

Co-creating Study of Experience in Dialogue

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Biography

Ira A. Virtanen is a postdoctoral researcher of interpersonal communication at Tampere University. Her doctoral thesis *Supportive Communication in Finnish Men's Friendships* won the Best Dissertation Award at Tampere University in 2015. Virtanen's most recent studies have focused on intergroup interaction and boys' support-seeking. She looks at the experience of vulnerability and masculinities, particularly in close relationships. As a communication trainer, Virtanen works closely with companies and organizations in efforts to develop training programs of supportive interaction. The past few years she has done research in Belgium, Finland, France and Romania.

PhD, Docent **Jarkko Toikkanen** works as university lecturer in English Philology at the University of Oulu where he moved from Tampere University in 2019. His research is focused on the concept of *intermedial experience*, or how experiencing literature and other media produces sensory perceptions, both imagined and non-imagined, through medium-specific ways of presenting that mediate the conceptual abstractions of language and culture. This three-tier model of mediality is a work in progress. Toikkanen has published articles on Wordsworth and Poe, among others, two co-edited anthologies, and the monograph *The Intermedial Experience of Horror: Suspended Failures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Abstract

This essay reflects on the origins of an edited book that brought seventeen authors together to define experience. We co-create the experience in the form of a dialogue between us, the book’s two editors, and argue for the sake of words in the experience. We explore what it was like to start and lead a process that supported “making science” as a creative process, adding to what we learnt and keep learning, about the editing experience from this new dialogic experience. The premise of our dialogue is that, conceptually speaking, experience is the whole process of sensing, perceiving, grasping, and interpreting – it is our way of becoming aware of the environment. What follows is our conversation that elaborates on the definitional premise with our book as the example.

Keywords

Dialogue, editing, experience, interpretation, writing

Introduction

We recently edited a book on the study of experience (*Kokemuksen tutkimus VI: Kokemuksen käsite ja käyttö*, 2018).¹ The multidisciplinary interest in experience creates an obvious need for extensive dialogue about the use of the concept. To answer the demand, the collection contains articles across the sciences including arts, philosophy, literature, communication, developmental and educational psychology, musicology, ethnomethodological interaction research, cognitively oriented transgender studies, leadership and management psychology, as well as social and health policy research. The task set for all authors was to define the concept of experience and how it is operationalized in their field and their own research.

For us, the experience of editing the book was both personal and interpersonal. We had previously organized a conference on the study of experience, as our first effort of working together.² In fact, Jarkko had contacted Ira after seeing her name in the book of abstracts of one the events arranged by the Finnish network for the study of experience. At the time, we were both working at what was then called the University of Tampere, representing different research disciplines, Ira in communication and Jarkko in English philology. Yet, between us, there was an ample amount of shared theoretical history, including rhetoric. The institutional task of organizing a conference created a professional context in which trust and the understanding of the academic expectations became clear to us. However, the relationship that formed in experiencing all the exciting new opportunities was unanticipated, as many friendships are.

After the conference, we were bent on turning the momentum of the conference into a publication. Both of us had our own hopes and motives, intensified and shaped by the experience of others involved. For example, we felt the articles started to communicate mutually after we had assigned our authors to read and comment on each other's work during the editing process. Then the order of the articles changed when we talked about how we experienced them in relation to one another and between the two of us. In our experience, the knowledge that the texts kept creating in the book was made acute by the order in which they were experienced.

The essay's conversation is structured into three themes that present the interdisciplinary setup, contrast experience with interpretation, and argue for the sake of words. We illustrate how the book took material shape in co-creative interaction. As dialogue is one of our keywords, a few remarks about the method are in order. For Ira, dialogue is a tensional experience that comes into being as oppositions interact. The perception is grounded in phenomenological communication theory, particularly in relational dialectics by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery (e.g., 1996). Their reading of Mikhail Bakhtin positions relationships as entities that grow with conflicting ideas shared in dialogue. When people engage in everyday dialogue

they need to fuse their perspectives, at least to an extent, and sustain the uniqueness of their individual perspectives (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Therefore, individuals grow in the interplay of such differences with which they obtain creativity, spontaneity and change all the while experiencing continuity. Jarkko's literary theoretical research has been inspired, among other things, by Paul de Man's deconstructionist critique (1983) of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. In Bakhtin, the multitude of voices speaking in a variety of ways (*heteroglossia*) dialogically constitutes the literary novel as a discursive object in reality. Our book might be a case in point, in another form. However, de Man cautions against forgetting about the figures of speech that both produce the illusion of reality and unsettle it by always producing the object again. Without this paradox of taking shape and dissolving there would be no experience of the dialogue that sustains the co-creating of our book either. We continue the dialogue with some of the book's articles to facilitate our engagement in dialogue with each other.

