

## **Fostering Conversational Leadership: A Response to Barnett's Call for an Ontological Turn**

**Olen Gunnlaugson\***

Université Laval, Québec, Canada

### **Abstract**

This article examines Ronald Barnett's notion of an ontological turn in higher education as a language for framing the current existential demands and emerging learning needs of young adults. After presenting different interpretations of ontology, I make a case for how contemplative approaches can be applied to communication-based higher education classes to support ontological learning processes and outcomes. I then introduce a case study, drawn from a graduate course entitled *Dialogue Processes*, that I have taught over the past seven years at University of Massachusetts (Boston). Here I illustrate how a contemplative approach to instruction helps develop conversational leadership, a central learning objective of the course.

**Key words:** ontological; higher education; contemplative learning; conversational leadership

\* Olen Gunnlaugson, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in leadership and organizational development within the Department of Management at Université Laval, in Quebec City, Canada. Olen's work has been published across academic books, peer-reviewed journals and presented at numerous international conferences. Olen brings an increasingly multi-disciplinary approach to his current research interests of communication processes in teams, conversational leadership, the development of management skills and leadership coaching.

## Introduction

Traditional, teacher-centered university instructional methods focus on having students acquire the concepts, theories and knowledge of their particular field of study from a “functionalist model of education, a model whose dominant epistemology emphasizes the expert transmission of a non-negotiable curriculum of concepts and facts to relatively-passive students via highly-didactic pedagogic strategies” (Badley, 2000, p. 245). Within this prevalent model of higher education, there is a tendency to conclude that these problematic aspects of university instruction can be traced back to the breakdowns of transfer and acquisition of knowledge. However, as this chapter develops, a blindspot of the functionalist and technocratic epistemology with its instrumental view (Higgins, 2011) is its emphasis on content mastery to the diminishment or exclusion of pedagogies that support (a) the ontological development (Eryaman, 2007) and transformation of students and (b) the cultivation of individual and collective wisdom as *fundamental processes* of learning. In this article I take inspiration from Blatner’s (2005) more holistic process-oriented definition of wisdom:

Wisdom is an activity, something one does, rather than a fixed state, as if it were a possession or social status. It is a broad category of component activities including, for example, seeking wisdom; balancing different kinds of wisdom; discerning the optimal amounts or degrees of various efforts; exercising compassion and interpersonal sensitivity; appreciating; re-evaluating tradition and accepted knowledge; integrating information and skills; developing deeper understanding and integrating also one’s personal ideals; becoming alert to self-deception and the temptations towards foolishness; practicing humility and self-questioning; opening to intuition and imagination; and even weaving in a measure of playfulness (p.33). By overlooking ways to support these core interior dimensions of our student’s learning, as instructors we risk endorsing “trends whereby we increasingly instrumentalize, professionalize, vocationalize, corporatize, and ultimately *technologize* education’ (Thomson, 2002, p. 124; emphasis in original).

As a way of addressing the blindspot of the functionalist paradigm, in the sections that follow I take up Ronald Barnett’s (2005) notion of an ontological turn, which addresses a fundamental challenge of learning in our present era characterized by general conditions of uncertainty and complexity. I then build on Barnett’s use of ontology as qualities of being, as a set of assumptions informing our worldview, and as existential ways of being in uncertainty. Following my discussion of ontology, I introduce contemplative approaches to learning that I believe are essential to the ontological tasks of leadership development today across disciplines, which in my own course I frame as central to the aims of “conversational leadership” (Hurley & Brown, 2010) or cultivating forms of collective intelligence through conversational means. Finally, I introduce a case example of my experience in applying an ontological approach to communications with my students in a graduate course that I teach in *Dialogue Processes* at the University of Massachusetts (Boston).

