Book Review: The Phenomenology of Learning and Becoming: Enthusiasm, Creativity and Self-Development.

Rodger E. Broome, PhD

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The non-reductive and holistic nature of phenomenology serves as an important approach to studying the unique subject matter of human learning and self-development. DeRobertis (2017) writes, “[h]umans are learning beings *par excellence,* capable of sustaining a world-spanning, open realm of perception, concernful dwelling, and meaningful questioning” [*italics original*] (p. 8). It is the unique affinity of human beings to learn and develop through using language, sociality and meaningful engagement with the world, that makes this taking of a humanistic approach to learning so important.

There is more to becoming a human person than simply acting in one way or another. Early humanistic psychologists critiqued the earlier learning theories because the behaviorist-based research upon which the mainstream perspective was founded utilized animal subjects (e.g. pigeons and rodents) or college students (Bugental, 1963). Giorgi (2001) was a critic who pointed out that psychology’s subject matter had deviated away from the psyche and become over focused about behavior or cognitive processing (neo-functionalism) that the soul of humanity had been lost or ignored along the way. DeRobertis (2017) presents a deeper view of learning theory as it is actually situated in both its sociality and practicality. Moreover, the role of learning in human development (becoming) provides a view of knowledge beyond that which is what we know but in the context of becoming who we are as an ongoing developmental project.

Plants and animals live in environments, but humans world their worlds through active social engagement and thriving with motivation to transcend their natural conditions. Meaning making is a unique human project that becomes quite elaborate in terms of our sense-making. Sense making is always personal and has relevant practicality to navigating one’s world. All knowledge
is personal knowledge, and human learning is that which gives the person direction, judgment and conviction to believe that the world in which he or she dwells is and works a certain way (Polanyi, 1975). DeRobertis (2017) shows in his research how learning becomes part of the person through its personal usefulness in terms of world engagement with others. Simply, if it does not work, then it is not learned in terms of self-integrated reality. I find this point vital to the very nature of learning because the dominant view on learning still seems to be about information acquisition.

DeRobertis uses the word *Becoming* rather than mere development to describe learning’s role in the ongoing and ever-changing human person (2017). Development is typically used through a naturalistic and thus, a physicalistic perspective. Giorgi (2018) explains how naturalism is the dominant ontology of mainstream psychology. A phenomenological ontology is unique because it neither reduces consciousness to be a product of the Central Nervous System, nor posits it as a mysterious Substance in the Cartesian view. Phenomenology holds that human beings are psychophysical beings that cannot be reduced to a mind and body separately. We know that the lived-body (*Leib*) has consciousness, but a body without consciousness is just organic tissues (*Körper*) (Husserl, 1977). Learning and Becoming for DeRobertis (2017) are therefore not a combination but rather a synthetic process of Self-and-World intercourse. One becomes a self through real-world engagements.

Becoming is the very actualizing nature of the human person. DeRobertis (2017) says it this way,

> Humans are learning beings *par excellence*, capable of sustaining a world-spanning, open realm of perception, concernful dwelling, and meaningful questioning. To be sure, these aspects of human character are not mere biological inevitabilities resulting from a genetic reductionism, but rather a complex, dynamic, and contextual-relational, and *developmental* aspects of psychological life (p. 8).

As within the title of the book, *creativity* is an essential aspect to human becoming. DeRobertis’ (2017) position on creativity is that it is not a mere cognitive activity. Information processing is certainly part of creativity, but imaginative and synthetic abilities are essential to authentic learning. “... [H]uman intellection operates from within a network of body, brain, affect, and self-other relatedness” which is consistent with contemporary neuroscience (p. 9). An important aspect of the imagination and synthetic abilities that is not explicated is the *irreal* dimensions of consciousness. Husserl (1977) defined the irreal as that which is not governed by time, space and causality (in counter distinction to that which is real).
Our imagination does not perceive real objects but generates and intends irreal objects within consciousness itself. Moreover, all acts of consciousness in the intentional structures of consciousness are irreal. It is an important phenomenological principle that is not in agreement with contemporary neuroscience and is dealt with by cognitive psychology as mental copies (e.g. schemas, representations, etc.) The irreal therefore, is one aspect of phenomenology and a phenomenological psychology that is explicitly not explained in the book. It is an important phenomenological concept in learning because lived-experience is a synthesis of real and irreal intentional content in complex unfolding adumbrations in the stream of consciousness (Drummond, 2010; Husserl, 1977). The human being’s irreal content of experience is its sense-making aspect of that which is perceived, reflected upon and expansive in phenomenological psychology when compared to cognitive theories and models. That being said, it is the imagination, creativity and motivation that are vital to human learning and becoming (DeRobertis, 2017).

