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On the Why-What Phenomenon

Why and what why-questions and what-questions on a character's behaviors and/or experiences do or don't help in teaching literary works or art?

---A phenomenological-psychohlogical explication---

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In the psychology of teaching, teaching of knowledge is one of the central themes. The psychology of teaching itself is also a knowledge, so that the psychology of teaching and the teaching of psychology are mutually inculding each other. Here I would like to choose to consider a phenomenon in the art of questioning in teaching a literary work of art, and would like to show its relevance to the psychology of teaching in general.

§ 1 The Meaning of the Art of Questioning in Teaching

"Man is a questioning being" (F. Bollnow, 1976 p. 181 / E. Straus, 1966 p. 166). Holding this view of human being in the horizon, the knowledge will be considered as the system of answers that have historically been attempted and claimed as true in response to questions once raised. "There is a sense in which .....the analysis of questions is logically prior to that of indicative sentences; for the meaning of an indicative sentence is often ambiguous until we know the question to which it is an answer, and/or the assertion which it excludes," wrote Donald Mackay (Mackay, D. M., 1969 p. 96). Also "the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, ie it necessarily goes beyond what is said in it. The logic of the human sciences is .....a logic of the question," says Gadamar (Gadamar, H-G., 1975 p. 333). From this perspective, teaching a system of knowledge is a process of helping every learner acquire a system of answers-with-questions and an ability to ask questions and find answers on his own, much more than the mere transmission of fixed knowledge as "the mere recreation of some one else's meaning" (Gadamar, p. 338).

I believe that the teaching of knowledge should teach the way of asking questions, if along with their answers, rather than teach only reproducing established knowledge as correct answers to some unknown questions once asked by some one now in oblivion.

Needless to say, the quality of questions are enhanced proportionally with the quality and quantity of knowledge which is the system of questions-and-answers. This is because a better focused stimulating question could possibly be asked with a richer horizon of knowledge.

When learners learn a knowledge from a teacher, they initially learn knowledge as answers, then learn what questions to ask, how to ask them, and how to find their answers. They gradually learn to ask questions and find their answers on their own, and, they eventually learn even to discover possible and/or probable questions to given "texts", perceiving the latter as attempted answers to the former.

Thus, true genuine teaching-learning is expected to help the learners liberate themselves to become
able to ask their own vital questions themselves. In this sense, learning is learning to ask questions far more than learning to give memorized supposedly correct answers.

Learning to ask, genuinely as one's own, the same questions as asked by the teacher is to enter the world of the teacher. In teaching a literary work of art, the teacher asks questions to help children enter the worlds of the characters appearing in the work of art and/or the worlds of the artist who created the work. Thus, when the children have completed their learning to ask themselves those questions once asked by the teacher, they are expected to learn to enter the worlds of the teacher, of the characters, and/or of the artists. In other words, when the learning has successfully been carried out, the horizon of each child is expandingly fused, to some extent, with the horizons of the teacher, of the characters, and/or of the artists (Cadamar, p.337).

In these senses, we may say that the art of asking questions is most important in teaching.

In Japanese education, there is a tradition among teachers to study and practice the art of asking questions to children in the classroom-teaching (cf. Toyta H. 1988.). This tradition is ever more vigorous now. Teachers teach each other and learn from each other on the art. As a psychologist, I have learned on teaching from two late Japanese master teachers: Mr.Kihaku Saito and Mr.Tsuneo Takeda.


Both these teachers left us many records of their own teaching practices. Let me introduce a description of a teaching episode written by one of them, Mr. Tsuneo Takeda. He was well known in Japan as a master teacher having taught in public elementary schools, excellent both in his own teaching practices, particular in teaching literary works of art, and in his literary descriptions of his own teaching experiences and of many other teachers' teaching practices he had observed.

Mr. Takeda gave in one of his many books the following description of his own teaching experience. The class was the 5th grade, and the work of art taught was Naoya Shiga's master piece novelette "Seibei and the gourds". (The translation is mine. The original in Japanese is in the Appendix.1

In the earlier part of the work ["Seibei and the gourds"], described is an extraordinary fascination of a boy, called Seibei, with his collection of artistic gourds. One day, when walking on the street, he mistook an old man's bald head to be a gourd and got deeply impressed with it as a splendid one. When he became aware of his own mistake, he felt so funny, burst into laughter, started running and ran for half a block or so, but "he could not still stop laughing".

