Hermeneutics and Education

4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the implications of philosophical hermeneutics for the well-known 'pedagogical triangle' of teacher, student and subject matter. We find our way to what is specifically educational in the hermeneutic dialogue by considering examples of deficient or degenerate conversation. The close relationship between the 'instructional' (or pedagogical) triangle and the hermeneutic situation can then be emphasized, particularly once we acknowledge Heidegger's requirement that the teacher must learn to 'let learn'. All hermeneutic situations, it will be shown, are educational. How, then, moving beyond this global understanding, can hermeneutics inform those local situations that we wish to think of as *specifically* educational (i.e. schooling)? This leads us to consider the constellation of hermeneutic circles that constitute the event of classroom learning. An important distinction will be made between the 'object of study' and the 'subject matter'. The subject matter – Gadamer's *die Sache* – 'emerges' in the event of learning, which implies a transformation of teacher, student and curriculum. We are then well equipped to consider the preoccupation in RE in England and Wales with the relation between *learning about* and *learning from*, which reveals itself to be serendipitously attuned to Gadamer's observations about the relationship between *interpretation* and *application*, and thus of broader educational significance than simply the RE context.

4.2 Deficient dialogues

In the event of understanding a new understanding is reached. This is an event in tradition which transcends participants in the dialogue. The ontological

significance of this event as a moment of self-transformation of each of the participants has been emphasized. But let us consider the explicit *educational* significance: every hermeneutic event, in being directed towards a new understanding, aims at learning. The question then naturally arises: in dialogue, what is learnt *about* (and in RE in the context of England and Wales, we might also add learnt *from*)? This can be further explored by considering some derivative dialogic situations in which a new understanding is *not* reached.

One form of degenerate dialogue has already been introduced in the discussion of 'empathy' in the previous chapter: the exclusion of the other that comes about when we pursue mutual understanding without aiming for agreement over the subject matter. In an early discussion of dialogue, Gadamer acknowledges that we do not in conversation *only* learn about the subject matter, but also about our interlocutor – 'For in speaking about something, Dasein always expresses *itself* at the same time' (1991: 37). This raises the possibility of a dialogue which does not have agreement as its aim: 'Its motive is not to secure the disclosure of this matter, but, rather, to enable the participants themselves to become manifest to each other in speaking about it' or for each 'to become explicitly visible in his being to the other' (37). 'Community cohesion' defences of RE have often drawn on this form of 'being with one another' (for an early example, see Schools Council 1971: 23). The argument goes, that once the possibility of agreement over contested questions has been put aside, our affective relationship with others stands to improve through this kind of mutual understanding. Gadamer contends that this form of dialogue has a distinctly different ethical significance: 'For a person who thinks that he understands another person who contradicts him in some way and that he understands him without agreeing with him has by that very means protected himself from the other person's contradiction' (37) and 'one rigidifies oneself in ways that make one, precisely, unreachable by the other person' (38). This kind of 'being with another' both 'pushes the other person away' and claims *in advance of* the event of dialogue an understanding both of the other and of oneself according to which this holding at a distance is justified (38).

Sometimes we might find ourselves reaching a final agreement in dialogue. At this point the conversation comes to a satisfying end. More often than not, however, we find that we do not agree or do not fully agree. This does not indicate an unsuccessful dialogue, but an *ongoing* one: 'An inability to come to a shared understanding is never a final outcome but indicates only that one has been unable to bring the process of understanding to a conclusion, and therefore requires resumption of the conversation' (Gadamer 1991: 39). Recall

the provisionality of the agreement entailed in understanding: the dialogue continues because we agree sufficiently over the way in which the issue at hand is to be interrogated for there to be a need for further dialogue over our differing standpoints. We must 'agree to disagree' in that we must agree *in order to* meaningfully and productively disagree, and for the dialogue to continue. But this is not the sense in which we normally use the expressions 'agree to disagree' or 'agree to differ'. These more often refer to those situations where we come to an understanding that we will not, or cannot, agree. Gadamer observes that this failure to reach an understanding 'is sometimes interpreted in such a way that the contradiction that has emerged is taken as a positive result – that is, as showing a difference in assumptions that are not open to discussion' (39); here we 'discover' that the source of our disagreement is our holding two irreducible standpoints (one might, in RE, refer to our holding a 'theistic' or a 'secular worldview', for example). 'Agreeing to differ' at this point prematurely closes down dialogue and 'excludes the other person in his positive function' (40). Our relevant assumptions do not constitute an inflexible bedrock for dialogue and are not undiscussable: for Gadamer the dialogue continues by '(precisely) making those assumptions the subject of the conversation' (40).

We should clarify at this point an issue of intentionality which will become more significant as the chapter progresses. I have not claimed that our interlocutor (or the speaker herself) cannot become the subject matter (*die Sache*) of the dialogue. We have observed already that each is always necessarily implicated and transformed in any event of understanding, but we can also conceive of a form of dialogue that is 'about' us or our interlocutor more directly, such as when we engage in conversation about our real motives for a particular action, or about whether we are well suited for a future career. In educational contexts we might have such conversations in a mentoring situation, or when we meet with pupils to discuss their targets and achievements. In these kinds of situations, it is more appropriate to say that one of the interlocutors has in fact emerged in some way as the subject matter of the dialogue, *as well as* their being learnt about in the usual way, 'in passing' as we consider some further issue. This said, what marks out a dialogue from a deficient form, in this case, remains the desire to reach agreement. If we 'agree to differ' with a friend about the career to which we are most suited, this is tantamount to saying that we do not value their opinion sufficiently to continue exploring the reasons for our difference on this important matter. If a teacher 'agrees to disagree' with a student over the student's achievement in the last term, neither stands to learn from the other any longer.

There are other forms of deficient 'being with' one another. Sometimes we shoot the breeze. Two or more people engage in aimless conversation. We are passing the time. We might throw some jokes around, taking pleasure possibly in the act of speaking itself, but with nothing specific or important on the table or commanding our attention. Here we are engaging in what Heidegger calls *Gerede* (translated in Macquarrie and Robinson as 'idle talk'). Heidegger claims not to disparage this everyday phenomenon, but nevertheless his ontological exploration marks it out as a degeneration from the kind of relation that Gadamer denotes by term 'dialogue' (1967: 211–4). He writes:

> Because this discoursing has lost its primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such a relationship, it does not communicate in such a way as to let this entity be appropriated in a primordial manner, but communicates rather by following the route of *gossiping* and *passing the word along*. (212)

What is lacking in such an exchange is a relationship to *die Sache*, the subject matter or the issue at stake. This is not to say that such an exchange does not involve mutual understanding, but rather that it does not advance or transform the participants beyond the shared understanding or 'average intelligibility' that 'has already been "deposited" in the way things have been expressed' (211). There is 'a hidden way in which the understanding of Dasein has been interpreted' to which 'Dasein is constantly delivered over' (ibid.).