### Re-Visiting Barnett's Ontological Turn

When knowledge acquisition is pursued in university settings to the exclusion of wisdom cultivation, as instructors we invariably fall short of preparing our students for thriving in an era that is becoming increasingly marked by pervasive change and an “inner sense of a destabilized world. It is a destabilization that arises from a personal sense that we never can come into a stable relationship with the world” (Barnett, 2004a, p. 251). As the moorings of their institutional, professional and personal identities are called into question under such conditions, students are confronted with a fundamental inner challenge of uncovering a viable basis for being and orienting not only effectively, but *wisely* among these emerging life-world conditions where the new world is quickly emerging from the cracks of the old. Lacking a foundational clear-cut sense of certainty about what the “right thing” is and how to go about doing it has brought about a pervasive global climate of uncertainty and contingency that touches upon deeper philosophical questions of morality, identity and meaning.

Inquiring into the forces of change and uncertainty that characterize our time, Barnett (2004) points out, “the changes are characteristically internal. They are primarily to do with how individuals understand themselves, with their sense of identity (or lack of it), with their being in the world.” (p.248). Instead of acquiring further knowledge or skills, Barnett (2004) proposes the importance of learning to be disposed ontologically towards uncertainty in a manner of, “carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness” (p.259) through what could be construed as an orientation to our learning, one another and our changing world that is helpful in fostering wisdom. Yet, Barnett does not specifically prescribe recommendations about how to go about cultivating such qualities of being, a task this article aims to explore, particularly within curriculum focused on leadership and communication practices.

Proposing the need to learn ways of being for flourishing with uncertainty, Barnett points out the importance of cultivating certain practical wisdom dispositions for working with uncertainty over knowledge and skill acquisition. Barnett's discussion of ontology focuses on fostering constructive relationships with our changing world through renewed attention to the quality and intentionality of our *ways of being*. Barnett does not advance a particular ontological conception, but rather leaves the conversation open for interpretation. For some readers, this will involve entertaining several competing ontological conceptions of one's self that embody multiple if not at times contradictory ways of being in our professional and private lives. For others, this will require holding onto and aspiring to embody a particular ontological ideal in one's work—as an example, a facilitator aspires to model relational ways of listening and speaking in their way of co-ordinating group processes, pausing periodically to sense into the learning needs of others. Still for others, there may be interest in integrating multiple ontologies as a means for discovering the synergistic and creative possibilities of abiding in what appear to be conflicting experiences of being as an ideal basis for working with the supercomplexity at play in our working lives.

Barnett (2000) describes our age as one of supercomplexity; a time marked by a multiplicity of competing and often incompatible knowledge frameworks that have

brought about conditions of conceptual overload, making it increasingly challenging to inhabit multiple perspectives or advance a comprehensive epistemology that can address the diverse epistemological challenges at hand. To the extent that knowledge is, broadly speaking, increasingly susceptible to change due to its shortening life expectation (Bauman, 2000), such a world of supercomplexity is bringing about an “age of conceptual and, thereby, emotional insecurity” (p.416). This epistemological complexity influences and dwarfs the significance of the interplaying relationship with ontology, which has been overlooked in the scholarship of teaching and learning particularly.

Wheelahan (2007) criticizes Barnett’s portrayal of supercomplexity as resembling a kind of super-relativism, insofar as Barnett does not offer a basis for evaluating or choosing between knowledge descriptions amidst increasingly unstable self-life-world context(s). Wheelahan raises an important point insofar as not all knowledge contains the same half-life of uncertainty, nor is all knowledge equally fallible or incapable of enduring or serving our needs as in the case of the humanities or world wisdom traditions. And so the challenge might be framed as: how to engage with the highly complex situations we encounter in ways that acknowledge the limitations of attaining certainty of knowledge of the world or ourselves without accommodating a goofy relativism (Midgley, 1997) that deems all forms of knowledge as uncertain and changing? Put in another way, how might we work with both the dynamic and relatively stable features of knowledge and our identities in the interests of embodying some helpful combination of both in our work? Further, how can our instructional practices serve to develop students in meeting this pervasive challenge?

