

*Teaching, Learning, and  
the Phenomenology of Meaning*  
by  
*Dr. C. George Boeree*  
*Shippensburg University*

Original E-text\*:  
[ <http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/meaning.html> ]

***"Joy is man's passage from a less to a greater perfection."***

**– Spinoza**

In young children, learning is so easy, so natural, it is hard to imagine that it could ever be as difficult as it seems to become for older children, adolescents, or adults. The modern mind might be tempted to look for "baby hormones" to explain the young child's enthusiasm, or "hardening of the neurons" to explain the adult's lack of it, so vivid is the contrast.

As teachers, we dream of rekindling this joy of learning. Perhaps we could inject our students with baby hormones? But it's not baby hormones or anything else about the young child that makes learning a joy for them. We do see older children, adolescents, and even adults easily and naturally and joyfully learning, when they want to, when the subject of their learning is important to them, when it's meaningful.

The question I'd like to address is this: What does meaningful learning involve, and how can we make it more likely?

---

\* Originally published as *Teaching for Meaning* in the **Journal of Professional Studies**, 15, 1991.

## Method

---

It has been said that there's nothing so useful as a good theory. As teachers, i.e. people involved in an applied discipline, we know this is true: Pieces of disconnected research leave us nothing to base our actions on. But, as teachers we are also aware that theories have come and gone, and go mostly because they don't capture the detail of day-to-day reality.

Examples abound. We have been asked to base our practices on Freudian and behaviorist theories, only to wonder later how we ever convinced ourselves that rats, pigeons, and unfortunate neurotics are proper models of our students. Today we are asked to suspend our disbelief again by cognitive psychologists, even though Ulric Neisser (1982), often called the father of cognitive psychology, points out that the only real-life situations he's encountered in the cognitive psychology literature were playing chess and looking at the moon.

Many years ago, I came across phenomenological psychology. Instead of going back and forth between ethereal theories and contrived experiments, phenomenology encourages a close relationship between the experiences of real life and the ideas that guide our actions in practice.

It does this by dropping the dualism of subject and object: All views of reality demand a viewpoint – i.e. everything we experience has a subjective component; likewise, the existence of a viewpoint implies the existence of a view – i.e. everything we experience has an objective component as well. "Subjective" and "objective" are only poles of all experience. Another way of putting it is that, whatever the benefits of our scientific or philosophical conceptions of reality, we as human beings must inhabit a "lived world" that doesn't put up with abstraction long.

The essence of the phenomenological method is this: Examine experiences carefully, without theoretical prejudice; discover the essentials of those experiences; and communicate what you discover to others for verification. (For a detailed introduction to the method, please see Herbert Spiegelberg's 1965 historical overview.)

Permit me, then, to describe to you what I have seen in my experiences with meaningful learning. Perhaps my description will resonate with your own experiences.

## Meaning

---

There are two meanings of meaning of interest here. The first I'll call mundane meaning: Things that meet up to my expectations have mundane meaning. "I understand what that means; it means something to me; it makes sense; my knowledge is sufficient unto the task." Emotionally, this kind of meaning is "flat."

The opposite of this is to say something is meaningless, that it has no meaning. Again, this is emotionally "flat;" something meaningless in this sense is not seen as problematic or threatening. The wallpaper has a meaningless pattern, it is random or irrelevant, it is not meant to make sense. Or someone else's religious rituals are meaningless: They are sheer "hocus pocus" (from the Latin *hoc est corpus*), a lot of "mumbo jumbo" (from the Mandingo *mama dyambo*). Or a friend's quantum physics book – mumbo jumbo.

Obviously, education must be meaningful in this mundane sense, and usually it is. But, when a student takes a look at his older friend's algebra book, the very one he'll be using next year, the meaninglessness he sees, the mumbo jumbo, is now threatening, anxiety-arousing. Although meaningless in the mundane sense, it is now meaningful in a personal sense: highly relevant and loaded with affect. I'll call it personal meaning.

In this second, more important, version, meaning is a problem. In fact, it's just about the opposite of mundane meaning: Things are definitely not meeting up to my expectations. My knowledge has been shown to be deficient, and it distresses me.