What goes on when we engage in *Gerede* is that we reinforce or preserve this shared or 'average understanding', or it is perpetuated through us. States of mind are thus perpetuated in 'wider circles' and take on an 'authoritative character' – 'Things are so because one says so' (212). There is a closing off of possibilities for new disclosure because we 'do not so much understand the entities which are talked about; we already are listening only to what is said-in-the-talk as such' – we engage in a verbal form of scribbling (212). In such situations, everything has already been understood; Being has already been disclosed. No hermeneutic circle is at play here, and no *event of understanding* occurs.

Although the ontological implications of these claims extend beyond a literal speech situation, one can illustrate idle talk by turning to those public 'gnomes' of everyday speech, such as: 'You get what you pay for' or 'You win some, you lose some'. Such claims do not admit of challenge, but expect assent; they contain and restrict the possibilities for the further development of the dialogue. Idle talk can then be seen to have an ethical implication. There are other gnomes – like, maybe, 'One ought not to speak ill of the dead' (or a whole host of other

'one oughts' or 'one shouldn'ts') – that call to mind Heidegger's critique of 'das Man' or 'the they':

> The dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already been decisive even for the possibilities of having a mood – that is, for the basic way in which Dasein lets the world 'matter' to it. The 'they' prescribes one's state-of-mind, and determines what and how one 'sees'. (213)

This is not, of course, *all bad* – the 'public way in which things have been interpreted' constitutes the essential background from which intersubjective talk can emerge: 'In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed' (213).

Heidegger criticizes idle talk as 'groundless'. This charge needs careful consideration so that it is not confused with the call for a foundational perspective beyond the hermeneutic circle, or outside of language. It refers rather to the fact that 'understanding has been uprooted' (214) so that the participants in this kind of talk are no longer allowing themselves to be conducted by the thing or the issue at hand. A *Dasein* that maintains itself in idle talk is described as 'alongside the world' and 'toward itself'. This topological language constitutes a clarification of the intentionality of idle talk, in which participants have fallen out of the usual relationship of 'belonging' to a subject matter. Where dialogue participants are bound together by a common concern, and are thus bound to the subject matter, nothing can be understood without 'making the thing one's own' rather than relying on an 'undifferentiated kind of intelligibility' (Heidegger 1963: 213).

Although 'shooting the breeze' or making small talk might appear to have little to do with the classroom context, Heidegger's *Gerede* identifies a possible situation where a concern with a shared subject matter has been replaced by 'passing the word along' or the transmission or perpetuation of a kind of 'average intelligibility'. Leaving aside his emphasis on a *particular* shared subject matter (in the language of reality, ultimacy and transcendence), Andrew Wright offers a compelling account of how a widespread public understanding that we must be tolerant of all beliefs, or that religious questions are simply a matter of opinion, has the effect of turning the attention of students in RE classrooms towards the discourse itself, or towards themselves, and away from the subject matter at stake. Drawing on the sociological work of Doug Porpora, he describes what could be construed in somewhat Heideggerian terms as a situation of 'existential uprootedness' in which 'contemporary society … construes identity predominantly in terms of networks of relationships with family, friends

acquaintances and work colleagues. The result is a contraction of meaning: moral space has relevance only insofar as it impacts on social space, while metaphysical space is disregarded almost completely' (2007a: 1). Wright cites Porpora's claim that in answer to questions like, 'What is the meaning of life?', 'we quote Douglas Adams or Monty Python and laugh' (Porpora 2001: 58). Bereft of a mutual concern for the subject matter, RE can become a sort of passing the word along.

At this point we have an opportunity to develop in more detail a critique of Richard Rorty, who has been employed explicitly as the source for Jackson's (1997) notion of 'edification' in RE. Elements of this critique will also complement our discussion of Erricker's approach to RE in the previous chapter, for whom, recall, there is 'no sense of "development" except change' (Erricker and Erricker 2000: 199). In addition to explicitly appropriating Gadamer's hermeneutics, Rorty has drawn significantly on the work of pragmatist and philosopher of education John Dewey, as well as taking over Oakeshott's motif of the 'conversation of mankind'. We ought to recognize that although Rorty intends no trivialization by employing this term, the metaphor he employs to characterize the conversation is a 'useful' sort of 'kibitzing' (2009: 393). This kind of talk is usually understood alternatively as a commentary (wanted or otherwise) running alongside a game or some other kind of event, or as a kind of idle gossiping. Recall Hogan's criticism of arbitrariness in that Rorty's kind of discourse 'turns its back on anything like a joint search for truth and seeks its fulfilment instead in that which is aesthetically new or different' (Hogan 1995: 149). This criticism is echoed in Garrison et al.'s (2012) evaluation of Rorty's use of Dewey, in which 'the relativism of vocabularies and language games may easily turn out as arbitrariness' (172).

Kibitzing differs from Heidegger's *Gerede* in an essential way: rather than drawing on a shared 'average understanding', it requires an encounter between different worldviews, which Rorty characterizes as 'incommensurable'. Great care is needed here. Rorty characterizes hermeneutics as 'discourse about as-yet-incommensurable discourses' (2009: 343) and presents Gadamer as a champion in the 'struggle against the assumption of commensuration' (Bernstein 1991: 89). Taking his inspiration from Thomas Kuhn, Rorty elaborates that

> by 'commensurable' I mean able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict. These rules tell us how to construct an ideal situation, in which all residual disagreements will be seen to be 'noncognitive' or merely verbal, or else merely temporary – capable of being resolved by doing something further. (Rorty 2009: 316)

If this is all that is meant by commensurability, then we can indeed see in philosophical hermeneutics a recognition of the problems of such an assumption. This is the substance of Gadamer's critique of Habermas discussed in the previous chapter (Habermas is also one of Rorty's targets here). However, Rorty's work (and in particular his portrayal of the encounter between worldviews as so much kibitzing) tends towards a stronger claim for incommensurability, in which we could be forgiven for thinking of different languages and traditions as 'self-contained windowless monads that share nothing in common' (Bernstein 1991: 92). We have seen previously that Gadamer's philosophical form of hermeneutics entails a rejection of this claim, in that 'there are always points of overlap and crisscrossing, even if there is not perfect commensuration. ... Our linguistic horizons are always open' (Bernstein 1991: 92). Of course, the claim that no two languages are ever *in principle* incommensurable does not necessarily entail that in any particular interpretive moment we can be sure that we have not failed to 'understand "alien" traditions and the ways in which they are incommensurable with the traditions to which we belong' (ibid.).

