

Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning

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Much light has been shed on important features of teaching and learning by Alasdair MacIntyre's writings. Yet there are experiences that are crucial to teaching and learning that are unaddressed in MacIntyre's arguments; experiences that reveal education as a distinctive kind of practice. This paper examines one kind of such experience: an experience I call 'being pulled up short'. Drawing on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gerald L. Bruns, I analyse an example of teaching King Lear to argue that being pulled up short is a unique experience of disorientation that cannot be taught merely by pedagogical skill, including the modern tools and approaches provided by constructivist learning theory and meta-cognition. The paper concludes by identifying challenges that being pulled up short poses for the education of disposition, and for the aims and activities of teaching.

INTRODUCTION

How should we understand the purposes of teaching and learning? According to Alasdair MacIntyre, teachers impart skills, which enable students to participate in disciplinary communities of practice. Young students may not understand the ends to which skills are put. Nor are they necessarily proficient in using the skills they learn. Nevertheless, teachers can help the student to 'learn to care about "getting it right"' and 'to feel a sense of his or her own powers, of achievement in getting it right' (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5). At more advanced levels, 'teachers enable their students to deploy their skills in order to achieve the goods of some particular practice' (*ibid.*). Advanced students also can be taught to value the goods of different practices, not because they lead to lucrative jobs, but because they are inherently worthwhile.

The aims MacIntyre identifies are necessary and important. There is, however, another dimension of educational experience that MacIntyre's writings on education do not address and which remains largely

unexplored by educators and educational scholars. I call this dimension of teaching and learning ‘being pulled up short’, drawing on an idea articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Being pulled up short emphasises, not proficiency and power, but proclivity for self-questioning and doubt. I am keen to explore this overlooked dimension in some detail in this essay. In doing so, I shall not be confronting MacIntyre’s arguments directly, but shall rather be unfolding educational practice from the inside, and thus highlighting some important things that go beyond skills and that make teaching and learning distinctive *as a practice*.

That teachers should help students learn to question their assumptions may not seem like an original idea. Proponents of reflective learning, for example, maintain that good teachers enable students to recognise and correct errors in their own thinking. (See for example Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000, p. 97). In a similar vein, Israel Scheffler argues that learning to recognise and productively challenge the painful unsettlement of one’s expectations is necessary for the development of rational character (Scheffler, 1977, p. 182). MacIntyre also emphasises the importance of learning to put one’s beliefs at stake (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 388).

While all these views illustrate the phenomenon of self-questioning and doubt, none of them captures the experience of being pulled up short. These views assume that challenging our prejudgements is a choice we govern or an activity we can monitor and direct. Sometimes, however, our beliefs are thrown into doubt without, and even despite, prior deliberation on our part. This particular experience of negation is what Gadamer means by being pulled up short. When we are pulled up short, events we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we are immune interrupt our lives and challenge our self-understanding in ways that are painful but transforming.

The idea that questioning our presuppositions is not necessarily subject to our desire or will is unfamiliar to many educators. Given that educational aims typically stress the importance of learning to regulate oneself and one’s thinking, it may be difficult to imagine what being pulled up short entails, or what this experience might suggest for teaching and learning. I want, therefore, to offer a fuller analysis of being pulled up short and its implications for education. My analysis begins by examining Gadamer’s conceptualisation of being pulled up short as it appears in *Truth and Method* (1993). I then explore how and why being pulled up short may occur in an educational context. The situation I consider concerns the experience of reading *King Lear* for an undergraduate humanities seminar. My discussion concludes by identifying questions and challenges that arise when we want to teach students to be open to being pulled up short.

BEING PULLED UP SHORT: INSIGHTS FROM GADAMER’S PHILOSOPHY

To appreciate being pulled up short, it is helpful first to describe Gadamer’s account of understanding that is unproblematic. Everyday, we

make sense of people, events, social institutions, rituals and practices: 'One can hardly *not* understand', Gerald Bruns observes (Bruns, 1992, p. 3). Understanding is unavoidable, because we are born or 'thrown' into historical contexts that already have been interpreted. 'Human beings always have inherited a way of looking at things around them long before they begin to modify that way of looking', Brice Wachterhauser explains. 'Our very ability to understand at all comes from our participation in contexts that make reality meaningful in the first place' (Wachterhauser, 1986, p. 22).