Interdisciplinary setup

In using the concept of experience at the end of the 2010s, choosing from the many theoretical frames available can be complicated or even confusing for the researcher. Disciplines obviously draw on different conceptual foundations and rely on the practice of methodologies which are often at odds with each other, but joint contours can nonetheless be traced. We wanted to bring some of these foundations and practices forward in the form of a book and make use of the knowledge in various fields to strengthen the research on experience.

Since the classical notion of experience as the source of accumulated knowledge that, in recurring and being re-employed until validity is confirmed, one of the key dichotomies has indeed been that of experience and knowledge. An artisan may focus on repeating a past procedure that has produced good results, whereas a scientist must be able to identify the general principles by which sources, practices, and results are governed in their entirety. Once the

principles have been identified as the scaffolding of experience, the Baconian scientist can begin to experiment with the conditions to push their boundaries in search of new knowledge. (Backman, 2018.) However, when experimentation is the significant activity, resting on solid elements of experience, the scientist may be merely describing new experiences that come out of the activity without being alert to how the underlying elements may change in the process. How does experience come about? (Kukkola, 2018.) And how can we learn from it?

Jarkko: John Dewey said that “we do not learn from experience”³ but that “we learn from reflecting on experience.” What Dewey means is that while it’s in our nature to learn from the things we do, both the successes and the mistakes, the learning doesn’t happen magically or automatically. You have to work for it.

Ira: And so we did. We took on the project to accomplish X – to produce an edited book on what experience is and how it is studied in various fields. However, instead of the project unfolding as planned, it showed itself as an ongoing, unpredictable process and experience of sensing, perceiving, grasping and interpreting.

Jarkko: Yes. Dewey qualifies the experiential process of learning to underscore the fact that being educated requires taking initiative on the whats and whereabouts of the situation at hand, as well as being ready to question any first impressions and gut reactions that may take place. Learning changes everything – it is not just about stocking knowledge, it transforms the way you think. Simply responding does not constitute learning, as responses are always contingent on circumstance and subject to change, and if you cannot start to tell why something happened just now and how, nothing was learned. However, if you don’t expose yourself to such situations, of

taking chances and looking beyond yourself, you will surely never learn anything. Jussi Backman says much the same in the first article of our book as he looks at the philosophical conceptual history of experience. For me, organizing the conference on experience in 2016 and editing the book indeed felt like an act of exposure in which I was taking a chance whose results I couldn't predict. I'm now speaking in the first person in reflecting on the dreams and suspicions I had. In reality, the book editing process was an interactive dialogue from start to finish, both with you and our writers. Had it just been me, the end result would never have been as satisfying as it was, and the learning experience far less emphatic. If I was writing this epilogue based only on how my own expectations had been met, or had been at all, I might still have learnt something, but not nearly as much as the case is now. The experience would have had a notably weaker scaffolding.

Ira: As you quote Dewey, I'm thinking back to the creative moments of uncertainty and drive during the process. Those could be defined as "reflecting in experience." I argue that we not only learn about the process but about ourselves and each other, and the personal and the interpersonal learning took place while sitting in your office editing or writing the opening chapter online. Learning took place when the not-known challenged our competences, motivation and creativity. The book didn't only require academic competencies but, for example, metacognitive skills to reflect on one's own actions in the moment and to manage the unpredictability of interaction outcomes. As Backman (2018) laid out in his chapter, specifically referring to Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Claude Romano's hermeneutic experience, the power and depth of experience lie in its contextuality, uniqueness and ever-changing nature. What the book was going to be like and how it was going to be

received depended on the intersubjectivity of the process, not so much on us. Even though one might falsely anticipate that it would.

