

Bodily, in a 'Living' Way

Jan DeFehr

Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

“And we do this bodily, in a ‘living’ way, spontaneously, without our first having ‘to work out’ how we do it...”

John Shotter

A delightful question arrives in my email in-box: How has John Shotter’s work influenced your research and practice in the early part of your career and how it has endured and directed you as a professional/academic?

It occurs to me that my process of responding to this question might form my best answer to it. I begin by first encountering the question, enjoying the surprise it brings. Initially, I have no sense of how to proceed but I wonder and feel curious, and, little by little, I begin to enter the question and engage with it. I experience the question as a unique, living ecology, a place I have never visited before. Without a plan to lead me, I begin moving around within the inquiry context, quite literally, with my body, with its ability to look, sense, feel, anticipate, respond, and express itself. With my memory, I hear John’s speaking voice as I read his writing again, for “another first time,” a phrase I borrow from John’s references to Harold Garfinkel’s 1967 words.

Before I have a chance to look for them or write them down, some *Shotter words* immediately come to mind like guests arriving early to a party. The first ones there: *Spontaneous, embodied, response*. I soon notice other terms, like *witness knowing vs. knowing about or knowing that; living; alive; attunement; mutual responsivity; determining surroundings; beginnings; poised resourcefulness*. I am always so pleased to see the words *special* and, *very special*: “Something very special occurs when two or more living beings meet and begin to *respond* to each other (more happens than them merely having an *impact* on one another)” (Shotter, 2010, p. 2).

I keep moving, making my way through the notes I took during John’s floor-shaking presentations at the 2015 International Summer Institute. I visit also my red hardcover book of notes, frantically hand-written after my Skype tutorials with John during my dissertation years. A mix of deep gratitude and tearful sadness setting in, I turn next to the overstuffed folder on the left of my desk chair, the one with paper copies of John’s articles collected over years, heavy with my underlines, circles, and margin notes, each with the date of the download recorded. These articles, at first the mainstay of my dissertation, gradually melded with every part of my life. From this collection, I return to his books, and finally I search for my dissertation defense recording, wanting to hear again John’s last question to me. I remember fearing it would require some great demonstration of my knowledge of Wittgenstein, Bakhtin, or Merleau-Ponty. Instead, he asked, simply and eloquently, how my dissertation was transformative for *myself*.

I first met John Shotter's work through Harlene Anderson's 1997 book but it was my start in the Taos PhD program that provided my immersion into his writing. John's work catapulted me into a world quite different from the systematizations, methodologies, and classifications I trained in throughout my MSW degree. John's work turned my whole orientation towards the realm of the dialogic, a living soundscape of developing social ecologies teeming with voices and compelling calls. I began to appreciate more fully the up-close-ness and profound trust required in dialogic relations, the fundamentally shared nature of dialogic inquiry, and the ordinary *extraordinariness* of understanding dialogue *dialogically*—practically, partially, sensuously, and in-motion, from within the bustle of our on-going responsiveness rather than from static positions outside. I began to notice, for the first time, how generativity and novelty emerge, almost magically, from the intermingling of living organisms. John's descriptions of *mutual responsiveness* crucially led to my characterization of the dialogic researcher's role as *co-respondent* instead of *analyst* or *interpreter*. His work taught me how to follow, how to discern direction from the living ecology sustaining the inquiry effort instead of importing and applying automated methodologies which cannot sense and feel nor recalibrate as the inquiry unfolds.

How does John Shotter's work direct my work now? Throughout my first full-time teaching year, I have heard myself describing my experience of the courses I teach as movements, not classes. Due to the initiative of several course participants, two courses spilled over their official end dates morphing into an exuberant, growing, action-oriented list-serve with on-going meetings in my home. This new development seemingly just happened to us, over and above our intentions and plans.

John's attention to peoples' "phrasings" is internationally contagious and I continue to be deeply affected by students' novel use of words. I continually play with new ways of inviting dialogic engagement – 'living moments' – into classroom contexts. As an act of hearing, I gather quotations from students expressed throughout the course, integrating their words with end-of-course celebration. John's work convinces me of the grand potential in small things, in details, minutia and fleeting particularity, and the potential smallness and vacancy of big generalizations. John Shotter's writing is especially relevant to the courses I teach, most of which critique the field of mental health, a vast mechanized domain entrenched in abstract, fixed deficit classifications and psychiatric drugs. While the global mental health paradigm pathologizes human distress, John's writing alternatively honours feelings of disquiet and dis-ease as action-guiding necessities utterly crucial to human survival.

Writing this response has again allowed me to see the powerful relevance of John Shotter's writing to my current circumstances at the daunting start of my second academic year. So much of his work attends to the human experience of not feeling entirely at home and the corresponding necessity of "feeling one's way" forward. John's work, written over the expanse of many years, so brilliantly – and if I may say – so patiently and lovingly, shows us how we can become poised, resourceful, and ready for what comes. If we can collectively remain responsively 'in touch' and attuned to each other and the ever-shifting otherness around us, we can "bodily, in a *living way*," sense how best go on together. Inspiring and comforting guidance for all of us as we navigate the new terrain ahead.

References

Shotter, J. (2010). *Social construction on the edge: 'Witness'-thinking & embodiment*. Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Taos Institute Publications.

Author Notes:

Jan DeFehr
Faculty of Education, University of Winnipeg
Email: jn.defehr@uwinnipeg.ca