Wheelahan’s point notwithstanding, in contrast to previous historical periods of relative stability, given how the epistemological climate of our time is increasingly pervaded by uncertainty and instability, the nature of the pedagogical challenges we currently face can be construed as one of *being* as Barnett (2000) elaborates:

If knowledges are proliferating, if any account of the world is contestable from all manner of directions, if our sense of who we are and our relationships to each other and to the world are insecure (as they all are), *being* overtakes knowledge as the key epistemological concept... Translated into educational terms, pedagogies are required that provide the capacities for coping with supercomplexity; which encourage the formation of a human being that maintains a purposive equilibrium in the face of radical uncertainty and contestability (p.419).

By emphasizing ontological considerations here, I do not take Barnett’s emphasis to be displacing epistemological considerations, but rather to deepen our understanding of how our knowing-in-the-world is shaped by our *being-in-the-world*. Learning to constructively work with the sources of ontological destabilization in our lives and to intentionally cultivate and model certain qualities of being that are needed for thriving in a highly complex and changing world is becoming increasingly urgent. In a way, Barnett’s call for an ontological turn is reminiscent of existential philosopher Martin Heidegger’s (1962; 1998) reflections that “the real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it” (p.167). To forestall the

proliferation of educational practice that denies the soul and leads to an oblivion of being, alternatives are needed.

### **Contemplative approaches for developing ontological renewal**

Consistent with Barnett's ontological turn, in recent years a strong interest in contemplative practices such as mindfulness and meditation have been explored within higher education settings as a means to engage the ontological capacities of students. This growing interest in contemplative approaches to instruction and learning has emerged across a wide variety of disciplinary fields including education, psychology, philosophy, business, among many others (Brady, 2007; Gunnlaugson, 2009; Seidel, 2006; Thurman, 2006; etc). This has given rise to a new field of contemplative studies (Duerr, M., Zajonc, A., & Dana, D., 2003; Roth, 2006) as well as a number of academic conferences on contemplative education. Contemplative practice, in invoking a shift from mental-reflective modes of knowing and egoic self-identification, facilitates a shift towards more intentional awareness-based modes of knowing and expanded forms of self-identification (Duer et. al, 2003). Roy (2006) speaks to the deeper quality of being that is cultivated through contemplative practice:

Relative to the experience of "moving mind," the ontological dimension, by contrast, has the feeling/aspect of stillness. However, this "stillness" is not to be construed dualistically (that would be an epistemological reduction); rather, it is a dynamic stillness—like the axel of a cartwheel rolling down a hill. (p.133)

Contemplative practice offers the prospects for ontological renewal through this dynamic stillness and other interior ontological qualities of being (i.e. calmness, awareness, peace, compassion), both individually and collectively in the classroom. Additionally, contemplative practice can assist us in befriending the uncertain, unpredictable and highly complex situations we meet in the world by befriending the uncertain, turbulent and complicated realities we encounter within. Insofar as the world wisdom traditions (i.e. particularly eastern ones) encourage cultivating a fluid, creative relationship to uncertainty, our minds then become acclimatized to being with the complex interpenetrating flow of relationship that arguably characterizes existence itself. Through non-conceptual contemplative practices such as mindfulness and meditation, grounds for cultivating a wisdom-based relationship with reality gradually begin to take form. Contemplative approaches offer the prospects of transforming our psychological relationship to uncertainty by helping us see through problematic assumptions such as (a) what is beyond our understanding is of little consequence, (b) what is unknown or cannot be know is not worth our time, or (c) that uncertainty is necessarily a fundamentally threatening and overwhelming aspect of reality. Under certain conditions, contemplative practices offer a basis for unlearning such problematic beliefs and moving towards a more friendly and co-creative relationship with reality that accepts and embraces uncertainty or the unknowable as a fundamental aspect of our experience (Gunnlaugson, 2009). Cultivating wisdom and compassion by gently dispelling our selfhood illusions of fixity and separateness through contemplative practice also helps develop a "trans-traditional identity" (Sarath, 2003, p.229) that is less fixed, rigid and more contingent, interwoven and capable of living optimally with the uncertainties that increasingly define our complex emerging world.