Understanding is therefore an activity we naturally live, a way of being involved in and concerned with the world (Gadamer, 1993, p. 246). Gadamer equates 'lived' understanding with 'know-how' (p. 260). Knowing how to get around in the world is a practical activity, requiring me to engage my situation, not observe it from afar. What are these circumstances asking of me? What is the right thing to do? Am I willing and able to respond? What I do and do not do reflects past choices and expresses the kind of person I think I am and want to become. *How* I see the world and *what* I do within it is bound up with *who* I am and *where* I am headed. Gadamer calls this process of ongoing moral negotiation with oneself 'application' or self-understanding. In his words: '*all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding . . . Thus it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself (sich verstehen), projecting himself upon his possibilities*' (p. 260). In sum, lived understanding is pre-reflective practical know-how, intimately tied to self-knowledge and moral orientation. Lived understanding is not an achievement or state of mind we regulate and produce. Lived understanding signifies the existential condition of being human. To understand is to be at home, to feel we belong in our surroundings (Bruns, 1992, pp. 3, 158).

But while we may know how to get around in the world, the world also escapes being confined within what Bruns calls 'the conceptual apparatus I have prepared for it, or that my time and place have prepared for it' (1992, p. 180). This does not mean that the world lies before us as an alien object upon which we gaze as detached spectators. The world, after all, is our abode, the medium of our lives. Thus on one level, the world can be nothing other than deeply familiar. Nonetheless, the world departs from our expectations and desires, refuses to be appropriated by us or subjected to our categories. A degree of tension always exists between what we believe, see, and hope and that which happens despite our expectations and preparation. As the saying goes, 'Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans'.

While the difference between the world and us can be experienced when unforeseen happiness comes our way, more significant disclosures of difference occur whenever our assumptions, expectations, and desires fail to materialise, are thwarted, or reversed. Such disappointments of expectation Gadamer calls 'being pulled up short' (Gadamer, 1993, p. 268). Gadamer introduces this phrase in relation to reading texts. But being pulled up short encompasses other experiences in which our expectations

are denied. '[E]xperience is initially always an experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be', Gadamer asserts (1993, p. 354). Being pulled up short is not confined to times of profound upheaval; life is full of everyday kinds of shattering. No one, Gadamer declares, is exempt from being pulled up short. 'Experience in this sense belongs to the historical nature of man' (p. 356).

Tibetan Buddhism makes a similar claim, Walter Parker observes. 'Ancient Tibetan Buddhist texts contain various taxonomies of life's ruptures and refusals', Parker explains:

According to one, there are eight refusals, separated into two groups: the Big Five and the Daily Three. Any one of these will get your attention. The Big Five are birth, old age, sickness, death, and physical pain. The Daily Three are misfortune (getting what you don't want), longing (not getting what you do want), and impermanence (the haunting certainty that the present moment, whether peace or terror, will not last) (Parker, unpublished paper).

The experience Parker calls 'misfortune' corresponds to being pulled up short. Being pulled up short is a particular misfortune we unwittingly bring on ourselves as a consequence of trying to manage or avoid other events in Parker's taxonomy. Longing for desires to be fulfilled, we pursue big dreams. Attempting to outrun death, we chase success and fame. We want permanence and so we hold onto relationships.

But the steps we take to improve our lives contribute to our undoing. Pursuing dreams, we are pulled up short when obsessive attempts to quench our desires leave us feeling bereft. We are pulled up short when, despite great effort, our drive to be larger than life deadens our zest for living. Clutching others, we are pulled up short when our behaviour leads to betrayal or rejection. Confounding what we expect, being pulled up short invariably catches us off-guard, challenging 'know-how' and its accompanying sense of security and control. Cherished self-assumptions are also thrown into doubt. Being pulled up short discloses attitudes, qualities and behaviours we would prefer to disown, deny or recognise only insofar as we project them onto others. What seemed natural or right is exposed (Bruns, 1992, p. 183) as an evasion of responsibility, a blind spot that diminishes or distorts who and how we are in the world. Our dreams, fuelled by restless ambition, are vain attempts to fill a spiritual void. Our drive for notoriety is an effort to hide despair. Rejections and betrayals disclose that we are more afraid of instability than we are concerned with supporting others. Indeed, the self-perceptions (self-deceptions) we try hardest to protect are most vulnerable to being pulled up short.

Being pulled up short thus disrupts self-inflation, betraying false pride, invincibility, or exaggerated desire for control. Living through this experience we ask: How could I have been so blind? Why did I not see this coming? Insight does not arise in advance of or apart from being pulled up short; to be pulled up short is just to see that I have been deluding myself.

Admitting self-deception is a kind of divestment, Bruns observes: '[N]othing is acquired, nothing is grasped or objectified in its essence; instead, *everything is taken away*' (p. 182). Seeing that the person I thought I was has stopped functioning and no longer exists can leave me feeling at a loss.

We tend to think that loss is unfortunate, something to avoid. But insofar as being pulled up short surfaces entrenched assumptions in lived understanding that would otherwise remain invisible, loss can be an opening to recognise perspectives that we tend to dismiss or ignore when life is going our way.¹ Our possibilities are not endless. Thus happiness may not lie in future gratification but in learning to accept the present, good and bad. Fame will not release us from death. Accepting this may leave us time us to engage in acts of kindness, the impact of which may reverberate far beyond our own lives. Letting go can enhance, not inhibit, relations. Accepting change, friendships can grow more stable.