Rorty rejects a notion of truth as correspondence to some 'real' state of affairs in a world 'out there'. So far, so Heideggerian. He then rejects or radically reinterprets the traditional notion of objectivity, so that it 'does not refer to "the way things really are", but to the presence of, or the hope for, agreement among inquirers' (van Veuren 1993: 191–2). Rorty then throws the hermeneutical baby out with the bath water, however, when he thus lets a relationship with the subject matter fall by the wayside. As we have seen previously, 'The world is in the circle' (Hoy 2006: 194), but what is also in the circle – as opposed to 'out there' – is the relation to the subject matter. A lack of attendance to the subject matter, which binds participants together or keeps them in the circle, marks out Rorty's conversation as a hermeneutically deficient account of dialogue, despite his professed adherence to Gadamer and Heidegger. As Caputo observes, 'Rorty is delighted with the critique of "method" in Gadamer and Heidegger, but he is stalled at the notion of a "truth" which eludes method' (1983: 662). In abandoning (as Heidegger does) the correspondence theory of truth – what Rorty calls the 'mirror of nature' – he takes up instead 'the mirror play of words in which words lead to more words but never to the matter itself' (663).

This criticism resonates with an aspect of idle talk, which is more concerned with its own discourse than with getting to grips with the truth of the matter at hand. Rorty's 'new' hermeneutics 'seeks only to recognise the plurality of discourses and is content to keep a civil conversation going' (Caputo 1983: 665). Although there is an emphasis on encounter, difference, newness and

tension, which is not found in idle talk, Rorty's thought leads us towards a dichotomy where 'either we are speaking about reality or we are just talking' (668); Rorty's 'conversation' or 'kibitzing' is thus simply idle talk that has cast off any ontological pretensions. Caputo reminds us of Heidegger's alternative here, expressed in topological terms as *Dasein* or there-Being, where thought 'is not a "subject" standing over and against "reality" … or an "object", but it is wholly given over to Being as the place where Being emerges into manifestness' (668). Thus Heidegger rejects 'ocular' metaphors, through which the assent of the individual subjectivity is accorded in relation to self-evident objects, but maintains the matter for thought, *die Sache*, through a set of aural metaphors of 'hearing, hearkening to' and (in German, etymologically related to these aural metaphors) 'belonging' (670). A rejection of foundationalist thinking does not entail a rejection of the truth of the matter, which is disclosed in language and exerts a call on the participants in dialogue.

A danger inheres in Rorty's account. Influenced by Wittgenstein and the concept of language games, as well as the 'pragmatist' account of language as a tool for human progress, Rorty characterizes language as both a game we play and as a tool we use to reach agreement. In each case, the game is one created by the players and the agreement is the achievement of the interlocutors. This differs significantly from the philosophical hermeneutics presented in the preceding chapters. Gadamer also likens dialogue to a game, but it is a game that plays us; understanding is an achievement that is reached 'in' language, but we do not *use* the conversation in order to understand – rather, understanding is an event that befalls and transforms us (and transcends 'us', at least in the sense of autonomous and separate subjects relating to objects in dialogue). The Heideggerian sense of 'belonging' can be further understood in Gadamer's claim that we *are* a conversation (2004: 340). We belong ontologically to our subject matter because 'to conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented' (360–1). Once *die Sache* is removed from this picture, it loses its power to conduct the dialogue and to call to attentive participants and make claims on them. In this case, and if language is seen as a tool to be used by participants with no restrictions apart from mutual assent, the danger is that the power to command assent could be transferred to the interlocutor with more skill in manipulating or employing that tool. Rorty is well known for siding with the sophists against Plato (Rorty 2009: 157), whereas Gadamer, as we have seen, favours Plato in this engagement. The goal of the sophists was 'to defeat one's opponents via skill of argument rather than to arrive at truth' (Barthold 2010: 2).

Where the dialogue's 'belonging' to the subject matter (Plato's '*ti estin*') is lost, then, the path to rhetorical domination by superior skill lies open. This is not to say, incidentally, that philosophical hermeneutics has the power to insulate or protect us from rhetorical domination. Recall from the preceding chapter that it is Gadamer's aim simply to describe 'what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing' (2004: xxvi). Gadamer's account of understanding *does* allow us, however, to explain why such an instance of rhetorical domination would not constitute an event of understanding.

For Gadamer, the Platonic dialogue exemplifies an ethical relationship where, 'within this pure self-abandonment to the facts of the matter, the real potential of speaking with others consists in letting the other person help one in the process of gaining access to the facts of the matter' (1991: 39). Two related forms of what Gadamer calls 'degenerate speech' arise when 'a genuine co-relationship with the other person, in being toward the facts of the matter, is missing' (50). That speech can degenerate is attributed to a 'possibility of human existence' – *phthonos*, or the 'concern about being ahead of others' (44–5). This can give rise to 'inauthentic' or 'fallen' speech situations in which talk 'should reflect back on the talker in a way that distinguishes him or her in a positive way' (45). Speech thus takes on an 'agonistic' character, where instead of laying 'one's assertion open to the other person's response' (39) in a repeatable motion towards agreement over the facts of the matter (and where a contradiction would be productive of 'new insight' and point towards a new direction for the dialogue) the speaker seeks to cut off the possibility of the other's 'free response' and aims rather at getting her agreement or refuting her. This in turn is made possible by a 'seduction' that inheres in discourse, where speech itself can appear to have knowledge (45).