## **Uncovering the ontological dimension of conversational leadership through *Dialogue Processes***

To illustrate my argument for using contemplative approaches within higher education classrooms to develop ontological capacities, I now turn to my online graduate course, *CrCrTh616 Dialogue Processes* in the *Critical and Creative Thinking Graduate Program* at the University of Massachusetts (Boston). In my course, students come from a wide array of academic disciplines and professions seeking tools and approaches to become more effective dialogue leaders and as agents of change in education, organizational and social justice settings. In addition to developing internal capacities of wisdom, my course enables students to recognize their power to reconstitute social, educational and political life through more skillful and engaged means of communication, which in turn influences their decision-making ability and personal-social-political awareness.

As an example of this later teaching objective, a core course objective of *Dialogue Processes* is to cultivate practical know-how and theoretical knowledge of dialogue facilitation processes with a particular in-depth focus on Otto Scharmer's (2007) account of the four fields of conversation as well as presencing within a variety of contexts of applied learning. I also draw upon Isaacs' (1999) research from the MIT Dialogue Project, David Bohm's (1996) conception of dialogue, in addition to my research in dialogue processes (Gunnlaugson 2006, 2009, 2011).

The course not only provides theory and opportunities for practicing dialogue as a class, it also has students explore their personal and professional experiences in relation to dialogue facilitation as a means of challenging and transforming their ways of being in conversation. I have designed the course in a way that helps student's become aware of their ontological disposition as a way of influencing and leading in conversation. Within the course, through group-based forms of inquiry and peer-coaching exercises, students explore the relationship between ontology and leading different fields of conversation—listening from stillness, speaking from presence, among others. In addition to imparting theoretical knowledge about dialogue, I encourage students to closely attend to their experiences in conversation in terms of identifying and listening from the distinct qualities of being that distinguish different fields of conversation. In the next two sections, I describe in more detail how my own students develop their ontological capacities through two contemplative approaches: meditation and presencing (Scharmer, 2007).

### **Setting the stage: Introducing meditation as a first-person contemplative practice for opening up interior ontological horizons**

In the interests of supporting the conditions for student's transformation in relation to the dialogue practices that shape their sense of self and their capacities for different forms of conversation, I have introduced dialogue practices with a contemplative orientation as a means for engaging the deeper ontological dimension of their learning. More recently, I have worked with Ed Sarath's (2010) heuristic of first-, second- and third-person approaches for distinguishing contemplative processes. Concerning the distinctions of first-person, second-person and third-person educational approaches, the academic world is arguably dominated by third-person forms of education (Roth, 2006) where analysis, investigation and critical

discussion of knowledge prevail. Within Sarath's (2006) integral pedagogical heuristic, first-person forms of education involve learning that is drawn primarily from our individual experience through modes of journaling, introspective reflection, among other approaches. Second-person forms of education are more process oriented, generally including collective forms of learning and discovery in group work, community-based learning and so forth. In the upcoming section I outline the first-person method of meditation, which serves as a foundational practice for the second-person method of presencing—a creative approach to conversation that draws on contemplative processes. As Sarath points out, our pedagogical methods “contain first-, second- and third-person aspects to varying degrees” (in press, p. 2).

