**Play in Conversation:**

**The Cognitive Import of Gadamer’s Theory of Play**

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**Abstract**

This chapter presents a conception of understanding where understanding emerges out of the joint experience of conversation. On this conception, understanding requires more than the pre-reflective acquisition of shared social meanings – a conception of understanding historically highlighted by existential phenomenologists. Beyond this, it requires what occurs in genuine conversation, namely, that one put one’s pre-reflective social meanings at risk in the process of critical self-reflection. Drawing from the hermeneutic phenomenology of Hans-Georg Gadamer, I argue that conversation is that joint experience that gives rise to such critical self-reflection and that it is conversation’s play-structure in particular that makes it a source of understanding in this sense.

When we reflect on the fundamental role that language plays in our lives, it is difficult to overstate the importance of conversation. Conversations, after all, have the power to transform our beliefs. This transformative effect can take place not only when we pass the hours in meaningful discussion with a friend but also when, in reading, we think along with the author about a subject matter or when, in listening to a lecture, we follow along with another’s path of inquiry. In each case, the conversation into which we enter is an opportunity to examine our present beliefs, to put them to the test, and potentially to rethink them.

In emphasizing the importance of such interactions, however, one might think we weaken the argument that language is essential to how we develop *understanding* of the world. After all, we do not tend to think about understanding as something that emerges out of self-examination—let alone a continual series of self-examinations. This is apparent if we examine the theory and practice of education today. In schools today, one finds little emphasis on conversation and the social interactions and personal transformation that come along with it. Instead, education is understood as the transmission—from teachers to students—of socially valuable facts and skills. Paulo Freire famously calls this the “banking concept” of education. On the banking model of education, a teacher (or, in many cases, some impersonal educational technology) deposits content into the mind of the student. Teachers possess the facts, the possession of facts is understood to be knowledge, and their job is to transfer this knowledge to pupils. As Freire (2017) puts it, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues *communiqués* and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (45). This model is widespread in schools today. While nowadays one is likely to find more emphasis on the application of ideas and not just memorization and on the acquisition of skills and not just facts, assessment is still focused on the unilinear process of the banking model. Students still focus on mastering the content that their teachers have mastered, and teachers are still assessed on the basis of the extent to which they have successfully transmitted this content. In this scheme, conversation is at best regarded as a means of introducing new information, the absorption of which is still taken to be the essence of understanding.

When genuine conversation does take place as part of educational experience, however, it unsettles both the assumption that learning transpires through this unilinear process of transmission and the theory of understanding implicit in this assumption. Engaged in class conversation or in reading a text, students are not simply absorbing new information to be inscribed upon an empty mind. They engage in conversation by putting forward what they already think they know about the subject matter but also by being open to changing their minds, to discovering the limits of their own beliefs. For those who engage in this way, genuine conversations have an intrinsic unpredictability that teaching and learning according to the banking model of education do not. In genuine conversation, no participant determines in advance where the conversation will go and what will have been learned from it. This unpredictability is part of what is exciting about conversation. Yet it is also what tends to make us suspicious of its cognitive significance.

In what follows, I set out to explore the role of conversation in understanding. I begin, in the first section, by considering how phenomenologists have laid the groundwork for this investigation by shedding light on the role that social bonds and interactions have in disclosing the world to us in particular ways. In the second section, I turn to the role of one particular form of social interaction in this development, namely, play. Taking my lead from Gadamer’s analysis of the ontological valence of play in *Truth and Method*, I find that play not only prepares us to participate in conversations with others but allows us to take the conversations into which we enter as opportunities for ongoing critical self-reflection. Moreover, I argue that when we highlight the importance of play in this way, we gain clarity not just on the way understanding arises but into the nature of understanding itself. We see that the acquisition of prereflective social meanings is but a moment in the process of understanding and not the whole of that process. In the third and final section, I elaborate on what it means to see understanding as a process of ongoing critical self-reflection, returning to the topic of education and drawing from hermeneutic educational theory to clarify this point.