Mr. Takeda thought this spot was a good one that we might do well pick up as a problem and begin studying in our class.

Why did Seibei start running, I cannot know for sure. Perhaps, he could not help feeling to laugh at the wildness of his own misperception and could not bear the feeling and started running. Or, it may have been a behavior motivated by the unconscious wish to remove himself as soon as possible from the place where he committed such an absurd, wild and funny mistake of which he is so much ashamed—even though nobody was witnessing his mistake.

However many such inferences we may give, still we would not yet be able to reach any decisive conclusion whatsoever. It may be so, but it may not be so. The important point here would be not the reason why he started running but the content of Seibei's funny feeling in which he could not but start running. So I thought, and asked squarely the straightforward question: "Why did Seibei laugh?", in the seventh hour since my class began studying the novelette.

"Because it was funny", children answered. Such a natural answer that sounded almost foolish.

"Why was it funny?"

"Because he mistook the bald head to be a gourd."

I got stuck. My questions and children's answers were both amazingly simple and clear. And yet, if I ask myself whether there were any elements in our exchange that stimulated children's thinking or imagination, I have to admit that there were no such elements at all.

I did not pick up this spot intending to make such an idle exchange. What I intended was to look at the inner life of Seibei, together with my children. The inner life: the Seibei's extraordinary
fascination with gourds which is depicted behind this little episode, and his seemingly abnormal behaviors in which his fascination sometimes find its expressions. [Omission]

The old man's splendid bald head is not the cause of Seibei's laughter. Of course, it can not be said to be totally irrelevant. But what attracted Seibei so strongly was the intensity of his own fascination with gourds that led him to make the mistake and to get so deeply impressed, and also the intolerable funniness of his own state of being less than normal, to say the least. However, here is not a bit of abnormal dark shadow commonly observed with an engrossed monomania. Seibei's fascination is bright and healthy through and through, always filled with the naivete of a young boy.

Seibei must have thought that something was a little wrong with him to have mistaken the bald head for a gourd, but also that the old man's bald head, nevertheless, was a splendid one. Both of these thoughts grew into such an intolerable funniness that made him burst into a bright loud laughter. I wished to help children read the inner image of Seibei: his almost abnormal fascination with the gourds, which is, at the same time, always filled with a bright healthiness. [Omission]

In teaching a literary work of art, it is one thing to grasp clearly the spot that should be considered as specially important, and it is quite another to present, as a concrete problem to children, the same spot in the same form as is originally given. The core of the teaching material is not the core of the development in teaching.

The next day, I raised my questions on the same spot.

"Seibei ran half a block or so and eventually stopped running. And yet he could not stop laughing. He must have been so amused. And yet, at some point, his laughing must have calmed down. There must have been a time when he stopped laughing. What on earth did Seibei think at that moment ?"

This time, children did not answer so immediately. [Omission]

"Something must be wrong with me, he thought."

"He felt his face a little abashed, thinking that he is a little too much fascinated with gourds, even if he loves them so much."

"I think that Seibei began laughing 'cause the way the old man's bald head went into the sidestreet was so funny. And, when he stopped laughing, I also think, he thought himself to be a little abnormal, of course. Yet, the funny feeling of the bald head remains still. I would say there were both these feelings." [Omission]

"When Seibei calmed down, I would think, Seibei was reflecting upon everything from the moment of discovering the bald head to the moment of stopping after the running. And, he must have thought more about the abnormality of his own fascination with gourds than about the funniness of the bald head." [Omission]

At least the responses of children in this session were so different from the previous one. It was because children's thinking and imagination are dependent upon the content of the problems the teacher raises, the sharpness of the angles of the questions and the clarity of the images behind them [Tsuneo Takeda, 1973, P.183-190.]

In other places, Mr. Takeda gives his comments on the questions using "Why?", such as "Why did Seibei laugh ?", as being vacant, with which we cannot be sure to succeed in moving children and which contain a chaos and an idleness. A "why" question, he writes, depends too much upon the good quality of children's own thinking which solely decides whether or not it works, either succeeds or fails [Takeda, 1964, p. 128].