Perhaps you recall the trials and tribulations of shop or home-ec: Trying to build a picture frame and confusing the inside and outside measures, or trying to put a zipper on a pillow and confusing the good and bad sides of the material. During those moments, the world suddenly appears too complex and, conversely, my mind too limited. I can do "this" and I can do "that," but "the other thing" (which would give me the solution) is just not available to me. These are personally meaningful moments.

As the examples intentionally emphasize, what we call our understanding of the world is based on our ability to discriminate one thing from another, to contrast a and b, to differentiate. A quality must be brought out from the background of experience and into the foreground, as when we finally figure out how to distinguish those identical twins. And what brings that quality forth is our need for it! "Consciousness is a desiring," I like to tell my students when trying to impress them: And that desiring is precisely the root of all personal meaning.

So (if I may be simplistic) it is a differentiation that we are lacking when we are faced by a problem – the differentiation, for example, between inside and outside. And what we need to do is discover this new differentiation.

Fritz Heider (1958) talked about this. Say I see a painting that strikes me as extraordinary. I am anxious to meet the artist; she must be a special person to have painted such a masterpiece. But when I meet her, I find her coarse, abrasive, immature, ignorant, etc., etc. This is a problem. Since the artist and her painting form something of a gestalt – i.e. they belong together, are relatively undifferentiated – to both love and hate at once is uncomfortable.

We can decide that we didn't like the painting all that much after all. Or we can decide that the artist's abrasiveness was actually attractive. Or we can even conclude that she didn't really paint the painting. All three are not true solutions at all; they are defensive lies. True learning, says Heider, would be a matter of adding a differentiation to our repertoire, i.e. realize that a person can have a great talent without necessarily having a great personality!

### Feelings and Learning

---

You may have noticed that, as long as you are conscious, there is some degree of "feeling tone" or interest, which has a positive, drawing-toward, quality or a negative, pushing-away, quality. Usually this is in the background, hardly noticeable other than as "attention" to something. When more intense, we notice these feeling tones as delightful or distressful in some way. For example, unpalatable food draws our attention to it with a "feeling tone" most of us know as disgust.

As I've been intimating, when we are faced with a problem, we feel some sort of distress, ranging from the mild irritation we feel when a pen runs out of ink or we are stuck in a crossword puzzle, to the terror we feel when a stranger attacks or we lose control of an automobile. And, when the problem resolves itself, we feel some sort of delight, whether it be delight in our own competence, or relief at regained control, or even the joy of discovery. The range is enormous and, more often than not, the feelings are blended with a variety of bodily experiences that give our emotions so much of their richness. I hope it is clear, though, that feeling tone is not some epiphenomenon of physiology, but rather a characteristic of our consciousness of the difficulties of life.

To focus more clearly on meaningful learning, notice that there are two outstanding versions of our problem-solution or distress-delight cycle. The first is better known and has become a stereotypical example of creative thought: the aha! or eureka! experience. It begins with someone – a scientist, for example – essentially stumped by a problem, and experiencing increasing frustration. To use the language introduced above, the scientist repeatedly tries to apply old differentiations when what is needed is one not in his repertoire. Only when he takes his mind off the problem, perhaps in his sleep, or when some accident introduces the needed discrimination through a metaphor, does the solution come to him. When it does, he feels an intense feeling of relief, perhaps, like Archimedes, leading him to run though the streets naked, shouting "I have found it, I have found it!"

In other words, a slow build-up of distress is followed by a sudden delightful resolution.

The literature on meaningful learning (under the rubric "creativity") so focuses on the positive feeling of the "aha!" experience that I used to think that it was the solution and its pleasure that constituted the meaningful learning experience. Since then, I had the occasion to ask an honors

phenomenology class to describe their "most meaningful learning experiences." Almost all of them described a very painful, distressful experience, wherein they had discovered some truth that took months to assimilate: You can't trust everyone; parents have their limitations; good people aren't perfect; love can end.... The new differentiation was clearly understood (i.e. learned) near the beginning of the process rather than at the end.

In other words, sometimes meaningful learning is a matter of spending endless hours confronting the problem, followed by a sudden joyful insight; Other times it's a matter of being slammed against the wall and then spending endless hours coming to terms with the undeniable.

"Cool rationality" in problem solving might seem the ideal to many, but an examination of meaningful learning makes it clear that the amount of the affect is an intrinsic measure of the meaningfulness of the experience, i.e. of how important it is to the person.