The level of insight that arises in being pulled up short does not represent a gradual alteration or expansion of our existing worldview. It is instead a radical transformation. Georgia Warnke explains: 'What we experience is the error or partiality of our previous views and we experience this in such a way that we are now too experienced or sophisticated to re-live the experience of believing them' (Warnke, 1987, p. 26). Having been pulled up short, there is no going back. Life will never again be the same.

We might be tempted to conclude that transformation is a gain, not a loss. Being pulled up short, we gain self-understanding that is clearer, more honest, and deep. But to call understanding a 'gain' worries Gadamer. Doing so suggests that self-insight is a shield we fashion to prevent or protect us from ever again being pulled up short. It implies that by improving our skills and expanding our knowledge, we can make and remake ourselves, much like master craftsmen mould objects. This false assumption, Gadamer argues, is not just personal or idiosyncratic. It shapes entire ages and cultures, particularly in the West.

We are not at our own disposal, Gadamer insists. Self-understanding is not entirely subject to regulation by desire or will (Gadamer, 1993, pp. 314–317). Even transformations in self-understanding that arise when we are pulled up short are susceptible to being pulled up short. To deny this is to perpetuate the condition of self-inflation, which only increases the likelihood that we will be pulled up short again. Ultimately, Gadamer concludes, the insight of being pulled up short is less a gain or self-achievement than an acknowledgement of boundaries and limits:

What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity . . . into the absolute-ness of the barrier that separates man from the divine . . . To acknowledge what is does not just mean to recognise what is at this moment, but to have insight into the limited degree to which the future is still open to expectation or planning or, even more fundamentally, to have the insight that all the expectation and planning of finite beings is finite and limited (p. 357).

To accept limitation is not just to recognise fallibility as a contingent condition. It is to admit that we are limited in principle. 'Finitude', Gadamer says, is the inescapable condition of being human (Dunne, 1993, p. 131; Bruns, 1992, p. 180).

We can choose to ignore, evade or deny human limitation. Or we can choose to acknowledge our finitude and realise that every gain in self-understanding entails loss (Gadamer, 1981, p. 104). While accepting this paradox is hard, doing so can free us from the despair that denying limits arouses. In this way, being pulled up short can liberate us to become more fully human and 'present' in the world. To summarise, being pulled up short arrests, reverses or negates pre-reflective lived understanding of world and self. Being pulled up short is a misfortune we bring on ourselves, because we try to outrun or outwit human finitude. This disorienting experience of loss reveals that despite our planning, life-events may unfold in ways we do not foresee or want. While this experience is painful, living through it can awaken us to choices we could not otherwise imagine.

READING *KING LEAR*

Having analysed being pulled up short as an element of Gadamer's philosophy, I want to further clarify this experience by considering how reading a text for an undergraduate humanities seminar may pull a reader up short. I draw my example from a volume entitled, *Great Books*, by film critic David Denby (Denby, 1996). *Great Books* chronicles Denby's sabbatical year at Columbia University, re-reading texts he initially encountered thirty years earlier as a Columbia freshman. In the section that follows, I present Denby's account of what happened when Professor Edward Taylor's class read Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

When we got to *King Lear*, [Professor] Taylor began by analysing metaphor and structure, recounting the play's bounty of negatives – the many 'nos' and 'nothings.' But suddenly he said: 'Nobody can lay a glove on this play. This is the greatest thing written by anyone, anytime, anywhere, and I don't know what to do with it'. In a case like this, no one else knows what to do with it either.

He had never made a remark remotely like that one, and my wife, who had accompanied me to class that day, looked at me oddly, as if to say, 'Who is this guy?' for Taylor, the hipster wit, normally imperturbable and allusive, was now on the verge of tears. Quickly, he returned to a notion he had developed back in the fall, when we were discussing the *Odyssey*: the difference between surface, or nominal, recognition, and deep, or substance, recognition . . .

Lear was similarly about deep recognition—an experience accompanied by pain as well as pleasure. 'The play starts out bad, and gets worse and worse,' Taylor said in his baritone murmur. 'What we've got here is

delay, protraction, until moments of supreme recognition.’ And we read through the scenes of the shattered Lear at the end of the play encountering his old friend, Gloucester, now blinded, and soon after, Cordelia. Tayler, following Harvard philosopher and critic Stanley Cavell, focused on a plangent exchange between Gloucester and Lear. Gloucester says, ‘O, let me kiss that hand,’ and Lear replies, ‘Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.’