Scott Lash (2018) has construed that, in the modern period, the attitude informing the scientific experiment may be oriented either objectively or subjectively. One alternative is to think that the scientist is a detached observer whose experience has no impact on the process, while another option is to understand the subject as thoroughly involved in both the premises and outcome of the experiment. The question is, who is the subject and how does the subject come into being? Since German idealism, answers have gravitated either towards the transcendental subject who makes decisions out of their free will or towards the finite subject who is bound by contingent circumstance. In disciplinary traditions including the humanities and social sciences, the transcendental subject may have manifested as the traditional scientist who stands apart from their object matter. Such is the premise in formalist and structuralist schools of thought that observe abstract types or signs as substantial representations of stuff the observing subject is not part of. Alternatively, the finite subject may have manifested as the compromised actor within a system of relations and conjectures over which they have no control, in the sense of not being objectively able to set anything out before there is experience. No object of knowledge exists for study and interpretation until the process of experience brings it about.

Beside the split of experience and knowledge, another key dichotomy makes its presence felt – the one between nature and culture (language, society, technology). Is the separation intractable, and does it follow that words which only describe nature will forever fall short of nature? Some means of expressing experience are considered less indirect than verbal language and so 'more natural'; such would be bodily gestures and performances, and media formats or works of art that are firstly designed to engage the senses. In some branches of study today – in affect theory and neurosciences, for instance – the naturalness of human activity is rooted in the raw, prelinguistic stuff of human experience that cannot be put into words or cognitively

processed without losing much of its original power. Verbal language may attempt to funnel the remains in the idiom of science or art, but eventually it can only succeed in belatedly reflecting on its non-verbal origins, by gluing language on top of nature.

Ira: Let's attempt at connecting the two dichotomies: experience and knowledge, and nature and culture.

Jarkko: My stance is that if no transcendental, a priori reasoning can be thought to produce objective knowledge about nature, then the empirical finiteness of the a posteriori subject appears to foreclose any access to nature through language.

Ira: Which is why, in terms of our task, the objectivist view does not appear viable because the book object does not exist prior to its co-creation in dialogue. But we cannot fully endorse the subjectivist view either if it implies that the words we use in the process are only a pale reflection of some original experience. The words make our book happen, in all of its power.

Jarkko: Exactly. Our dialogue shows how, instead of experience being only captured in language after the natural fact of the raw and prelinguistic, the experience of words is more than what they represent and refer to. The sake of words is more than the experience of the failing discourse of experience.

Experience against interpretation

In both scientific and everyday discourse, it can be hard to tell the difference between terms such as comprehension, understanding, and interpretation in reference to the cognitive activity

of mental conception. The distinction becomes even trickier when any one of these terms is related to the process of experience as either the result or condition of being able to experience in the first place (Scott, 1991). There are hermeneutic theories that subscribe to the idea of experience being possible only because of the subjective ability to interpret the world, and so make sense of it in a way that brings the world to understanding. Interpreting, in other words, is prerequisite for any sensible or meaningful experience of one's surroundings. (Backman, 2018.)

However, we do not agree with this Heideggerian definition of interpretation because it turns the process of experience into a retrospective scrutiny of objects that already exist. For instance, in this essay, the co-creation of our book in dialogue implies that the book object in question does not yet exist and will never exist in a finished form – it will always be created again in the discourse. Since the Middle Ages, the hermeneutic act of explicating the meaning of a (biblical) text has depended on the thoroughly subjective effort of retrieving information and setting it in its proper frame. Even if the idea of an objectively correct reading of a single interpretable object was removed from the equation, and interpreting was redefined as the always renewed and renewing act of making sense of the world, the existence of the interpreted object before the experience would be metaphysically guaranteed. This is not how it is with our book, or in our view of experience as the whole process of sensing, perceiving, grasping, and interpreting by which we become aware of the environment.