At this point, let me introduce and identify a why-question, a what-question and, then, the Why-What Phenomenon.

Most typically, a why-question asks: "Why did this person do this?", whereas a what-question asks: "What did this person see/feel/think when he did this?" Both types of questions naturally have their respective variations. The former may ask for instance: "Why did not she do that?", "Why was she doing that?" and so on. The variations of the latter may be: "What was he feeling when he did not do that ?", "What did he see when he was doing it there?" and so on. Whatever the variations, a why-question asks with "Why" and a what-question asks with "What" with respect to a person's behavior and/or experience. Then, the Why-What Phenomenon, as embodied in Mr.Takeda's episode described above, refers to the following: While teaching literary works of art to children, a what-question works better than, or at least differently from, a why-question in helping children think.
and imagine to get insights into a character-person's behavior and/or experience.

It would be too much to claim that the Why-What Phenomenon formulated above is a universal law of some kind. However, at least, I would like to assert that it is a summerized formulation of a thematized wisdom sedimented from many years of a Japanese master teacher's experiences in teaching children literary works of art.

In the following, I would attempt to explore and to explicate the meanings of the phenomenon as identified above. The following observations can be made:

1/ A what-question helps a child think more concretely and specifically than a why-question does. When answering a what-question, a child is forced to think/imagine concretely and specifically in terms of time and place. In fact, a what-question explicitly specifies "when" and, at least implicitly, "where" also. On the other hand, a why-question can be asked without specifying when and where, i.e. time and place, thus can be answered in a more general terms. A child can answer a why-question remaining more ambiguous and non-specific about when and where of the behavior/experience.

2/ Even though both types of questions are equally open-ended, a why-question tends to impose a predetermined frames, the frames to be used in answering the question, whereas a what-question tends to leave them more open to allow the child to choose. To a why-question, a child would be led to word his answer in such frames as "motive" [either in-order-to motive or because-motive](A. Schutz. 1967), "cause-effect" and/or "means-end". A what-question, on the other hand, tends to encourage a child to word his answer freely on his own with no such constraint. Thus, a what-question allows more freedom for the child to explore the possibilities, whereas a why-question allows less freedom.

3/ A why-question does not specify any perspective to be taken by the child asked, but often tends to tempt, at least temporarily, the child to take an external perspective, i.e. other perspectives than the character-person's. A what-question, on the other hand, implicitly but clearly specify the perspective to be taken by the child, i.e. the internal perspective of the character-person's own.

4/ A behavior/experience of a human being ---a character-person of a literary work included---has much richer and deeper meanings than the why-question-and-answer frame can possibly cover. However, a why-question naturally tends to limit the scope of the exploration of the meanings within the why-frame. On the other hand, a what-question tends to allow a much wider exploration of the meanings as long as it is within the character-person's perspective.

5/ A what-question has a richer resource of possible variations than a why-question. The variations of a what-question can be created with regards to the loci of the temporal present, i.e. of the "when" in the what-question, to the temporal modes of experiencing, e.g. remembering, anticipating and their combinations, and to the mode of experiencing, such as seeing, feeling and thinking. This difference between the what-question and the why-question also implies the what-question's immediacy to experience.

6/ Entering a character-person's "life-world" (A. Schutz, 1973) by reading a literary work of art is much more difficult than by watching a movie drama, for instance. Thus a child needs to be helped by appropriate questions offered by the teacher. In this respect, a what-question tends to help a child "enter" the character-person's life-world, whereas a why-question tends to help less. Thus a what-question helps more in concretizing the "places of indeterminacy" (R. Ingarden, 1973, pp.50-55) in the work.

7/ A why-question tends to disclose the child's pre-existing frame of reference; such as, in our Takeda's teaching episode, "When someone laughs, he is feeling funny," "When one makes a mistakes one feels funny," and so on, a "pre-theory" of laughing which might be viewed as a naive prototype.
of developed theories of laughing (e.g. Plessner, H. 1970; Bergson, H. 1900). On the other hand, a what-question tends to tempt the child to imaginatively explore the new emerging meanings of human behavior/experience described in the work.