Learning is described as an irreducible relational meaning complex that involves both explicit and tacit constituents. The learner is always part of the relational nexus, and co-constituting that which is learned (DeRobertis, 2017). Polanyi (2015) said that all knowledge is personal knowledge. That is to say, when knowledge is acquired by a person it is personally believed and personally useful. Tacit knowledge is that which is understood but not yet articulable. The phenomenology of learning then is the lived-experience of one’s acquisition of personally relevant relational structures that connect the subject to the world.

Learning is an interrelated organization between that which is learned and the learner in what DeRobertis (2017) articulates as a system reorganization [italics original] (p. 24). Learning facilitates a person’s ability to relate to the world anew. It is described as an embodied spatio-temporal participation involving ongoing reflection on the person-world interrelations. Giorgi (2015) puts it succinctly that the world impinges upon the individual and the person takes action against the world. The environment and its contents become a world for the person through this interrelation. DeRobertis (2017) adds the “omnipresent” social dimension of learning which places others always in the co-constituting of meaning structures, and of course, the purpose that language and the body are unique means of learning. Therefore, the individual is part of a self-world system in which others intersubjectively teach and learn through co-constituting meaning structures via sociality. “... [A]s a dynamic process, learning must of necessity emerge as a function of the learner’s own continually unfolding involvement within the lifeworld” (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 27).

Authentic Learning exposes one’s uniqueness in a non-categorical sense such that it paradoxically changes the learner, but into more of himself or
herself. In this way a learner is becoming toward actualizing potentials while discovering these potentials. DeRobertis (2017) points out that mainstream education has largely turned a blind-eye toward authentic learning due the depersonalization by institutions, technocracy, and engineered obsolescence. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) have become the focus of education for their utility and practicality in society. There are however, in some areas of occupational education, that simulation, internships, and service-learning strategies are aimed at providing opportunities for some authentic learning. Learning in reality-based training scenarios, police academy cadets in role-play lethal encounters were able to discover a kind of felt-sense of being right for the job (Broomé, 2011). Even the dissertation process in a doctoral program is intended to and have been shown to hold a pivotal moment at which a transformational experience ushers in a learner's doctoral identity (Schell, 2017). Therefore, there are educational contexts that still foster authentic learning, but the mainstream classroom experience and standardized testing process do not provide space for it.

Inter-Learning as described in the book could also be understood as intersubjective learning. This is a very valuable experience but one that seems more likely in smaller, more intimate groups of people. DeRobertis (2017) writes,

[i]nter-learning denotes a process wherein learners co-discover and co-create what is learned from within their physical, linguistic, and social-organizational situatedness ... inter-learning ... is organizationally facilitated (with greater or lesser degrees of formal structure) among dynamically related agents in the process of mutual, creative becoming [italics original] (p. 38).

One might be reminded of the notorious Stanford Prison Experiment and the embodied co-discovered and co-created lived-experience it turned out to be (Zimbardo, 1971). In this case however, it is possible to see this study can be explained in research participants experiencing a combination of authentic learning, inter-learning and existential learning.

Existential Learning was discovered by Amedeo Giorgi (1999) 10 years ago. He described it as learning that co-constitutes new meanings in a person’s capability to do something. DeRobertis (2017) explains that confidence is a central aspect in the learning process as the learner’s personal belief in his or her ability grows in relation to the task or skill being learned. An extreme example of existential learning is what we have discovered in phenomenological psychological studies of actual police deadly force. The finitude experience in the death of a suspect discloses to the officer something new and transformative.
about himself or herself, while inter-learning through embodied social engagements with others co-constitutes meanings for those involved (Broomé & Russell, 2018; Broomé, 2014). When considered in contrast to the training simulation of the same kind of incident without real finitude confronted, these learning exercises seems to be not as severely transformative. Perhaps there are types of occupations that involve perpetual learning and becoming that need exploration. Further, a second edition of this book may include some learning contexts other than classroom and traditional teacher and student interactions. DeRobertis (2017) does bring in the therapeutic situation in which a client can engage and achieve existential learning he characterizes as radical. He says,

> With the help of the therapist, the client co-creates and appropriates new meanings, giving rise to structural (therapeutic) transformations that lead to the realization of a new belief in oneself... [a]ll forms of therapy revolved around a trusting, supportive relationship that makes confrontation possible. Here, confrontation does not mean reprimand, but rather the challenging of old meaning-making networks.