**1. THE EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF UNDERSTANDING**

It is common to define knowledge as the condition of having true beliefs about the world, that is, of possessing an objective mental representation of how things out in the world actually are. This way of conceiving of knowledge has become especially common in recent centuries with the rise of the Scientific Revolution and its pursuit of what is “out there,” beyond our biases. We know from the Platonic dialogues, however, that this was already a dominant conception of knowledge in the ancient world. When Socrates investigates the nature of knowledge in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, for example, he asks Theaetetus to present what he considers the most plausible definition of knowledge. After realizing the inadequacy of his initial answer that knowledge is perception, Theaetetus states confidently that knowledge must be “right opinion” (187b), that, is an opinion or belief (*doxa*)that corresponds to how things actually are in the world. On such a definition, the development of knowledge needn’t involve any exchange between people. To achieve it, one need only capture the imprint of reality on the mind.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Over the past century, phenomenologists have sought to problematize this notion in several ways. Philosophers in the existential phenomenological tradition, for example, have insisted that knowing must be thought of as a form of being-in-the-world and thus as something that we are always already engaged in insofar as we have being-in-the-world as our mode of being. In Section 13 of *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger makes clear how this conception differs from the former:

When Dasein directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated, but its primary kind of Being is such that it is always ‘outside’ along entities which it encounters and which belong to a world already discovered. (1962, 89)

Developing knowledge or understanding, then, is not a matter of receiving new information—of inscribing it onto a blank slate. Understanding is always already occurring insofar as we are always immersed in a world. Let us call this existential phenomenological conception of understanding “immersive understanding.”

Needless to say, it is difficult to “get behind” immersive understanding in order to give an account of how it first emerges, and developmental accounts that do so run the risk of losing the ontological force of Heidegger’s argument. For Heidegger, it is misleading to speak about a world in which a knower at some point emerges and eventually comes to understand that world in some way. That said, there have been several authors coming out of the existential phenomenological tradition who have attempted to give some account of how immersive understanding emerges in the course of human development (Dreyfus 1992; Hatab 2017 and 2019; Watsuji 1996). In these developmental accounts, social interactions turn out to be essential to the development of the immersive understanding that Heidegger describes.

Particularly worth mentioning here is the work of Japanese phenomenologist, Watsuji Tetsurō, who, in his major work, *Rinrigaku*, offers an account of the constitutive role that social relations play in worldhood and in the immersive understanding that accompanies it—an account that he finds underdeveloped in *Being and Time* (Watsuji 1996).[[2]](#footnote-2) For Watsuji, immersive understanding of the world is first configured through social relations, through what Watsuji calls relations of “betweenness” [*aidagara*]. The book that I hold in my hands, the street beneath my feet, even the heat of the summer air on my body—all of these are first set forth for me by others and retain tacit meanings incurred through these pragmatic, social interactions. Indeed, for Watsuji, it is not just in my language but already in my pre-verbal existential spatiality, in the way that things appear to me in space, where social relations play a constitutive role in setting forth that world with which my understanding is always already engaged.

As it turns out, from a developmental standpoint, these pre-verbal social relations play a pivotal role in allowing children eventually to develop language. Hans-Georg Gadamer hits upon this point in his late essay, “The Boundaries of Language,” published in 1985. In the essay, Gadamer makes the developmental argument that the ability to speak with others requires that a child first be attuned to others. They must already have in common, for example, a pragmatic social context that acts as the hermeneutic background for interpreting any words or gestures exchanged. Here Gadamer reminds us of a passage from Aristotle’s *On Interpretation* (16a26)where Aristotle argues that language comes not from nature but from agreement (*sunthēkē*). Whereas it is typical for translators to render συνθήκη throughout the text as “convention” in the sense of artificial, agreed-upon custom, Gadamer points out the shortcomings of this translation. In this context, he argues, *sunthēkē* cannot mean an agreement in words, since the agreement at issue must occur prior to and serve as the basis for the development of semantic language (Gadamer 2000, 11–12). It must instead describe a way of being in agreement with one another [*Übereinkommen*] prior to any linguistic exchange.

What Gadamer argues must exist as a condition for language-learning corresponds to what developmental psychologists today recognize as an important stage in the development of social cognition—what they refer to as “joint attention” (Mundy and Newell 2007; Seemann 2011; Tomasello and Farrar 1986). The development of joint attention marks an important step in social and cognitive maturation prior to and also crucial to the development of mature language skills. Children are said to have the capacity for joint attention when they are able to focus with another individual on the same object and where both individuals are aware that they are focused on the same thing. For example, a father points to a bird, exclaiming “wow, look at that bird!” and his daughter follows along with his gaze and his pointing hand, seeing the same bird and understanding that she is seeing the same object as her father. Another version of joint attention occurs when the child is the one who initiates the shared gaze, for example, by looking at and pointing to her toy and waiting for her father to recognize it and look with her. The appearance of such capacities are milestones in a child’s psychological development and typically start to take root in children beginning at about nine months. Their appearance signals that a child is developing the important capacity for joint attention—the capacity to have meaningful social interactions with others through establishing some mutual understanding with them.[[3]](#footnote-3) Phenomenologically speaking, they indicate that a child is learning how to dwell in a world that is opened up by others and to construct worlds of meaning themselves in which others can participate.