8/ A why-question, when asked by a teacher to a child, puts the child in a situation where he has to give even a hurried and premature answer as to the motive/cause-effect/means-end relationships. The child would see/feel/think that he is supposed by the teacher to be able to answer the why-question and also that he is supposed to accept the teacher's supposition, so that the only way to escape or overcome the situation is to give a quick answer in whatever possible way. I recall an episode of a 5-year-old boy from Newzealand who used to finish answering a why-question just with the single spell-like word "BECAUSE" emphatically and quite contendedly, giving no further elaboration whatsoever. When asked "Why?", a child would feel compelled to say "Because..." even when he does not yet have any clear idea about the reason. The exchange of why-question and its answer seen to presuppose that every human behavior/experience can successfully be explained by an answer with "Because".

9/ When a teacher asks children a why-question in the classroom situation, the children tend to suppose that somehow the teacher already knows the correct answer, unless the teacher explicitly indicates otherwise, thus the children tend to limit their exploration accordingly. On the other hand, with a what-question, the children tend to suppose that there is no correct answer to this question and that the teacher, therefore, is also wishing to explore the possibilities together with them. Children, as well as teachers, gradually grow to know the inexhaustibility and unlimitedness of possible meanings of any human behavior/experience. In fact, to convince children of this inexhaustibility and unlimitedness is, I believe, an objective of teaching children the literary works of art.

10/ Even in response to a why-question, some mature children may actively begin asking, on their own initiative, a series of various what-questions implied in the why-question, and may attempt to answer them both accordingly. However, this is only in spite of the teacher's why-question, but not because of it. Thus, as Mr.Takeda writes, a why-question depends too much on the quality of children's own thinking.

11/ Within the context of the Why-What-Phenomenon, an objective of teaching literary works of art may be expressed as helping children grow to be able to ask by themselves a series of relevant what-questions even when only a why-question is asked. In other words, the objective is to help children grow to able to "enter" by themselves the lived world of a character-person in the work.

12/ A why-question may be said to be oriented toward a technological interest, since, if the answer to the "why" is known and clarified, then explanation, prediction and control would become within reach. On the other hand, a what-question would be oriented toward a hermeneutical interest, since, if the "what" is known and clarified descriptively, understanding of the character-person's life-world would become facilitated, deepened and enriched.

This series of explicative observations could and should continue, in principle, without end, but let me stop here.

§ 3 The Why and What of the Why-What-Phenomenon: Explanation and Understanding Reconsidered

Many of you may have noticed here the correspondence between the Why-What contrast and the Explanation-Understanding contrast in social/human sciences. In fact, an existential-phenomenological psychologist once wrote as follows, advocating the importance of the "what" question over the "why" question in psychological researches.

- 5 -
What then is the goal of the existential–phenomenological psychologist? ...the existential–phenomenological psychologist seeks to reveal the structure of experience through descriptive techniques and,..., does this by asking the question "What?" That is, he or she seeks to understand phenomena in their perceived immediacy and is not concerned with explaining, predicting, or controlling them—the question "Why?" is not asked as this question implies an underlying causal view of the world. (Valle & King, 1978, p.15.)

As you may well know, there has been a long history of the Explanation–Understanding (Verstehen) controversy (E/U Controversy, hereafter) in the philosophy of social/human sciences, a detailed discussion of which far exceeds my capacity here. However, we may say that several representative positions have staged so far in the controversy. They are: 1) The naive position neglecting, ignorant or unconscious of the E/U distinction (Naive psychologists); 2) The enthusiastic belief in Explanation following after the success, since 19th century, of natural sciences (Natural scientific psychologists); 3) The emphasis on the importance of of Understanding, which is for the historical/ human sciences, over Explanation, which is supposed to be for natural sciences (W. Dilthey); 4) The advocacy of the separation between Explanation and Understanding (K. Jaspers); 5) The unification and subordination of Understanding under the expanded notion of Explanation (C. Hempel); 6) The theoretical association of Explanation–Understanding to distinct co-existing knowledge-constitutive interests—i.e. technical, practical and emancipatory cognitive interests (J. Herbermas); 7) The attribution of complementary roles to Explanation and Understanding in their dialectic cyclic relationship (H. Yasunaga 1986, S. Strasser 1985); 8) The proposal of a hierarchically stratified structure, each stratum respectively presupposing the next one—i.e. the four strata of the scientific, the technological (explanation), the hermeneutical (understanding), and ultimately, the ethical rationality (K-O Apel 1984).

