Inside processes:
Transitory understandings, action guiding anticipations, and withness thinking*

John Shotter

To talk and to think, not about process, but in relation to it, is not easy. Many brilliant writers and thinkers in the recent past have helped us to think about process from the outside, about processes that we merely observe as happening ‘over there’, but few have helped us to think in terms of our own, spontaneously responsive involvement in ongoing processes from the inside. Yet practitioners need a style of thought and talk that allows them uniquely to affect the flow of processes from within their own unique living involvements with them. Crucially, I will argue, this kind of responsive action and understanding only becomes available to us in our relations with living forms if we enter into dialogically-structured relations with them. It remains utterly unavailable to us as external observers. I will call this kind of thinking, thinking-from-within or “withness-thinking,” to contrast it with the “aboutness-thinking” that is more familiar to us. In articulating its nature, I will draw on the work of Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, along with Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty, and Polanyi. Central to it and quite unavailable to us in aboutness-thinking, is our subsidiary awareness (Polanyi, 1958) of certain “action guiding anticipations” and “transitory understandings” that become available to us within any ongoing processes in which we happen to be engaged, such that we can always have an anticipatory sense of at least the style or the grammar of what next might occur.

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