Early on each term I introduce a basic awareness-based practice of sitting meditation to help students cultivate the capacity for deepened attention and mindfulness in their conversations. The discipline of sitting meditation involves a practice of taking time out from their normal day-to-day activities in order to discover an inner source of stillness, attention and ontological renewal. Sarath (2003) elaborates on the benefits of meditation from his experiences of teaching in the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Jazz and Contemplative Studies degree program at the University of Michigan:

Descriptions of contact with this core as instances of extraordinary clarity, insight, and inner calm can only approximate this awareness state; it ultimately can be understood and appreciated only by the experience itself. In fact, the coexistence of levels of wakefulness and profound calm that exceed ordinary experience, which makes these states so difficult to convey to others in words, is perhaps what renders them so transformational. As one invokes these states on a regular basis, they promote the development of these values in everyday life in a way that, as noted above, most other experiences generally cannot match. However, this is not to devalue other activities, or suggest meditation should replace them, whether they are undertaken with contemplative aims or not. Rather, silent meditation can be thought of as a kind of anchor and means for enriching whatever activities one pursues. (p. 219)

Midway in the course I introduce mindfulness meditation exercises to strengthen their connection to stillness and attention through exploratory practices of becoming aware of breath, body, emotions and thoughts. I generally encourage everyone to work up to 20 minutes of daily meditation practice and to document their learning in the context of course themes and assignments of dialogue processes on their coaching blogs. A number of students have reported the benefits of meditation in helping them slow down to experience how the state of their body, emotions and mental attitude influences their capacity for effectively engaging in dialogue and presencing conversations.

Despite its importance to learning (Duerr, M., Zajonc, A., & Dana, D., 2003), *intrapersonal* awareness, a learning objective of the course, is rarely if ever practiced or cultivated in most higher education settings. It is ironic that in spite of the increasing importance of self-knowledge, colleges and universities tend to give minimal to no attention to the development of ontological capacities such as self-awareness and self-understanding, at best assuming this to be a natural by-product of

the program. Insofar as meditative practice strengthens student’s capacities for observing their internal, cognitive-emotional processes, including biases, beliefs, and mental perspectives, through this process, self-awareness and self-understanding are developed as students have reported in their blogs. Students have also reported that meditation has helped them work less reactively in conversation and more closely with the challenges they face in their studies, employment, as well as collegial and personal relationships.

**Engaging being: Exploring presencing as a second-person contemplative practice of conversation**

There is often a struggle to unlearn old habits as one brings forth new ways of being to the extent that customary preconceptions and patterns generally stand in the way of authentic dialogue, at least initially. In our online and skype conversations, I encourage students to become more aware of how their accustomed habits of listening and speaking reflect and depart from the characteristic dynamics within each of Scharmer’s four fields of conversation (figure 1).