‘I’m sorry, this stuff gets to me,’ Tayler said haltingly, looking down for an instant. ‘Lear feels shame. Shame is one of the biggest emotions.’ He paused for a second, and then glared at some of the men in the class. ‘You’re breaking out in pimples; your girlfriend comes upon you when you’re masturbating. It’s *shame!*’ The men looked up, electrified but silent. ‘Shame, the most basic emotion. Lear wants to be *loved*. Lear says, “Which of you shall we say doth love us the most?” But what won’t he give? In order to receive love, you have to be seen through and not just seen. You have to let people see your murderous impulses as well as your benevolent ones. En route to recognising Gloucester and Cordelia, Lear has to go through a process’ (Denby, 1996, pp. 305–306).

Tayler proceeded to quote the speech in which King Lear questions the legal basis of royal authority. ‘See,’ said Tayler, ‘Lear has recognised himself. You recognise something in yourself and you punish someone else for it’ (Denby, 1996, p. 306). As Tayler spoke, Denby eyed his classmates. ‘Around us, the students sat dry-eyed’, Denby observes (p. 306). In contrast to the students’ lack of expressed emotion, Denby felt ‘a peculiar, unsought intimacy with this play’ (p. 293). He explains:

When my mother was ill and at her worst, about four years before she died, I had thought about *King Lear* more than anyone would want to. ‘She *is* King Lear’, I would say angrily to my wife after an impossible phone call or visit, the joke seeming staler and less illuminating each time (p. 293).

According to Denby, the ability to relate personally to *Lear* is helpful for understanding Shakespeare’s message. Denby writes, ‘Certainly, if [*King Lear*] doesn’t suggest something intimate to us, it risks seeming outrageous and improbable, a preposterous fable with overwrought emotions and extravagantly embittered poetry’ (p. 293).

But familiarity with *King Lear* did not make reading it easy. ‘Gearing up to read [*Lear*] again, I felt something like fear’, Denby writes (p. 293). ‘It was immense, looming, threatening; sinister and violent as well as noble, a great work that comes and finds us out . . . Much of it—details of the story and individual lines—came back readily enough, and with the force of accusation’ (p. 293). ‘What need you five-and-twenty? ten? or five?’ Goneril says to her father. ‘O reason not the need!’ King Lear replies (Denby, p. 307). Reading *Lear* now in Tayler’s class, Denby realised something he had not understood during any of his previous encounters with this text. Denby’s mother may have been King Lear. But Denby was Goneril and Regan, who spoke to their father ‘in the tones of

coldest rationality, trying to check his anguished demands with reason' (p. 307). Denby confesses:

The famous lines mortified me as I read the play again, because I was forever trying to reason with my mother, trying to separate her real difficulties from her imagining of difficulty . . . I see a bit of Goneril and Regan's stony rigor breaking through my exasperated relation to my mother (pp. 307–308).

Understanding *King Lear* and himself in ways he had not noticed before, Denby despaired to see how blindly he had behaved in the past. 'If only I could have let fly my fancy, any fancy that worked, and performed a cure out of love – a cure like the Fool's or Edgar's!' Denby laments (p. 308). 'How could I not have realised that, emotionally, [my mother] needed reassurance, not reality?' (*ibid.*).

DENBY'S RESPONSE TO *KING LEAR*: PULLED UP SHORT

Three characters appear in Denby's story: Denby, the students and Professor Tayler. I begin my analysis with Denby's experience, because it clearly illustrates what the experience of being pulled up short is like. Later, I will turn to the students and Professor Tayler. Their responses to *King Lear* illuminate challenges that arise when being pulled up short becomes a focus for teaching and learning. To clarify why Denby's response to *King Lear* exemplifies being pulled up short, it is helpful to recall our brief definition of this experience. When we are pulled up short, an event we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we are immune interrupts our life and challenges our self-understanding in ways that are painful but transforming. In light of this definition, it is helpful to ask three questions. Which aspect of Denby's understanding is interrupted? How exactly is Denby's understanding transformed? What is the unforeseen and unwanted event that precipitates transformation?

The aspect of Denby's understanding that is challenged concerns his strategy for dealing with his ailing mother. Denby assumed that reasoning with his mother would assuage her suffering by helping her come to terms with the reality of dying. Denby comes to see that 'reassurance, not reality', would have served his mother better. This transformation in understanding pertains to Denby's self-image. Denby realises he is the kind of person who uses reason to allay difficulty and hide or manage exasperation. Why was I unable to perform a cure out of love? Denby wonders. Denby now wants to be someone who offers comfort, not 'stony rigor,' even when reassurance may seem unreasonable in the face of death.