Our main grievance with this stance does not have to do with epistemological realism – or if it was possible to know that things in themselves really existed even if beyond reach – but with the fact that everything there is to be experienced is turned into subjectively interpretable data. It has to do with objects awaiting their interpreter who interprets them as they wish. Even if there were conventionally established criteria for how to interpret sensibly and according to reason, they could be easily circumvented, because there was nothing to check the radically subjective

nature of the experience and nothing to return to except another interpretation. (cf. Scott, 1991, p. 794, for her reference on Samuel Delany's autobiographical "memory and the self" as "the substitution of one interpretation for another.") In such a society, experience is reduced into a shouting match. Nothing is experienced but pick-and-mix bargains that can be debated and traded for one another without much concern for what might be lost in the transaction.

Ira: I went back and read emails that were sent during the book editing process. I was surprised to see that we have exchanged and cc'ed hundreds of emails, which is much more than I remember. I didn't perceive the editing of the book as laborious as it now could seem. And as I'm reading the emails, and from the perspective of the temporal context of the book being already published, I'm reminded how I perceived the online interaction and the meaning I gave to the messages between us, the writers, and the publishers.

Jarkko: You know, it wouldn't be too complicated to see the whole editing process as a series of interpreting intentions. "What will Ira think of this particular choice I would like to make, how should I spell out my ideas, and have I done justice to this writer in revising their text and asking them to refine their course of thought into a certain direction?" But to see the process as nothing but interpretations of existing objects (emails, drafts, things left unsaid) at a certain point in time reduces the experience of the process into a discursive to-and-fro between individual subjects. Whereas in reality the experience felt much more collective.

Ira: I perceive and grasp from the emails that the process had structure. I didn't want the writers to have to search for notes on, for example, font size or reference

style but rather, let them focus on writing. That's why I crafted comprehensive instructions. I also intended that to save time in compiling the book. I empathize with researchers who are busy and overworked – brains loaded with information and to-do-lists. I imagined what their experience of the tight schedule could be like and how they would perceive our instructions and the tasks we set for them. I made it a priority to have our communication with the authors to be positive, supportive, and clear both in content and in style. From the authors' emails I sensed, and still sense, that's how they took the communication. Retrospectively parts of the experience become highlighted or reinforced because I interpret them in a certain way, and I add meaning to certain events during the editing process. Yet, I experience the process at present as I am co-creating it with you. . .

Jarkko: . . . and this present experience is exactly the problem I have with just interpreting what you are saying with your words, what they refer to, and what kinds of things and feelings they represent. The chance to make such interpretations is being created and enabled by the experience we are having, and it will always be so. We are encountering together and sensing that we perceive the same book object – sometimes in our imagination, sometimes on the bookshelf – even when we have different ideas about what the book, its texts, and this essay might mean. The book object acts as a material resistance to our shared thoughts about it.

Ira: A great example of the shared thoughts that we came to realize in conversation with each other was the feedback from the authors. The feedback they gave us in writing and face-to-face described how they sensed we were there for them, how they perceived that others too were committed to the timeline, and how they

grasped the gravity of the project. We sensed we were working on something special and with great authors when deadlines were constantly met even when there were seventeen authors, most of whom we had never met in person.

Jarkko: There was a whole collective of individuals who, in their respective contexts of experience, affected the process.

Ira: For sure. The potential of the book was not tangible, yet it was something that kept being created in the experience. It took form in interaction whenever we sat for a meeting or communicated our experience of reading the article drafts and designed the order of the articles in the book. The texts communicated with each other in the experience of “putting them in dialogue” with each other. If we changed the order of the texts, the book seemed to tell a different story.

Jarkko: And what are stories but collectively shared discursive formations designed for the interpretation of individuals? Experiencing the book object together provided an opportunity, as it still does, for shaking up those formations to create new ways of interpreting the texts.

In our view of the process of experience, interpretation forms an integral part of the process but does not define or steer it. The conditions of sensing and perceiving are instead grasped as being objectively necessary for the subjective act of interpreting. In any other case, it would be impossible to share anything collectively except individual interpretations. What is mutual to our experience is the possibility to encounter together and sense that we perceive the same thing even if we interpreted it differently. Experiences of the “thing” will be manifold and erratic in

the joint environment, and it will have an affective impact simultaneously as an affordance to our understanding and a material resistance to conscious thought (Tuovinen & Mäkikoskela, 2018).