Separated from a need for 'adequacy to the facts of the matter', the 'strength' of an argument can be sought for its own sake, or simply for the sake of winning the contest. This is a form of degenerate speech explicitly identified in Plato's early work, where the speaker 'claims knowledge of *everything*' (47), in that she already knows in advance that no argument will be adequate to toppling her conception of the matter at hand. In this case the facts of the matter become unimportant (in fact concealed) and only 'ascendancy over contradiction' matters to the speaker. This kind of speech is exemplified in the making of public speeches, where the crowd cannot answer and only the impression made by the speech is important. Gadamer identifies the counterpart of this kind of speech to be 'refutation of others for the sake of refutation' (49), which has the sole intention of silencing the other. In each case the aim is to present oneself as 'the one who knows' (51).

In summary, we have seen how the deficiency of certain forms of dialogue is related to the issue of intentionality, or of what dialogue is 'about'. Dialogues can become deficient when participants cease to seek agreement over some shared concern but instead seek only to become 'manifest' to one another, when certain assumptions are taken to be 'undiscussable', or when participants engage in 'idle talk' and turn their attention to the discourse rather than its subject matter. The ethical implications of this are that the other is excluded from dialogue, or that participants engage in rhetorical competition, or that the conversation is susceptible to rhetorical domination. It is the intentional relationship of 'belonging' to a subject matter, which Gadamer describes as a state of 'pure self-abandonment' (1991: 39), that excludes these possibilities from the hermeneutic event of understanding. Of course, philosophical hermeneutics is in no way intended or able to *ensure* that participants in a dialogue allow themselves to be conducted by the subject matter in its unfolding or emerging (which is tantamount to ensuring that dialogue *happens*); furthermore this will be seen to be particularly difficult in educational contexts.

4.3 The pedagogical triangle, authority and the hermeneutic situation

The threefold unity of teacher, student and subject matter – the pedagogical triangle – is a commonplace in educational thought. In diagrammatic form (cf. Figure 4.1) it can make powerfully clear the relational aspect of education (it concerns the activity of both teacher and student) as well as the mutual belonging of teacher and student to the subject matter (they are commonly placed underneath the subject matter, in a subordinate position). The similarity to the hermeneutic event of dialogue is striking. Shaun Gallagher has in fact argued that in place of either a dialogic or textual paradigm, learning should be offered as the fundamental model for understanding the hermeneutic situation (1992: 319–52). While I do not want to displace the dialogic model (because of its capacity in what follows to inform our understanding of learning) this fruitful interaction between the two contexts is acknowledged. What distinguishes a dialogue that is productive of understanding from deficient versions is the continuing possibility that each participant might learn from the other about the subject matter. In fact, I would go as far as to say that (i) the pedagogical triangle and the hermeneutic situation constitute an identical context (*all* dialogues are educational), but that (ii) informed by a hermeneutic understanding of
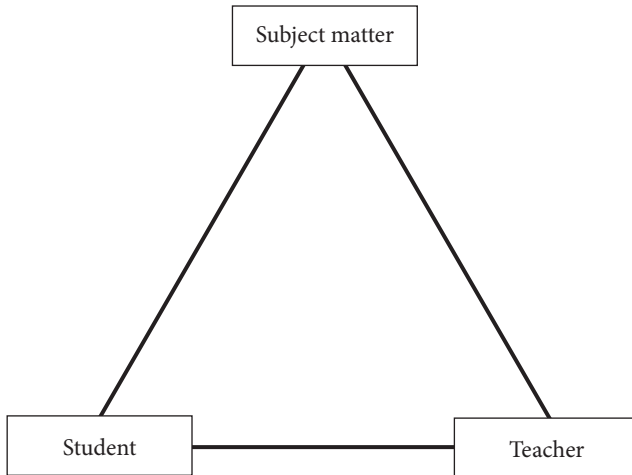
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Figure 4.1 *The instructional or pedagogical triangle*

subject matter, the pedagogical triangle does not in fact capture what school practitioners would recognize as an educational context.

It might be objected against (i) that the distinctive roles of teacher and student are not replicated in the hermeneutic situation. Recall, in response, that the interpreter is required to approach the text with the anticipation that it has something to teach him. However, we have established that the interpretation of a text – in which the student must make the text speak – is a subset or special category of the broader dialogic paradigm, in which it makes more sense to think of a *doubling* of the teacher-student relationship: each participant in the dialogue continues in the hope of learning something about the subject matter from their interlocutor, so that each stands as both teacher and student in the hermeneutic situation. This will not satisfy a reader who wants to maintain a *distinctive* role for teacher and student, where the teacher has a gift to impart to the student. A few further things can be said about this. The first is that there is no requirement for an 'equality' of participants in dialogue, at least in terms of their having an equality of prior access to the subject matter. It would be rare and surprising indeed, given the diversity of human horizons and the complex variety of experiences that go towards constituting the 'effective history' of a particular perspective, if the prejudices of each interlocutor turned out to be 'equally' sufficient in their grasp of the subject matter at hand; in fact, given that the relevant prejudices would be different, and largely unthematized in advance of dialogue, it is not even clear what equality would mean in this situation. The

possibility of understanding requires rather that each approaches the other with the expectation that he or she has something to teach him; the recognition of one participant as 'teacher' would then constitute a movement in understanding, and a relatively common one. Alternatively, there are those informal situations when we approach someone we trust as 'teacher' and find that our dialogue has enriched us both.

Let us consider that Gadamer takes the Platonic dialectic as his paradigmatic hermeneutic situation. The figure of Socrates and his method of questioning has also been offered as the paradigmatic educational situation (cf. Hogan 1995), and the 'learning paradox' of the Meno has been claimed as the definitive problem for both education and hermeneutics (Gallagher 1992; Hermans 2004; Marton and Booth 1997). But in his dialogic procedure – the recognition of the aporia as a starting point, his claim to know nothing and his willingness to learn from his interlocutor, his valuing of dialogue and mutual enquiry – it is the virtues of a *student* or *enquirer* that Socrates (or at least the mythic Socrates) is modelling. His authority and status as a teacher are derived from no external source and from no privileged epistemic access to the subject matter, but solely from this: the recognition that his interlocutors learn from him in dialogue.