Scenarios involving pointing, where an adult deliberately and intentionally tries to direct the child’s attention to an object by pointing to it, have become paradigmatic in the literature on joint attention. However, as Chad Engelland (2014) argues, it would be wrong to think that one learns social meanings as a child only from those who are intentionally trying to teach them or to show them something. According to Engelland, children are able, from a very early age, to pick up on the intentional action of others, to identify with them in their intentions, and thus to populate their worlds with social meanings acquired by identifying with others. Children do this, Engelland argues, by cluing into the intentional bodily actions of others. This form of social communication, which Engelland calls “ostension,” typically develops even earlier than the child’s ability to understand a deliberate gesture of indication such as pointing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**2. THE ROLE OF PLAY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNDERSTANDING**

In this section, I would like to add to the developmental accounts just presented by exploring the role of play in the development of understanding. My aim is, on the one hand, to show how play is important to the development of immersive understanding as it has been understood by the existential phenomenological tradition. On the other hand, my analysis of play here brings to light the limits of this conception of understanding by explaining how in play we learn to put immersive understanding at risk and to attend to new disclosures of meaning. I take play, therefore, as what educational theorists call a “threshold concept” (Meyer and Land 2005)—a concept that can help pave the way for an inquiry that might otherwise be quite troublesome. In the context of this discussion, the analysis of play allows us to reconceptualize understanding in a way that would otherwise be quite difficult, and furthermore, it allows us to see that, while immersive understanding remains an important moment in the process of understanding, it cannot be taken as the entirety of this process.

Play is another way in which infants begin to develop joint attention prior to any deliberate teaching by adults. We use the term “play” in a variety of contexts (e.g., playing tag, playing music, the play of the light, and so on), but in each case, what we mean is an interaction that someone or something has with someone or something else such that surprising, unpredictable discoveries take place in a way that produces pleasure. When one *plays* a game, for example, there is at least some part of the outcome that one cannot predict, and indeed, if one could predict it, what is played would no longer be a game. Similarly, when one *plays* a piece of music with other musicians, there are a number of elements of the experience that the audience (and sometimes even the players) cannot predict.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is the unpredictable element in both cases that is pleasurable; it is part of what makes the performance exciting.

From a startlingly early age, infants display a desire to play in this sense. They delight in the game of peek-a-boo. They enjoy splashing water in their bath and experimenting with the sounds they can create with the shake of a rattle or the press of a button. They enjoy seeing what transpires as they stack blocks on top of one another or reach out to pull the tail of the cat. They are mesmerized by the playful movements of the mobile above their crib. Such natural fascination with play provides a basis for the development of immersive understanding early on. A child who plays peek-a-boo with her younger brother helps him learn to interpret the world along with her. The face that she suddenly discloses is the object of amusement. The hands she puts over her face is the build-up to this revelation. Similarly, he learns from watching her stack up the blocks until they fall. He quickly picks up on the game—on the parameters and rules of the game that allow the unpredictable disclosure—when and how the blocks will fall—to take place.

Although there is no deliberate teaching taking place in such scenarios, children are nevertheless learning, as these games help them to develop immersive understanding. By learning to play different games, they are acquiring meaningful hermeneutic backgrounds that will allow them to engage in interpretation alongside others. They become immersed in a shared world. They become attuned to a set of rules governing the game: here is where the boundary of the game is, here is where you can throw the ball, these are the movements that you can make as the ball comes to you, this is the moment in the game where you react to catching or missing the ball. In this way, children can clue into many of the social, pragmatic “games” that operate in the background of human interactions. They can learn, for example, to take turns, to respond to someone when addressed, and to pay attention to those expressions and occurrences that are meaningful for their social group. Such forms of agreement must be put in place before language can emerge, for as Gadamer says, “language always presupposes a common world—even if it is only a play world” (Gadamer 2013, 424).

