Dialogue in Evaluation: A Hermeneutic Perspective

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Dialogue is crucial to evaluation. Through dialogue, people are invited to develop new, shared ways of seeing and acting. From a hermeneutic perspective, dialogue implies consensus, based upon shared meanings and oriented towards reaching agreement. Dialogue also implies disagreement, in the form of a conflict between different, rival stories. The role of the evaluator is to enter into dialogue with people participating in practice. It is also to stimulate a dialogue between participants. This requires support for marginalized voices, but also attention to the voices of those who are in power. Only if the evaluator tries to understand the values endorsed in a practice and is prepared to listen to the stories of all parties involved, can evaluation become a practice to which all participants contribute.

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Introduction

Evaluation involves communication. It requires interviews with people, asking them about their experiences. The data gathered in such interviews will have to be discussed with other people, for instance, policy makers. Conclusions will have to be communicated in order for the results to be implemented. As such, dialogue seems to be a constitutive element of evaluation. One cannot assess or improve a practice without entering into a dialogue with the parties concerned. Yet, the role of dialogue in evaluation can be conceptualized in various ways. On the one hand, it can be regarded as a vehicle for establishing facts that are relevant for policy making, for instance concerning the opinions of parties involved, and for delivering conclusions and recommendations. On the other hand, it can be regarded as a process in which the practice under consideration is itself changed as the perspectives of the participants are confronted with one another. In the first conceptualization, dialogue provides data which may prove to be relevant for action. In the latter conceptualization, dialogue is itself the medium through which practices are created, sustained and modified.

Tineke Abma (in this issue) presents an approach which is clearly based upon

the second conceptualization, seeing evaluation as changing practice by creating dialogue. She aims to set up a dialogue engaging as many people as possible in order to develop new stories about the practice under consideration. She presents a rich case description about a project which aims to promote self-care and injury prevention in performing-arts schools. Abma shows how stories can play an important role in stimulating reflection. The standard myth about performing arts (involving the need to completely dedicate oneself to the art, to accept the authority of the teacher, and to regard one's body as an instrument) is destabilized by organizing dialogues focussing on concrete experiences of students. The process results in alternative scenarios for organizing educational practice. Abma also reflects upon several issues concerning the way in which dialogue may function as a medium for change. She argues that stories are a good vehicle for dialogue, because they are open to multiple interpretations. She further discusses the ways people who have so far had little influence on the discussion can be included in the process. In the third place, she criticizes the notion of deliberation, as it focuses too much on arguments and involves judgements of others rather than a sharing of experiences. Fourth, she criticizes the Gadamerian concept of dialogue in terms of consensus and mutual understanding. Finally she makes some remarks about how to organize a dialogue in difficult circumstances.

Abma's description of the case and her provocative statements about the role of dialogue give the reader much to think about. Both the case and the theoretical comments contain insights which are highly relevant for those who are interested in evaluation as dialogue. Yet, the approach of the case and the theoretical perspectives offered also raise questions. The case study seems to presuppose that the standard myth in dancing education is suspect, if not altogether wrong. The theoretical comments are based upon a similar presupposition about philosophical approaches to dialogue focusing on deliberation and consensus. These presuppositions may themselves raise doubts. Are dedication and authority to be dismissed as fundamental values in the performing arts? Is there no role for deliberation and consensus in dialogue? In order to further the discussion on these points, it may be helpful to turn to Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gadamer presents us with a philosophy which is positive about deliberation and consensus. It also entails a view on education which stresses the importance of tradition and authority. Yet, Gadamer's philosophy also emphasizes the need for a critical appraisal of actual dialogues and practices of education. A more detailed discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutics may therefore further the discussion on both the theoretical aspects of Abma's approach to dialogical evaluation and its practical application to the case.