How is Denby's understanding transformed? Reading how Goneril treats her father, Denby recognises the consequences of his own behaviour more clearly. Using reason to help or protect his mother did not work and in fact may have made matters worse. Denby's new understanding, while better, nonetheless is mortifying. Denby's mortification suggests that his insight is painful, so much so that he may not have come to it on his own,

without the aid of Shakespeare's text. Denby's new insight thus is unwanted and unforeseen. But what is the unforeseen and unwanted *event* that pulls Denby up short and transforms his understanding? The following passage sheds light on this question:

Gearing up to read [*Lear*] again, I felt something like fear. It was immense, looming, threatening; sinister and violent as well as noble, a great work that comes and finds us out . . . Much of it—details of the story and individual lines—came back readily enough, and with the force of accusation (p. 293).

In the words of this excerpt, *King Lear* accuses Denby. *King Lear* is a great noble work that comes and finds us out. Being found out is not something Denby wants or expects. Immense looming threatening fear overtakes him. What is striking about this scene is its revelation about who is in charge. The text, not the reader, initiates and controls the action. *King Lear* overcomes Denby and discloses his blindness, over and beyond anything Denby intends or does. Denby thus does not read *King Lear* in order to understand it and determine its relevance for his life. *King Lear* prevails over Denby and pulls him up short.

That Shakespeare's play had this effect on Denby defies conventional assumptions about what happens when we read and interpret texts. We do not expect texts to accuse or expose us. Rather, we assume that we approach texts and do things to them. Texts are at our disposal, objects to examine and grasp. We dissect narrative structures, analyse metaphors, consider how characters and themes are developed. We thereby record, clarify and even contribute to or shape the meaning of the text we read. Having interpreted a text's meaning, we can connect its lesson to our lives, use its message to inspect, supplement and/or correct our self-understanding.

But Denby's language suggests that he did not interpret *King Lear* or use this text as an instrument for self-criticism. *King Lear*, rather, critically interprets Denby: accuses him, finds him out, interrupts his comfortable self-image. The immense looming threatening fear Denby feels when approaching this text suggests that learning from *King Lear* was not entirely Denby's choice. If Denby does not self-consciously choose to interpret *King Lear*, how does he understand this text and what it means for his life? How and why does understanding occur, when a text pulls us up short? Although he does not use the phrase 'pulled up short', Gerald Bruns conceptualises the experience of reading in a way that can help us answer these questions:

every text occupies the position of Socrates with respect to the one who seeks to interpret it, so that even when we try to reduce a text formally by means of analysis and exegesis, we are nevertheless (know it or not) always in a position of being interrogated, opened up and exposed in the manner of one of Socrates' interlocutors . . . interpretation is an event that moves in two directions. It is not possible to interpret a text without being interpreted by it in turn (Bruns, 1992, p. 156).

According to Bruns, a text is not necessarily an object that lies in repose. Texts can 'invade' (Bruns, 1992, p. 148) and 'overwhelm' (Bruns, 1992, p. 157) us. The reader, meanwhile, is not necessarily a self-possessed agent who beholds a text and decides whether or not to engage it. Sometimes, a reader submits to a text, surrenders to its message, without or even despite her desire or will. When this happens, a reader does not determine what a text means. Rather, she stands accused by what the text reveals. Bruns elaborates: 'one is subject to the text, under its jurisdiction and power, exposed to it, answerable to it for one's conduct, defined by its meanings' (p. 146). On Bruns' model of reading, then, a text can address me in a manner that compels my response, whether I like it or not. I find myself caught up in 'the mode of being' (p. 145) that animates the work; I see myself in light of the text's message. Such understanding is not exclusively an operation I guide or conduct. Understanding instead is an event I can not help but live through. I understand what a text means, because I personally experience its lesson, undergo the drama that the text plays out.

Looking at what happened to Denby through the lens of Bruns' analytic framework, we can see that Denby understands *Lear*, not because he decides to plumb or extract its theme of filial relations and turn this message back on himself in act of critical self-reflection. Shakespeare's drama instead touches and overwhelms Denby, explodes his false belief that he can fend off his mother's despair. Denby 'gets' the play, because the play gets to Denby. Caught up in its denouement, Denby involuntarily suffers enlightenment through exposure and endures on a personal level the pain of 'deep recognition' that *Lear* undergoes. *King Lear* thus offers Denby an opportunity to learn a lesson that, on his own, he dismissed or failed to perceive: the very steps we take to ensure protection can expose us to life's harrowing storms. While this lesson is personal for Denby, it is not his alone. Learning to accept limitation is a profoundly human struggle. *King Lear* thus pulls Denby up short. Exposed by Shakespeare's drama in a way he neither wills nor wants, Denby's self-understanding is penetrated and transformed. Self-transformation in turn allows Denby to appreciate *Lear*'s meaning at a level that is more clear and deep.

PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES

Denby apparently came to understand *King Lear* on his own. While Tayler's response to the play may have resonated with Denby, it is unclear whether anything the Professor said or did in class served to guide or prompt Denby's understanding. Tayler's students exhibited a different response to *King Lear*. Whereas the play moved Denby, the students' dry-eyed reaction suggests that they were indifferent to it. To say that the students failed to understand *Lear* is not entirely accurate. On a technical level, Denby reports, the students could understand Shakespeare. Earlier, when reading *Richard II*, the students had no trouble deciphering the play's difficult language, analysing its narrative structure and deconstructing

its complex metaphors. 'The work was all detail,' Denby notes, 'highly specific, highly analytic: [Tayler] had yanked the students from their freshman reading habits to graduate-school subtleties' (Denby, 1996, p. 305).

Denby does not comment on the students' technical facility with *Lear*. We can surmise, however, that their exegesis of this text was also skilful. Nevertheless, the students failed to 'get' the play. Being able to systematically wield interpretative methods and theories thus may be insufficient to understand what a text means. While Tayler may not have to teach Denby, he does need to purposely induce his students to try and understand *Lear*'s message. To meet this challenge, some might suggest that Tayler turn to constructivism, a well-known theory of learning and teaching. Constructivist theory maintains that 'people construct new knowledge based on what they already know and believe' (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2002, p. 10). Existent knowledge and interests, in other words, act as a foundation upon which new understandings can be built. When students are given a chance to articulate their existing knowledge, they can learn to recognise what they know. Not only must students identify *what* they know: they also must specify *how* they reason and think. By developing skills such as meta-cognition, students can learn to inspect and regulate the processes by which they achieve new understanding (p. 47).

Following a constructivist model, Tayler might create opportunities for his students to apply *King Lear* to their own lives. To do this, Tayler might ask his students what they believe about themselves and the world, and whether they think *Lear* clarifies, affirms, extends or refutes their self-understanding. Tayler also might ask his students how and why they arrived at their conclusions. In so doing, Tayler would give his students a chance to make their thinking visible. He also would invite them to make public what they understand or fail to understand about Shakespeare's play and themselves. A number of themes in *King Lear* might be amenable to constructivist pedagogy. For example, the idea that parents sometimes demand their children's love is a phenomenon to which undergraduates might personally relate. Tayler might ask his students to work with classmates to verbalise whether and how this aspect of Shakespeare's text coincides with their own experience.

While constructivist pedagogy can be a valuable tool in helping students establish connections with certain themes in *King Lear*, it cannot promote understanding of the play in its entirety. Specifically, constructivism is inadequate for helping students appreciate the key theme of deep recognition. When Denby realises, for example, that reasoning with his mother did not protect her from suffering and in fact may have worsened her despair, he experiences deep recognition of his own self-deception. Deep recognition confronts the fundamental limits of what human beings know and can do. To recognise this level of limitation, we must admit: 'I do not control events as much as I think or would like. Moreover, my quest for control likely will bring about the very disappointment or failure I'm trying to avoid.' Acknowledging the outer limits of what we know and

can do is not a form of understanding we construct or meta-cognitively control. At this level, recognition of limits can not rely on the assumption of power that must be arrested if distortions of agency are to be exposed. Exaggerated faith in our ability to regulate events and ourselves becomes visible only when this ability is taken away—pulled up short—by experiences we do not expect but which we nonetheless bring about through our own duplicity or blindness.

To understand *Lear*'s dramatisation of deep recognition and human limits, students must experience radical limitation *for themselves* in the course of being pulled up short by Shakespeare's play. Like Denby, Tayler's students must undergo enlightenment through involuntary exposure. Constructivism cannot promote, much less construe, this experience of understanding, because constructivism perpetuates the very assumptions about agency and understanding that *King Lear* explodes. Within a constructivist framework, understanding is an activity human beings initiate, monitor, and direct. Not only texts, but also our own intellectual operations, are regarded as being at our disposal, subject to our inspection and control. Underlying constructivist understanding is a vision of what human beings are and can be. A recent report published by the National Research Council (USA) captures this vision: 'Humans are viewed as goal-directed agents who actively seek information', the report states (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000, p. 10). 'New developments in the science of learning . . . emphasize the importance of helping people take control of their own learning' (p. 12).

Promoting our propensity to regulate understanding and ourselves, constructivism works against and even belies the possibility that we can be pulled up short. Relying exclusively on constructivist theory to help students understand *Lear* thus may actually prevent them from learning the lessons that Shakespeare can teach. Tayler must find another way to help his students understand *Lear*; he must create opportunities whereby his students may be pulled up short by the text. Because being pulled up short diverges from conventional assumptions regarding the aims and activities of understanding and learning, working out what is required to teach individuals to appreciate and undergo this experience is a challenge that surpasses the scope of this paper. To conclude, therefore, I would like to sketch two issues that additional studies might pursue. My discussion is not limited to being pulled up short by texts; the issues are broad and are amenable to conceptual and empirical investigation. The first issue concerns the cultivation of disposition. The second issue concerns how being pulled up short can enrich the way we view the aims and activities of teaching.

