Hospitality, Language Pedagogy, and Communities of Practice

Abstract:

The Gift of the Stranger *(2000) presented hospitality as an "ethical imperative," an "attitude," a "metaphor and spiritual virtue," and a "practice" in relation to world language learning. Etienne Wenger's account of how communities of practice function can illuminate how these aspects cohere, and sharpen the implications for pedagogical practice.The contours of a pedagogical practice for the language classroom informed by hospitality are explored.*

Amid a wider resurgence of engagement with historic Christian spiritual disciplines, there has been substantial interest in recent years in the importance of hospitality in various contexts. In addition to explorations of hospitality as a Christian spiritual and social practice (Pineda, 1997; Pohl, 1999; Oden, 2001; Bretherton, 2006; Newman, 2007), there have been efforts to use hospitality to reframe our understanding of educational practice (e.g. Bennett, 2003; Newman, 2003; Gallagher, 2007; Marmon, 2008; Call, in press; Walton & Walter, in press). Among Christian world language educators, the notion of hospitality to the stranger as a frame for understanding world language education has gained ground since the publication a decade ago of *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Smith & Carvill, 2000). This book has proved to have resonance for those seeking approaches to language pedagogy that resonate with Christian educational goals, and is still used as a text in methods courses for future language educators at a number of Christian colleges and universities.

The book was built around the following proposal:

> Students who become strangers in a foreign land are called to be a blessing to the locals by speaking in their tongue, by listening to their stories and sharing their own, by asking good questions, by comparing and contrasting, by learning from them--in short, by using the special freedom and responsibility an educated stranger has in the host country for being a loving presence.
>
> Similarly, students also are called to become good hosts to the foreigner or alien in their own land, to receive the stranger graciously, and to practice a kind of hospitality which is a blessing to both the guest and the host. Both callings, we propose, make up the very heart of foreign language education. (Smith & Carvill, 2000, p. 58)

Suggestions were offered concerning how adoption of such a frame might lead to adjustments in common practices, giving examples from curriculum design, pedagogy, and articulation of learning goals. The authors, Barbara Carvill and I, did not believe that a Christian approach results in wholesale difference from wider patterns of practice, as if every move in a Christian classroom needed to differ in some way from corresponding moves in other classrooms; that would amount to contrarianism. We were, however, aiming at something more than a rhetorical re-baptizing of business as usual with some noble-sounding ethical goals. The intention was to affect how things get done, not merely to provide new labels for existing practice.

A decade later, there are inevitably things that could be updated, added, or subtracted, and matters that ought to be stated differently. Subsequent publications (Smith, 2006, 2009) have noted, for instance, that the theme of hospitality to strangers was more readily echoed in appropriations of the book's themes by others than was the parallel emphasis on realizing our own stranger-status. It is always more comforting to think of ourselves as the magnanimous hosts prepared to tolerate, even celebrate, otherness within our familiar spaces than it is to accept our own cultural strangeness, partiality, and need of completion. The idea of being hospitable thus came to seem more readily appealing to some than the idea of being a stranger, or that of learning from strangers (Smith, 2009).

The present essay addresses another concern. *The Gift of the Stranger* proposed "that hospitality must shape the spirit and manner in which learners welcome, acquire, and respond to the foreign language and culture." (Smith & Carvill, 2000, p. 88) This framing function of hospitality was expressed in various ways in the book – hospitality was said to function as an "ethical imperative," (p. xiii) as an "attitude," (p. 81) as "an overarching metaphor and spiritual virtue," (p. 82-83) and as a "practice" (p. 84). This is a rather broad collection of terms. The vacillation was to some degree intentional, though probably not fully self-aware. Part of what the varied vocabulary was meant to convey was a sense that the biblical tradition of hospitality was not a quick fix to be conveniently inserted into Christian course rationales, but would need to be carefully and holistically explored in various directions. We hoped to launch an investigation, not conclude one.