This history of E/U Controversy may help us get deeper insights into our Why–What Phenomenon. Our Why–What Phenomenon involves at least four layers of phenomena which await explication by our study in a mutually consistent manner. In the first layer, Children (C) explain/understand (E/U) Seibei (S)'s behavior/experience. In the second layer, Teachers (T) explain/understand children (C)'s explanation/understanding. In the third layer, we, Psychologists (P), explain/understand both Teachers (T)' and Children (C)'s explanation/understanding. In the fourth layer, We (W) ourselves are also attempting to reflectively explain/understand our own explanation/understanding contained in the whole of the above situation. Schematically, thus, we can draw as follows:


Therefore, we get:

\[ W [E/U] [P (E/U) T (E/U) (C C [E/U] S)] \]

That is to say, We explain/understand Psychologists explaining/understanding Teachers explaining/understanding Children explaining/understanding Seibei. This embedding can be, in principle, multiplied without end. Besides, teachers and children also explain and understand others' explaining/understanding in their own ways. Now, we notice the recurrence of \(E/U\)'s in the schema. If we accept that no one among S, C, T, P and W is in a privileged position in any fundamental sense, and also if no special reasons to be otherwise, we as (W) would wish to make our explanation/understanding of all \(E/U\)'s mutually consistent and systematic in such a way that explication of one \(E/U\) would help creatively and harmoniously explicate all other \(E/U\)'s.
If, what-questions, in place of why-questions, help children, then the similar what-questions may also help teachers, and ourselves, as P and/or W, too. Thus, the history of E/U controversy helps explicate our [E/U]s in the whole situation accordingly.

What do we want to know of our Why-What-Phenomenon? It clearly depends upon the kind of knowledge-constitutive cognitive interests which motivates our own research activities. A typical modern "scientific" psychologist would choose to attempt answering the why-question of the "Why-What Phenomenon", rather than its what-question, in his/her psychological study: he/she would ask "Why was it so?", rather than "What did the child see/feel/think when he was asked each of these questions respectively?"

What if we, as psychologists, ask a what-question on the Why-What Phenomenon?

What if our knowledge-constitutive cognitive interest becomes emancipatory more than technical or practical? That is, what if the aim of our researches in the psychology of teaching becomes that of attempting to aid in the self-reflective processes of teachers, of children and of ourselves as researchers and thus promoting their own self-understanding to emancipate and liberate their own potentialities?

Many Japanese master teachers, with whom I have so far acquainted, are lovers of literary works of art. They all love to know and understand the richness of human psychological lives in general, including the psychological lives and the lived worlds of children they teach. They also learn very much from the descriptive records by every master teacher, such as Mr.Saito and Mr.Takeda, to "enter" his lived world as a teacher, so as to enrich their own lived worlds. A psychology of teaching should be able to help teachers in their efforts in entering the lived worlds of the children, their fellow teachers and the experienced master teachers, just as we saw in the way Mr.Takeda helped children enter the world of Seibei. If this is the case, then should not our psychology ask more what-questions than why-questions, to explicate the lived worlds of teachers and children? Asking more what-questions will change the nature of our psychology of teaching (Please refer to such works as Giorgi,A. 1971; Yoshida,A. 1987).

I am planning to devote my remaining years to explicating the why-what of teaching practices of master teachers from the perspective of children and teachers with the aim of helping the self-reflective emancipation of learning-children and of both practicing and prospective teachers.

Lastly, let me ask you a what-question: "What have you seen/felt/thought when you kindly and patiently listened to my presentation on Why-What-Phenomenon?" Thank you.
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この作品の前半の部分に、清兵衛という子どもの、飢餓に対するあらゆる行動が描かれていた。かれは、道を歩いていき小さい女の頭を見て、それを飢餓と思い込み、いっかく飢餓と心を吹く。気がついて、さすがの人物でもおかしくなり、笑いながら半手ほどもかかった。＜それでもまた笑いはとまらなかった。＞ わたしは、ここは夢話としてとりあげて追求している場所だと考えた。