Hermeneutic Understanding

According to Gadamer (1960), human life is essentially a process of understanding. Human beings interpret their situation and try to make sense of it. This is not primarily a conscious achievement, but a preconscious process of becoming at home in a situation by responding to it. Understanding is not a matter of 'know that', but of 'know how'. Gadamer characterizes the process of understanding as

play (Gadamer, 1977). Like a child bouncing a ball, moving it rhythmically and getting immersed in the movement, a person who interprets a situation gets attuned to it and is drawn into it. The experience of being drawn into a rhythmical process is evident if one reads a book or watches a movie. The book, or the movie, only has meaning if one becomes part of it, is being moved by it, and forgets oneself. Paradoxically, during such a process of forgetting oneself, one does not lose one's identity, but one feels being oneself present and participating in the situation.

Following Heidegger, Gadamer emphasizes that understanding is based on pre-understanding. One can only interpret a situation if one already has some prior understanding of it. Entering a situation, one has expectations. Such expectations are based upon prior experiences, as well as notions and conceptions which are part of one's language. Every judgement requires prejudgements which are 'givens' within the tradition in which one participates and in order to understand, one has to become acquainted with the tradition. This again is not a matter of conscious appropriation. One comes to know a tradition by being immersed in it, responding to its appeal.

Understanding is not an isolated event. It is part of a process of becoming involved in the phenomenon, a process which is there already before one actually turns to it and which goes on after one has turned away from it. One has already some expectations of the book or the movie, before one actually reads or sees it; those expectations will be influenced by what one has heard about it. After finishing reading and seeing, the experience continues, as one will remember it and tell others about it. Here again we see the rhythmical movement of understanding. The cycle of expectation, actual experience and remembrance is itself the movement of life (as Husserl [1976] makes clear in his analysis of the temporal structure of consciousness).

From a hermeneutic perspective, understanding a situation requires that one is able to make sense of it in the light of one's prior experiences and expectations. One cannot understand what happens if one does not have some frame of reference in which the events can be connected. Yet, hermeneutic understanding also requires openness to the situation, and sensitivity to aspects which do not fit with expectations. Every experience is always different from what one expects. It is not a mere confirmation of some general pattern of expectation, but an event which presents itself as unique and new. It is the difference between expectations and concrete experiences that makes room for new understanding. The experience of difference itself raises questions. As long as everything happens as expected, nothing new is learned. The moment that expectations are not met, the limitations of pre-understanding are confronted, and this urges the revision of opinions. Once the situation is experienced as strange and unexpected, the hermeneutic process itself is made explicit. When natural understanding breaks down, the process of understanding becomes reflexive – it becomes clear that one has always started from preconceptions, which can prove to be wrong. At that moment, one comes to realize that a new perspective is needed in order to make sense of the situation, a perspective which goes beyond the frame of reference which existed before (Winograd and Flores, 1986).

A Hermeneutic View on Stories

From a hermeneutic perspective, understanding is based upon stories. Our experience is prepared by stories which we hear from others, and it is elaborated in stories in which we try to explain what happened to others. Our life is shaped by the stories which are told about it. In such stories, our experiences, which are at first vague and ambiguous, become more prominent. Stories make explicit the implicit meaning of lived experience. In stories, the pre-narrative structure of life is transformed into a narrative structure (Ricoeur, 1983; Widdershoven, 1993). By telling stories, we shape the world we live in, giving meaning to our experiences and urging one another to perform certain actions (Widdershoven and Sohl, 1999). Our experiences are surrounded by stories, in which the meaning of experience is shaped, either in the form of preconceptions, or in the form of later interpretations. This is expressed very clearly by Proust, telling about a performance of La Berma. Proust describes how the meaning of the performance is influenced by the expectations of the narrator, to such a degree that he is actually a little disappointed when he hears La Berma singing. Only later, by telling others about the performance, and reading the reviews, the performance is turned into a magnificent event. This shows that preconceptions and commentaries are in a sense more important than the experience at the moment itself.