As you can see, even given the range we allow for distress and delight, there are other feelings involved as well. There is sadness, when we recognize a need to drastically adapt our understanding to what life has shown us, as with my honors students, or in the clear example of grief. And there is anger, an energy-builder that comes from a reluctance to change ourselves: I'm right; the world is wrong!

Both sadness and anger are natural, healthy – unless they aren't working: We are sometimes angry about the inevitable, in which case we could call the anger hostility; Or we sadly try to come to terms with what we should be fighting, which might be the essence of depression. As AA points out, it is not always easy to tell whether assertiveness or adaptiveness is the more appropriate.

Two other feelings stand out: Anxiety is the distressful anticipation of distress, i.e. the problem seen on the horizon. The inverse, the delightful anticipation of delight, has been less well explored, but would include feelings such as hope and eagerness. These are important because there is a difficulty inherent in meaningful learning: You must get through a problem to get to a solution, and so, generally, through distress to get to delight. So one might be eager to be a graceful diver, but anxious about the belly-flops in the mean time. Or one might hope for an interesting career, but fret about the work it takes to get there.

This is the basis for the common understanding that it takes maturity, self-discipline, or will-power to get anywhere in life. Only the immature, or the neurotic, expect to get satisfaction without payment!

If the problem appears too difficult and so the distress and anxiety too great, and simultaneously the promise of resolution too slight and the anticipated delight too small, we run from the problem, especially if we have reason to believe we can continue to do so. But, if the problem challenges without overwhelming, and the delight of solution is seen as a real possibility, we get "carried away." There is no need to motivate.

This is true for painfully meaningful learning as well. It is, of course, not felt as cheerful involvement; It is felt as a burdensome task that cannot be avoided. You wake up with the pack already strapped to your back.

There is a lot more detail for us to investigate, but I'm afraid I may have already strained your patience. If you are interested, there are other phenomenological descriptions of learning, such as those by Paul Colaizzi (1978) and Amedeo Giorgi (1985). Teaching is a practice, so let's turn to the practical implications of our description.

## **Practice and feelings**

---

We must first be meaningful to our students in the mundane sense: If we and our subjects are irrelevant, students won't even notice us. We will be wallpaper.

Where there is learning there will be feeling! Unfortunately, where there is feeling there is not necessarily learning: If we are not wallpaper, we may be algebra! We can't allow distress and anxiety to discourage our students, to drive them into avoidance. One common suggestion is well worth noting: Break large problems into smaller ones less likely to overwhelm our students.

Besides avoidance, anxiety can also lead to a certain defensive blindness to the problem. We don't want to see that which disturbs our comfortable truce with reality. So another worthwhile suggestion is to encourage students to look at the problem carefully, describe it fully, and seek the essence of it. Many problems so handled provide their own solutions; At least, they will provide direction.

The natural anger we feel in the face of a rather persistent problem is useful – until it degenerates into the rigid thinking so characteristic of hostility, and we find ourselves making tired attempts at applying old categories, old rules, and old solutions to novel situations. We can help our students break out of this pattern by encouraging them to "loosen up" their thinking, explore metaphors, brainstorm with friends, daydream, or even take a nap!

In the same vein, we can't allow these frustrations to degenerate into depression. In some ways, the student who gets depressed about a problem is closer than one who pounds away at it or avoids it altogether: She is at least aware that a change in her perceptions is immanent. Unfortunately, depression manifests itself in a cessation of effort and ultimately in a sense of inferiority that can stay with her and spread into other domains of life. Here is where a teacher's encouragement is most needed!

Conversely, we can bolster our students' hopes and eagerness by directing them to focus on the goal and the delight that will accompany it, rather than on the often distressful processes that precede it. It may seem trite, but both experience and research suggest that there is something to the idea of "positive thinking."

## Active learning

---

The obvious place to find meaning in education is in the various forms of "active learning." By placing students in the framework of a true problem, and by placing the responsibility for a solution on the students, we give learning the meaningfulness (and affect) it should have.

Note the reservations: A "true" problem is one seen as legitimate from the student's perspective, which means it must be engaging, real or realistic, relevant or entertaining.... It must not be routine, repetitive, rhetorical, contrived..., i.e. anything resembling a "word problem." As soon as students adopt a skeptical or cynical attitude, we – and ultimately they – are in trouble!