The reality of the classroom situation is, of course, that there are teachers and there are students; in this sense the teacher's *de facto* role is predetermined and does not emerge in the event; nevertheless, the possibility of students' learning from their teacher rests on the teacher's willingness to learn from her students. This does not require that the teacher will take away from the event a transformed understanding of the object of study in her discipline (although, speaking only anecdotally, this is a possibility to which teachers of RE are often open) but that the teacher *will* nevertheless be transformed ontologically in her engagement with students. If she is to understand a student and be understood by that student, there must be a fusion of horizons in which a shared subject matter – the subject matter of the classroom dialogue – emerges. This entails that the teacher will discover and respond to particular aspects of how the subject matter is construed by an individual student, or particular prejudices or fore-conceptions that are at play in the way students are construing the subject matter. Thus the teacher's own horizon is expanding to accommodate that of her students, and her own prejudices are continually transformed as the dialogue continues. There is always the possibility that the teacher is surprised, or pulled up short, by a student's contribution to the dialogue; she will find that her own prejudices concerning the subject matter of the classroom dialogue are inadequate to following the subject matter in this new direction, and she must

modify her teaching practice along the way. This 'to-and-fro of teaching and learning' (Hogan 2009: 65) need not be consciously enacted by the teacher or student (recall that understanding 'befalls' participants in dialogue rather than being the achievement of either participant); it is because it happens in an implicit and largely unthematized way that we might, following Heidegger (2011a), refer to a 'craft' of teaching. This is what is intended in Heidegger's instruction that the teacher must learn 'to let learn': a teacher must be open to the particular potentialities of her students, and the ways in which they might or might not be receptive to particular attempts to advance the subject matter, in much the same way that the carpenter must get to know his materials and not attempt to work against the grain of the wood. This is a knowledge that comes only in the event and cannot be theorized or worked out in advance; hence van Manen and others have discussed the 'tact' of teaching (van Manen 1991; English 2014).

Although we have acknowledged the *de facto* role of the classroom teacher, this hermeneutic conception of the pedagogical triangle nevertheless forces a reconsideration of the teacher's *de jure* authority or moral legitimacy; in this sense the teacher deserves the name only to the extent that a fusion of horizons occurs in the classroom dialogue. Pádraig Hogan (1995) offers the distinction between teaching conceived as 'custody' (whose historical dominance he attributes to a Christian conception of education as imparting the gift of redemptive knowledge, as discussed in Chapter 1) and as 'courtship', which he traces to a Socratic origin. The teacher who earnestly feels that a subject has 'something rich and enduring to offer' (Hogan 2009: 65) does not engage in a 'process' so much as an 'unfolding interplay' or 'venturing' (ibid.), a 'wooing' of 'students' attentions and efforts' (77) that sometimes enables a student to 'unearth' or 'understand something more of her own particular promise, of her own aptitudes and limitations' (65). He continues: 'I have to make overtures to the students on behalf of that idea' (66), and we might insert here the full gamut of tactics, sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful, that the teacher might imaginatively and tentatively employ as the occasion seems to demand: perhaps a version of Oakeshott's list of 'hinting, suggesting, urging, coaxing, encouraging, guiding, pointing out, conversing, instructing, informing, narrating, lecturing, demonstrating, exercising, testing, examining, criticizing, correcting, tutoring, drilling, and so on' (1989: 70). What is distinctive here, however, is that 'I've put a foot wrong if, in any instance, my approach presumes some proprietorial claim on the minds and hearts of students' (Hogan 2009: 65). The contrast to Hogan's portrayal of teaching as this kind of 'heartwork', is to be found in those stereotypical instances where teachers 'use a "teachery" kind of voice that's higher and louder than natural speech and

who spend much of their time giving orders and reprimands … maintaining order and discipline among the ranks below themselves while conforming to the orders of a class of superiors' (67).

For Gadamer, authority is conceded to others in a moment of 'recognition' or 'free' acknowledgement (1986: 263). We 'concede to others an authority based on what we perceive as their superiority in matters of judgement, knowledge or some other quality' (How 1995: 172). The recognition of authority, then, is another emergent product inseparable from the event of understanding, and in teaching and learning contexts, this recognition is due to the extent that the teacher is successful in her attempts to 'open up a world' for her student. This does not mean that educational situations are free from the possibility of domination (far from it) but that 'there is a distinction to be made between the way the powerless are forced to accept something, and an authentic acceptance, or acknowledgement of authority. [Gadamer] does not make the distinction sharp, and implies that there is no a priori way of distinguishing one from the other' (ibid.). In fact, although Gadamer argues in *TM* that 'all education depends on' the fact that 'the authority of what has come down to us – and not just what is clearly grounded – always has power over our attitudes and behaviour' (2004: 281), in his later response to Habermas he offers 'the *system* of education' (my emphasis) as an instance where authority *is* dogmatic (1986: 285). The problematic interaction between the educational or schooling 'system' and the pedagogical triangle so far developed will be considered in the next section.

4.4 The new educational triangle and the complex of hermeneutic circles

The phenomenologist Shaun Gallagher argues, in applying what he terms a 'moderate hermeneutical approach', that 'education is essentially a "larger" process than that defined by the student-teacher relationships or the usual conceptions of teaching and learning', including 'the essential and necessary participation of individuals, be they teachers, students, or institutions' (Gallagher 1992: 180). Drawing on the philosophical hermeneutics elaborated in the preceding chapters, we might say that viewing education ontologically, as a transformative event in the Heideggerian sense, will take into account a richer constellation of hermeneutic situations than has previously been considered in the literature of RE. Gallagher appropriates R S Peters' claim that 'individuals are "put in the

way" of educational experiences. … Teachers and students find themselves in a process that encompasses them and cannot be reduced to their individual efforts' (180). He elaborates on this complex of interconnected dialogues as follows:

> Learning requires (a) a dialogue or circulating relationship between an individual learner's fore-structure and the subject matter; and (b) a dialogue between the teacher's understanding and the pedagogical presentation. These two kinds of dialogue or interchanges are not unrelated; as parts, they enter into a third dialectical interchange which constitutes the whole of the classroom situation – (c) the give and take of discussion, the interchange of interpretations between teacher and student. (74)

The weaker contention of this book is that the literature of RE has tended to focus on one or other of these dialogic contexts at the expense of others – usually at the level of either the teacher's interaction with subject matter or the student's understanding of the subject matter. Thus it is not uncommon for hermeneutical questions about the appropriate representation of religions, or the interpretation of religious texts, to be imported from the disciplines of religious studies or theology respectively (see Chapter 2). The stronger contention of this book is that none of the literature to date has engaged with the ontological implications of the interrelation of these dialogues in the classroom context.