DeRobertis, 2017, p. 42

The book has direct researches reporting on existential learning of new skills and the development of confidence in early childhood. In his final analysis,

> [i]n a highly dense form, existential learning invariably involves responding to change, seeking out trustworthy others for social acceptance, positive feedback and the adoption of a hopeful posture, the recruitment of the learner’s will to engage in the dialogical alignment process, and the imaginative widening of one’s projective potential for appropriating new meanings.

DeRobertis, 2017, p. 59

One can see in both excerpts above how existential learning has a structure that involves all three typological learning kinds mentioned above: authentic, inter-learning, and existential.

Motivation of the learner is a key dimension in the learning process. DeRobertis (2017) refers more than once to Giorgi’s (1999) view that motivation comes from being disposed to learning based on self-belief by the learner in his or her ability to do so. Therefore, two studies explore (a) the first time a student is enthusiastic to learn in the classroom as a child and (b) another study about enthusiasm as high school and college students. A key constituent regarding
student enthusiasm is that, in the context of the student-teacher dyad, the student exhibits a kind of persistence in staying the course. DeRobertis (2017) suggests that this might be the precursor in the student’s academic development to becoming academically tenacious. There are three aspects of an academically tenacious student, (a) future oriented and looks forward to the lessons, (b) focused on higher-order goals and reaching new world and other people, and (c) experiences a felt-sense of belonging in the learning space. I think it would be interesting to look at this through the eyes of the phenomenology of the educator that can foster such academic tenacity. Moreover, it would also be interesting to study academic tenacity in different kinds of students; such as, learners in special education on one hand, or in gifted programs on the other. Nonetheless, DeRobertis (2017) presents good evidence that fostering academic tenacity is possible, given the right circumstances.

The creative experience emerges in an unconventional environment that has supra-typical possibilities that sets for a personal growth trajectory. DeRobertis (2017) presents another scientific phenomenological study on paradigmatic creative experiences in which he finds a coherent general structure. The child navigates and operates freely in an unconventional place and achieves something he or she is personally proud of doing. The child embraces a fond memory of the experience and uses it as a frame of reference for future creative development. Eloquently it is summed up thus, “... becoming creative as a child is not understood to be ‘mere play’ or separate from ‘real’ life but inextricably woven within the fabric of the lifeworld” (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 108). I see in this description, a synthesis of the real and irreal contents of an embodied consciousness in-action (Leib), being exercised in such a way so that what is achieved personally matters to the learner in a permanent sense. “Creativity, as learning’s dark side, must be embraced to facilitate the movement toward becoming and enthusiastically involved learner disposed to develop a lifelong learning orientation” (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 121).

Becoming oneself is potentially a lifespan personal project for one who is motivated, engaged, supported relationally, and makes meaningful gains in self-in-the-world understanding. In this particular chapter, DeRobertis (2017) draws from the aforementioned presented studies and the extant theory to theorize about the existential concept of becoming. Kierkegaard (1983) the Danish father of existentialism said, “... the progress of becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the finitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process” (p. 30). DeRobertis (2017) provides scientific phenomenological evidence with which he dialogs with other works and generally supports Kierkegaard’s description of becoming that he remarked centuries before now.
The bigger picture theorizing that is in this chapter of the book takes the reader out of the mindset of focusing on the individual learner or just the learner-teacher dyad, to the broader social situation of group dynamics. Moreover, it is the creativity fostering environment that lays the ground for world-relating growth (DeRobertis, 2017). In contrast, the creative environment is entirely different than the mainstream educational situation that aims at conformity, standardization or a “herd-like obedience to authority” (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 133). It seems here that the form of the educational situation should be the jumping off point rather than the container of educational content. Creativity is expansive and must have room to grow in a socially relevant context. In the end, the learner acquires embodied adjustment, readiness and synchronicity with respect to his or her world-relations (DeRobertis, 2017). A summative conclusive statement is made regarding optimal-generative tensions between the self-structure prior to learning and reorganizational possibilities,

Learning and creativity best serve the self-cultivation process in the middle ground where a temporary disruption of the self-system (of varying magnitudes) is tolerable and tolerated. A “controlled,” productive disintegration of self-structure can occur in this middle ground, providing the most efficacious means for achieving a new, more differentiated and diversified form of organized personal integration.

DeRobertis, 2017, p. 152

In this way, the goal is optimal self-cultivation rather than maximal student achievement. As with economics, business, and other institutions, education has adopted the “more is better” ethos with respect to student achievement. With student achievement, the learner is confined to the role of student and productivity is valued over developmental integrations.