But this is not the only way in which play relates to the development of understanding. Importantly, children also learn that those who engage in a game become transformed in it, just as the meaning of objects brought into the game become transformed.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this way, they learn that games are opportunities for novel disclosures of meaning. Now, to be certain, this development is not as readily observable as the development of immersive understanding. To appreciate this development fully, we need to rely not just on observation but on theory and, in particular, on an ontological theory that can allow us to conceptualize the features of that world opened up by play. Fortunately, such a theory can be found in Gadamer’s discussion of play in *Truth and Method*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

What then are the essential features of the world that play opens up? First, Gadamer explains that play involves presentation (2013, 112–13). Play involves presenting things that, through immersive understanding, are already familiar to us but in a way that allows them to show up as if for the first time. In this sense, play is mimetic in the way that Gadamer says art is mimetic.[[8]](#footnote-8) Art takes something familiar to us but lets it shine forth in a new way.[[9]](#footnote-9) To say that play is mimetic, however, does not mean that it lacks autonomy. On the contrary, Gadamer insists that play has a kind of autonomy precisely in its ability to bring forth new meaning—meaning that was not evident to immersive understanding before. This is precisely why play, like art, fascinates us. The young boy that puts on a costume insists that he *is* Ironman, just as the painting of the peasant’s shoes makes the being of the shoes manifest right there and then in the viewing of the painting. The autonomy of play is also clear in the case of games. The parameters of a game are not determined by the particular interests or backgrounds of the players nor by the time of day, meteorological conditions, or geographic location where the game is played. Rather, the rules and internal regulations of the game alone prescribe how the field of the game is filled (Gadamer 2013, 111–17). The pleasure of the game then lies in seeing what actually takes place given these constraints. This, then, is another salient feature of play: the unpredictability of its outcome. To grant the game its autonomy, however, the players must set aside some of the immersive understanding that they would otherwise use to interpret what occurs and to determine how they’ll respond. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer describes this willingness to put parts of one’s immersive understanding at risk as the attitude of “seriousness” that play requires. For Gadamer, play “contains its own, even sacred, seriousness,” fulfilling its purpose only if a player “loses himself in play” (107). The necessity of this step explains why, as Gadamer points out, one who fails to take the game seriously is considered a spoilsport.[[10]](#footnote-10) If one takes the game seriously, by contrast, one finds oneself pulled into the game in a way that requires one to set aside one’s usual intentions. One is not just passive in this process though. As Monica Vilhauer (2010) puts it, one loses oneself in the game “but with the seriousness of a fully engaged participant” (35). Through these distinctive characteristics of the play world, we learn, from a very young age, to inhabit that “temporary world within the ordinary world” (Huizinga 1949, 10). As it turns out, there are a number of social interactions in which a child will participate, later in life, which will require the kinds of seriousness and openness to transformation required of her by play. Play has an especially important role in preparing a child to engage in dialogue with others. Conversation, after all, shares some of the essential features of play. First, conversation is mimetic in the way that play is. Through conversation, we are able to take subjects already familiar to us and let them come to light in new ways. Next, genuine conversation requires the same attitude of seriousness expected of players in a game. It requires that we take seriously what our interlocutor says, meaning that we hear their words as “truth claims” that have the potential to change our understanding (Gadamer 2013, 403). Conversation is thus transformative in a way that play is. In conversation, we allow some of our immersive understanding to be put at risk. We open ourselves up to having our minds changed. What will result from doing so is, moreover, unpredictable to some extent. As Gadamer says, “No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us” (401). Finally, just as the unpredictable, disclosive, and transformative qualities of play make these experiences pleasurable for us when we are young children, these same qualities make conversation pleasurable for us as well. For this reason, we needn’t make a deliberate effort to engage in the activity of conversation. Rather, conversation is, like play, something into which we naturally fall.

For the reasons just named, Gadamer describes play as having a pivotal role in how children develop not just that immersive understanding that is the precondition for language-learning, but also the capacity for dialogue that is characteristic of mature language users. Play, Gadamer says, is not only “the process that bridges the gap between a not-yet semantically articulated form of communication and word communication,” but “a type of pre-linguistic dialogue” that is visible “already in the play of the infant with its own fingers and movements, and especially in the play that includes others” (Gadamer 2000, 14). This is not to say that there is no difference between conversation and other forms of play. Despite the fact that a kind of seriousness is required in play, there are often practical and theoretical stakes to a serious conversation that make participation in it different from participation in a purely recreational game. Moreover, for Gadamer, it is ultimately only in language and, in particular, in the language of conversation, that we come to understanding in its fullest sense (Gadamer 2013, 462). In the next section, we will attempt to get a clearer picture of why it is conversation in particular that is so crucial to the development of understanding for Gadamer and, having obtained this clarification, to assemble a clearer articulation of how Gadamer conceives of understanding and knowledge.