From a hermeneutic perspective, people need stories in order to make sense of their situation; yet they are not locked up in those stories. Strange and unexpected experiences can open up the horizon of expectations, and elicit new stories. Experiences are richer than expectations, and can create room for new ways of meaning making. Concrete experiences of strangeness cause awareness of the limitations of one's horizon and urge the broadening of one's view. A book, a movie, or a performance, may shatter expectations and present a new horizon of meaning. In the process of understanding, the need is felt to enter this new horizon, in order to make sense of the strange experience. This does not mean that one's own horizon is just left. It is impossible to simply step outside of these preconceptions. Rather one will endeavour to see where the horizons meet. From a hermeneutic point of view, understanding is essentially a process of extending one's horizon by the appropriation of new perspectives. Gadamer describes this process as a fusion of horizons.

If pre-understandings, which are embodied in the stories one is used to telling, are inadequate to make sense of the situation, new stories will be looked for. A change of story can often help to see the situation in a different light. Again, this does not mean that former stories are merely given up. Stories which have always been lived by cannot simply be given up, but they can be supplemented with new notions, coming from other stories. The new story will have to relate to the former way of seeing the world and will have to explain the limitations of prior interpretations. Even if the new story takes the form of a total reversal of the old one, it will have to make clear why the old story was experienced as relevant for such a long time. In this sense, the new story will have to take into account elements of the old story, and give them a proper place.

Dialogue and Interpersonal Understanding

According to Gadamer, hermeneutic understanding takes the form of a dialogue. In a dialogue, the participants have to be open to what the other says. Although they will interpret the expressions of the other within their own frame of reference, they will have to be prepared to admit that the other's perspective may be superior. Starting from their own story, participants will have to be open to the possibility that other stories may shed a new light on the situation. This notion of dialogue can be applied to the reading of a text or the interpretation of a movie. It is, however, very prominent in the process of interpersonal understanding.

According to Gadamer, the notion of interpersonal understanding is equivocal. It may be used in several ways. Gadamer (1960: 340) distinguishes three kinds of knowledge of the other. The first entails an explanation of the other's behaviour by applying knowledge of human nature. This is not interpersonal understanding in the strict sense of the term, since the other is seen as an object. The second is to know the other in his or her uniqueness. In this case one party claims to be able to understand the other exactly as he is. The one who knows in this way, does not consider herself part of the relationship with the other. She is superior to the other, and cannot herself be touched by whatever the other brings to the fore. She does not consider the relation with the other as a mutual relation.

The third kind of understanding of the other is to be really open to what the other has to say. This means that one party does not put herself above the other, but is prepared to hear what he has to say, and to acknowledge that it may be necessary to change her own views about the matter. Gadamer explains this third, specifically hermeneutic, kind of understanding of the other thus:

When two people understand one another, this does not mean that one 'understands' the other in such a way that he sees the other from above, and thus oversees him (*über-schaut*). Likewise, to 'hear someone and respond to him' (*auf jemanden hören*) does not mean to execute blindly what the other wants. A person who acts in such a way is called slavish (*hörig*). Openness towards the other entails the recognition that I myself will have to accept things that are against me, even if no one else pushes me to do so. (p. 343)

The first kind of understanding of the other aims at manipulation; the other person is used to serve one's own purposes. The second kind of understanding focuses upon the other's point of view. It aims to help the other to reach what he really needs. The third kind of understanding is mutual; it involves dialogue. According to Gadamer, in dialogue both of the participants change. 'To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of asserting one's own point of view, but a change into a communion in which one does not remain what one was' (p. 379). Two points should be added. In the first place, this process of understanding through dialogue is not necessarily (nor even primarily) an intellectual process. Understanding is not based upon a conscious decision, but upon a pre-conscious engagement into a common movement. In the second place, the mutuality reached is never a total union; in a dialogue, a common point of view may be reached, but this is always partial (since the perspectives of the participants will never fully overlap), and in danger of breakdown.

What's Wrong With Consensus?

After this short presentation of Gadamer's hermeneutics, we can now turn to Abma's article, 'Reflexive Dialogues'. According to Abma, Gadamer puts too much emphasis on consensus. She claims that consensus is neither necessary, nor desirable. Consensus may lead to a repetition of stories, which does not create new meaning, but excludes diverging voices. But can we really dispense with consensus? Is a repetition of stories to be avoided? Does consensus result in the exclusion of differences?