I mentioned responsibility. We often say things to the effect that responsibility is the flip side of freedom: To the extent that you are free, you are responsible for your condition. But we forget to reverse this: In order for students to be responsible, they must be free. For example, they must be free to explore various approaches to the problem.

More importantly, they cannot be coerced into problem solving. If we punish, by ridicule or grading, the problem-solving process, we destroy the meaningfulness of it. Nor should we rely on praise or promised rewards. By making the meaning of problem solving the gaining of rewards or the avoidance of punishments – making it anything other than an end unto itself – we undermine its intrinsic meaningfulness. It is no longer the students' meanings but the teacher's that apply, and so the meanings disappear when the teacher does!

## Meaningful lectures

---

We tend to assume that, to improve teaching and learning, we have to get involved in groups, learning-by-doing, etc., and avoid old fashioned lectures. But complaints by students about do-nothing groups and meaningless experiments and experiences suggest that merely getting into groups and getting active hardly guarantees meaningfulness. In all likelihood, your own best-remembered teacher used nothing more sophisticated than good lectures.

What makes a lecture meaningful? The same things as anything else: relevance to the listener's own existence, well-paced development of a problem and resolution of that problem, plus concrete, real-life imagery that encourages imaginative participation and identification. That is to say, meaningful lecturing is a matter of story-telling.

We tend to think of imagination as a quiet, introverted thing. But note that getting all the senses involved is the key to story-telling. My father still remembers a history teacher who drew colorful chalk drawings of great historical events, and my mother recalls one who played the parts – voices and all – of historical personages. Perhaps you've heard a camp-fire ghost story told by a "real-life" mountain man? Or seen a television presentation of Hindu sculpture backed by the rhythms and melodic complexities of a sitar rag? Compare these with the usual irrelevant textbook illustrations,

the drama-less accounts of great historical moments, and the elevator music that accompanies most documentaries.

If all this is too much, we can at least present good, patient examples, go to some effort to personalize our presentations, use examples from our own lives, or ask for examples from the students' lives.

I heard a workshop "facilitator" suggest that lectures were superfluous the day Gutenberg invented the printing press. For some of us, this may be true. For the rest, and for everyone to some degree, the human voice will always have more impact, more intrinsic meaningfulness. Perhaps this is our nature: Reading, after all, was invented a few thousand years ago. Listening is something we've been doing since before we even became Homo sapiens.

## Rote learning

---

I believe that rote learning – the memorization of "facts" – will always be with us. Learning about a new field, for example, requires becoming familiar with its terminology, symbology, and other details that need to be "at the learner's fingertips." I don't believe, on the other hand, that rote learning is entirely devoid of meaning.

One example is the sense of pride, of accomplishment, we feel when we master a collection of facts. As a child, I learned to count to ten in some 60 languages – a profoundly useless thing to do – which made me feel special. Likewise, as the popularity of Jeopardy and Trivial Pursuit testify, collections of facts can be fun. And, often enough, a piece of trivia is itself an aha! experience in miniature: Seven in Eskimoan is pingashoorooktook attausuglo, literally two times three plus one!

Unfortunately, students seldom feel pride, find fun, or otherwise notice any value in academic facts. I think that this is, at least in part, due to the fact that, while you can become the local expert in flags of the world, baseball statistics, or rock and roll trivia, and so amaze your friends, in school matters, the teacher is always better than you. Comparison with an authority takes away some of the potential for pride.

Further, it is assumed that this "non-problematic" learning must be supported by external consequences, i.e. the conditions of conditioning. So teachers tend to "support" the students' rote learning with threats of punishment or promises of reward. We have already discussed what this does to any intrinsic motivation that may exist.

And it is simply not necessary to add external consequences. For example, we can encourage the learning of terminology by asking our students to work in groups. In group work, the need to communicate makes terminology meaningful, and the learning intrinsically motivated. This is why the infant learns language, and does so so easily! It needs to learn language in order to be what it must be – a social creature.

The trick, therefore, is to encourage the student by making the necessity of the rote learning meaningful. A student who wants to learn karate is willing to go through hours of repetitive movements because she understands the essential relationship of practice to her goal. Likewise, the music student practices scales, the mathematics wizard memorizes derivations, the lover of languages memorizes conjugations, the history buff memorizes names, places, and dates.... In other words, while rote learning is by nature less meaningful, it sits in a context of meaningfulness that can, if noticed, support it.