**3. CONVERSATION AS A SITE OF UNDERSTANDING**

In our earliest social interactions, understanding another person typically requires no more than sharing a pragmatic social context with them that provides the necessary background information for interpreting their expression. If, as a five-year-old child, my mother announces at 8 p.m., “It is getting late; it’s time for bed,” I know immediately that this means that I must wash up, go into my bedroom, get into my bed, and stay there until I go to sleep. The primacy of such immersive understanding is rightly emphasized by phenomenologists like Heidegger, Watsuji, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. After all, when we are young children, outside of interactions that occur in the play world, this kind of understanding—understanding we can ascertain through pragmatic, social contexts—is all that is expected of us. Indeed, well into adulthood, these contexts remain an important part of how we interpret others’ expressions (Gallagher 2011, 29). If I am grappling with a partner at the gym and they give me two quick taps on the shoulder, I do not stop to think about what this might mean. I immediately interpret the taps to mean that I should stop and that my partner has submitted. If I walk by my colleague on campus and she gives me a quick “Hey, how’s it going?” as she breezes by me to the library, I know to interpret this as a greeting and not to bother her with a long description of everything happening in my life. In such cases, as Merleau-Ponty (1964) says, a person “does not hold before himself the words said, understood as objects of thought or ideates” (201). The pragmatic, social context is sufficient in such cases to interpret the expressions of others.

 But this is not always the case. In the play world, as we have seen, one must also be able to suspend one’s ordinary ways of interpreting experience and to attend to the novel disclosures of meaning that happen within this world-within-a-world. In this way, play prefigures a transformation that the child will undergo as she becomes attuned to the “ideality of the word.” What Gadamer refers to as the “ideality of the word” is that which allows the meaning of a word to be interpreted in different ways and, indeed, to say something different over time to different people. In the context of writing, it refers to the ability of a text to be interpreted by those who are not clued in to the original pragmatic, social contexts for and in which it was written. It is this ideality of language that makes written traditions feel contemporaneous to us and, as Gadamer puts it, “raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterizes other remnants of past existence” (Gadamer 2013, 408). It is not only writing that has this ideality, though. For Gadamer, speech shares in ideality as well (410). While live dialogue certainly requires that we attend to what our interlocutors mean to say and to the pragmatic, social contexts that give their words meaning, it also requires that one be attuned to the ideality of their language, for even in speech, what we mean is never exactly the same as what we say. This difference is what makes dialogue a source of unanticipated questions, responses, and discoveries. In dialogue, I may find myself compelled to articulate what I take to be the meaning or significance of what my interlocutor has said. I may, in fact, insist on some significance that an interlocutor did not recognize herself. Likewise, something that I say may prompt others to point me to some meaning or significance that I did not intend. In either case, I am allowing the verbal exchange to operate as a site of new disclosure for all those involved. This sophisticated form of social cognition is enabled by the ideality of language and, developmentally speaking, prepared for early on by the child’s early experiences with play.

Similarly, play prefigures the development in the child that takes place as she starts to master the generative aspects of language, which allow her and others to construct new meanings from a set of rules governing syntax and derivation in sentences. With this, her understanding of the world now encompasses not only objects like the “bird” that she can name and gaze upon with others but novel sentences about the bird, creative uses of the subject “bird” or its qualities in a metaphor, claims about what the bird is *not*, and so on. In this, she becomes attuned to the speech of others in a different way. With this crucial development, she is now well-equipped to communicate and understand novel interpretations of given subject matters. She starts to grasp that linguistic understanding is the understanding not of singular, private phenomena, but of their meanings, and that these meanings are always being determined by the enterprise of collaborative interpretation. The speech of the other now has the potential to open up a particular subject matter in a way that challenges her current ideas about it—sometimes to the point of forcing her to reconceptualize the matter entirely. In turn, she begins to see that what she knows through her immersive understanding are not permanent, unchanging disclosures of the world but are the product of ongoing social, historical interpretation.

This ongoing process of interpretation is, for Gadamer, essential to the process of knowing. For Gadamer, knowing is not reducible to possessing an unbiased mental representation of some reality outside of knowing consciousness. Such a conception of knowing is what, in *Truth and Method*, he famously calls “the prejudice against prejudice itself” (283). Rather than holding out for a form of knowing that is without any initial bias, Gadamer suggests we think about knowing—or, as he prefers to call it, understanding—as the process by which a finite, situated consciousness becomes exposed to others’ claims, transformed, and thereby educated.