When we argue that interpretations are more thoroughly subjective than experiences, it might be counter-argued that it is the other way around and experiences are the most subjective kind of subject matter. After all, everyone has their own experience they cannot fully share with anyone, and this idea is related to the dichotomy between nature and culture discussed above. If the naturalness of human activity is rooted in the prelinguistic, experience as such can never be reached except in the form of interpretations about it – you could be trying to interpret my or their intentions, whoever they are, or you could be figuring out your own thoughts to yourself. In this view, where language cannot penetrate experience as such but can only skip around it, nothing is collectively shared but the abstract signs and types of language whose affective power is compromised in the shift from nature to culture. In the following, we will speak for the sake of words to redress this misguided conception.

For the sake of words

“NOW, as words affect, not by any original power, but by representation, it might be supposed, that their influence over the passions should be but light; yet it is quite otherwise; for we find by experience, that eloquence and poetry are as capable, nay indeed much more capable, of making deep and lively impressions than any other arts, and even than nature itself in very many cases.”

(Burke, 1990/1757, Pt. 5, p. VII)

Edmund Burke claims that what the work of art makes you imagine can be the most powerful experience there is. By way of representing nature, art can surpass nature, and the verbal arts in particular (“eloquence and poetry”) are best endowed for this effect. Burke gives three causes to

support his claim: (1) words can most forcibly elicit sympathy because you are not just affected by their content but also the manner of their delivery,⁴ (2) words can represent the abstract and supersensible in a moving and lasting fashion, and (3) words can be combined into images that would not have the same impact in another medium. In painting, for instance, the painter can only paint what they are able to imagine, whereas in poetry it is the poet's task to make the audience imagine instead.

It is, of course, possible to disagree with Burke on the notion of words being the sole medium that could be experienced in any of the three ways described. In studying why art matters, Alva Noë (2015) has defined art as “a practice for bringing our organization into view” (p. 29), in which organization refers to any manner of shape and structure to how we think and act. Analogous to cerebral work such as philosophy, organization takes place in the form of different technologies – or “evolving patterns of organization” (p. 19) – which can be roughly divided into basic activities (e.g., talk, movement) and more advanced forms of presentation such as the arts, or cerebral work such as philosophy. As Noë proceeds, painting, music and dance, among other “strange tools” of experience, are shown to have similar effects to Burke's words, and the impression is that whereas media indeed possess medium-specific qualities – the experience of words, for instance, is not the same as the experience of visual images – preferring one medium over another cannot be normatively established. We do not wish to be drawn into a fight over what the different arts can do in Burke's regard, but we will focus on two questions about the verbal medium that are most tangibly demonstrated in our discussion. First, how the experience of words can be more than the failing discourse of experience, and, second, how language should not be separated from nature through the prelinguistic fallacy.

Whereas Scott (1991) understands interpretation as evidence of experience that can only be construed and recognized as experience after the subject has interpreted the retrieved data, we are committed to grasping, experience as an ongoing process of which interpretation forms an

integral part but does not precede it. As we seek to make sense of the experience of editing our book, the book still does not exist as an object ready for interpretation – even though the book is now “out there” both physically and virtually. Instead, the object is co-created in the dialogue of writing this essay, and it will not be the same object when read by its readers, or if it was written in another instance. In terms of being able to encounter together and sense that we perceive the same thing (“the book”), we will share more than individual interpretations of the book object with our readers – we will share the joint environment in which such manifold and erratic experience is possible in the first place. This is a roundabout way of saying that our book will ever only exist in the form of words that will always create it again. This is the process of experience carried out in dialogue as we understand it.

As the book keeps on being created, it is suspect to consider any instance of its creation a failure – except in the sense of measuring out interpretations against specific criteria, or in the sense of thinking the experience of words can never do justice to the natural or “authentic” object beyond words. Although conventionally established criteria are necessary for sharing knowledge about the book object in public, without which we would not be able to assess each other’s interpretations at all, there is no reason to think an original object or power had been lost because of the words. In contrast, it was the verbal medium that first brought the imagined object into sensing and perceiving.