According to Gadamer, understanding requires a certain repetition of stories. Meaning cannot be made of a situation without recurrence to a set of narrative structures which are already familiar because they have been repeated over and again, and have become a way of life. Of course, these stories have limitations. Such limitations are, however, part and parcel of the human condition. We live in a horizon of meaning, which we cannot just leave behind. The repetition of given stories is itself the way in which we try to make sense of our lives. We live in myths, and cannot dispense with them. In sharing stories, we agree with one another, not on specific propositions, but on how to see the world and how to value life. Thus, the stories about La Berma are the context in which the narrator in Proust lives. Such stories confirm the importance of the performing arts, and make clear what to expect from excellent performers. Without such stories, one cannot make sense of what happens in a theatre at all. Exactly because of their limitations, such stories help the participants to build up a common life. This primordial consensus, which is not consciously aimed at, but which is already present before one can even start to disagree, is crucial to human life and human experience. By characterizing the repetition of shared meanings as a 'bad' dialogue, Abma seems to overlook that shared meanings are essential for human life.

Although a primordial consensus in the form of shared stories is crucial to human life, this does not mean that there is no room for disagreement. Stories never completely fit to the situation. They always leave room for other interpretations. Even if such interpretations are repressed, they cannot be totally dismissed. Every consensus is always open to the possibility of breakdown. A shared view, embodied in shared stories, can become questionable if it cannot accommodate new experiences. From a hermeneutic perspective, the occurrence of breakdown is crucial since it makes one aware of the limitations of one's horizon; it urges one to go beyond the given stories, and to look for new ones. Although we always start from consensus, and expect it to continue as we keep repeating the stories we are familiar with, we will inevitably enter into situations where consensus breaks down, and new stories are needed. This is a negative experience, in that expectations are not being met. Yet such a negative experience is itself the precondition for developing new perspectives. Thus, pre-given consensus does not preclude from opening up one's horizon. For Gadamer, we learn when our expectations are put into question. The hermeneutic conceptualization of understanding does not exclude differences, but sees them as crucial for the development of new ways of meaning making.

If expectations are not being met, one is confronted with different stories,

embodying different horizons of meaning. From a hermeneutic perspective, the endeavour will then be to try and understand what is at stake in such stories and this will require an openness to what they tell and a preparedness to learn from the other. Here again the notion of consensus is important as according to Gadamer, one can only understand what the other has to say if one is prepared to give up one's own point of view. The process of understanding aims at a fusion of horizons. The model is the dialogue in which the participants reach a common perspective which goes beyond the perspectives they each had before. This process of reaching understanding is completely different from the 'search for artificial consensus' which Abma rightly denounces. Consensus in the hermeneutic sense cannot be strategically produced. It is certainly not reached when one denies differences. From a hermeneutic perspective, there is a crucial difference between artificial consensus and real consensus. Hermeneutic philosophy claims that people know this difference, and are in principle able to distinguish the two. By using the term 'artificial', Abma actually introduces this very distinction, thereby supporting the hermeneutic claim.

It seems to me that Abma's criticism of consensus as crucial to understanding and dialogue is not well-founded. Consensus is always presupposed, and when it breaks down, a new consensus is needed. The importance of consensus in meaning making is actually quite clear in Abma's description of the process in the story workshops. The language in which the process is described contains many Gadamerian concepts. Participants were being 'confronted' with new stories. They were invited to see the point of these stories. The method of rotation which was used aimed to open their views, and to develop a sensitivity for 'the rationality of the other'. This is quite akin to the way in which Gadamer describes the hermeneutic approach to interpersonal understanding. The experience of solidarity and mutuality which is described as fundamental to the process in the workshops is very much in line with Gadamer's hermeneutic dialogue. Consensus seems to be both the basis and the aim of the story workshops.