Let us now return to the topic of education in order to see how Gadamer’s conception of understanding applies to the educational process. As hermeneutic educational theorists (Fairfield 2011; Gallagher 1992; Hirsch 1988; Wiercinski 2011) point out, education requires that students begin with background knowledge of some kind. More specifically, it requires an initial sense of the social, pragmatic contexts that give meaning to the words that they share in common with others (e.g., with their teacher, the authors they read, and fellow students). Teachers know this point well. In a geometry class, for example, students must have some working familiarity with what a rectangle is before they can learn the sum total of the angles in a rectangle. Likewise, a feminist philosophy class presumes some background familiarity with the concept of gender as it functions in pragmatic, social contexts. Such background knowledge, which, following E. D. Hirsch (1988), we might call “cultural literacy,” is a necessary condition for any more abstract or critical investigation. Yet, as such examples make clear, this background familiarity is only the prerequisite for education to take place. It is clearly not the goal of education itself. In a geometry class, the students will at some point need to learn that different rules apply to three-dimensional objects than to two-dimensional objects. So, what they learned about rectangles as two-dimensional objects will need to be re-examined in the case of rectangular prisms. In the case of the feminist philosophy class, the aim may be to deepen the group’s understanding of what sustains the idea of gender as a natural type and which behaviors and institutions contribute to the problem of gender inequality. For such investigations to proceed, one needs to have background familiarity with social meanings related to gender, but one also needs to be able to put this immersive knowledge at risk for the sake of new understanding.

According to hermeneutic theories of education, this is precisely what happens in genuine educational experience. Students come into a course with preconceptions and an assortment of fore-meanings relevant to the subject matter. The point of education is not simply to sweep away these things. They are, after all, necessary for any inquiry to begin. Their presence makes it so that when students reads a text, they are not simply passively absorbing new information. Pre-conceptions and fore-meanings are inevitably in play. Likewise, when they listen to a lecture by the professor or to a remark on the text made by another student in the class, they do not do so as a blank slate. Interest, bias, and preconceptions are inevitably at work.[[11]](#footnote-11) What distinguishes educational experience, though, is not the presence of these things, which operate in interpretation even when education is not taking place, but the way that they are put at risk as one enters into conversation. In classroom conversation, one relies on the social meanings ready-to-hand for them in order to interpret what another is saying, but in doing so, one is often forced to articulate and justify these meanings as one’s own beliefs and, if one cannot do so, to abandon them. Paul Fairfield (2011) points out that, in this way, genuine conversations in the classroom can “remove our intellectual comfort by eliciting from us the semi-articulated judgments of which so much of our intellectual life consists” (83). This is a process that philosophers know well, as it is modelled throughout those dialogues of Plato where Socrates exemplifies the teacher who, in love with conversation, knows how to engage others in it in a way that delivers their preconceptions to them for reconsideration.

The same process takes place, however, when a student reads a text in such a way whereby they are engaged by the truth claims the author puts forward. To be open to the author’s claims, it is not necessary to set aside entirely the immersive understanding that develops naturally in us during childhood. Such an accomplishment, even if one could pull it off, would make reading impossible. Reading discloses new understanding for us, but it requires that we rely, for example, on the operative understanding of words. This is the case even when reading philosophical arguments that ask us to question what we hear in certain terms. To read Simone de Beauvoir’s, *The Second Sex*, for example, I need to have some sense of that to which the term “woman” refers, even though one of the major philosophical questions that Beauvoir pursues in the book is the question of what woman is. I begin reading the text with an operative understanding of the subject under discussion but, as I read, that operative understanding falls short and I discover that I must refine it. In this sense, reading a text (or, for that matter, listening to a lecture) is not a passive experience at all. While one may acquire new information from what they read, what is most significant in this experience is not, to use Freire’s term, the “banking” of new information. It is, instead, the critical self-reflection that takes place.[[12]](#footnote-12)

On this model, good teachers are those that help students develop the comportment that they need to engage fully in this process. They help students to cultivate sensitivity to the claims of others, that is, to be attentive to the way that other voices and traditions may make a claim on their beliefs. They also help students learn how to take these claims seriously—to treat them not with mere tolerance and indifference but as opportunities to reflect on and to test out their own beliefs. The teacher thus has an important role in the process of education, although education [*Bildung*] is also self-cultivation.

Despite the important role that immersive understanding plays in this process, it is common to imagine that education involves setting aside any social meanings acquired early on in life and simply “thinking for oneself” or observing the world free of all bias. We may even imagine that what is involved is a move away from the social interactions through which we develop immersive understanding early in life. But this is not the case. As Shaun Gallagher (1992) argues, “Learning is not the collecting of information in an isolated mind; it involves the dialectical interplay between ourselves and traditions which we find within ourselves because we are linguistic beings” (116).[[13]](#footnote-13) Social interactions remain just as essential to this new mode of understanding as they had been before, then. But what hermeneutic theories of education make clear is, as we have seen, how the role of others in understanding evolves. In mature social cognition, others are not just those *from whom* I receive the transmission of social meaning; they are those *with whom* I engage in critical self-reflection and thus *with whom* I develop new, shared worlds of meaning through conversation.