Neurosciences seems to be adopting more and more phenomenological concepts and sensibilities than in the past. DeRobertis (2017) covers neuroscientific literature on learning and creativity that indicate meaning-making and neurological functioning are seemingly interdependent. Moreover, some neuroscientific literature is becoming less reductive in the sense of trying to explain psychological phenomena in terms of activities of the nervous system. This is a good step for neuroscience, but for phenomenology, Husserl (1977) already had expressed that neurological structures and functioning are a physical correlate to consciousness. That is, consciousness is not a product of the nervous system but interrelated in such a way that makes the embodied consciousness (Leib [lived-body]) irreducible to either (Husserl, 1977).
In this way, I find the title of the chapter as “Neuroscientific Support” implying that it is to the presented research earlier in the book. But really, it reads more like DeRobertis (2017) has phenomenological evidence to support contemporary neuroscience. The relationship between the meaning-making of consciousness and the structures and functioning of the brain seem to be similar to Polanyi’s (2017) relations between engineering and the natural science. He explains that physics and chemistry are dependent upon engineering to be relevant to human beings. Neuroscience is only relevant to human beings insofar as it is useful for providing information about human world-relating. As such, world-relating is the terminal objective of learning, creativity and becoming (DeRobertis, 2017). Therefore, this chapter should be understood as providing human relevance of neuroscience via phenomenological psychology’s contributions.

The final chapter is aimed at formal education and it seems mostly at mainstream public education. The two themes of the chapter are Engagement and the Cultural Milieu of Teaching and Learning (DeRobertis, 2017). The author points out that most educational engagement activities in the higher levels of education are occupational skills oriented and typically influenced by the needs and desires of employers. I referred to two studies done on such learning contexts (Brinker, 2016; Broomé, 2011). But I want to remind the reader of the third study by Schell (2017) that explores the doctoral learner’s pivotal-point of transformation in the dissertation process. The dissertation process is a long-standing scientific or scholarly apprenticeship under the mentoring of the faculty committee. So as DeRobertis (2017) suggests, there are non-occupational skills engagements that teachers and learners can do. Language immersion programs have shown to be more effective than traditional didactic pedagogical approaches (Fortune, & Menke, 2010). Therefore, the world-relatedness that the book points to repeatedly is the key to person-in-the-world relevance that is cultivated under the right conditions. That is, the Cultural Milieu of Teaching and Learning.

The constituent conditions or characteristics of the cultural milieu are, (a) secure environment, (b) honest feedback, (c) empowering, (d) trust, (e) sentiment, and (f) personal. A secure environment means that teacher provides the learner with time and space where he or she can have confidence in approaching and appropriating new experiences which can lead to a new way of being. Empathetic listening and a genuine interest in the learner by the teacher give way to honest feedback. Empowering the learner is important to his or her persistence and motivation to face change. Academic Tenacity can emerge when sufficient empowerment is provided by the teacher. Trust is an interdependent constituent with a secure environment and honest feedback.
Moreover, empowerment is impossible when the learner has no faith in the teacher. Finally, guidance provided in appropriate *sentiments* that make the learning *personal* which sets the foundation for self-cultivation toward better world-relation (DeRobertis, 2017).

The above conditions provide a liberated learner. “The liberation of the learner is not mere freedom from conditions, but a freedom for dedication, an opportunity to work toward the ongoing establishment of a responsible life calling and concomitant life story” (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 185). With the contemporary educational focus on *STEM* and occupational knowledge, skills, and abilities (*KSAs*), such a liberation and facilitation of creativity is very tough to implement in mainstream education. It seems that implementing the findings of this book in public education would take significant political courage and effort by educational stakeholders. The current employment milieu in the United States is fundamentally competitive and meritocratic. As such, parents are very interested in educational strategies that will help their children “win that game.”

The current volume discussed is seemingly aimed mostly at an educational audience or learning, creativity, and developmental theorists. It seems like it would also be appropriate for higher education teacher training programs. As far as the discipline of psychology is concerned, this book brings a new perspective to educational research, theorizing and practice. Future editions of this book might involve learning contexts like occupational training programs, as well as, academic and professional apprenticeship programs. This could broaden the audience for this book but also solidify what it offers across different contexts of self-in-world-relations. The size of the book and its constituent chapters makes it suitable for an original work to be among a constellation of other readings for education and psychology students. Further, the chapters do knit together well, but that does not make it so that using some but not all the chapters in a course would be a viable option.

*Rodger Broomé*

Utah Valley University

*broomero@uvu.edu*

**References**