The risk, of course, was lack of clarity – was the book proposing an ethic, a metaphor, a spiritual practice, a virtue, an affective posture, an inner quality, or something else that mixes these? The items in this list are hardly interchangeable; could they be coherently combined? If the result is merely adoption of a

Christian framing rhetoric without defensibly related shifts in pedagogical behavior, then the possibility must be addressed that what is mostly at stake is making ourselves feel more righteous while doing essentially what we were doing before. The task of making more precise sense of how the practice of hospitality to the stranger can inform pedagogical practice therefore remains significant, and it is to that task that this paper is intended to contribute.

Practices and Communities of Practice

The contours of practice have been examined in recent years from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. For present purposes selected elements of Etienne Wenger's account of how "communities of practice" function (Wenger, 1999; see also Lave & Wenger, 1991; McLaughlin, 2003) will provide sufficient leverage. Drawing from a range of social theorists, Wenger (1999) offers an extensive account of the mechanisms of mutual adjustment and alignment that shape a group that engages in shared forms of practice over time, and of the forms of learning embedded in this process. His use of the terms participation, reification, repertoire, and imagination will be used to focus the present discussion.

Participation refers in a relatively straightforward manner to the actions, interactions, and relationships that are feasible for group members at any given time. In one group, spontaneous speech may be encouraged, while in another turns at talk might be more controlled, or even discouraged. In one classroom student participation may be limited to listening and taking notes, while in another students may lead discussion. These norms are part of the acquired social contours of the particular community of practice, and are commonly not matters of explicit attention – no-one tells students explicitly not to leap up, run to the front, and hug the teacher when called upon by name, and yet none of them do this, whereas they might if the context were a TV game show. Accepted forms of participation become plausible and hence available within a particular community of practice.

Forms of participation are adopted and negotiated in tandem with an ongoing process of reification; abstractions such as ideas, goals, desires, and the like are turned into things that endure from one session to another and can be become sites of negotiation of meaning between group members. Approval and disapproval become letter grades and report cards, ideas and concepts become books and images, power relationships become room layouts and differences in dress, degrees of motivation to learn become seating choices and postures. Participation and reification constantly interact. If I have chairs with attached writing surfaces fixed in a series of forward-facing rows, then certain kinds of participation (lecturing and listening) become easier, more tempting, more available, while others (collaborative activity) become a little more difficult, a little less available. Choices become reified into stable institutional structures reflecting previous processes of participation, and these reifications constrain future choices and shape future patterns of participation.

Over time, a repertoire emerges. Certain words and gestures take on shared shades of meaning. Instructions may not need to be reiterated, for members know their expected moves. Certain topics are never broached. Certain seating plans are never considered. Certain ideas become shared reference points. Once a repertoire is in place, participants instinctively know their moves and make them without explicit commentary, and significant changes in repertoire may be experienced as disruptive.

The repertoire arises not only from participation and reification, but also from a shared imagination, a construal of what it is we are really seeking and doing. Imagination does not here mean fantasy or fiction, nor does it necessarily connote creativity. Wenger (1999) explains:

> I remember once standing with my children around a globe and pointing proudly: "This is where we live." They were duly impressed – not for a moment doubtful, yet a little puzzled – and I started to reflect on the kind of process by which it made sense to indicate a point on a globe and claim it is where we live… It was not imagination as opposed to fact, because the issue was not whether what I was saying was factual. At issue was constructing a picture of the world such that it did make sense to point to a globe and say that we live "there." We talked about the earth, the solar system, and gravity, and from that perspective I think that it did seem rather exciting to them to think that, indeed, we live "there" – little stick figures glued to a huge revolving planet. (p. 177)

Imagination in this context has to do with the pictures of the world, our relationship to it, and our actions in it that we construct together, whether they be factual or counter-factual. Such imagination is at work in the ways we construe our common enterprises. The lack of running-to-the-front-and-hugging behavior in my language classes has much to do with our shared imagination regarding what a language class should be and how it ought to function. Imagination explains why forms of participation that are technically available – they have not been forbidden, and are physically possible – are nevertheless implausible, and therefore unlikely. Sharing this imagination, this construal of what we are about, is one way of belonging to a social group; not sharing it is one way of not fitting in.