Heidegger, in fact, makes this point in his early lecture on Aristotle, arguing that the way in which people communicate with one another is essential to how it is that they have a world in common.

I *communicate* with others; I have the world there with the other and the other has the world there with me, insofar as we talk something through—*koinōnia* of the world. *Speaking is, in itself, communicating*; and, as communication, it is nothing other than *koinōnia*. . . . *logos* is the mode of being of human beings in their world, such that this being is, in itself, being-with-one-another. (Heidegger 2009, 43)

Now, as we have seen, from a developmental standpoint, it is certainly right to say that there must be something in common already that permits people to engage in conversation with one another. Yet this should not lead us to overlook the common world [*koinōnia*] that emerges *through* conversation. Like the play world, the world of a conversation emerges as a world-within-a-world. It is a place where things can come to presentation in a new way, where we have an opportunity to rethink them. Indeed, for Gadamer, it is what comes to presentation through the world of conversation and not some pre-linguistic entity that is the object of our understanding. To capture this point, Gadamer often speaks about the object of understanding as a subject matter [*Sache*] in the sense of a topic of conversation or debate rather than as a thing [*Ding*].

Reaching an understanding in language places a subject matter [*Sache*] before those communicating like a disputed object set between them. Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another. All kinds of human community are linguistic community: even more they form language. For language is by nature the language of conversation; it fully realizes itself only in the process of coming to an understanding. That is why it is not a mere means in that process (Gadamer 2013, 462–63).[[14]](#footnote-14)

For a linguistic community, the common world that members share is that which comes to presentation through the ongoing linguistic activity of different human beings as they engage in the process of interpretation with one another. It is what comes to presentation, in other words, through conversations with one another. As we have seen, the capacity to form linguistic communities of this kind is nurtured in us early on during childhood play. In play, the learning that takes place is not just a matter of receiving social meanings from others. It is not a matter of taking an object of understanding *from* others but constructing one *with* others. To play is thus to be open to new, unpredictable disclosures of meaning that emerge for the participants in the game. In these ways, play teaches one how to be a participant in conversation. Conversations require that participants allow the conversation a certain autonomy, namely, to determine the subject matter and what comes to light through the conversation itself. They also require serious engagement from participants. This means, as we have seen, that participants must take what others say in the conversation as truth claims that have the potential seriously to transform their beliefs and habits. Interlocutors cannot be indifferent to or dismissive of what unfolds in the conversation (Wiercinski 2011, 115). Rather, they must allow the subject matters discussed to come to full presentation in the conversation. To do this, they must accept that conversations have a life of their own and that they cannot determine in advance what will come to presentation as the conversation unfolds.

For those who view education as a technical procedure for transmitting content in a predictable, efficient way from one generation to the next, what happens in conversation will seem alien to the educational process. The prospect of recognizing conversation as essential to education may even be troublesome. As I hope to have shown here, though, much can be gained from thinking about the nature of understanding on the basis of an analysis of play. To this end, I have offered a concept of play here, one informed by Gadamer, as a “threshold concept,” allowing us to reconsider the nature of understanding that might otherwise cause us trouble. By highlighting the role of play in cognitive development, we can better appreciate the unique qualities of the world that play sets up and the importance of play for our cognitive and social development. This play world, I have argued, has significant similarities to the world opened up by conversation. In conversation, one encounters others—other voices, other traditions—in a way that requires one to attend to new disclosures of meaning and to reflect critically on and refine one’s own beliefs. It requires that one be willing to reflect on and to put at risk some of the background theories upon which one normally relies, and to do so in communication and in community with others. In this essay, I have tried to articulate what it would mean to think about understanding, as Gadamer does, as what emerges from this linguistic process. As I hope I have conveyed, this account of understanding is not irreconcilable with the account of immersive understanding that existential phenomenologists have offered. Rather, it recognizes the existential phenomenological account of understanding to be one moment in a larger process. At the same time, it insists that others are not just those *from whom* I inherit understanding but those *with whom* I find understanding, and that the latter process requires a comportment of sensitivity and seriousness about the claims of others, which we do not automatically possess. We become educated in the fullest sense, then, through the unique form of linguistic play that is conversation. In this way, conversation is indeed essential to the process of understanding.