In philosophy of education, an imprecision in terminology has dogged attempts to fully elaborate this interrelation of hermeneutic circles. This imprecision rests on a tendency even in hermeneutically informed accounts to refer to the lesson content, stimulus or object of study as the 'subject matter' of a lesson or educational moment, while also translating Gadamer's term *die Sache*, or the matter which is at issue in the event of understanding, as 'subject matter'. This leads to situations in which 'subject matter' is locked into a particular location in this constellation (as it is even in Gallagher's threefold, above) when more properly, if what we have here is three connected hermeneutic relationships or dialogues, some shared 'subject matter' is at issue in all of them. I propose firstly for theoretical clarity to continue to use the term 'subject matter' in place of Gadamer's *die Sache*, the thing or matter at hand, and to depart from ordinary pedagogical use and interpose the term 'text' (albeit broadly understood in the manner elaborated in the preceding chapter) to denote collectively the object of study, lesson stimulus or content – whatever, in short, is placed directly before the student by the teacher.

That the text is not identical to the subject matter, in the sense of *die Sache*, is illustrated in the following diagram of the new educational triangle (Figure 4.2) which I view largely as the centrepiece of this work.[1] It is in relation to this model
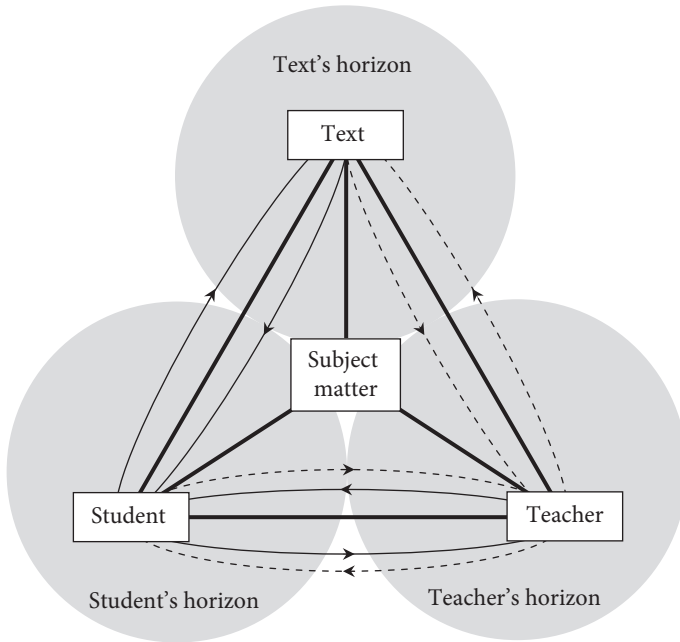
Figure 4.2 *The intentionality of the educational event.*

of the intentionality of the learning event that I am able in Part 2 of the book to meaningfully advance the debate about the appropriate subject matter of RE.

Gallagher's important insight is that although all hermeneutic situations can be considered educational, there is something more complicated going on in an educational situation like the classroom, which we might think of as a more *deliberate* or *self-consciously* educational situation than the dialogue so far discussed. Perhaps we might refer to the 'constructed' educational situation, using the language we introduced by way of contrast to the 'poetic' approach discussed in Chapter 1. Inspired by Gallagher's threefold, we firstly see that in an *explicitly* educational situation – the classroom, for example – three dialogic interactions are in play. Since each of these dialogues, as a moment of understanding, has its educational dimension (even if that is in the sense of self-education or of 'making the text speak'), it follows that the new educational triangle consists also of three interlocking pedagogical triangles of the kind I have previously described. In this three-in-one we see that the educational triangle is thus a 'sacred triangle' in ways not anticipated even by Paul Standish's use of this image (Standish 2014).

The teacher's pedagogical practice is informed by an understanding of the text; she is thus bound to the text in a circular relationship in which some subject

matter is at stake. The student also understands the text in some way, and is thus bound into another hermeneutic circle in which some subject matter is at stake. Finally the teacher attempts to engage the student in dialogue about the text and guide his understanding, and the student seeks to learn from the teacher, which means that on the bottom line of the triangle we have the dialogic situation *par excellence* in which both student and teacher attempt to understand each other; each projects his or her anticipatory understanding, and finds it transformed, in the to-and-fro of classroom interaction. Again, there is some subject matter at issue between them. We have already noted a hermeneutic 'doubling' here, in that both teacher and student learn from each other.

A *deliberately* or *self-consciously* educational situation adds to the hermeneutic moment described in the preceding section in that it brings together the teacher's understanding of the object of study, or text, with that of the student; it thus entails the unification of three related hermeneutic moments. Students will understand texts to some extent regardless of their teachers' presentation of them or their intentions on their students' behalf. There is always also the possibility of Dewey's 'collateral' or unexpected learning in the sense that a student cannot but understand his surroundings, and therefore cannot avoid learning, albeit in ways that the teacher might find unconducive to the kind of classroom environment she would prefer to maintain (cf. Dewey 1998: 49). In that sense, any moment of understanding in which a student is involved will to some extent be 'educational' (productive of new understanding), regardless of the teacher's efforts. Both teacher and student are involved in a great deal more hermeneutic circles, and their horizons are being continually transformed by a great deal more dialogic exchanges, than we have been able to illustrate in this diagram; each is at any moment already 'perched on a pyramid of past life' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 457).

But the coherence of what we would recognize as a deliberately educational endeavour relies on a convergence between the teacher's understanding of the text and that of the student, which is, at least for the teacher, the aim of the classroom interaction. It is for this reason that the 'subject matter' or shared concern has been placed in the centre of this triangle, at the intersection of three hermeneutic relationships. The moment of understanding that is relevant to this deliberately educational endeavour is not only one in which a student 'understands' a text, or even one in which a student 'understands' a teacher, but also one in which there is a convergence between the student's understanding of a text, the student's understanding of the teacher, and the teacher's understanding of the text.

Although it will resist specification in advance of any particular situation, we can say a great deal more about this subject matter and the sense in which it emerges:

(i) **The subject matter is properly said to emerge because it is the mutual achievement of three hermeneutic relations which converge in the event of learning.** This emergence cannot be predicted in advance, because the teacher necessarily cannot have 'total' knowledge of the horizon of the text, or of the student's horizon of understanding, and therefore cannot predict the ways in which each student's horizon will be transformed in this encounter, but can only respond to and accommodate these transformations. This entails that the subject matter that emerges necessarily emerges *differently* for each different student in the classroom. In this sense, *all* classroom learning is to an extent 'unintended'. The teacher's anticipatory projections can never be adequate to the horizon of even one of her students, let alone a group of thirty.