It is worth noting, in counterpoint to the concerns that I expressed in the opening section, that Wenger (1999) sees contrasts in imagination making a difference to learning even when other aspects of practice are not variable:

> two stonecutters … are asked what they are doing. One responds: "I am cutting this stone in a perfectly square shape." The other responds: "I am building a cathedral." Both answers are correct and meaningful, but they reflect different relations to the world. The difference between these answers does not imply that one is a better stonecutter than the other, as far as holding the chisel is concerned. At the level of engagement, they may well be doing exactly the same thing. But it does suggest that their experiences of what they are doing and their sense of self in doing it are rather different. This difference is a function of imagination. As a result, they may be learning very different things from the same activity. (p. 176)

What we think we are doing, how we frame it to ourselves, may play a significant role in determining exactly what we learn from doing it, even if our actions are apparently identical to those of the next person.

There is much more to Wenger's account, but these points of reference will suffice for present purposes. To summarize: a community of practice is shaped out of certain forms of available participation, an ongoing process of reification that turns intentions into stable objects, the growth of a shared repertoire of meanings and behaviors, and the development of or appeal to a shared imagination concerning the nature of the group's enterprise

Hospitality, pedagogy, and communities of practice

Returning to *The Gift of the Stranger,* even this brief sketch of Wenger's account provides a framework for the more inchoate intuitions behind that book. Hospitality, it will be recalled, was there characterized as an ethical imperative, an attitude, an overarching metaphor and spiritual virtue, and a practice. Metaphor and ethos shape imagination. If a shared imagination of a certain kind takes root in a community of practice, becoming reified in shared symbolic reference points and reflected in repeating patterns of participation, then it becomes plausible to talk in terms of the development of virtues, at least according to much scholarly work on virtues and practices. Alastair MacIntyre (2007), most notably, has famously argued that "it is always within some particular community with its own specific institutional forms that we learn, or fail to learn, to exercise the virtues." (p. 194-195) In other words, in a well-functioning community of practice it makes sense in the context of shared goals to talk concurrently about metaphors, ethics, virtues, attitudes, and practices. My concern here is not, however, with providing a belated rationale for the admittedly more intuitively scattered terms used in *The Gift of the Stranger*. I am more concerned with how accounts such as Wenger's can push the conversation represented in that book further.

I suggest that even this subset of Wenger's account can help to name some potential gaps. Christian discourse in the classroom can sometimes come across as an artificial add-on, or as rote lip-service. It can feel, even for Christian educators and students, faintly embarrassing and intrusive. If this is the case, perhaps we should consider the possibility that while a Christian discourse articulating an identifiably Christian imagination is being articulated, the lived repertoire of the classroom is rooted in, and associated with, a different imagination. The Christian frame fails to resonate as a way of picturing the actual shared repertoire. If, for example, I frame a course with talk about hospitality to the stranger, and then teach using mainly language exercises focused on consumer transactions, or focus learner speech mainly on talking about self, or justify hard work for the class primarily in terms of various forms of personal gain to be achieved, there will be a mismatch between proposed imagination and actual repertoire. The hospitality metaphor will then either ring hollow, or be adopted only as an ideological cover for the actual repertoire. In such cases, the hospitality metaphor has been adopted as a label, but not as a construal – I can label a jar of honey with the word "salsa"; it is much harder to reasonably construe it as salsa while eating. Applying the ethical practice of hospitality to the stranger metaphorically to aspects of language and culture learning may become part of the official way of talking about a course, and yet not really function for teacher and/or students as a way of construing what is actually being done together in the classroom. It then remains "imagination" in the sense of creative fantasy, not shared interpretation of joint enterprise.

This suggests a set of pointed questions to ask if we want to understand language learning in relation to the complex of metaphor, virtue, and practice associated with hospitality to the stranger:

- First, what ideal repertoire, what forms of ongoing participation and reification, might plausibly enact in a language classroom a commitment to hospitality to the stranger?
- Second, if I were to record the actual pattern of interactions and learning events in my class in a given three week period, could this pattern be honestly and plausibly construed in terms of hospitality to the stranger?
- Third, what specific strategies are in place to encourage the learning community to adopt hospitality to the stranger as a legitimate shared construal of its joint enterprise?
- Fourth, what evidence is there that this adoption is taking place?

