

Talking with books: A Response to a Discussion

During a follow-up on-site visit to Rita Witkowski's class in Lomira, Wisconsin, I led a discussion on discussions. The class began with an exploration of the question, "Why do we talk?" At the end of this part of the class discussion a question was raised for thought and possibly future discussion, i.e., can we talk with books? The question was raised primarily to initiate further thinking on the part of the students, but as is often the case, a question which is interesting to the students is also a question which is good for the teacher. This paper explores the ways in which we can and do talk with books and some of the reasons why this conversation is or can be productive.

First, a word about what I mean by talking with books. A conversation with books occurs in the margins of that book. In its most primitive form, it also occurs when we underline significant and/or interesting thoughts. This is not an insignificant beginning of a conversation if we are in fact highlighting some points of agreement or interest, but it is a very primitive beginning. It may lead to a genuine conversation but this is not necessarily the case. The underlining, if it is to be a step toward a conversation with the author of the book, fits into the element of conversations which might be called decoding the message. Underlining should help us to understand the message.

The next type of response in the order of level of contribution to a significant conversation but not necessarily in order of occurrence is responding. A response in the margin of a book is like a nod of the head, or a statement like "I agree" or "I disagree." Very similar comments may be written in the book. These comments, unlike the comment to a friend during a conversation, are intended for the readers own purposes. In a conversation we nod to let the other person know that we are in agreement. In a conversation with a book we write, "I agree with this idea" for our own record. At this point, and for the next two steps we are more accurately engaged in parallel monologues rather than in true conversation.

Next, as we begin to understand the direction and meaning of the book, we may extend the author's point or idea. We may write "this point is similar to a point raised by the author in a different context and/or a different author and/or thought about by the reader". We may also connect several points made by the author in this work - that is, we may make a tentative summary. Additionally, we may make connections between the points in the book and seemingly unrelated points. It was in precisely this manner of responding in a conversation that I was having with children in a fifth grade class that led to this paper. I saw one type of conversation (and conversation used in a very broad way) as connected with another very different type of conversation.

Questioning is the next type of comment that one may make

in the margin of a book. Throughout the book, the author can be asked questions. Two types of questions can be asked with the hope of getting an appropriate and helpful answer. The first and most obvious type of question is a factual question. This is the type of question that might be stated like this, "What does that book say about this point?" or "What is that author's stand on this issue?" These questions are easy to formulate and easy to answer. We know we have the answer if we can point to at least one passage in the book. The second type of question is an interpretive question. This is a question of the author's meaning. These questions are difficult to formulate, and to answer. A question of meaning may have more than one possible answer. It is a genuine question in that it is one which does not have an easy answer. What does the author mean by her use of a particular word or phrase? What are the underlying assumptions concerning this point? Why was this approach to the question taken as opposed to another approach? To find an answer to one of the above questions, one must seek support from the author, but one will not find the answer. The answer will only be found if the question is a factual question. The asking and seeking involved in an interpretive question is the beginning of a conversation as opposed to parallel monologues. The answer is to be found in the author's words, but the author does not give out the answer easily. We, the readers, must ask the right questions, our questions, and then look for answers in a give and take conversational manner. The reader asks a tentative question, finds a partial answer, reasks the question. The dialogue has begun.

At this point, given a quality book on a subject which is of great interest to the reader, a very productive and exciting conversation may begin. This type of dialogue is called exploring new ground. It begins when the reader asks a new question. A new question is a question which rises out of the context, of the book, but is not specifically addressed in the book. We may begin a dialogue now because the give and take between the book and the reader builds on what is given but goes beyond. It is this availability for give and take, for exploring new ground that makes the "classics" classic. Michael Polanyi's A Study of Man provides insight into this process of exploring new ground via a book, even though Polanyi never discusses the point directly. Polanyi describes two types of knowledge-explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is that which is written down in words, maps or mathematical formulas, or can be so written, whereas tacit knowledge is unformulated, such as we have in the act of doing something. The major logical difference between the two types of knowledge is that explicit knowledge can be subject to critical reflection, while we cannot reflect on our tacit knowledge. In applying this point to conversations with books, the following is one way in which we respond to new ideas in books. New ideas often appeal to us because they are the same or similar ideas which we have held in tacit ways. We have acted on these ideas without having been able to articulate them. When we read these ideas, we see at least a part of ourselves and our ideas. These may not be, in fact are not likely to be the same exact ideas that we have been acting on but they are close enough as to "ring true" to us. This relationship between the reader's tacit knowledge of a subject or idea coupled with the author's articulated knowledge work together to create new questions. The reading of a work which has this effect begins with a recognition. This, then leads to undefined questions which lead to formulated questions. These questions lead simultaneously back to the author's words and our newly ar-

ticated understanding of our own knowledge. This begins a dialogue between the author and the reader - this time on the reader's questions with the author being placed in the position of answering the reader's question.

In understanding tacit and explicit knowledge and in understanding the relationship between the possessor of articulated or explicit knowledge (the author of the work) and the possessor of tacit knowledge (the reader of the work) it is helpful to know more about the relationship between the thing to be understood and the person seeking to know. A person, Polanyi says, has access to knowledge because of a three way relationship between the subsidiary, the focal and the knower. A person sees the world which is mostly background (subsidiary) and focuses attention to bring an object into the foreground (focal), all the while being a part of the world which is being observed. The knower (the reader) controls what is ground and what is figural, what is subsidiary and what is focal. Marjorie Greene in her introduction to Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi summarizes Polanyi's ideas on the effects of subsidiary awareness on problem-solving:

His central thesis is that no knowledge is, or can be wholly focal and in the case of a problem, the subsidiary aspect looms large. We do not know in a focal sense, what we are looking for, and yet we can look for it, because we rely in looking for it, on clues to its nature, clues through which we somehow anticipate what we have yet to plainly understand. Such clues we hold in subsidiary rather than focal awareness (Greene, 1969, pp. ix & x).

This process of engaging in dialogue with a book, that is, looking for clues to help us understand what we do not yet plainly understand is enhanced by the previous work which we have done in relationship to the book. Our underlining, responding, extending and questioning now form the basis for exploring our new question.

This exploration of the manner in which we "talk" with books has been helpful to my sense, to a considerable extent. I have been able to learn more explicitly what I only knew tacitly. And to end with a quote from Polanyi, "... articulation does not merely make us better informed, it enriches us more by increasing our mental power over the given piece of information" (Polanyi, 1959, p. 24).

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