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1. To be clear, I am not attributing this conception of knowledge to Plato himself. I take Plato’s dialogues to be exemplary models of how conversation can be educative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From a developmental standpoint, it is indeed curious that in *Being and Time*, it is 150 pages before Heidegger finally turns to address the role of others in the constitution of Dasein. Moreover, when in the fourth chapter of Division I, he finally does, his focus is almost exclusively on the role of an impersonal “one” [*das Man*] whose pronouncements we are constantly tempted to conform to (Heidegger 1962, 149–68), rather than on the constitutive role of significant personal relationships (e.g., friendships, parent/child relationships, and so on), which are much more reciprocal than Dasein’s relationship to *das Man*. Hubert Dreyfus (1992) identifies this as a missed opportunity, arguing that, had Heidegger distinguished between “constitutive conformity” and “the evils of conformism,” he might have penetrated more into the role that others play from the very beginning in the way that we dwell in the world (154). Lawrence Hatab offers a similar criticism of Heidegger on this point (2017, 65). It is worth mentioning here that, although Watsuji understood his criticism of Heidegger in *Rinrigaku* to be a criticism of Heidegger’s thought as a whole, it cannot be understood as such, since Watsuji was not familiar with other works where Heidegger dealt more extensively with the social dimensions of Dasein. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Culbertson (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It should be noted that autistic children do not develop joint attention at the typical age, and indeed the absence of a capacity to engage in joint attention is an important indicator of autism. In such cases, parents must take extra measures to assist the autistic child in developing joint attention. I do not have the space in this chapter to consider such cases, but suffice it to say that my description of typical child development here should not be taken to mean that all children develop joint attention on the same schedule or in the same way. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Engelland explains that ostension helps us to understand the primary way that children learn to speak. While philosophers of language have typically imagined a scenario where an adult speaker deliberately teaches a child a set of words and rules for combining them, Engelland (2014) explains that children actually learn language primarily by eavesdropping (23). They pick up on the intentional actions of animate agents that they observe, including these agents’ expressions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a discussion of the different forms of play present in making and listening to music, see Nielsen (n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Johan Huizinga (1949) describes this transformative power of play as play’s capacity to bring about symbolic transformation—something he found essential to the formation of culture. For Huizinga, socio-biological and psychological explanations of play are unable to recognize the real force of this symbolic transformation, since what is opened up in it is something other than the entities studied by these sciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I am indebted to Monica Vilhauer (2010) for demonstrating the significance of Gadamer’s discussion of play in *Truth and Method* for his theory of understanding as a whole. Although the treatment of play would appear to be consigned to just the first part of the book (“The Question of Truth as it Emerges in the Experience of Art”), Vilhauer makes a persuasive case that play is actually pivotal to grasping Gadamer’s general theory of understanding and how it differs from the model offered by modern science (2010, 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between art and play, see Gadamer’s essay, “The Play of Art” (Gadamer 1986, 123–30). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The word “mimetic” may be misleading here if we take it to mean that art provides a copy or duplication of the subject matter it presents. Gadamer is clear, however, that the work of art produces not a mere copy (*Abbild*) but an image (*Bild*), where the subject matter presented can come to appear in a new way (Gadamer 2013, 138–42). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. To illustrate this point, Gadamer (1986, 98) reminds us of how a young child in costume will get frustrated if someone refuses to recognize them as who they are attempting to portray. In this case, one is being a spoilsport in refusing to engage seriously in the child’s game. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This point, which is essential to hermeneutic theories of education such as those offered by Paul Fairfield and Shaun Gallagher, is grounded in Gadamer’s famous argument about the positive role of fore-conceptions in the process of understanding (Gadamer 2013, 278–96). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It should be noted that critical reflection in this sense seems to offer much if not all of what educational theorists commonly attribute today to “critical thinking.” Whereas it is common to teach critical thinking today by introducing students to a set of general rules, abstracted from any social context, however, such courses would be greatly improved by showing how critical reflection/critical thinking emerges in conversation with others in the way that I have described. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A similar hermeneutic conception of education is offered by Andrzej Wiercinski. Wiercinski (2011) argues that becoming educated means developing the sensitivity to difference required to encounter others (other voices, traditions, etc.) in a way that prompts critical self-reflection. For Wiercinski, it is conversation with these others that prompts critical self-reflection and indeed “reshapes the lives of its participants into a state of permanent self-examination and renewal” (113). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In the last two sentences, Gadamer is echoing a point that Heidegger makes in his lectures on Hölderlin from the 1930’s. “Man’s being is grounded in language; but this actually only occurs in conversation. Conversation, however, is not only a way in which language takes place, but rather language is essential only as conversation. What we usually mean by ‘language,’ namely, a stock of words and rules for combining them, is only an exterior aspect of language” (2000, 56–7). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)