(ii) **The situation expressed in the educational triangle is not an 'ideal' situation.** Granted, students and teachers can speak or act at cross purposes, and students can often fail to take seriously the demands of texts in ways that have been explained in this chapter. Likewise, we must acknowledge that teachers can fail to be open to being transformed by the claims of their students. There is always the danger that students or teachers will take an 'agonistic' approach to learning, or regard either teaching or learning as a contest to be won, rather than enter into a 'co-relationship' of 'being toward the facts of the matter' (Gadamer 1991: 50). What is attempted in this diagram, however, is not a prescriptive goal but a description of the ontological conditions that necessarily pertain when mutual understanding has taken place in an educational context. As we have seen in previous chapters, understanding can never be considered 'complete', since it entails a fusion of horizons rather than a total identification of horizons. For this reason, however, it does not make much sense either to speak of any moment of understanding as 'partial'. Rather, we are better off saying that, *to the extent that mutual understanding occurs*, it consists in the constitution of a shared 'subject matter' across the three dialogic relationships described, but this subject matter is always emergent and provisional.

(iii) **This subject matter cannot be explicitly thematized or captured in a theoretical abstraction.** This is firstly because the subject matter is dynamic and subject to continuing transformation. Teacher and

student are each engaged in *two* hermeneutic dialogues, both of which are circular, and therefore transformative of their horizons of understanding. The student's horizon of understanding, for example, gives rise to anticipatory projections, or fore-structures of meaning, in two dialogues (that is, diagrammatically, these fore-structures run along two sides of the triangle). The two hermeneutic circles are connected, and a transformation of the horizon of understanding effected by a fruitful understanding within one circle will transform not only the fore-structure of understanding operating within that circle but also projected understandings in the related dialogue on the other side of the triangle, and vice versa. The student is involved in a tentative, back-and-forth relationship with the text or object of study, but also with his teacher. Any provisional understanding achieved in his dialogue with his teacher will be applied to, and tested in, his engagement with the text. The teacher is similarly implicated in two connected circles. She brings her understanding of the text, and of her student, to bear on her interaction with that student, but this understanding is subject to transformation. She may (ontologically speaking) 'return' to the text with a new fore-structure or projection as she comes to know more about her student, and therefore interrogate the text with fresh insight, or with a transformed sense of the question that it might pose to that student. This transformed sense of the question is then brought back into the dialogue with her student. These to-and-fro movements along both sides of the triangle are inseparable for each participant. An interpreter does not step outside of one circle in order to participate in the other, but the alternate circle is in each case an enabling element of the interpreter's horizon of understanding. Although we cannot represent this diagrammatically, another way of understanding this insight is to think of each of the two circles in which a participant is involved as being 'inside' the other.

The second reason that we cannot explicitly thematize this subject matter is because it describes an ontological relationship to the world rather than the epistemological achievement of individuals. We have here a continuation of Gadamer's image of linguistic circles merging into ever larger circles within a shared tradition, rather than the result of a unified effort by individual subjects to bring some object into presence. Intentionality here is not to be thought of representationally, in terms of the subject matter's 'being present' to consciousness, but (recalling Heidegger's response to Husserl) as a state of being-towards, or directedness. The

co-relation to the subject matter that emerges is not one of 'knowledge' but of orientation: in the moment of understanding, text, student and teacher come to be oriented towards the world in a related way. That relationship, as we have seen, is best understood in terms of the question – student, text and teacher have come to an agreement over the manner in which the subject matter is to be interrogated. This is not to say, as we have seen, that there will not be a great many matters on which they *do not* agree.

4.5 Application and belonging – or, so what?

So what, indeed, does this imply for the teacher looking for methodological guidance? In previous chapters I have argued against the possibility of a critical theory or method that could ensure a student's 'correct' understanding. Additionally so far in this chapter I have implied, but not yet fully elaborated, a tension at the heart of the educational endeavour. Recall the difference introduced early on in the book between the 'problem' and the 'mystery'. Hermeneutic understanding is not properly – or at least exhaustively – methodical, in that it relies on the interpreter's openness to what is strange in the text. Any purposes that an interpreter brings to the text – in the form of prejudices, or the fore-structure of understanding – are necessarily transformed in the event of understanding. So the event of understanding is not a moment that could be 'constructed' or prepared for in advance by one seeking understanding. Any *aim* that an interpreter might bring to the moment of understanding stands to be transformed through dialogue as the interpreter himself is transformed, in the same way that any method will necessarily fall short of transformative understanding. Recall the model of play: we do not 'use', 'apply' or 'weigh up' our prejudices. They constitute our being and it is rather in the to-and-fro of the dialogue that productive prejudices do their work and others are transformed. Thus there is a necessary sense in which transformative understanding is *aimless;* understanding does not accompany any particular method employed by an active subject, but rather 'befalls' someone who is disposed in a certain way towards dialogue – that is, someone who submits to being conducted by the subject matter.

A professional teacher can hardly see her work as aimless, and thus a tension emerges in the educational event. The possibility of a fusion of horizons in the educational event relies on that openness, on the part of both teacher and student, to being transformed by the unfolding dialogue. A teacher cannot

foresee the emergence of subject matter and must thus necessarily, as much as her student, commit to being conducted by the demands of the dialogue as it unfolds. Yet the conditions of systems of schooling are such that we think of learning in terms of lesson plans, units of learning, programmes of study, and schemes of work. A teacher who is to be considered responsible must be able to demonstrate a commitment to designing learning experiences in accordance with the most up to date research and carefully recorded evidence of student achievement. Since the moment of understanding is indeterminate, and in any case different for each student, the educational imperative to 'move on' to the next stage in a predetermined programme of study necessarily interrupts or forecloses dialogue. Rather than transforming in the to-and-fro of classroom interaction, the teacher or other curriculum designer's prior understanding of the subject matter predetermines the possibilities for its disclosure in the learning event. Thus our most educational efforts appear to be, in a hermeneutic sense, anti-educational.