## Tests and feedback

---

Some things, such as learning to drive a car, give immediate and continual feedback: When you don't steer properly, you wind up on the sidewalk. The driving test that comes afterwards is not intended to be feedback to improve learning; it is intended to keep incompetent drivers off the roads. Video and computer games similarly provide immediate and continual feedback, so parents seldom need to encourage their children to practice harder at the Nintendo. The involvement turns what might otherwise be construed as the rote learning of eye-hand coordination, into something meaningful.

I don't know that much academic rote learning could easily be converted into video games. Frequent, non-punitive "quizzing" – admittedly nowhere near as much fun as Pacman – provides good feedback. With computers, that feedback can be used to alter lessons to emphasize practice of weak skills, as in many of the typing-tutor programs.

But, with non-rote, intrinsically meaningful learning, feedback can certainly be made more immediate and continual by engaging students in meaningful projects and simulations. If the material is indeed meaningful, the student will be intrinsically motivated to do better, which in turn means he or she will be motivated to notice and even seek out detailed feedback. In other words, if you care about what you're doing, "testing" takes care of itself.

## The student's perspective

---

Whatever we choose to do as teachers, we must begin with the students' own view of things. What do they know, or think they know, about the topic? What differentiations do they make, and what values do they place on these differentiations? Journeys always begin where you are.

We must adapt not only to the students' understanding of the topic, but to their understanding of the world. Some will have more experience of methods of problem-solving or creativity or have more general background to draw from. We can't take these things for granted.

Also part of this background are their "native" abilities, whether truly genetic or simply learned at a tender age: openness to phenomena versus defensive or inherently narrow perception; rapid versus slow capacity for assimilation; learned or inherent energy levels; etc. In other words, we must be aware of all those various and disparate things we often label intelligence.

The question remains (and it is a difficult one): How do we as teachers become aware of the students' view? One answer is to test them. We have gotten to the point where we see tests as feedback rather than purely evaluative instruments. But why not see tests as feedback for the teacher? Sadly, many teachers see poor test performance only as indications of a lack on the student's part. I believe that it's time for these teachers to begin taking some of the responsibility!

There are, for students and teachers, more immediate and continual forms of feedback: Teaching is an interaction, and if you are aware of students' responses to your presentation, you will receive important information about their understanding. If they laugh when you expect them to, look puzzled when you expect them to, ask questions when you expect them to, and so on, it is at least more likely that you and they are "in sync."

But we can be more direct: We can ask. We can ask them for their views, ask them if they understand, ask for examples, ask them to explain to others (for "in teaching we learn"), and so on. Education should be a reciprocal process. If you are not learning something in your classes, perhaps you aren't getting your due!

Finally, I'd like to suggest that teachers develop their phenomenological sensibilities. Traditionally, we are taught to use theory to establish hypothetical expectations and to create the categories and dimensions with which we measure these expectations. It is the measurements that then draw our concern. Instead, a phenomenological approach suggests suspending our theories, expectations, categories, and measurements and going to the source: Open ourselves to the students' communications of meaning and we will at least approach an understanding of their understanding.

Perhaps I've made a rather radical assumption: I have assumed that, despite many differences, we are similar enough to our students that if we calmly, non-defensively listen to them, we can in fact understand! I believe that this is not just an assumption, however: They are right there listening to us – perhaps calmly, non-defensively – and can confirm or correct our understandings. As phenomenology transcends the subject-object split, it also transcends the subject-subject split: In dialog we can rise above our separateness.

So what is "meaningful teaching?" It is a form of compassion, for, to paraphrase Spinoza, "compassion is love insofar as we take joy in another's joy and sorrow in another's sorrow."

## References

---

Colaizzi, Paul (1978). *Learning and Existence*. In R. S. Valled and M. King (Eds.), **Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology**. N.Y.: Oxford Press.

Giorgi, Amedeo (1985). *The Phenomenological Psychology of Learning and the Verbal Learning Tradition*. In A. Giorgi (Ed.), **Phenomenology and Psychological Research**. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University.

Heider, Fritz (1958). **The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations**. N.Y.: Wiley.

Neisser, Ulric (1982). **Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts**. San Francisco: Freeman.

Spiegelberg, Herbert (1965). **The Phenomenological Movement**. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Spinoza, Benedict de (1976). **Ethics**. N.Y.: Citadel.