LEARNING TO BE PULLED UP SHORT: EDUCATING DISPOSITION

The indifference of Tayler's students may surprise us. Given the power of *King Lear*, it may be hard to imagine how anyone could read this play and not be moved. Nonetheless, the students' indifference makes sense.

Explaining this reaction (or lack thereof) can help us see what is required if students are to learn to be pulled up short. To understand the students' indifference, it is helpful to clarify the role that choice plays when we are pulled up short. We do not choose the events that pull us up short. Neither do we choose whether this experience will expose self-distortions. Like or not, being pulled up short shatters self-deceptions we would not perceive outside or in advance of this experience.

While we do not elect or regulate when and how events will overtake us, we *can* choose to recognise these experiences when they occur. We can choose to admit or 'own' the self-delusions that being pulled up short reveals. Or we can choose to rationalise or deny the power of the event, to numb ourselves to the pain of being pulled up short. An event or encounter thus does not force us to be pulled up short. Even a compelling play like *King Lear* will not automatically break down our defences and expose us, despite our desire or will. Being pulled up short is an experience we choose to recognise, avoid or resist. Encounters and events pull us up short only when we acknowledge that they have revealed blind spots or deceptions we prefer to dismiss or ignore. The students' indifference to *King Lear* thus can be interpreted as an act of choice. The students choose to avoid, not succumb, to the play's shattering of self-deception. What is required to help individuals choose acknowledgement over avoidance?

Often, we regard choice as a capability or power we can distinguish, develop and deploy. Our power to choose can be directed to any number of ends. One goal of teaching is to help students choose ends that are good or right. With practice, our ability to choose worthy ends becomes more proficient. When this happens, we can say that choosing well has become a skill. Where being pulled up short is concerned, however, choice is not a skill we can hone. We do not become better at choosing to acknowledge being pulled up short. Neither does the choice to acknowledge this experience make undergoing it easier. Self-exposure is no less painful for having chosen to recognise it.

Choosing to acknowledge being pulled up short is instead a disposition, a way of being that shows itself as a proclivity or inclination to reason, feel and behave in certain characteristic ways. Dispositions reveal who we are and how we are oriented. Those who acknowledge being pulled up short understand that they are persons for whom being pulled up short is an ever-present possibility. Such a person can relinquish her self-assumptions, even those she believes protect, preserve or enhance her self-image. She is able to let go of the temptation to insist that she is right, and she can forego the need to always control her experience. One who chooses to be pulled up short tends to be open or receptive to the possibility that she may unexpectedly be found out. In the context of being pulled up short, then, disposition expresses self-understanding and a person's way of being in the world. It follows that teaching students to acknowledge being pulled up short requires that we pay attention to their self-understanding. Specifically, teachers must address and re-direct the tendency of students to think that they are impervious to self-exposure and radical limitation. For some students, the possibility of exposure may be

unfathomable. Others may entertain this idea, but only as a scenario that happens to other people, not to them.

Breaking this self-delusion is especially challenging in adolescence. Adolescents try to extend, not limit what they know and can do. There is another reason why the disposition to be pulled up short is difficult to educate. Simply putting students 'in the way' of being pulled up short, structuring conditions such that self-exposure is likely, may not be sufficient to pull a student up short. Unless a student already is inclined to be found out, he may miss or resist admitting he has been exposed. At the same time, the blindness or deception that prevents an individual from recognising self-exposure cannot be overcome in advance of being pulled up short. Being pulled up short thus requires the self-insight that is unavailable prior to being pulled up short. Given the circular relation between experience and self-understanding, it is not immediately clear how the disposition to be pulled up short can be educated.

Acknowledging this conundrum, I nonetheless suspect that good teachers can and do cultivate the disposition to be pulled up short. It behoves us to identify and study teachers who succeed in helping students learn to be open to this experience. A number of questions are amenable to empirical investigation. For example, enhancing self-mastery and self-esteem for all students has become an important educational aim. Indeed, many claim that education is distinguished by the goal of helping individuals release, direct, and enlarge their powers (Dunne, 1995, pp. 72–73). Being pulled up short challenges this view of human beings. How do teachers understand and negotiate this tension, particularly for students whose cultures may regard public self-exposure as a shameful occurrence that must be avoided?