Deliberation and Narrative Rationality

Abma's criticism of consensus is related to her critique of deliberation. The notion of deliberation implies that the values of participants in a dialogue are not regarded as given, but are seen as subject to examination and discussion. In a deliberative process, the participants have to be prepared to respond to the reasons of others and if necessary to give up their own point of view. The aim of deliberation is to learn from one another, and to develop new values that may be more relevant to the situation than those endorsed before.

Abma rightly questions the conception of deliberation used by House and Howe (1999). They reduce deliberation to argumentation and cognitive rationality and moreover, they seem to presuppose that the role of the evaluator in the deliberative process is to discover the 'real' interests of people. Yet, this conception of deliberation is not the only one. From a hermeneutic perspective, deliberation is not equal to rational argumentation. It refers to the process of jointly examining values by being open to the perspective of the other. In this process,

feelings of doubt are as important as reasons and argumentation. Interests are not regarded as being given, but are developed through dialogue. Thus the notion of 'real' interest is dismissed, if this is to mean that the interests of people are lying somewhere hidden to be discovered. Interests are not real in the sense of being already present before the examination. They can only become real through the deliberative process itself. In this process, all parties involved are equal: the evaluator is not the expert, but the facilitator.

This is not at odds with the idea that one of the participants acts as a guide for the other. This can be seen in the classic example of Socrates (Gadamer, 1993: 172). Socrates guided his pupils, not by showing them the truth as he himself knew it, but by opening up their horizon, thus enabling them to actively take part in the process of making sense of the situation. The teacher who acts as a guide is not someone who knows best what is good, but someone who helps the student to find out what is good through communication. This model of guidance in the process of deliberation can be applied to the physician-patient relationship (Emanuel and Emanuel, 1992). It might also be applicable to the role of the evaluator, who tries to open the perspectives of people in a practice.

Rather than denouncing the notion of deliberation in favour of narrative rationality, one should try to develop it in such a way that it accommodates narrative rationality. The aim of narrative rationality, as the term is used by Abma, is to make people aware of alternative values, and stimulate them to take these seriously and this is very much in line with the object of the hermeneutic concept of deliberation.

How to Empower Marginalized Voices

An important issue in the hermeneutic conception of dialogue and deliberation is the claim that one should try to actively involve all those concerned. A dialogue should not exclude parties who are in some way related to what is at stake. This hermeneutic principle is especially prominent in discourse ethics, developed by Apel and Habermas (Habermas, 1991). If a dialogue is to be set up with people in a certain practice, it should be the aim to involve everyone who is a stakeholder. This is also a fundamental issue in evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

A difficult problem in trying to arrange the participation of all parties concerned is the inclusion of people who in the past have had little or no voice. Those people are easily excluded from the discussion, because their contribution is seen as irrelevant, and they are said to lack information or the capacity to take part in the process of deliberation. Abma is very much concerned with the involvement of people who tend to become excluded and she clearly puts much effort into giving them a voice. She makes many practical suggestions regarding how to empower these parties. She mentions that it may be helpful to set up dialogues in a surrounding which is different from the usual place of interaction, in order to prevent standard hierarchical patterns of interaction. She also makes clear that a safe environment is required, in which people are prepared to listen to one another and allow time for explanation.

This emphasis on preventing exclusion of marginalized parties is certainly relevant since it may prevent the neglect of diverging voices and their submission

to the dominant discourse. Yet, by putting the focus on the empowerment of the people who tend to be excluded, Abma runs the risk of creating a divide between the powerful and those who lack power. It may be helpful to give full attention to the less powerful, in order to help them to become more confident and to develop their alternative stories further. Yet, this may also result in creating a gap between the marginalized groups and those that are more dominant which might actually increase the feeling of being powerless. The alternative stories that are being developed may have no influence on the dominant discourse, exactly because they have been developed in splendid isolation.

