levinas’s declared “fundamental themes,” which he developed in *Totality and Infinity*, is precisely this interpersonal, non-symmetrical “intersubjective relation.” This intersubjective relation cannot be synthesized, no totality can integrate it. Through this interaction and the sense, the “conscience” and the awareness of this interaction, Levinas sees the compelling and inescapable emergence of implication, of interconnection, of the responsibility to and for the Other. “There, there is a relation, not one with a very serious resistance, but with something absolutely *Other*: the resistance of what has no resistance — the ethical resistance.”¹⁶

Drawing on Gert Biesta, Lugones, and Margonis, Hinsdale provides some suggestions to “help marginalized students, as well as those from more dominant backgrounds, come into presence within the social field of the classroom.” She also cautions against the pitfalls of empathy, citing Margonis’s acknowledgment that “summative understandings of the other’s being ... [reduces] mysterious and complex individuals to our object of knowledge.”¹⁷ Hinsdale stresses the importance of “a responsive stance.” She deems “responsiveness ... vital for encouraging every student in a classroom” and cites Joanna Kadi: “If you want to hear me, you will listen to my silences as well as my words.”¹⁸ Besides responsiveness, she also espouses Margonis’s advice to use “critical forms of address in the classroom.” As educators, we must be willing to listen, to relinquish our position of authority. Levinas writes, “I become a responsible or ethical ‘I’ to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself — to abdicate my position of centrality — in favor of the vulnerable Other.”¹⁹ Levinas shows how consciousness and moral conscience are developed through the encounter with the Other, through an intersubjective relationship, through the responsibility and the respect one must develop for the Other *as other*. A concept that should be precisely at the root of the educational project and that would preclude

any claim that we could ever “put ourselves into the other’s shoes.” Indeed, intersubjectivity is conditional on the existence of boundaries, thresholds, differentiations, distinctions, separateness, and so on. We must accept that we cannot bridge the gap, erasing the differences between ourselves and our students, nor would we want to do so since we are all defined more by our differences than by our commonalities. It is precisely these differences that make each single individual unique, and uniquely valuable. It is precisely in that gap where intersubjectivity can thrive and enrich all involved. Hinsdale acknowledges this when she writes, “human connection across difference is ... more basic than sharing the same social background,” and sees as a consequence that such interactions “ultimately hold the possibility of revitalizing our shared intellectual world.” It is not without risk, but with Hinsdale I believe that “support[ing] outsider students’ unique resources, gifts, and perspectives” is worth “going out on a limb.”

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1. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
 2. Here Hinsdale quotes Lisa Weems, “Difference, Power and the Limits of Openness,” *Philosophy of Education 2013* (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/article/view/3979>.
 3. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988); Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Erster Teil. 1905–1920 [On the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity, Texts from the Estate, Part 1, 1905–1920], in *Husserliana*, vol. 13, ed. Iso Kern (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973); Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Zweiter Teil. 1921–1928 [On the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity, Texts from the Estate, Second Part, 1921–1928], in *Husserliana*, vol. 14, ed. Iso Kern (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973); and Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Dritter Teil. 1929–1935 [On the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity, Texts from the Estate, Third Part, 1929–1935], in *Husserliana*, vol. 14, ed. Iso Kern (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).
 4. Christian Beyer, “Edmund Husserl,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, Winter 2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/husserl/>.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Edith Stein, “Zum Problem der Einfühlung” [On the Problem of Empathy] (PhD diss., University of Göttingen, 1917); subsequently published as *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970).
 7. Beyer, “Edmund Husserl.”
 8. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
 9. María Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 11.
 10. Beyer, “Edmund Husserl.”
 11. See *Husserliana*, vol. 6, 126–38, and 140–45.
 12. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 44.
 13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 84 and 83.
 14. See also Emmanuel Levinas, “The Asymmetry of the Interpersonal,” in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Press, 1969), 215–16 and 251.
 15. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 83. See also Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence is Not Negativity,” in *Totality and Infinity*, 40–42.

16. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 217 (emphasis in original).
17. Frank Margonis, "Tending Neocolonial Gaps," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 71.
18. Joanna Kadi, "Speaking (About) Silence," in *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray! Feminist Vision for a Just World*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander (Ft. Bragg, CA: EdgeWork Books, 2003), 539–45.
19. Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), 27.