I have argued (Aldridge 2013) that the moment of understanding is in tension with the curriculum or scheme. But I do not hereby describe a hopeless situation; this is a familiar dialectical relationship between the intended and unintended aspects of the classroom situation with which many teachers will readily identify. Some 'scheme' is inevitable in that the teacher's interaction with a student is structured in advance by a projection, or anticipatory understanding, of the contribution a particular text might make to a student's development, and this will have been informed by the teacher's anticipatory projections of her student's horizon of understanding (the teacher's 'prejudices', you might say, in relation to her students). The tension between these anticipatory understandings and what 'emerges' in the event corresponds to the tension between reconstruction and deconstruction in understanding elaborated in the previous chapter. It is the tension between fruitful and unproductive prejudice. This tension is resolved, as we have seen, in a manner which is more rightly considered 'tactful' than methodical. There is no doubt, however, that the teacher's room for tactful movement is restricted, perhaps disastrously, by too close a prescription of the progression of curriculum content of RE, as we will explore in detail in Part 2 of this book.

Given that we cannot prescribe a pedagogical method, what can be said that is of use to the classroom teacher, in general terms, before we go on in subsequent chapters to consider the specific challenges of RE? Granted, we cannot outline a procedure that will ensure 'correct' understanding on the part of the student, but nevertheless – in the descriptive spirit of what has been offered so far in

this chapter – we have said a great deal about the ontological conditions that will obtain whenever this convergence of three dialogic situations has occurred. Perhaps the aspect that will prove most illuminative for classroom practice is the language of 'belonging'. In the moment of understanding, teacher, student and text will find themselves in a relationship of mutual 'belonging' to the subject matter and thus, through this relationship, to each other. We might be able to offer, then, not a prescriptive method, but an ethical or existential orientation that could guide teaching practice. In the same way that understanding befalls a participant in dialogue who has a certain ethical disposition towards the dialogue – a willingness to submit to the subject matter and an openness to being transformed by the claims of a partner – so the moment of understanding occurs in the classroom (inasmuch as the teacher has control over this) when a teacher is disposed towards the educational moment in a particular way – that is, has as her goal not some specific understanding, but the mutual 'belonging' to the subject matter of teacher, student and text.

Without wishing to anticipate in too much detail the arguments about curriculum content and disciplinary identity that will follow in the second part of this book, the idea of belonging can be seen to cut through perennial debates about pupil-led versus knowledge-led curricula that still loom large in general educational debate. Belonging will entail that the 'interests' of both student and text are taken seriously in the educational event. Thus a teacher will need to take into account the demands that the text is made 'relevant' to the student, and also that justice is done to the text, or that the student engages in some way that is 'authentic' to the concerns of the text. But these demands are not balanced in any way that could be determined or prescribed in advance. We have seen that the relationship with the subject matter is to be conceived in terms of the constitution of a shared question. This question cannot be reduced to the question that the pupil brings in advance to the text. The question is transformed in the moment of understanding, and becomes the question that the text puts to the student. This question similarly cannot be reduced to the question that the text's author intended, or the question intended or understood by the community that produced the text (although an awareness of such considerations will undoubtedly inform the teacher's tactful presentation of the text to the student, so that 'the text's question' might emerge).

The relationship of mutual 'belonging' is illuminated in terms of the question. The student has made the thing his own (Heidegger 1963: 213) in coming to see the way that the text is 'in question' for him. But he has also come 'into question' in relation to the subject matter, in that the text has put a question to him;

understanding entails an acknowledgement of the text's claim on the interpreter. In this way Gadamer is able to offer a critique of a deep-seated assumption in the history of hermeneutics, the distinction between *subtilitas intelligendi* and *subtilitas applicandi* (2004: 306–10). For Gadamer, there are not two separate movements, in which the interpreter first understands the text's meaning and then discerns its relevance to his own situation or the manner in which it can speak to his own interests. There is rather only a single movement, and these two aspects are inseparable in the event of understanding.

In RE in England and Wales there has been considerable debate about the two attainment targets, AT1 (Learning about) and AT2 (Learning from). At this point I recapitulate some elements of my discussion of the attainment targets from Chapter 1 because I wish to offer, in keeping with Malpas's notion of Heideggerian 'iridescence' introduced in that chapter, another significance for this distinction in addition to the 'strife' between earth and world.

The attainment targets have their origins in a phenomenological distinction offered originally by Grimmitt (1987), which was then formulated into two attainment targets in the SCAA model syllabuses in the 1990s (SCAA 1994), and was finally 'canonized' in the non-statutory national framework (QCA 2004). Questions have been asked about how to balance the two targets and about the dangers of over-emphasizing one or other aspect, as well as about the intelligibility of the two moments (Aldridge 2011; Maybury and Teece 2005; Teece 2008, 2010). Robert Jackson has questioned the possibility of always expecting a moment of application, although he has argued that some critical appropriation of the religious content understood by the student is *desirable.* Perhaps Hella and Wright have come closest to acknowledging the inseparability of *subtilitas intelligendi* and *subtilitas applicandi* when they have argued that coming to know the world will always imply an element of self-knowledge (Hella and Wright 2009, and my discussion in Chapter 2). Some recognition of the inseparability of this moment is probably implicit in Erricker's proposal to replace the two attainment targets with the single target of 'interpreting worldviews' (Erricker 2010). However, when the two aspects of RE learning are seen as elements of a unified ontological movement, rather than a prescriptive methodology, much of this debate is resolved. It does not make sense to require, for example, that students firstly understand a text authentically before they can apply it to their own lives, or to argue that relevance to a student's experience takes educational priority over any particular religious knowledge or content. There is no 'undifferentiated kind of intelligibility' (Heidegger 1963: 213) that could precede productive

understanding. Viewed in the light of Gadamer's insight into the inseparability of 'application' from understanding, the distinction between 'learning about' and 'learning from' looks not so much like a local debate within RE as a rare hermeneutic success in describing an ontological necessity in all learning: rather than 'learning from' being a desirable possibility that might be 'added on' to RE learning, there is in fact no 'learning about' in any curriculum area without a concomitant 'learning from'.

Note

1   I acknowledge a shortcoming of this diagram, which to some extent Higgins attempts to address in his own diagrammatic depiction of the intentionality of learning (2010), in that I have only considered the pedagogical relationship between a teacher and a single student, rather than a group of students. I have also neglected the way in which a student's interactions with other students will contribute to the constitution of a relevant horizon of understanding. I accept that there is more fruitful thinking to be done in this area, but I hope at least that in this chapter, through the focus on the individual dialogic exchange, I have gone some way towards addressing what Heidegger has termed the teacher's disregard for 'the differences and distinctions within the concrete student manifold' (2002: 40).