The tension between mastery and being vulnerable also raises questions with respect to teaching texts like *King Lear*. On the one hand, teachers try to develop exegetical skill. On the other hand, teachers must help students learn to be pulled up short. Exegesis presumes that readers are agents who act on texts and are capable of regulating their powers of understanding. Being pulled up short assumes that texts act on readers and that understanding is not always subject to our desire and will. These two views of understanding and agency are opposed. Of course, there is nothing to suggest that exegetical skill cannot co-exist alongside being pulled up short. Insofar as comprehending *how* a text structures or organises its message enables a reader to understand *what* a text means, being pulled up short may require or depend on skilful exegesis. This possibility suggests that teachers must be able to distinguish these two ways of understanding and discern which one is appropriate, and when. Teachers also must be able to determine how these ways of understanding interact, overlap or play off each other. How do successful teachers think about and accomplish these complex tasks?

As these examples illustrate, helping students choose to acknowledge being pulled up short presents a number of interesting empirical questions. Observing teachers who successfully cultivate this disposition, and asking them to explain what they do and why, can enrich our understanding of

how disposition can be educated. It also can deepen our understanding of being pulled up short as an experience that occurs in educational environments.

PULLED UP SHORT AND TEACHING

Twice while teaching *King Lear*, Tayler had to stop his lesson in order to regain his self-composure. Analysing *Lear*'s metaphors and structure, Tayler suddenly confesses, 'I don't know what to do with [this play]'. The normally imperturbable wit was 'on the verge of tears', Denby relates. Later, reading through the scene when Lear encounters Gloucester, Tayler haltingly says, 'I'm sorry, this stuff gets to me'. Tayler's loss of equanimity apparently was startling and perhaps uncomfortable to behold. 'Who *is* this guy?' Denby's wife wonders. The students, meanwhile, 'sat dry-eyed'. These reactions are understandable. We do not expect professional teachers to hesitate and cry in class. Professors with PhDs in English are not supposed to admit they are stumped by a text.

In an era that stresses high-stakes assessment and gains in student achievement, some might contend that Tayler's behaviour is inappropriate and not conducive to learning. Students can not master knowledge and skills if teachers are out of control. Teachers, therefore, must do what they can to increase their own knowledge, hone their skills and develop new competencies. The more teachers are in command of what they should know and do, the more they can help students achieve to their highest potential. This familiar line of thinking has much to recommend it. We want students to achieve, and we want expert teachers to help them. The knowledge and skill expert teaching requires is certainly complex and deep. But to define successful teaching and learning strictly in terms of increasing competence, mastering knowledge and maintaining control is to miss the import of Tayler's experience.

We can not be certain whether Tayler's experience is an example of being pulled up short while teaching. To determine this, we would need to know more about Tayler's self-understanding, his view of himself as a teacher, and whether teaching *King Lear* exposed self-distortions to which Tayler was previously oblivious. When Tayler claims that Lear feels the shame of deep recognition, he may or may not be describing his own experience and feelings. That Tayler loses his composure nonetheless suggests that being pulled up short is an experience to which he may be disposed. So disposed, Tayler is able to confront his self-deceptions. Amenable to learning from experiences he does not create or control; teaching for Tayler becomes a way of life wherein vulnerability and transformation are continual if unforeseen possibilities. In this sense, contra MacIntyre's argument, the life of a teacher can indeed be seen as 'a specific kind of life'—one that remains open to the possibilities just mentioned.

The disposition to be pulled up short does not guarantee that teachers will be able to induce their students to understand this experience. Being

pulled up short reminds us that outcomes can exceed and even defy what we plan and expect. Sometimes, teaching is a well-crafted leap . . . into the unknown. Nevertheless, teachers who are open to being pulled up short themselves can conceive that this experience might be a learning opportunity for their students. The range of options for teaching and learning thereby is enlarged. As Gadamer puts it, 'only those teachers who can freely question their own prejudgements, and who have the capacity to imagine the possible, can help students develop the ability to judge and the confidence to think for themselves' (Gadamer, 1992, p. 58).²

These arguments thus reminds us, in contrast to MacIntyre's case that teaching is not a practice and that it is never more than a means, that teaching encompasses more than what a person knows and can do. Teaching also expresses who a person is. Teachers are professionals who command expertise; teachers also are human beings who are likely to be pulled up short. Negotiating this tension is not easy. But to paraphrase Gadamer, wisdom 'consists in not covering up the tension . . . but in consciously bringing it out' (Gadamer, 1993, p. 306).³

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NOTES

1. I believe that Gadamer tends to discount the role that agency and choice play in understanding. See for example Gadamer, 1989, p. 26.
2. For additional examples of Gadamer's writing on education, see Gadamer (2002) and his discussion of *Bildung* in Part I of *Truth and Method* (1993).
3. I am grateful to my husband, Dave Tarshes, for his perceptive comments and unfailing support.

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