From a hermeneutic perspective, one cannot simply step out of the dominant discourse, without losing contact with the practice concerned. The dominant discourse embodies the values which are characteristic of the practice, the values which are part of its tradition. Those values do not have to be accepted uncritically – they may be questioned both for their actual relevance as well as for their practical consequences – yet they cannot be put aside as totally obsolete. In order to improve a practice, one should not do away with its fundamental values, but critically examine how these values can be applied under the given conditions and how they need to be adapted to the present situation. This means that one has to be open to the tradition which comes along with these values. From a hermeneutic perspective, Guba and Lincoln are right in stressing the need for participants to adjust to the inherited discussion. This does not mean that they will have to accept everything that has been taken for granted in the past but it does mean that they cannot change the discourse altogether.

Values in Education

In evaluating a practice, one will have to take seriously the values that are part of its tradition. In the case of the dance schools and the schools of music, these values include longstanding notions of what is important in education in the performing arts. The 'dominant myth', which is reconstructed by Abma, gives a clear picture of such values. They include dedication to the profession, respect for the authority of the teacher, regarding performance as more important than health, and having control even in the case of pain and injuries. Such values may appear strange if one is not familiar with the tradition, so an evaluator, who will often be unfamiliar with the tradition, must try and understand these values. This requires preparedness to see them as relevant, even if they seem to be against the evaluator's own convictions. This can start a dialogue between traditions (the tradition of the practice and that of the evaluator) and result in a fusion of horizons, in which both the evaluator and the people participating in the practice change.

By focussing on the student's experiences, the teachers play a secondary role in the discussion. This may easily lead to a dismissal of the traditional values in education in the performing arts. When Abma describes these values, she does not seem to be very open to what can be learned from those values. Paradoxically, this also implies that she is not able to challenge them in such a way that they may be changed and adapted to the present situation. If there is a readiness to see dedication to the profession or respect for authority as potentially relevant issues, it

becomes possible to discuss whether the way in which they are presently organized is right. It may then be argued, for instance, that dedication is not the same as compliance to rigid schemes, and that respect for the authority of the teacher does not mean strict obedience. However, if dedication and respect for authority are not regarded as relevant, the current practice is 'stepped out of', and the opportunity to influence it is lost. The same holds for the dominant view on health and body. It may be more fruitful to accept ideas about, for instance, the role of training as relevant, and at the same time question the rigid ways in which these are currently put into practice, than to dismiss the notion of self-control altogether.

Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy is more positive towards the tradition which is expressed in the dominant myth of the performance schools studied by Abma. He is in favour of values such as dedication and respect for authority, yet his philosophy also entails notions that can be used to criticize the way in which the schools have organized their practice around such values. According to Gadamer, education is not a matter of moulding the pupil into the system, but of eliciting her to act in accordance with the fundamental values of the practice. Education is not based upon the use of power; it requires dialogue and openness. Again, the example of Socrates comes to mind. Socrates instructed his pupils, not by telling them what to do, but by stimulating them in a playful way. From a hermeneutic perspective, the Socratic dialogue might be introduced in the discussion as an alternative to current education practice. This alternative may be relevant to the discussion, not because it denounces the educational values of the schools altogether, but because it shows that they can be put into practice in a different way.

Conclusion

Dialogue is crucial to evaluation. From a hermeneutic perspective, dialogue is the vehicle for change since through it, people are invited to develop new, shared ways of seeing and acting. Dialogue implies consensus – it is based upon shared meanings and is oriented towards reaching agreement – but it also implies disagreement – one can only open up one's horizon after the experience of breakdown, and dialogue takes place in the form of a conflict between different, rival stories. Dialogue is the way in which a practice is both continued and changed. While evaluating a practice, an evaluator has to be open to its tradition and has to try to understand the values endorsed in a practice and to be prepared to listen to the stories of all parties involved. Only then can the practice be changed in such a way that its values are adapted to the present situation. Rather than giving up the notion of consensus as a theoretical element in evaluation, it should be developed in such a way that it includes the notions of disagreement and difference. Rather than dismissing the values in educational practice, their current interpretation should be challenged in a dialogue including students and teachers alike.

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