If these questions can be satisfactorily answered, then that might be taken as a sign that the notion of

hospitality to the stranger is functioning in the language classroom in a way that is more than mere ideology.

Contours of a hospitable repertoire

In the space that remains I will sketch some suggested features of a plausible repertoire rooted in hospitality to the stranger. This is only offered as a programmatic sketch, and is intended for others to refine and expand. References indicate where some of the points suggested have been discussed at greater length elsewhere. Many items are, taken singly, far from unique either to the Christian classroom, or to classrooms focused on hospitality. It is a mistake to see all defining characteristics as necessarily also in a strong sense distinctive. By way of analogy, the features of my person that clearly make me who I am are not necessarily therefore, taken individually, unique to myself, and each feature may resemble or differ from a different subset of other people. It is in their combination and insertion into a particular narrative that a recognizable Gestalt arises. I suggest, however, that while the elements here are not unique, nevertheless the overall pattern may push in somewhat distinctive directions.

1. **Foregrounding persons.** I suggest that a hospitality-oriented repertoire will reflect a bias towards persons and encounter with persons through language, rather than towards language as abstract system, or even as a repository of cultural themes or artifacts. This does not mean that there will be no attention to systems, artifacts, and the like, nor that such things may not be found beautiful in themselves. It does, however, suggest a degree of prioritization. Virtual or actual encounters with human others whose selves are expressed in the target language will be the end toward which other legitimate aspects of language learning are organized and aimed.

2. **Deepening representations of identity.** There will be a shift in course materials away from cartoon characters and stock photos, and perhaps even away from representations of real individuals who are included only in brief passing encounters as token representatives of some linguistic or cultural item. The corollary is a shift wherever possible toward curricular representation of fleshed-out individuals whose context, identity, and life history are represented at sufficient length, and with sufficient substance, to make it plausible to respond to them ethically with respect, engagement, and compassion (Smith, De Young, Uyaguari & Avila, 2007). These individuals may be literary, but will often be real persons. If talk of hospitality is to have substance, then the strangers encountered in class should not for the most part be the curricular equivalent of folk encountered for a few moments at the supermarket checkout.

3. **Using narrative.** A focus on persons-with-identities demands that in terms of form there will be a shift away from brief informational text snippets and towards a regular inclusion of connected narrative, especially personal narrative; on a very simple level hospitality involves learning to hear another's stories. Particularly in the earlier stages of language learning, this involves developing effective strategies for making such narratives linguistically accessible and sustaining student engagement with them.

4. **Emphasizing human significance.** Topics reflected in the language syllabus, and in representations of others in course materials and course discourse, will not be restricted to the transactional. It is true that there is a "hospitality industry" focused on enabling consumer exchanges, and that relatively impersonal transactions can offer services to visitors that are experienced as hospitable care. Transactional language and service skills need not be out of play. However, I also take it that for such service to be grounded in an ethic of hospitality implies a perception of the other as more than the sum of their transactions, as, in some admittedly loaded sense, "fully human" (Smith, 2007b), and that this should be reflected in curricular representations. The others who are represented in curricula will therefore be represented in terms of topics of personal import and humanizing depth, including attention to beliefs and values as well as interests and behaviors. Strategies will be designed for enabling students at all levels to engage with such themes in another's self-disclosure. This will mean pushing the language and topics practiced beyond language that is "civil and practical, but [not] particularly intimate" (Cook, 2000, p.157).

5. **Learning from.** There will be a deliberate effort to balance learning how, learning that, and learning about, with learning from. This implies that the others represented in curricula will be allowed/enabled in those representations to say things that are of sufficient existential import for students to open the possibility of those students learning important things from them. They will talk not only about where they like to go on vacation, or what they eat at Christmas, but also about what they believe is immoral, and how they would change the world, and the struggles in their own souls. Again, language pedagogy will incorporate strategies for enabling students with a limited linguistic repertoire to engage in these topics in meaningful ways.

