

Preface

The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and to offer some reflections on how his thinking—and his particular idiom—might impact upon education at every level: early years, primary, secondary, further and higher and continuing education. To expect from Gadamer's vast body of work, a set of educational guidelines or protocols would be to work entirely against the grain of his thinking. To read Gadamer is to enter an ongoing conversation in which we clarify the focus of that conversation through the gathering of insights and formulation of questions. Gadamer can help us understand what we are trying to do as educators and what our students might be trying to do as learners. But there are no easy answers. There are, Gadamer quietly insists, only meaningful questions to be gradually formulated and posed: questions that point a way forward.

Chapter 1 provides a brief outline of Gadamer's life and work. '[T]he work of a man', as Erich Auerbach put it in an essay first published in 1958, 'is a fruit of his existence, an existence which was once here and now' (Auerbach 2014, 17). This opening chapter explains how the body of work that constitutes Gadamer's legacy came to fruition. Chapters 2–4 focus on the dominant themes in Gadamer's major work: what we bring to the search for understanding by way of our prior understandings (Chap. 2); how we fuse our disparate understandings with a view to achieving mutual understanding (Chap. 3); and why understanding cannot be bound within the confines of a pre-specified method (Chap. 4). Across this primary thematic a number of subthemes are pursued across the three central chapters: Gadamer's emphasis on 'tradition', his preoccupation with 'the question' and his insistence on the ethical and moral bases of human understanding. The final chapter (Chap. 5) draws together the themes and subthemes in order to make explicit the educational implications of Gadamer's worldview. Thus, although each chapter can be read as a stand-alone text, the overall argument achieves coherence across chapters through the recapitulation and progressive gathering of core concepts and ideas.

Nowhere does Gadamer spell out comprehensively and systematically what he sees as the educational implications of his philosophical position. His available writings on education are restricted largely to occasional lectures and speeches addressed in the main to academic audiences. What follows therefore are inferences drawn from his major work, his later work on philosophical hermeneutics and applied hermeneutics and his various conversations with fellow philosophers. The central insight that informs the whole of Gadamer's diverse corpus is that understanding, interpretation and application comprise one unified process. This introductory monograph is an attempt to elucidate some of the implications of this insight for education generally, for the role of the teacher in particular, and for how we conceive of teaching and learning across institutional settings. (Throughout I use the term 'student' or 'learner' to refer to children, young people and adults attending schools, colleges or universities.)

I would like readers to think of this book as a gateway into Gadamer's own deeply reflective mode of thought: an invitation to read, re-read and enter into dialogue with his work. Given the range and sheer bulk of Gadamer's publications, knowing where to start can in itself present difficulties. My advice to anyone coming new to Gadamer would be to start with his later and more accessible work. Some of his later interviews in particular summarise his views and give a flavour of the conversational nature of his own thinking (see Gadamer 2001, 2006). His essays and lectures in the area of applied hermeneutics will be of particular interest to those involved in the education and health professions (see Gadamer 1992, 1996). For those already familiar with Gadamer's work, I hope this brief introductory text to his thinking will prompt them to return to his work anew.

The essays collected in Gadamer's 1976 *Philosophical Hermeneutics* reflect upon the key themes of his 1960 *Truth and Method* and offer a way into that major text, the structure of which is at once beautifully simple but highly complex in its detailed working through of the central argument regarding the nature of 'truth' and 'the problem of method' (see Gadamer 1977, 2004). In setting about reading his *magnum opus*, the reader needs to have grasped the overall structure of the work: three major parts, with the first two parts comprising two chapters each and the final part comprising a single chapter. It is in the detail and complexity of the individual chapters that readers may lose sight of the larger picture. So it is important to keep reminding oneself of how each chapter and each subsection of each chapter relates to the symphonic structure of the whole.

Indeed, the insistence within the hermeneutic tradition on the importance of relating the part to the whole in any attempt at interpretation is a sure guide to reading Gadamer's work. Even more important is his own insistence on the need for the interpreter to insert her or his own self into whatever it is that he or she is interpreting. Reading Gadamer, we need constantly to ask: how does this work relate to me with my own history and expectations? How does it connect to my own personal and/or professional circumstances? What questions is it asking of me? We must read Gadamer as if he were speaking to each and every one of us in our unique situations—and must not be afraid to answer back from those situations and with the opinions and beliefs we bring to the dialogue.

I have not included a full bibliography of Gadamer's publications, which would be beyond the scope of this brief introduction. However, a comprehensive bibliography of Gadamer's works in German and in English translation and of secondary works in English can be found in Robert J. Dostal's *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (see Dostal 2002, 283–312).

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-52116-9>

Hans-Georg Gadamer
The Hermeneutical Imagination
Nixon, J.
2017, XV, 72 p., Softcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-52116-9