

Reflections/Conversations with John Shotter Words

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When invited to write about how John Shotter's ideas have influenced/touched our practices, we immediately responded yes. Very soon after that, we entered into a frantic conversation about how to organize our ideas and, consequently, this paper. We quickly came to realize that what touched us the most was not necessarily the many articles or books written by John. More, we have been most greatly touched by those moments when we felt "touched by his words," using a Tom Andersen metaphor, when we encountered John in person. It is in those moments that we find a man who talks not just with words, but also with his eyes, his smile, his spontaneous responsiveness, his emotions; a man who embodies dialogue or, as we heard him mention during his video conversation at the 2016 ISI in Cancun, *deep dialogicality*.

So this paper is a conversation, a reflection on our work and how some of John's ideas have entered into our bodies and transformed our practice. It is an attempt to describe the myriad of ways in which he has touched us, including phrases he offered us in spoken or written words and how we have danced with his words. We started by asking ourselves, what are the actions/words from John that have touched us and have stayed with us?

ROCIO: *I would like to begin with a series of phrases, of words that have touched me, that I have re-read many times and are always present either when teaching or working with clients in psychotherapy. They remind me that I am in relationship with others. All of these phrases come from notes I have taken during the times we have shared the same spaces:*

"each time we interact with one another, we create a third other;"
"the otherness of the other, when it enters me, creates a different me;"
"the way in which we approach others is always ethical and poetic;"
"it takes time to encounter the other;"
"think within the relationship and not about the relationship;"
"to be always in the responsiveness position in relationship with the other."

PAPUSA: *Yes, Rocio, I hear all those phrases again and I can remember the moments, almost the inflection of his voice. And as you reflect on relationships, it takes me to remember some things I have read in some of his writings about dialogues that happen within those relationships. It is related with what Bakhtin says about how dialogue has to pass through our body. Some place I read John saying something like, "accepting ourselves primarily as bodies, relating directly to our surroundings by our spontaneous responsiveness to other bodies; not as an intellectual exercise but as an action of responsiveness." John has talked about how everything we say is in response to something that has been said before. This is very clear when I am teaching; the words of the students bring anticipation and I realize that such words are not contained in that*

very instant but they have a trajectory. They are expressions that, in some manner, organize the experiences that the students are having with the readings, other classmates, other professors, and their personal and professional daily lives.

ROCIO: *Yes, yes, what you are saying about experiences and how our expressions organize them moves me to this other conversation we had with him last summer about thin and thick knowledge. How within thick knowledge, that of experiences, we move around a trajectory where we keep recognizing what he called “landmarks.” This process for me is very clear when working with psychotherapy clients. Many times, when they come to me, they have already been diagnosed from a medical or psychiatric framework (thin knowledge), and this compels the client to see their diagnoses as something that is happening to them as individuals, that responds to a pre-determined category and does not have anything to do with their surroundings and their relationships; in other words, with their contexts and their circumstances. So, most of the time my work is to begin conversing with them about their daily interactions with others and working through what John called “the fog” so we can construct new landmarks for their lives. As we engage in a process of looking at their own and others’ experiences from another perspective, they soon begin generating new meanings for their relationships and the emotions that they originally came with. This has been very helpful when I am with clients who do not seem to find alternatives for the situation in which they are immersed.*

Well, as we pause and do a word count, we realize that we are approaching seven hundred to one thousand words that Sheila requested. How would we like to close this brief conversation/reflection? We feel as though we are packing in many reflections that can be unpacked even more, and we haven't even touched on one of the first concepts we heard or read from John: the idea of the social poetics.

However, maybe the examples we have mentioned are actions and experiences that have made their way into expressions as we re-member moments of poetics with students, clients and among ourselves. As he said on one occasion, “We have tried to bring words to experiences that have not been expressed before.” In closing, we would like to use some of the words we read that, although we cannot remember in this moment exactly where we read them, we had copied them down and continuously re-read:

What I want to talk about, then, is the ‘moving’ power of people’s bodily voiced utterances to create in joint action...in the ‘spaces’ between people... ‘worlds of possibility,’ ‘worlds of meaning’...Indeed, I want to talk, not merely about the kinds of events I have just ‘depicted,’ ‘evoked,’ or ‘called out’...but also, about how my words here, in the ‘space’ between us now, can have an influence of that kind on you...how they can, in fact, give you a sense both of a ‘social world’... ‘our world’...with certain shared ‘things’ within it... (John Shotter, from a writing that we once read and noted).

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