6. **Targeting moral dimensions.** Language pedagogy will be concerned with ethics not only in terms of professional ethics or ethical teacher behavior, but also in terms of reflection on how pedagogy can contribute to moral growth (Smith, 2007a). An ethic of hospitality to strangers will be promoted not only through stating of principles and preaching of aims, but through participation over time in practices likely to strengthen hospitable care as an intention, a skill, and a virtue. Pedagogical decisions such as choice and use of examples and images, pacing of narratives, pace of giving or withholding information, or classroom layout and ethos, will be interrogated in relation to the question of how students might through them become or remain open to learning from cultural others.
7. **Relating affect and ethics.** Language pedagogy will be concerned with affect not only in the context of matters such as language anxiety and student security, i.e. matters to do with how affect constrains language acquisition. There will also be interest in the pedagogical conditions under which the voice of the other might become affectively compelling, and might be received as important personal communication rather than as an inert classroom datum. Strategies will be developed for making encounter with the other's voice affectively engaging, with a view to motivating and practicing care with the words of others.
8. **Practicing attentiveness.** There will be explicit, intentional apprenticeship in practices of attentiveness, including matters such as self-awareness in relation to the likelihood of cultural and interpersonal misperceptions, good listening practices, suspension of judgment, slowing of interpretation, charitable construal of others' utterances and actions, and openness to correction of interpretations through further receptivity. These skills will not be assumed or treated as by-products, but intentionally taught for. There will be at least as much emphasis on learning to hear others well as on learning to say what I want to say.
9. **Recruiting imagination.** There will be intentional strategies in place, applied consistently and evaluated over time, to foster connections in students' imaginations between the present practices of the class, their future practices as language users and intercultural communicators, and reflections (including, in Christian settings, biblical reflections) on the ethics and practice of hospitality. Students will be encouraged to explore the connections and disparities between our rhetoric and our repertoire (Plantinga Pauw, 2002). This will not be relegated to opening statements of aims, or to the initial course syllabus; there will instead be an intentional, ongoing pedagogical focus on the connection between imagination and repertoire, enabling students progressively to construe the shared repertoire as training in hospitality to the stranger.
10. **Fostering delight.** Care will be taken to avoid all of the above becoming too heavily serious. One does not laugh at guests, but it is normal to laugh with guests, and to be helped by guests to laugh at oneself. Ways will be sought to foster delight in the lives and words of others as a regular experience in the language classroom.

I am sure that both additions and refinements are needed here, as well as much unpacking. These need to happen in dialog, and in connection with concrete instances of practice. In my own classroom, for instance, these impulses have led to ongoing experimentation with learning the past tense through engagement via image, audio, and written word with the life story of an elderly lady from Hamburg - learning about her and her life amid the 20th century historical events of central Europe, learning from her how one might respond as a Christian to repeated experiences of displacement and cultural exile, and so learning with her what love of neighbor might look like in specific historical circumstances (Smith, De Young, Uyaguari & Avila, 2007; Smith, 2007b). This connects with weekly reflection with students on biblical passages related to hospitality and diversity, explicit attention being given to how and whether these can plausibly frame what we are doing in class. Perhaps, I suggest, by painstakingly learning to listen to an elderly, German-speaking housewife they are beginning themselves to practice something of what these texts call for. I have also been engaged in exploration of how charitable attentiveness might be acquired in the context of textual interpretation (Smith, Shortt & Sullivan, 2007; Smith, in press; see also Griffiths, 1999, 2002), leading to pedagogical changes focused on the nature of students' engagement with texts.

We need more examples, described in more detail. They need to be examples that offer themselves as repertoire plausibly grounded in Christian imagination. As with *The Gift of the Stranger* a decade ago, I am really hoping here to provoke discussion and investigation as much as to offer conclusions. If we want talk of hospitality to be more than a comforting rhetoric serving to make us feel more Christian, then we need a coherent account of how imagination relates to, informs, and grows out of practice. We do not need a prescribed Christian teaching method, but we do, on pain of hypocrisy, need to be able to describe plausible connections between what is proposed as a shared Christian construal of the world, and the particular forms of participation, reification, and repertoire emerging in our classrooms.

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