かれがなぜかしたのか、わたしには明確には分からない。おそらく自分がかかれた飢餓の突飛な思いを、わずか笑いがこみあげ、それがどうにもこえきらなくて走りだしたのだだろうと思うわれる。あるいは自分ながらもあきるほどのことかして飢餓を演じた自分自身を早くその場から（だれも見ていたわけではない）遠ざけたいという気持ちから発した無意識の行動だったかもしれない。

しかし、そうした推理を、どれほど積めてみて、決定的なものはえられない、そうかもしれないし、そうでないかもしれない。ここで別にしたことは走り出したわけではない、走らずにいられないほどにこみあげた清兵衛のおかしさの中身である。わたしたちは、そういうふうにそこに考えて、「なぜわかったのだろう」と真正面の話である。

「おかしかったから」と子どもたちはこのうた。ぼかしのようなど合の答えであった。

「なぜおかしいの？」

「頭痛を飢餓とまちがえたから・・・」

わたしは、ここでぐっとつまってしまった。わたしの問いは、子どもの答えも、あらわれるほど簡単であり明快であった。しかし、この問いの答えは、多少でも、子どもの思考や想像力にあらかじめある何かの要素をあっけらかんといえば、それはほどとんど皆無であったといわざるをえないのである。

わたしは、この急な危険をするつもりでここをとりあげたのではなかった。この小さなエピソードの背後に描かれている清兵衛の異常なほどの飢餓への執着、そして、それがいったときには常識を逸れるとも思えるほどの行動によってあらわれ、そういう清兵衛の内面を子どもといっしょに見つめたかたのである。

清兵衛が笑ったのは、掃除の村のことになんだが、科比ち子がなにか無関係たとはいえないだろう、ここで清兵衛を強くとらえたのは、幼児を飢餓とまちがう反射をもつほどの飢餓への執着の強さ、その常識にも思える自分自身の変化に対してもおかしなのではないか。ここには一つのことに疑りかされたモノマニアにこと見られるアブノーマルな暗いものが見られる。清兵衛のそれはあくまで明るく健康であり、そこに、たえず少年のナイーブさがだよっている。

「たまものを飢餓にまちがえるなんて、すこしとうかいているな、と私は、それにもかかわらず、あの小さい女の頭は、見ごとなかった思い、それらはたまらぬお楽しみとなって、明るい笑顔とあればのうちのおかげにまきおこしたのではなかったか。そういった清兵衛の内面をとおして、かれの飢餓への異常なまでの執着と、そして同時にそれがかえって明るい健康さに貫かれているという、清兵衛の内面のイメージをわたしはよくとらえたいと考えた。」[中略]

作品のなかで、とくに重要だと思われるところを明確に把握することと、それをそのまま授業で具体的な問題として子どもに提出することは同じではない。教材の核はそのまま展開の核ではないのである。[中略]

翌日、わたしはまた同じところを問題にした。

「清兵衛は半手ほどもかかって、そしてやっと走るのをやめた。それでも、まだ笑いはとまらなかった。ようどおおかしだったんだ。でも、いつかもかき(optimizer)まで。笑いが止むときがあったでしょう。そのとき清兵衛はいったいなにを思ったでしょう。」[中略]

子どもたちは、こんどはすぐにこたえなかった。[中略]

「すこし、どうかしているな、と思った」

「幼児や飢餓と思ってしまわれて、いくら飢餓が好きでも、ちょっと夢中になりすぎているようだ、と思って、ちょっと顔があがくなかった」

「ぼくは、おじさんが幼児をふり立ててこうの横顔へ入っていくようがおかしかくて、清兵衛が笑い出したんだと思います。それで笑いやんだとき、やっぱりどうかしているな、と思ったと思うけど、でも、あの幼児のこともおかしいも、まだ残っていたように思います。何とかあると思います」[中略]

「清兵衛はおおっけたとき、幼児を見つめたときから、走り出してとどまるまでの全部のことをふりかえっていたと思います。それで、幼児のおかしさよりも、自分の飢餓への凝りようがつぶしきなない、と思ったおもしろい」[中略]

前の時間とこの時間とで、すくなくとも子どもの反応だけはかがっていた。それは、授業での子どもの思考や想像力を、教師の問題提起の内容、その角度やイメージの鮮明さにかかっているからなのであった。[p.183-190]