Ira: We talked about the book idea and spoke about possible content through what we knew about the authors who were committed to writing for the book. Yet there was no way to predict the experience of the book as we needed their words to create it, not for it. Wolff-Michael Roth (2012, p. 157) says that writing “does not pre-suppose space and time but rather constitutes the experience that produces space and time while occurring in space and time. And, as events, speaking, thinking, or writing are saturated phenomena where intuition exceeds intention so that we might

find new ideas in what we have been writing or saying.” The words that the authors use in the book to define experience and to describe how they understand and use experience in research kept creating new knowledge in each cycle of rewrites and edits. Writing is thinking. Writing is experiencing with words.

Jarkko: Noë (2015) has also designated writing as the condition that enables the practices of art and philosophy in the first place. The basic and more advanced technologies by which we organize our activities are “bent on the invention of writing” (p. xiii), and once an activity settles into a practice, it is by writing that it is kept both being and evolving. As Noë reiterated at the Research in Art and Experience seminar at Aalto University in April 2019, choreography is the writing of dance and the score the writing of music that is required for both fidelity and improvisation. In our mind, then, the dialogue is the co-creative process by which the book object is always written again. In this sense, the book will never be finished – Noë calls this repeated eventuality “the need to write ourselves” that “starts all over again” (p. 44).

Ira: One way of looking at experience is that when we tell another person about our experience we account for our experience, that is, we represent the experience we had (or lived, or created). However, in telling or writing something to someone else we are not only the subject of the experience but also subjected to an experience of experiencing the telling in relation to another. Therefore, the account of our editing process in both our dialogue and this essay’s argument is not recounting the experience or remembering it, but rather our speaking (writing) about as the experience of the process. And you know what? When I see the book object today on my desk,

I feel a pinch of excitement in my stomach. I pick it up, open it randomly and start reading. Even though I have read the articles several times I learn new things. I engage in dialogue with the author, their words, to realize new things about myself, and it changes me. It is the experience.

Jarkko: In retrospect, the question of what I, a literary scholar, learnt during the book editing process, of course, has a lot to do with stock responses such as "co-operation," "listening to other people," and "dealing with uncertainty." And these are all right answers – correct interpretations of the work being grasped in stages. But they are not very informative answers, because although they connect the dots, the whole experience of editing the book cannot be reduced into an interpretive diagram of either short or long description. The experience is there, in the words of the book and the words of this essay, and the experience will keep being and evolving in the form of new words about it. So what did I learn? That learning changes you to the core, punches you in the gut. That learning will always take place together, even if you were on your own, thinking alone. You do not share only hopes and fears, emails and drafts, to bicker over – you share the conditions of experience that make it possible to be talking about the same object. In a joint environment, working together is not something that can ever be finished.

Dialogue, as the opposing tensions that are essential to human interaction, made possible for us also to experience aesthetic moments. Writing this essay counts as one moment in which the discourses of creativity and discovery merge in ways that alter the system of meaning-making for those involved (see Bakhtin, 1990). To conclude at this point, even if concluding was only a way of cutting short, we see our book as an interpersonal co-creative process whose origins can be traced back to our, the editors', initiative. Along the way, the joint effort, the

debate, and shared knowledge on the experience spurred the co-creation of the dialogue, and the whole process of experience now continues in people reading and talking about the book. The experience has no beginning or finish, and the book constitutes no ready object of interpretation as the words keep making it up.

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Notes

¹The book (Study of experience VI: The concept and use of experience) is in Finnish, and it contains twelve articles on the concept and use of experience in various disciplinary fields. <https://lauda.ulapland.fi/handle/10024/63420> Ira completed her contribution to this article with the support from the Finnish Cultural Foundation. Jarkko completed his contribution to this article with the support from the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Academy of Finland (project number 285144, “The Literary in Life”).

²The Study of Experience conference at the University of Tampere back in November 2016. We (Jarkko Toikkanen and Ira Virtanen together with Reetta Eiranen) organized a national gathering of researchers interested in experience and some 160 people participated.

³This was the slogan of our Study of Experience conference at the University of Tampere back in November 2016.

⁴Even if Burke does not detail the matter, delivery can be defined to include nonverbal communication: pitch, volume, posture, proximity, movement, gaze, etc.