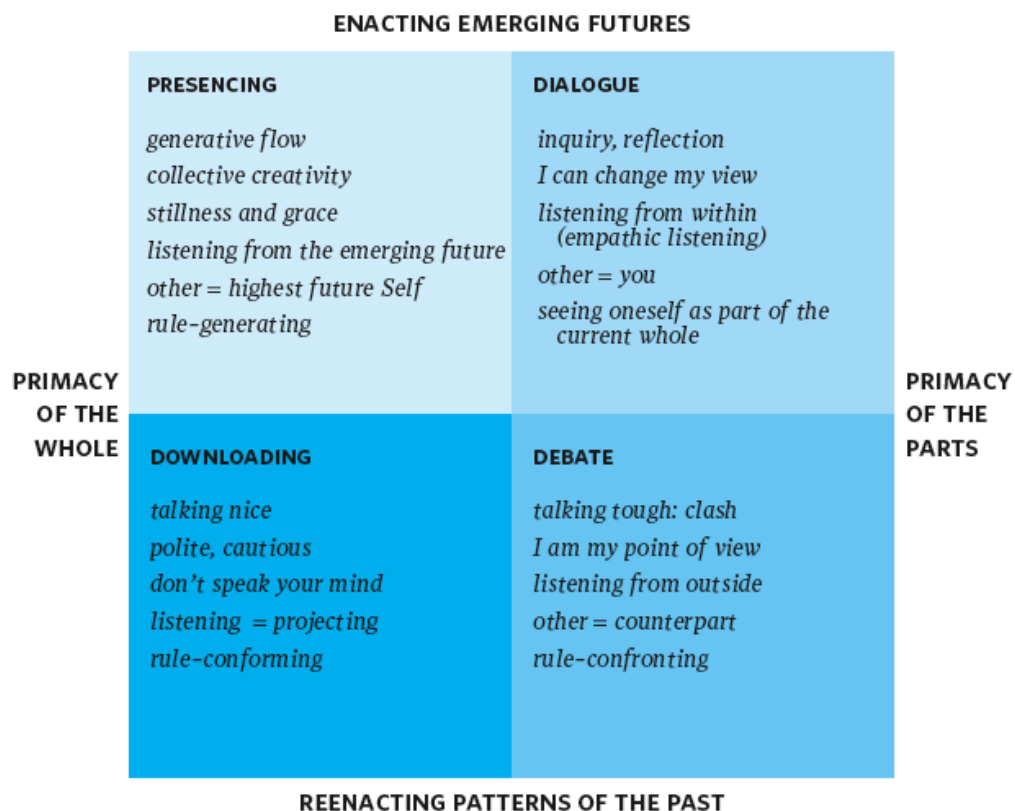


Figure 1: The four fields of conversation (Scharmer, 2007, p. 274)

In this heuristic, Scharmer describes how conversations move counter-clockwise through the fields of downloading, debate, dialogue and finally presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2007). For Scharmer, each field builds from the earlier habits of listening and speaking that characterize the previous field of conversation. In teaching the course, I dedicate a course week to exploring each of the four fields of conversation. Generally this involves introducing the characteristic habits and



practices of attention that distinguish downloading from debate, debate from dialogue and dialogue from presencing, as well as the habits of listening, speaking and patterns of engagement that give rise to these field-specific dynamics. We then explore alternatives for facilitating groups and teams from the field of downloading to debate, debate to dialogue and dialogue to presencing.

When teaching the four fields of conversation, I have found more advanced students tend to relate to dialogue and particularly presencing conversations through the discoveries made in their meditative practice, which sensitizes them to the subtle phenomenological processes that shape conversations and collective processes of knowledge creation. Presencing especially provides a context of conversation where deeper meanings and new experiences of one's self and the group arise. Where meditation offers a passive *intrapersonal* rejuvenation of the ontological dimension of student's learning through a renewed contact with their deeper being, presencing actively engages the ontological dimension *interpersonally* in conversation. In *Dialogue Processes*, I have adapted Scharmer's account of presencing primarily in the context of conversation, thus emphasizing the interpersonal context. However, Scharmer (2007) has also developed *intrapersonal* practices of presencing for different creative purposes. Along the lines of how Senge and Wheatley (2001) have explored the significance of meditative and contemplative practice within the context of dialogue processes in learning communities, I introduce presencing as a creative practice of conversation with a contemplative means for uncovering the *collective* ontological dimension of student's experiences. Emphasizing the contemplative aspect of presencing helps students learn to draw upon the ontological qualities of being that individual meditation practice invokes. Also, by framing presencing as a contemplative practice, students tend to be more attentive to the subtle dynamics of listening and speaking that distinguish presencing from dialogue.

Overall, presencing helps students develop a new appreciation for the creative possibilities of speaking and listening from a shared place, a common ground as it were, that is aligned more with a deeper existential and participatory sense of who they are individually and as a collective. Presencing then as a field of conversation offers a permission for everyone to listen for and be informed by the subtle ontological dimension of our experience in relation to whatever the subject or topic happens to be.

### **Closing thoughts**

Barnett's call offers a compelling visionary response for transforming conventional higher education instructional and learning practices. In my CrCrTh616 Course, this has involved inviting students to work with the core interior dimensions of their experiences through learning the skills and dispositions of conversational leadership. Working with practices of contemplative learning has offered my students an effective approach for stimulating fundamental ontological and creative dimensions of learning and knowing consistent with Barnett's vision, in addition to empowering students to thrive amidst the increasing uncertainty, complexity and deep existential and social challenges of our time.

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