Response to 'Being alongside'

Dick Tahta and Helen Williams respond to Laurinda and Alf's conversation on 'being alongside' (see pages 8–10).

Dick: I hope that you will continue the conversation, which has touched on so many important issues. Thanks for sharing your thoughts.

. . . three-point-six, three-point-eight, three-point-ten. The rhythmic trip along the signifiers suddenly pauses with a shift into the underlying signified. A surprise!

I was moved by the way your accounts noted the reaction of teacher and observer. I had been bold enough recently to ask for more writing in *Mathematics Teaching* about mathematics teaching (Reflections, *MT195*, March 2006, p2). And here was something powerful being said about the "undefined sea of whiteness which surrounds the letters on all sides" (a Hasidic tale draws attention to the lack of vowels in Hebrew script and the consequent ambiguity in reading marked by that undefined sea of whiteness).

I link the complex situation of the teacher following the chant with that of the psychoanalyst who also notes a surprising shift by attending to that undefined sea. The analyst Wilfrid Bion used to compare his wartime experience of leading men into battle with his first experience of 'leading' a therapeutic group. In either case he was on his own and had to do something. But that can be as difficult and dangerous as doing nothing. You never know whether you've done the right thing. "Like a mother you have to take whatever is slung at you", writes J O Wisdom in an article on Bion.

And so the issue, neatly described as being 'alongside'. Teaching involves a waiting stance like that of the psychoana-lyst. You have to take the wanting out of the waiting – contrary to the early credit card advertisement that invited you to do the opposite. What is the waiting for? In his article, Wisdom suggested that it was for the present, in the sense that the present arises from the intersection of the future characterised by uncertainty and the past whose meaning is repetition.

This is how I interpret the crucial notion that to attend to the other's mathematics you submerge your own (to avoid that repetition?). It's not, of course, easy. There used to be much discussion in early ATM days about whether in presenting a class with a so-called 'open situation' it was best to have explored the situation thoroughly oneself or rather to remain as ignorant as possible. How do you prepare yourself to be able to be alongside? As the character in a novel by E M Forster says, you can be prepared but never taken. But there is also a case for deliberate over-preparation in order to be able to 'let go', to be taken.

I was intrigued, but not yet entirely convinced, by the issue of different things being in some sense the same or conversely. I could imagine powerful examples in mathematics of apparently different notions turning out to be the same – this after all seems to describe the history of mathematics. But I was a bit puzzled about the converse situation. There seems to be a problem inherent in referring to equivalence as sameness (almost with the suggestion of identity). Equivalent things are clearly different – 50% and 0.5 and 1/2 – though they may be in some sense the same. Contrary to some points of view, young children are not, I suggest, fazed by the idea that Dad and Mum's husband and Uncle's brother refer to the same person.

There seems to be more to say about the unexpected, unwaited for, unpre-pared for . . . And for me it is what the teacher (or analyst) has to do with her/himself to receive the unexpected. Halving from the left was a delightful example. But not unknown. What I want to know more about is what is involved in the being alongside that was then with the surprise.

Helen: First, I love the 'getting alongside' idea. That really feels like being in an early years classroom – physically as well as mathematically. How does one do it mathematically? I am still unsure! But then I'm not doing it much currently. I know I need to have some 'stuff' that I know is very likely to 'work' – especially as I am in someone else's classroom. For very young children that, for me, seems to do with hiding and revealing things or an interesting collection of items; and us handling these and me being alert to their comments and concerns, with some planned ideas 'up my sleeve', meaning that we might end up in a number of places. Thanks for the phrase 'taking the wanting out of the waiting', Dick. This is helpful. To get alongside I need to allow time and space for the children to get there too.

Dick Tahta edited *MT* with Ray Hemmings from *MT103* to *MT119*. Helen Williams is one of the editors of *MT*.

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